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If I Had an F: A Feminist Picture Book for Boys

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If I Had An F:

A Feminist Picture Book for Boys

by

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Abstract

This independent study uncovers and meets a need in contemporary children’s literature: a book explicitly addressing Feminism as a critical democratic value for everyone. The study includes a comprehensive review of available children's picture books on the topics of gender identity, roles, and expressions after finding a notable absence of books dealing with, or even mentioning the word Feminism. Specifically, this picture book serves the previously unaddressed population of cis-gendered gender conforming boys aged eight to eleven by engaging them specifically in the topic of Feminism. The study posits that picture books can act as catalysts for positive change within classrooms by beginning critical dialogues about the power of language and identity. The developmental appropriateness of the book and its rationale are included in the study. Further sections include the original content of the book, entitled If I Had An F, sample illustrations, and sections detailing the creative process of writing the book as well as that of reading the book to children and garnering their feedback.

Ultimately, this book provides a jumping off place for teachers and teachers to instigate challenging conversations while teaching boys that ‘Feminist’ is a word for them, too.

Keywords: Feminism, gender, picture books, democracy
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Rationale

To introduce my integrative master’s project, I offer the following anecdote. I took a course at Bank Street last summer called “Developmental Variations”. In one of the first sessions, the teacher asked us to write down five words that we would use to define ourselves. They had to be five things so central to our identity that without any one element, we would no longer be ourselves. My classmates and I squirmed and groaned, trying to limit ourselves to only five words. When we had them, we put our pencils down and looked up. “Now cross one word off the list.” The groans increased, as we tried to imagine ourselves without a central quality or role. “Now cross out another word.” As one might imagine, this continued, until we were left with one word on the list. After we narrowed down to one, the teacher read us someone else’s list: “Artist, sister, reader, writer, guest lecturer”. The list belonged to Alba Somoza, a young woman with cerebral palsy who was wheelchair bound and non-verbal. Alba, along with her sister and mother, are activists that have lobbied for better special education services in New York City, and continue to fight for better visibility and public awareness for CP and its communities. The point, of course, was that nowhere on Alba’s list did the term “CP” come up, or “chair”, or “disability.” But when others see Alba without knowing her as a person, that may be the one word they see.

The activity was ultimately an exercise in self-definition--the assumptions we carry about ability, and the limiting lens of disability. It was a powerful
activity, and one that I have been moved to duplicate with other people, because it can be surprisingly revealing. When my classmates came to their final word, I saw terms like “woman” “teacher” “daughter”. I myself had a hard time choosing between my words, but ultimately I realized that I could still be me if I wasn’t a writer; I would still be me if I wasn’t a teacher; I would still be me if I wasn’t a passionate reader; I would still be me if I wasn’t a friend. But I wouldn’t be me, at my core, if I wasn’t a Feminist. Without that word at my core, my views on the world would be so unrecognizable as to change the very essence of me. And so I realized that this word should be the impetus for my master’s thesis. We are living at time when women’s bodies and decisions are limited and legislated without their consent in our country and beyond, when the doors to women are closed in a hundred loud ways and a million quiet ones; and yet conversations about Feminism are also now happening on private and public levels in ways they never have before. But for all the positive change that has happened recently, the word is still polarizing to many. It is clear that there is still more work to be done, and so much of that work can happen, and must happen, in education.

The drive of my integrative masters project is to address this critical need through the medium of a picture book aimed at upper elementary aged children. The book brings the word Feminist out of the shadows, out of the realm of the implied, and puts it front and center in a conversation about identity and language. In doing so, I believe this book has the power to begin critical
conversations that will plant seeds for the future in a positive way. In his article “Using Picture Books to Teach Democracy”, Steven Wolk (2004) speaks of the power of literature--particularly picture books--to "help all of us shape our political, cultural, and moral identities, and inspire us to work toward making our democracy come to life," (Wolk, p. 27). While discussing quality picture books in meaningful class discussions, the children Wolk worked with, along with children everywhere, have the opportunity to grapple with real issues: “Children’s voices were heard, connecting the book to their lives and struggling with complex questions,” (p. 27). Picture books in particular have a special ability to engender discussion, since they can be read and digested in one class period and so are conducive to a more holistic and focused literary experience.

Wolk asserts that “...the most vital aspect of democracy is an actively involved and critically informed citizenry engaging in ongoing discourse on the important questions and issues of the day,” (p. 28). Where better to do this than in the classroom, which should be the foundation of any “critically informed citizenry” and the perfect forum for the “important questions and issues of the day”? That so many classrooms across America do not constitute this ideal is a separate, and tragic, issue. And some may argue that many classroom are actually actively involved in preserving the status quo and in resisting the kinds of change that a “critically informed citizenry” is capable of enacting. But at the very least, classrooms have this potential, and picture books can be the key to
inspire children to engage critically with important issues, and to connect these issues to their own identity and actions.

In my beginning research for this project, I looked for children’s books that addressed Feminism. Finding a complete dearth of books that used that word, I broadened my search to issues of gender roles and identity, trying to touch on Feminism and equality in a more roundabout fashion. I found a good deal of books about empowering girls: whether it was a re-written fairy tale narrative that rejected a passive princess archetype; a biography celebrating a strong woman in history; or a story about a girl succeeding in an historically male-dominated field, like sports or politics. I also found a fair amount of books written on the topic of gender non-conforming boys, particularly a large subset of what Sarah and Ian Hoffman (2014) term “Pink Boys” or Cheryl Kilodavis (2009) calls her “Princess Boy”. These books explored the feelings and experiences of these boys and emphasized messages of accepting, normalizing, and celebrating differences in gender expression outside an established binary.

I was simultaneously disheartened by unsurprised when I failed to find books that tackled the word “Feminism”, or introduced the word as an identifier. But notably, what I also failed to find were books about gender equity that were aimed at straight, cisgender conforming boys. I did not see any books written for this huge population of children, this majority population, sending them messages about gender equity or Feminism or their role as allies in an unequal world. While books telling girls they can be anything they want to be were
(wonderfully) commonplace, there were no books telling boys that girls can be anything they want to be, and that this conversation has a place for them, too. There was an unwritten assumption that issues of inequality do not affect, concern, or interest boys. I see this as a critical gap in the literature.

Part of the hallmark of children’s literature is characters that children identify with. This is why the problem of diversity in picture books is a such a grave one: when children of color, or children who are non-gender conforming, or children of different socioeconomic statuses, background, religions, read books and do not see themselves represented, they fail to see themselves identified with a multitude of stories and possibilities. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks to this problem in her 2009 Ted Talk “The Danger of the Single Story”, in which she specifically mentions the stories of people in the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the dearth of widely published and read literature written by people with diverse experiences of life in these regions. Single stories, or the same story of one type of person told over and over, enforce stereotypes that dehumanize a group and allow other, dominant groups to dismiss and oppress them. As Adichie says:

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. (2009)

The more stories that proliferate about any population of people, the richer the overall picture of those experiences, and the more those populations can
self-identify and make meaning for themselves, which is the function stories serve for all people.

In this project I am concerned with the kinds of stories that boys are reading, and the types of roles they see themselves given. Historically, boys have been told they can be anything they want to be--this is not the problem. The problem is that not enough stories are teaching cisgendered boys to be allies, to be Feminists. Many boys grow up to be men who believe that Feminism is not for them--that it is irrelevant to their lives, their concerns, and their identity. This is a huge problem. In this project, I seek to engage boys in the conversation about Feminism particularly through use of the word itself, which has seen a long and troubled history and has landed of late at the center of many debates in American culture. A recent example of this was the 2014 Time Magazine debacle in which the word “Feminist” was included in a list called “Which Word Should Be Banned In 2015?”, along with trivial words like “bae” “obvi” and “om nom nom”. “Feminist” was listed with the explanation:

You have nothing against Feminism itself, but when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party? Let’s stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade. (Steinmetz, 2014)

While some may see this dismissal as frivolous or immaterial, the inclusion of “Feminist” on a list like this perfectly underscores the widespread misunderstanding and malignment of a word that addresses critical problems in contemporary society.
Language is important. The stories we tell, and whom we tell them to, matter. And the stories we tell in classrooms, to children, are especially critical. As Lisa Delpitt (1988) reminds us, classrooms are highly political places in which issues of power are enacted. When we ignores the culture of power and its rules, when we do not discuss and unpack these rules and make them explicit, we do a disservice to those who are not empowered. Most critically to this topic, Delpit asserts that those with power are often the least aware of its existence, whereas those without power are most aware of its existence. She advocates for a conscious and mindful awareness of power, and that those with power must learn to listen and to empathize.

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listen that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment--and that is not easy.

(Delpit, p. 139)

Teaching children, particularly children who belong in the dominant majority group in a culture, to empathize with others and to listen to others is one of the most critical and necessary skills we can teach, and one of the skills most necessary to a future democratic and just society.

Beyond listening and empathizing, we must encourage in children what Maxine Greene (1995) terms “social imagination”: the “capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools,” (Greene, p. 5). Picture books allow children to imagine, to see other worlds, and give them a language to discuss ideas that
may otherwise seem unexplainable. The ultimate goal with this project is to give boys the opportunity to safely and creatively imagine an identity for themselves that includes Feminism--that celebrates the best, the noblest, and the kindest in them, and helps to nurture an awareness of power and its attendant responsibilities that raises children into adults that fight for justice and equality. While this is a lofty goal for one picture book, I am reminded that resonant changes can begin with one idea, and that stories have tremendous power to shape and change the world.
Child Development

The audience of my book falls squarely in the 3rd-5th grade range—that is, mostly for children who are eight, nine, and ten years of age. This audience is intentionally matched to both the content and the style of my book, as children of this age generally are beginning to awaken to issues of social justice around them, becoming more concerned with ideas of “fair” and “right”, and beginning to develop their own identities and senses of self in a greater way. The characters of the book also fall into this age group, as the book takes place in a 5th grade classroom. This choice is deliberate, as it allows readers in 5th grade to identify with the characters, and readers in 3rd and 4th grade to ‘identify upwards’ and maintain interest in the actions of the characters as well. The 10 year old characters of the book act as avatars for the children reading the story, allowing them to imagine what they would do in a similar circumstance, and giving them role models for their actions as they engage in the issues of the story.

In his critical text “Yardsticks”, Chip Wood (1997) explores the various characteristics as well as cognitive, social, and emotional areas of growth for children of each year, ages 4-14. For the purposes of my text, I have looked at the descriptions of children aged eight, nine, and ten years, and how their characteristics are a receptive match for this book. Wood describes eight-year-olds as generally energetic, with an enthusiasm that often outstrips their ability or patience. Competence as a theme, particularly as it relates to mastering “the tools of their trade,” (p. 85) is key for eights. As their skills
develop, so too do their confidence and self-image. This quality of eights aligns with the characters in my book, who base their identities on their competencies, describing themselves by what they are good at, and what they do, rather than who they are. Wood also says that eights are somewhat preoccupied with gender in several ways: tending to seek out children of their same gender for play and for work; choosing same gender activities; and generally conceiving of and thinking about gender more than previous ages. Since this is a time when gender ideas are calcifying, this book can do a lot of good if introduced early enough. Eights are ripe for conversations on this topic, and much can be done to lay the groundwork for more expansive and accepting ideas of gender at this young age that later on may critically inform worldview. This dovetails nicely with eights’ attention to “fairness issues, growing sense of moral responsibility beyond self,” (p. 89) and their general responsiveness to stories with themes that center on fairness and justice.

This budding awareness flourishes as children turn nine, and their attention becomes consumed with issues of what is fair and what is just. As Wood (1997) describes: “Nothing is fair to the nine-year-old, who is struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior at a new level. [...] And there is a growing sense that nothing is fair in the world. Why do children die? Why is there AIDS? Why are there poor people and how come a few people have all the money?” (p. 97). Wood details the growth patterns of nines as the “dawn of a bigger world” and an uptick in intellectual curiosity. These qualities
are well matched for a book that addresses inequality at its root, and the widening appreciation of the nine-year-old for the world outside and the injustices that exist there. Since these topics are naturally absorbing and important to nines, they are especially receptive audiences to books that allow them to discuss and delve deeply into the issues at hand, issues that may resonate passionately with children of this age group.

This sense of right and wrong, unfair and just, develops more fully as children turn ten. Wood depicts tens as “good at solving social issues” (p. 110) as their maturity and groundedness builds on the passionate caring of the previous year. Outrage, then, can channel into action as tens are able to understand more nuance and abstraction than younger children. Tens are also an ideal audience for this book for a similar reason that eights are--firmly in the “age of industry”, tens more than any other age self-identify by what they are good at, and value competence highly. “Tens concentrate, even relish, working on tangible products that display their competence,” (p. 106). As such, children of this age will sharply identify with characters who also identify based on their skills and competencies, and therefore will follow with greater interest these characters’ developmental arcs.

My audience also falls squarely into the “Industry v. Inferiority” stage of life, as theorized by Erik Erikson (1959) in his Eight Stages of Life. This stage ranges from ages 5-12, and encompasses the entirety of elementary school. In the “Industry v. Inferiority” stage, the child is engaged in the task of building
confidence in productive skills and learning how to work. This aligns almost entirely with Piaget’s “Concrete Operational” stage, which spans ages seven to eleven, and during which children are becoming more capable of mental operations, which are “internalized actions that fit into a logical system”. In this stage, children are becoming more social, less egocentric, and beginning to empathize with other viewpoints and regulate their interactions. Though this is a wide range for the kinds of specific behaviors that can distinguish even a young eight-year-old from an older eight-year-old, Piaget and Erikson are helpful in that they describe the actions of elementary school children, which are largely focused on gaining independence and learning to accomplish work one can master and feel proud of. This age group is an ideal audience for my book, which also describes characters in this same stage of life and highlights the implications of the Inferiority v. Industry age. And since children of this developmental stage are increasing in their capacity for empathy and for understanding other viewpoints, it is a perfect time to challenge previously held and societally accepted notions of gender and equality, and to open to new ideas and definitions.

This process of an increasing awareness about the world and its problems of social inequality can be a difficult but rewarding journey for children of this age group. As Dorothy Cohen explains in *The Learning Child* (1972):

> By the middle years of childhood, children of both sexes are ready to examine many of the questions that man has struggled with for as long as history has been recorded. Like adults, they will not always find complete answers. Yet the content of their school learning can, and
should, be significant both as to depth and breadth. In struggling to understand the why and how of human resolution of social and economic need, of interpersonal relations, of man’s place in the evolutionary chain and on this earth, they will gain the competence and skills of the adult world. (Cohen, p. 240)

This is the time that children are experimenting with the ideas of the adult world--testing notions and theories in what should be the safe space of a receptive classroom. Children of middle childhood are deeply interested in adult problems, and adults prove to be important role models for juvenile attitudes:

Children’s struggles with the problems of group membership and morality during the middle years is in our time caught up with the unfinished business of the adults’ in-group, out-group exclusions and hatreds. It is confused by the gap between adults’ professed morality and their actual behavior. (p. 230)

This further underscores the critical importance for frank conversations with adults that delve into, rather than downplay, the difficulty of moral questions and the complexity of social issues. At the same time, the messages--overt and covert--that adults give set the stage for children’s views of the world.

Fictional characters can also be role models for children dealing with the perplexing puzzle of social justice and personal morality (Wolk, 2004) . In my text, the male student teacher Mr. Jeff plays this role of setting the stage for a question of identity that is played out amongst the male students of the 5th grade class. As Mr. Jeff demonstrates his own willingness to adopt the identity of “Feminist”, so the boys in the class are intrigued and compelled by his actions into a conversation that instigates a change. Critically, the adult character provides a role model but does not explicitly moralize to the children in the story.
Children of this age are increasingly peer-centered rather than adult-centered and my book deliberately walks this delicate balance. As Cohen notes,

> Children struggle to grasp relationships, meanings, and values in increasingly more subtle realms of thinking and judgment. They look with sharp eyes at the motivation as well as the behavior and attitudes of the adults who surround them; they idealize heros of the past and present. (1972, p. 226)

Mr. Jeff is analyzed and idealized by the children, but it is the conversations between the boys and their group dynamics that propel the self-discovery and self-definition that occurs by the end of the book. This process is both reflective of the developmental stage of these children, and also designed deliberately to appeal to this age group.
At the beginning of my research, I looked for books by searching under the banner of Feminism. My lack of results of any books that explicitly mention Feminism showed me that this was both an unexplored niche and also a conversation that is not happening currently in children’s literature. So I broadened my search for books that tackle gender in some way: whether these are books that speak to or subvert traditional gender roles; books that celebrate girls and women throughout history; or books that address gender nonconforming boys or girls. A major resource was the Amelia Bloomer Project, which is a committee through the American Library Association’s Feminist Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table. The committee of librarians produces the annual Amelia Bloomer Book List, an annotated bibliography of “well-written and well-illustrated books with significant Feminist content, intended for young readers” up to the age of 18. Each list includes titles at elementary, middle, and high school levels, in both fiction and non-fiction, along with several paragraphs addressing the year in review, and issues of Feminism and gender equity that are playing out in the world. The Lists were a tremendous resource, although it is important to note that even these wonderful books address Feminism in oblique, rather than overt, ways. Another important resource was Bank Street Children’s Library and Children’s Librarian, Allie Jane Bruce, who assisted me in a search of the Children’s collection and was extremely knowledgeable about books on my range of topics.
Throughout my broadened search for children’s books on gender and
gender roles, a major theme I encountered was female empowerment. In fact,
most of the children’s literature dealing with gender fell into this category. This
larger category included subgenres of this theme, usually divided along genre
lines. One of these was the fairy tale genre, which proved a rich basis for many
authors to address issues of gender. The “Princess phenomenon” in Western,
particularly American, pop culture of the last 80 or so years, including the
‘Disneyfication’ of folk tales and the proliferation of passive princess narratives,
centered on rescue and marriage, is well documented (Peterson & Lach, 2006).
I found that many picture books encouraged female empowerment by
subverting traditional princess narratives in a variety of ways. Cinder Edna
(Jackson, 1998) uses a tongue in cheek side-by-side comparison by telling the
simultaneous stories of Cinderella and her more enlightened, empowered
neighbor, Cinder Edna. While Cinderella mopes passively and relies on her fairy
godmother to get her to the ball, Cinder Edna is proactive, cheerful, and
resourceful. Ella ends up with the vain and boring Prince Randolph, who is
overcome by her beauty, if little else, while Edna marries his brother Rudolph,
lives in a solar-powered cottage and heads the recycling plant for the kingdom.
Jackson employs a subtle humor to point to the absurdities and inconsistencies
of the traditional narrative while providing an antidote to this traditional story by
comparison in Edna’s narrative.
The Princess Knight (Funke, 2004) and The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1980) take another tack by recasting the princess as a gender role-defying hero. The Paper Bag Princess’s Elizabeth saves her prince and her kingdom by outsmarting a fearsome dragon, and, when her Prince Ronald protests her ragged appearance as unbefitting a princess, she rejects him and dances off into the sunset alone. The Princess Knight’s Violetta, when presented with the fate of marrying whoever wins her hand in a joust, dresses in drag and wins the contest, securing her future on her own terms. In these stories, the intended audience appears to be young girls, as evidenced by the extensive marketing of princess media to young girls. The messages enforce independence, strength, bravery, and resilience in the face of stereotypes that limit and undermine.

Whereas these stories feature heroines rejecting the trappings and costumes of a traditional princess (Elizabeth’s dress is burned off and replaced with the titular paper bag; Violetta dons a knight’s armor; Edna wears sensible loafers to the ball), another subset of stories embrace them, albeit in a very different way. These stories center on boys who do not conform to gender binaries, and who long to wear princess dresses of pink and purple. In Jacob’s New Dress (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014), Jacob loves dressing up in princess dresses and playing with his friend Emily at home and at school. But his parents are not so sure about him wearing the dresses all the time, and another boy at school questions and ridicules him. Ultimately his parents, along with his teacher
and his friends, accept Jacob’s love of dresses, and his mom helps him sew a
dress of his very own. In *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) Bailey dreams of
dresses, but her mother, father, and brother tell her that she is a boy and boys
don’t wear dresses. Bailey finally meets an older girl working on her sewing
machine who thinks Bailey’s ideas are wonderful, and the two collaborate to
create fantastical dresses. *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009) takes the opposite
approach, as the narrator describes her unconditional love for her son, a
“Princess Boy” who loves to wear dresses and princess clothes, even though
some mock and tease him in public. She affirms her support of her son no
matter what, and implores the reader to do the same if they see a “Princess
Boy” in their own lives. These stories address quite a specific topic and
audience, and do a wonderful job of promoting acceptance of diverse gender
expressions for those whom Hoffman & Hoffman term “Pink Boys”—boys who
express interest in feminine clothing, activities, or even those, like Bailey, who
identify entirely as girls.

Another female empowerment theme came out along a different
genre—-that of historical biography. Many books aimed at young girls used real
life examples of historical figures to champion themes of courage,
independence, and success in male-dominated fields or against great odds.
*Me...Jane* (McDonnell, 2011) shows Jane Goodall’s evolution from curious and
explorative child to successful scientist and role model in a male-dominated
tells the true story of Clara Lemlich, a young immigrant teen who came to America, worked in a sweatshop, and rose to protest leader for better conditions and unions for garment workers. *Marching with Aunt Susan: Susan B. Anthony and the Fight for Women’s Suffrage* (Murphy, 2011) tells the also true story of a young girl named Bessie who marches with her mother, aunt, and their friend Susan B. Anthony for women’s suffrage in California. *Bloomers!* (Blumberg, 1995) follows Libby Miller, Elizabeth Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Susan B. Anthony through their adoption of the bloomer, which aligned with a new era of fighting for women’s rights. Each story focuses on the particular virtues of these real life girls and women while also illustrating a context of gendered limitations and, in the case of the latter three books, political and social movements that brought progress to women’s equality and rights in America. *Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan: Iqbal, a Brave Boy from Pakistan* (Winter, 2014) tells two true stories that meet in the middle of the book: of Malala, who fights for girl’s right to education, and Iqbal, who fights for the freedom of children from illegal forced labor to pay off their parent’s debts. Both children are shot for their resistance; Iqbal does not survive. These stories add another dimension of the painful realities of oppression still rampant in the world today.

While many books have been written in the last 20 years to inspire and empower girls, and books have been written in the last 5-10 years to promote acceptance of non gender conforming boys, I found a real lack of books on the topic of gender equity and Feminism directed to an audience straight,
cisgendered conforming boys. It seems as if these boys do not qualify as an acceptable audience for books about gender—that these boys do not need these books. After all, these boys are the “unmarked” group, and gender issues are still seen by a majority of people as a “special interest”. I think by having conversations with girls about gender and conversations with nonconforming boys about gender, but leaving gender conforming boys out of the conversation, we are doing a grave disservice to boys—and ultimately, to girls and women at large. It is the same disservice we would do by failing to discuss race in a deep and meaningful way with children who do not identify as racial minorities. In fact, the majority population—the population born into a society that empowers and privileges their identity—is exactly who should included in the conversation from the very beginning. As Lisa Delpit (1988) argues in “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children”, those with power are “frequently the least aware of, or least willing to acknowledge, its existence, and those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (Delpit, 1988). Schools need to use their resources, particularly ones such as picture books, to address these issues from young ages onward.

Thus the population that I want to write for is young, straight cisgendered boys. I want to write a book that includes boys in the conversation about gender equity, particularly surrounding the word Feminism. I realize this is a difficult task for several reasons. One is the trickiness of reaching an audience that is given little credit for its ability to engage on topics such as gender, and what I believe
is the attendant anxiety around promoting and supporting a strong aura of masculinity. I do not think the boys themselves are the problem; rather it is societal pressures, both reflected in and perpetuated by industries that market to boys and girls in very separate and very gendered ways (picture the screaming blues and pinks one can see in a quick stroll down a boys v. a girls aisle at a Toys ‘R’ Us). The reality, however, is that to change the audiences of the future, you must address the audience you have in the present. This means writing a book that is extremely accessible to boys, giving them characters they can identify with and situations that are familiar, in order to introduce ideas that may be unfamiliar. Another important aspect to my book is the inclusion of an adult male role model who also embraces the identity of Feminist and whose casual yet complete acceptance of this moniker is the impetus for the young boys of the class to examine and ultimately adopt it as well.

One such book that I saw firsthand success with, albeit on a different topic, was called *Arnie and His School Tools* (Veenendall, 2008). I saw this book used to great success with a 3rd grade ICT class with 11 children with IEPs (all male). The book features Arnie, a young boy with sensory processing issues. Throughout the book Arnie describes his difficulty focusing in school before he started using his “School Tools” like fidgets and weighted vests that help him to pay attention and be successful in school. As we read this book to the class, I saw boys faces light up with recognition. When the teacher asked if any of the children in the class sometimes felt like Arnie, there was a resounding cry of
“Yes!” and “Me too!” Books like this do a fantastic job of normalizing often stigmatized behaviors through the use of character identification and tone. Sometimes just hearing a story about someone like you can open your mind and make you feel accepted and safe. And that can be a powerful entry point to new conversations. I think a book like *Arnie and His School Tools* is a useful model for how an effective book about Feminism aimed at young boys could work. And by building in scaffolding for boys and navigating the delicate balance of new and old, I believe a book like mine can set these kinds of boys up to be allies, both now and when they grow into men.
Creative Process

The process of writing this book was a winding road. I started off knowing that I wanted to use language deliberately, and write a story in which the word “Feminism” was used explicitly. However, I was not entirely sure whether the book would be narrative in structure, in the manner of *Jacob’s New Dress*, or whether the book would ‘speak’ directly to children, in the manner of *My Princess Boy* or even *Arnie’s School Tools*. I was sure early on, however, that I wanted the book to be written in rhyming verse so as to give both a certain ‘ring of truth’ as well as a kind of levity to lighten the difficult and complex subject matter of the story. I also struggled with refining the audience and characters of the book. Would it be an informational-type text that merely dispelled myths around the word “Feminist”? I knew that the thesis of the book should be something in the vein of “This is a word for everyone.” Through conversations with my boyfriend Chris, who was a latecomer to the word “Feminist”, as well as my experience researching existing children’s literature, I discovered that I wanted the audience of the book to be that one so frequently left out of books of this nature: straight, cisgendered boys.

In my first pass at the book, I conceptualized that the book could introduce a host of characters—all male children, of different ethnicities, races, and background—who all identify based on what they do well. One character would be an athlete; another would be an artist; another would be a gamer; another would be a science buff. Each character would have a verse and an
illustration about them. In each verse, it would be clear that the actions of the male character were Feminist in nature, and each verse would end with the question “Is he a Feminist?” I began to write these verses and the cadence of the book started to come to me.

However, after a while working within this premise, I began to feel stuck. There was not an appreciable arc in the book, and the idea felt static. The characters did not change or grow, and they also felt more like poster children than real characters. There also was no inciting incident or reason why the conversation about Feminism was happening in the first place. I realized that the book wanted to be a narrative, and that I could still include these characters but I would take them off the ‘poster’, so to speak, and put them into real life. I talked to Chris as we brainstormed how this could happen. Where would the action take place? I knew immediately: a classroom, of course. And what would the inciting incident be that caused something to happen? Why does this story happen?

At first we thought that perhaps a girl in the class would claim herself a Feminist, and this would cause some sort of conflict. But why would she claim this, out of the blue? What kind of activity could lead children to think about their identity? Suddenly, we had it. An activity that is likely done at some point in every elementary school in the country. Acrostic poems! The story started to build rapidly. It was not a girl in the class who would incite the action of the story. It would be a male figure who claimed the title of Feminist for himself. It
would be someone the boys of the class would idolize—a cool, young student teacher. The student teacher would do an acrostic of his own, and he would have the letter “F” in his name, and self-identify as a Feminist. The boys would see the word, and argue over its meaning. A conversation would arise between the boys, and cause them to reevaluate their own identities in light of the student teacher’s. None of the boys would have an “F” in their name. The title came to us: “If I Had an F” as the framing device of the conflict itself: “If I had an F, would I be a Feminist?” The conflict was now surrounding the idea of choice, and of identity as something we actively choose to define. The ending page of the book came swiftly on the heels of this realization: the student teacher standing in front of the bulletin board of the boys’ acrostic poems, each one with an “F” scribbled into their names.

Now that the concept of the book was right, I storyboarded out the flow of the pages and sought an illustrator who could help me bring the story to life. I enlisted my friend Kyle, a very talented artist who draws distinctive cartoon-like illustrations. I picked him because I wanted the tone of the illustrations, like the cadence of the rhymes, to be light and accessible while dealing with a subject that few people would call “light”. It was important to me that the illustrations should feel cool and compelling to boys and girls alike. To this effect, I thought my book should feel more like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* than *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Kyle and I met to discuss my vision of the book, and I gave him my storyboard, and then another version of the storyboard once I started writing the
book and the story inevitably shifted a bit as the actual writing of the book informed the story, especially in the middle of the book. He sent me illustrations of each of the 5 boys, the student teacher Mr. Jeff, and the teacher Ms. Prest. They were exactly how I hoped they would look, with each characterization distinctive, freshly cartoonish, and compelling.

I wrote the verses for each page, finding that the constraint of the rhyme both made it more difficult to write as well as sharpened what I wanted to say. As I suspected, the weight of a rhyme and the cadence of metered verse makes a sentiment feel somehow more true and land more precisely than prose. There have been studies about the connection between music and language, as Besson and Schon (2003) describe in an article entitled “Comparison between Music and Language,”: “Both systems generate their own expectations. Either these expectations are fulfilled, giving rise to resolution or satisfaction, or they are not fulfilled, giving rise to tension or surprise,” (p. 273). Author of the article “Musicality in the Language of Picture Books” Robin Heald (2007) describes the reactions of children as young as 6 months who remember and respond to certain tempos and melodies. From nursery rhymes to Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter, rhyme and meter hold an undeniable appeal. It was hard to do, but infinitely rewarding when I landed on the ‘right’ verse.

The middle of the story, which had felt the most mysterious to me, took shape in another brainstorming session with Chris and with my friend Emily, who has a background in gender studies and Feminist critical theory. We threw
out different ideas for what the central turning point might look like. We knew it had to happen at recess, but what was it, exactly? I wanted to use the verses I’d already written in the first pass at the story, with each of the boys and their activity-based identity. But I knew I needed to finesse them as well. At first we wondered if there was a conflict at recess—a boy from the group says something sexist to a girl (You throw like a girl, etc.) and the boys rally around her? But this felt artificially imposed. It seemed that the seeds had already been sown earlier, and that recess should be the time for the new information about the definition of Feminism (having been discovered with a timely Google search) to be reconciled with the way the boys acted in their everyday pursuits. It was difficult to render what is mainly an internal process of thinking and realization externally, but this was the authentic middle of the story.

Once the main text of the book was complete I sent it to Kyle, with seven pages bolded to indicate which illustrations he should start on. Each of these pages had a short description of my vision for the page, although a bulk of the creative license was in his hands. Kyle sent me pencil sketches of illustrations as he finished them, and they were wonderful. Finally all seven were inked and finished, and we met to look at them. Kyle’s illustrations completely blew me away. He had utterly captured the spirit of the piece, injecting exactly the sense of fun, humor, and intricate detail I’d hoped for. The characters were accessible and fully realized, the scenes brought to life. I brought the seven illustrations with me for the next step of my process: reading the book to children.
Original Material: *If I Had An “F”*

Synopsis:

It is a normal Tuesday in 5th grade classroom 5B. The teacher Ms. Prest writes on the board that today is Acrostic Day. The kids are excited to use their names to write the poems. When they’re done, they all tack them up on the Sharing Wall, and see that even Mr. Jeff, the world’s coolest student teacher, has done a poem. All the boys, who idolize Mr. Jeff, crowd around to read his poem. On his last letter, they come to a word they don’t know: Feminist.

Aidan offers one definition he’s heard: it’s a word for people who think girls are better boys. Spencer gives a counter-definition: it’s just a word for girls, only. A third boy suggests that they Google the word. When they Google it, they find that the word means that feminist means a person who believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities.

They all go out to recess, puzzling the word privately, and wondering if they had an “F” in their names, would they be Feminists like Mr. Jeff? At recess the boys pursue their own interests: Spencer plays soccer with Sarah; Devon works with his drawing partner Danielle; Tim, Anderson and Aidan skateboard with Amelia. When they come back inside, Ms. Prest announces it is Choice Time: the kids can choose to draw, write, read, build with legos, etc. The five main boys are notably absent.

The final bell rings, and the class empties out. Mr. Jeff stands in front of the Sharing Wall, and reads 5 acrostic poems that have ‘F’’s added to their name. On the final page we see the boys playing a big game of soccer, waiting to get picked up. DevFon kicks to SpencerF, Faidan intercepts and passes to Fanderson, who kicks to Sarah. Sarah takes a shot past TimF and wins.
It was just an average Tuesday
In 5th grade class 5B.
The room was filled with screaming:
It was normal as can be.

Ms. Prest was writing something
On the board as they came in:
“Today’s acrostic poem day!
Write your name and let’s begin.”
2.  
*Kids all hunched over desks, writing, super into it, focused.*
The kids of 5B whooped and cheered;
They loved acrostic day!
They grabbed some colored pencils
and they started right away.

They wrote their names from top to bottom,
thought about each letter:
The words would paint a portrait
When they put them all together.

3.  
*Bulletin board with poems tacked up at kid-height levels. Mr. Jeff’s poem is tacked up taller at his level--visual joke.*
One by one they tacked their poems
Up on the sharing wall.
Even Mr. Jeff’s was there--
The tallest of them all!
Now let me take a moment
to explain this Mr. Jeff:
The coolest student teacher
Anyone had ever met.
He rode a *motorcycle*
There’s no book he hadn’t read
He once met Barack Obama--
At least, that’s what they said.
Close-up of Mr. Jeff’s acrostic poem, tacked on the wall, with the other ones maybe around it, but the focus is on his. The boys are facing the wall, so we see their backs in front of it.

The boys of 5B crowded round
To see what they could see:
M for motorcyclist
R for his love to read
J for juggler
E for environmentalist
F for French-Italian
and F for... Feminist?

Now, motorcycle’s easy,
And so are books and plants;
They had seen him juggle light bulbs,
And he’d cooked them French croissants.
But what’d he mean by Feminist?
They’d never seen that word!
They scratched their heads in silence,
Til one small voice was heard:
Aidan stepped up to the group:

“I'll give this thing a whirl.
I heard that word means someone
who thinks boys are worse than girls.”

Spencer said, “No, Aidan
That isn't what I've heard.
My brother said that feminist
is just a girly word.”
7.
The group, maybe from a different angle, with Anderson in focus--finger up like “aha!”
The boys were all quite baffled
They were worked up to a fit,
Til Anderson the peacemaker
said, “Let’s just Google it!”
They went online and typed it in
And quick as quick can be
The definition popped right up;
They gathered round to see:

[Definition of Feminist:
a person that believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities
: participant in organized activity in support of women's rights and interests]
9. **Wide view of recess yard; kids doing different things.**
The recess bell was ringing
and the class all raced outside.
They ran to use the swing set
Or climb backwards up the slide.

But five boys still were puzzling
This new important word.
It wouldn’t leave their brains alone.
It struggled to be heard.

10. **Spencer and Sarah on the soccer field.**
Spencer swiped the soccer ball
and dribbled down the grass.
He kicked the ball to Sarah
Who made a stellar pass.
Their team last year won regionals
And Sarah never missed.
He thought, she’s probably MVP.
*Am I a Feminist?*

11. **Devon and Danielle sitting under a tree, drawing together.**
Devon grabbed his drawings
and he went to find Danielle.
Together they were sketching
A cartoon called *What’s That Smell?*
Their hands were stained with sharpie ink
From fingernail to wrist.
*We always split the work,* he thought.
*Is she a Feminist?*
Aidan, Tim, and Anderson
Were crowded on the ramp.
They all cheered on Amelia,
The reigning skateboard champ.
They watched her do an ollie
And she landed in a glide.
Their eyes were seeing skateboards,
But their thoughts were turned inside.
Each kid with a thought bubble over his head, thinking of Google page, definition, Mr. Jeff respectively.
Aidan saw the Google page
It flashed inside his head,
And Anderson was thinking
Of the words that it had said.
And one by one they saw their poems,
And thought of Mr. Jeff.
Would I write down “Feminist”, they wondered,
If I had an F?
When recess time was finished they heard Ms. Prest's clear voice:
“Today we have a special treat.
It's choice time! Make your choice.”

The kids could draw, or paint, or build
With legos on the floor.
They could read or write a story,
Play cards or Connect Four
15. *Wide shot of the class, with the five boys conspicuously absent.*
The class all scattered off
in a cacophony of noise,
And left 5 boys against the wall
Who’d made a different choice

16. *Empty classroom, shadow of Mr. Jeff in the back of the room.*
At 3:01 the classroom was
As quiet as a tomb.
From a corner in the back, he stirred
and walked across the room

17. The Sharing Wall was full of poems
In front of Mr. Jeff
He saw each name, the list of words:
On each, a brand new “F”.

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18.

*All five boys and Sarah play soccer in the yard.*

At pickup time, the kids were playing soccer in the yard.
DevFon kicked to SpencerF Who knelt and headed hard.

Then Faidan intercepted and he passed to Fanderson Who stole and kicked to Sarah Who took a shot past TimF and won.
Applications

For this section of my project, I decided to return to the 5th grade classroom in which I completed my student teaching this year in order to read my book to children. This classroom is a very special one to me. The time I spent with the 23 children and their teacher was my most positive experience in a classroom to date. I felt fully immersed, accepted, and a full part of the classroom community and culture, even though I was only there for 3 months. The teacher was both a mentor and true collaborator, and we worked together to write curriculum from scratch in my time there. I also named the class in the book 5B after the name of this class—a small way for me to immortalize that special place.

I reached out to the teacher to ask if I could come back in to read my story to a small group of kids. He responded with enthusiasm, but asked if I could possibly do two sessions in half groups, so that all of the kids would get a chance to work with me. I agreed of course, and realized that this would be a great opportunity to try the book twice and get a sense of two different group’s responses. The teacher gave the kids no prior information of what we would be doing before sending the first half group off with me to another classroom as the other group stayed in the classroom, working on a separate project. I had 30 minutes with each half group.

When I had the first group of eleven children together in a nearby classroom, I informed them that I would be reading them a story, and told them...
they could get comfortable sitting on the rug or on chairs around me. Once they had settled, I told them that this story was actually not complete yet—it was a draft, just like drafts of stories they’d worked on in the past. Because it was a draft, I said, I would read the story from a paper instead of in a book format. Also, although it was a picture book, there were only seven illustrations finished. These I would put up on an easel when I read the corresponding page so they could all see them. I told the students that the author of this book needed feedback from 5th graders to complete the book, since it was intended for 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders. They asked me who the author was, and I told them I’d let them know after and we’d talk about it then. I’d decided to wait until the end of the session to tell them that I’d written the story, as I wanted as objective of feedback as possible.

I read the story to the first group, and they were riveted from the beginning to the end. They responded with awe and enthusiasm at the illustrations, especially the intricately drawn “Google search” page. At the end of the story, I allowed them to come up and handle the illustrations, looking more in depth at certain pictures as they chose. Then I brought them back to their seats and asked them for their feedback on the story. The first feedback was from a student who said that the story did a good job of not being “babyish”. The group recognized that Mr. Jeff was a role model that the children in the story idolized. Four students wanted Mr. Jeff to speak more and converse with the boys about Feminism, whereas six students disagreed, one stating that that would “ruin it”
since the change happens between the boys, not with an adult. Another child suggested a scene a recess where a conflict happened that enacted the ideas of Feminism (a suggestion that was indeed present in an earlier draft!) This led me to reveal this, and my authorship of the book, to the kids. They were very excited—a couple saying they’d suspected that since the class was called ‘5B’, among other reasons. At this point I realized that I hadn’t told them the title of the story, so I told them then the book was called “If I Had An F”. I received myriad congratulations, and a couple kids who asked if the story was about them, particularly one boy who pointed to a character and said, “He’s me! He’s got the same hat and the spiky hair!”

The second group began similarly to the first group. The only difference this time was that I remembered to tell them the title of the book before I began reading. When I told them it was called “If I Had An F”, there was a fair amount of giggling. I asked them why they thought the title was funny, and they tried to explain. I gathered that the letter “F” sounds somewhat provocative, perhaps because of the association with the term “F-word”. They couldn’t articulate exactly, but managed to get across that it sounded “iffy” or “kind of wrong.” “I hope this isn’t another version of It’s Perfectly Normal!”* said one boy, to lots of giggling from his friends. I assured him that it wasn’t, and launched into the 2nd reading.

*It’s Perfectly Normal is an educative book for children about reproduction and sexuality.
Again, I allowed the kids to come forward and look at the illustrations before getting into our discussion. My first comment was from a girl who said, “I think the author did a masterful job of putting a controversial and kind of hard idea into a simple format,” a response that is typical of this very thoughtful and articulate young lady (not to mention touching and very nice for the author to hear!) Other responses from this group included the idea that the book would make sense to younger children as well; that the book seemed relatable (specifically the idea of ‘Googling’ something you didn’t know about) and that they enjoyed the rhyming structure. One child thought that the change from “clueless to Feminist” was too quick, and that the author could do more to make that “stick in the mind” or explain why they changed their mind. “Maybe one kid isn’t convinced,” suggested another student. Like the first group, they identified Mr. Jeff as a “role model”, stating that the children looked up to him and because he was a Feminist, the characters in the story wanted to be too. One student stated that they liked the pay-off in the end, that they “got it’ with the connection between Mr. Jeff, and the acrostic poems, the letter “F” and Feminist. Again I told this group in the end that I was, in fact, the author of the book, and received a similar response to the first group. Several students assured me that if I ever published the book, they would be sure to buy it.

“Why do you guys think I wrote this book sort of about boys and for a male audience?” I asked the 2nd group towards the end of the session. One girl raised her hand: “I think Feminism is hard, maybe, for boys to care about.”
Maybe because the word sounds like it’s not about them.” “Why do you think it’s called Feminism, then?” I asked them. “Because,” said another girl, “It’s like, men have more power. So the word is about giving women the same power.”

This is clearly a class where much groundwork has been laid—the essential questions for the year of social studies have been: “What is power?” “What is fair, and what is equal?” and these words are pinned in bold letters on the classroom wall. So this class, more than most, had tools at their disposal to discuss issues of power—which is, I would argue, something of a rarity. It was fascinating and rewarding to watch a group of 10 and 11 year olds discuss the issues of Feminism and power with great and facile ability. I could anticipate more scaffolding needed in a conversation with children who have done less work with ideas of power and identity than this group. I also had introduced the subject through the lens of “craft”, asking the students to give feedback to an author rather than just to discuss the work as a finished product, so that is necessarily a different twist on the conversation.

This book could be used to great effect in any classroom. While the book is for everyone, it is especially for boys who feel left out of conversations about gender and Feminism and who perhaps have not been told ever that there is an important place in this conversation for them. The book would work best as a read-aloud to be accompanied by a whole class discussion, although it then could live in a classroom as a picture book to return to that children could read on their own. I think the book could fit naturally into a unit on gender and
identity, human development and social-emotional learning. It could also be used as a read aloud to address the specific dynamics of a class in which boys and girls are divided; where there have been issues of sexism raised; where the topic has arisen naturally and a book would serve to help focus a conversation and establish ideas as a whole class. Some sample discussion questions, listed below, will be printed in the back of the book for use by teachers.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is your understanding of what a Feminist is after reading this book?
2. Describe the character of Mr. Jeff. What was his relationship to the boys in the class? Why was he important in this story?
3. What happened at recess for the boys of 5B? What realizations did they have about themselves?
4. Why are words important? Why does it matter what words you claim as part of who you are?
5. Why does Feminism matter for boys as well as girls?
6. Do you have any questions about this story? Was anything confusing?
Annotated Bibliography

Age: 5-8 years
This book follows real historical figures Libby Miller, Elizabeth Stanton, Amelia Bloomer and Susan B. Anthony and their adoption of the bloomer, which aligned with a new era fighting for women’s rights. The book characterizes the women and uses the lens of the bloomer and its spread to explore the political struggle of the time. The tone is informative and fairly straightforward as the story moves from character to character, showing their interrelated stories and the importance of the bloomer and the ideas it spread in its popularity.

Age: 5-9
Sierra loves soccer, but her primary caregiver, her auntie, can’t come to the Saturday games because she works a restaurant job. The last game may be an exception, until it gets rained out. Sierra asks her coach if they can hold the last game at the empty lot by her house on a Monday, so her aunt can come. The book addresses issues of intersectionality, particularly of cultural identity, privilege, and socioeconomic status, as well as unconventional family units and the bonds of family and love. It is a touching and emotional story about sacrifice and compromise.

Age: 6-9
Grace learns that there has never been a female president, and decides to run for class president. Her opponent is a boy, Thomas Cobb, and the students vote by process of Electoral College. While Thomas sits back and waits for the boys, who have more votes in the electoral college, to bring him to victory, Grace works hard to listen to her constituents and make changes around the school. After a close race, Grace ends up winning the presidency by one state (cast by a boy who believes Grace is the best person for the job). The book also includes an author’s note explaining the process of the electoral college. Young readers may be as surprised and outraged as Grace to learn that there has never been a woman president. The story touches on gender inequality in governmental leadership and glass ceilings, while giving readers a victory through Grace.
Age: 5-8
Bailey dreams of dresses that are magical, fantastical, extraordinary. Her mother, father, and brother reject her fantasies and tell her that she is a boy and boys don’t wear dresses. Bailey finally meets an older girl who is sewing dresses who thinks Bailey’s ideas are wonderful, and the two work together to create a whole world of new dresses. While Bailey is shunted off by her family who doesn’t understand her, this new friend gives her the acceptance and support she craves and needs. The book uses pronouns and illustrations with great intention to show the disorientation often felt by transgendered children who look one way on the outside but feel quite a different way on the inside.

Age: 3-8
When her mother dies in childbirth, Violetta is raised by her father to be a knight. At first she is smaller and teased for it, but gradually through determination becomes better at jousting than all her brothers. When she turns 16, her father holds a joust with the prize her hand in marriage. Violetta, riding as Sir No-Name, bests the knights and declares herself free from marrying anyone in a contest. This subverted fairy tale emphasizes female self-determination and rejects the traditional narrative of princess as willing prize to be won. Instead, Violetta wins her own freedom and seals her own independent fate.

Age: 4-8
Elena wants to be a glassblower, but her father says that girls cannot be glassblowers. Her brother tells her to go to Monteray, so she travels there. On her journey she meets and helps a donkey, coyote, and roadrunner along the way by making music with her glassblowing pipe. When she arrives in Monteray, she dresses in boy’s clothing to become an apprentice. When she makes music with her pipe, her songs turn to beautiful glass. She returns to her papa, and they work together at last. The story employs magical realism and poetic mystery, as well as a mix of Spanish and English words together, to tell a story of a daughter proving her worth to her father through the merit of her work, despite her gender.
Age: 4-7
Jacob likes to dress up as a princess and wear dresses at home and at school. But his family is hesitant about him wearing dresses all the time, and a boy in his class ridicules him. Jacob waits for the acceptance of his family with anxiety, but finally gets it—from his Dad, his teacher, his friend Emily, and his Mom, who ultimately helps him sew a dress of his own to wear. Jacob’s story is an emotional and accessible one about non gender conforming boys, with an author’s note at the end about “Pink Boys” and more resources for them.

Age: 6-9
Mikey and Ellie’s dad is overseas fighting in WWI—and the boys and girls train for a knit-in to make warm clothes for the soldiers. At first Mikey thinks knitting is just for girls, until he realizes that any effort at all makes a difference, and that knitting is hard work. Ultimately he makes one perfect sock, who he gifts to an amputee returning from the war. The book features a male protagonist and is rooted in a true event—school children who help knit-ins for the national war effort.

Age: 4-8
Cinderella and Cinder Edna grow up next door to each other, with very different attitudes and personalities. Whereas Cinderella is passive and mopey, and needs her fairy godmother to get her to the ball, Cinder Edna is industrious, cheerful, and full of good ideas—and takes the bus. Cinderella ends up with Prince Randolph, the boring and vain, while Edna ends up with his brother Rudolph, who is in charge of recycling and lives in a solar-panel cottage. The book flips the traditional fairy tale on its head and champions a spunky, intelligent heroine who makes her own way. The tone of the book is humorous, frequently and wryly pointing to the absurdities of outmoded gender roles and notions.

Age: 3-7
A mother describes her Princess Boy who loves to wear dresses and princess clothes, even though others mock and tease him in public. She affirms her family’s and her own love and support of him no matter what, and implores the reader to do the same if they see a “Princess Boy”. The book’s illustrations are whimsical and lovely, and the tone is simple and straightforward, repeating the phrase “My Princess Boy” and promoting acceptance and unconditional love of non gender conforming boys.

Age: 6-9
Clara comes to America and works in a garment factory, eventually becoming so angry with the state of conditions that she leads the entire industry to strike until conditions improve. Although she is met is huge resistance, due to both her stance on labor and her identity as a small, loud, female immigrant, she is resilient and never gives up, even through her many arrests and injuries along the way. The book shows the power of an individual with passion and grit to change the fortune of many who are oppressed and voiceless. The story also shows the harshness of conditions for workers (almost exclusively young and female) in a relatable way and with a lyrical rhythm and language.

Age: 3-8
Curious Jane loves animals, nature, and exploration, and dreams of growing up and studying chimpanzees in Africa--which is what she does. The book’s language is simple as the story follows Jane’s pursuits and interests through childhood, even including illustrations and notes from Jane Goodall’s actual childhood notebooks. Children who are interested in animals and life sciences will identify with Jane’s explorations and drawings, and her persistent fascination with the world around her.

Age: 4-8
Elizabeth is all set to marry her prince when he is captured by a dragon, who burns all her clothes and forces her to wear a paper bag. She outsmarts the dragon and rescues Prince Ronald, who is ungrateful and tells her to come back when she looks like a real princess. She tells him off and ends up happily alone. The story subverts fairy tale norms and stereotypes across the board (and was
a trailblazer for books of this kind, published in 1980). The tone of the story is funny and sometimes pointed, and the heroine is brave, independent, and clever.

Bessie’s mother, aunt, and their friend Susan B. Anthony march, protest, and campaign for women’s suffrage in California. When the vote fails to pass, the family refuses to give up—including Bessie’s father, who finally invites Bessie on a hike with her brothers. The story is told through Bessie’s perspective as she learns more about the movement, and includes her friend, whose home life is quite different from Bessie’s, and whose father forcibly removes her from their march. The story places a political movement in a personal context, and explores real life historical figures (everyone in the family is based on a real person).

Malala fights for the right of girls to be educated in Pakistan against the Taliban’s wishes; Iqbal is enslaved for a loan his parents owe, and must work off his parent’s debt in a carpet weaving factory. Malala and Iqbal are shot for their resistance; Malala survives, but Iqbal does not. This beautiful and tragic book about real people shows a modern reality that many American children are unaware of, and explores issues of oppression and resistance by children who must fight for basic rights. The format of the book—with two stories that meet in the middle—encourages a discussion of the connections between the stories and their characters.

Arnie is a regular kid with sensory processing issues. He uses a variety of “School Tools” like fidgets and weighted vests to pay attention and be successful in school. The story is told through Arnie’s perspective as he explains his world to the reader in relatable, straightforward ways, inviting many readers to identify with him, and providing real world solutions for both children and the
adults reading with them. The book goes a long way to normalize sensory processing and attention issues and portray solutions in a positive light.
References


