Gender in Children’s Novels

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Introduction

Three years ago, when I began to consider ideas for my undergraduate research project, I was immediately attracted to children’s literature. I can attribute this partly to the security I felt in my new English major, to my childhood love of books, and to my fellow Gannon Scholar Jena DiMaggio’s work on Dr. Bren Ortega-Murphy’s project: a database of children’s movies to aid educators in choosing films with social justice-driven intention. My project is an analysis of gender performance and stereotypes in bestselling children’s novels. My mother recently recounted a memory of hers that she looks back on with parental insecurity. When my brother and I were very young, she frequently asked us “thinking” questions at the dinner table. This time, she asked my brother, “Dylan, what’s the most important thing for a boy to be?” and he replied, “strong.” She asked me, “Sonja, what’s the most important thing for a girl to be?” and I said, “beautiful.” She said that her heart sank in that moment, and she felt like she failed me as a parent. (She didn’t). But there was a world of entertainment, toys, movies, television, literature, and interactions that influenced those answers. I’ve always been interested in gender stereotypes and equity (and, later, gender performance). When I began thinking about how to build undergraduate research around social justice, popular culture’s effects on kids’ identity development came to the forefront. I chose books as my subjects, hoping to put my literary skills to work.

Children’s books were a substantial influence in my own introduction into popular culture. I grew up loving Shel Silverstein, then Roald Dahl, then young adult fantasy series, and so on. Through each phase, I found role models and anti-role models in books, often specific to my girlhood. For most elementary students, the most popular children’s books, the bestsellers, become a communal classroom arsenal. This gives those children a common ground of play,
memorable characters, and shared messages. Because all kids tend to read the same books as their peers, the content can appear universal, even if the books are non-representational. These books then shape kids’ reality and reinforce those “universal” themes. On the surface, children’s books do not seem to be marketed toward certain types of families. However, it seems most of the popular children’s books in the United States have represented one type of family: a caucasian, nuclear, heterosexual, middle class group. Mary Renck Jalongo writes for Scholastic that “media portrayals of diversity, acceptance, and inclusion often are severely limited, and the potential for this to impact the world view of children is troubling” (Renck Jalongo).

With all those categories of misrepresentation in mind, I narrowed my own project to an examination of the messaging in children’s books about gender roles and expectations. I am studying these themes in children’s books so as to understand the ways in which children are raised, starting at a very young age, to think a certain way about gender relations, equality, and how to express their identities as boys and girls. (Non-binary representation is still very rare in children’s novels.) By nature of the classroom-wide genre, most children’s books are meant to reach any child of a given reading level, to teach and entertain them all. Therefore, any gender messaging in these books becomes the shared norm, helping to form children’s standard for their own gender expression. As Judith Butler writes in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” “surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (525). For kids, I think that non-individualist, agreed-upon gender conformity is influenced greatly by the most-used classroom media: books.
In his essay “Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books,” Frank Taylor writes, “as children learn how to read, they are exposed to the cultural symbols contained in books. Given the assumption that language shapes and conditions reality, then it might be useful to ask what children might be learning about gender when they learn how to read” (301). Taylor did a study about preschool level books, and I have analyzed children’s novels, but books in both categories “present a microcosm of ideologies, values, and beliefs from the dominant culture, including gender ideologies and script” (Taylor 301). I wanted to take the tools of literary analysis I have practiced extensively in university courses—such as close reading, etymology, and character study—and apply them to children’s books. I focused on symbolism, diction, figurative language, plot, pronoun use, and more to uncover the themes and messages in the books, either obvious or more hidden.

My original idea was to analyze children’s books for younger kids, like *The Giving Tree* or *Winnie the Pooh*. That changed to “chapter books” when I thought more about what I was looking for and the limitations of short picture books in exploring characters and plot. To take a somewhat historical approach, I decided to divide my list of books by decade, spanning from “pre-1950” to “2010s,” which ensured a variety of social contexts in which the texts were published. Websites titled *All-Time Bestselling Children's Books*, *50 Books All Kids Should Read Before They're 12*, *100th Anniversary of Children's Book Week: Top Books from Each Decade*, and Amazon’s best selling lists informed my selection. To narrow it down, I restricted the list to books that I, personally, either read or observed being read when I was in elementary school (with the exception of those published in the most recent decade). Since there are so many books out there, the final list came down to some randomization as I was choosing. Originally, I chose three books from each decade. The analysis of each book took more time than I expected, and
due to a combination of academic, work, and pandemic-related difficulties, I eventually cut back to two novels per decade. The selection of the books is subjective, but I did not choose specific books with the intention of finding faults or praises. I did, however, choose some books to set up comparison opportunities, such as *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, as well as *Hardy Boys* books of two different time periods. Here are the steps I created and followed:

**Phases of the project**

1. Carefully reading the books and recording rough notes of everything I notice that may be relevant to the topic of gender roles/performance/expression.

2. Analyzing the notes and writing up some literary analysis of the texts, drawing together gender-related themes. I’d like to make this presentable enough that a parent could read it and discuss with their child.

3. Making a rubric that exemplifies progressive techniques these books offer regarding freer gender expression for kids, and negative stereotypes to avoid.

4. Drafting a children’s book of my own. Mainly so I can have a go at this genre that I’ve spent a couple years critiquing, and to see if I can make a convincing story that I feel doesn’t perpetuate the harsh boy/girl molds that I grew up with.

My goal is not to demonize, or “cancel,” all the books that I think have issues in their portrayal and perpetuation of gender norms. Comments on my virtual poster from 2020’s Undergraduate Research Symposium show that some people who grew up with these texts are quick to defend them, which I understand. I hope that my analysis might create a dialogue to critique the books and act as a catalyst for conversations between adults and the children reading them in classrooms today. If books with restrictive gender performance examples are still read, I
think kids reading them need to understand that they don’t need to follow the books as guides for their own identities.

The children’s novel that I created is an adaptation of a “troll story.” When I was young, my grandfather, who was very proud of his Norwegian heritage, often read us bedtime stories about trolls, very famous creatures in Norwegian folklore. My grandfather gifted us books of these stories, and when we weren’t visiting him, my father read them to us. As an homage to this tradition, and to my late grandfather, I chose to adapt one of my favorite troll stories into a novel. The story I used as a guide is called “The Troll With No Heart in His Body,” retold by Lise Lunge-Larsen in her book, *The troll with no heart in his body and other tales of trolls from Norway*, our most-read troll book. Lunge-Larsen’s version is about 2,300 words, while my version is around 8,543. The largest changes I made to the original were removing a princess character and adding character sketches of each sibling. My most significant changes, though, were the alterations I made and elements I added in the interest of creating diversity, inclusion, and aversion to gender stereotypes. I made an effort to give no physical description of people in the text. Each character is completely open to interpretation as far as appearance goes. Likewise, there are never any indications of race or ethnicity. I found this to be my best approach when attempting to be inclusive in this way. I wanted any children reading it to be able to picture characters who look like themselves. While the original story centers around a King and seven sons, my story is centered around a Queen, a King, and seven children. Three of the children are boys, three are girls, and one child has no specified gender. In my version, there are three characters with no specified gender, two women/girls in STEM, many instances of men/boys/women/girls exhibiting vulnerable emotions/traits, a girl with a physically demanding passion, a boy whose passion is ballet, a non-heterosexual couple, parents of equal power and
respect, women in leadership, and no animal is assigned a gender pronoun. Very little clothing or accessories are described, save a pair of ballet shoes, some jewelry, and a lab coat. No hairstyles, makeup, or other grooming-related traits are described. In refraining from these descriptions, I hoped to create no affiliation between certain wearable items and gender identity, allowing for the freest possible expression.

All of these elements were part of my attempt to make this book inclusive. Throughout this project, I’ve learned a lot about writing for kids and how to incorporate underrepresented folks and themes into what they read. A difficulty I encountered was the problem of creating a text following a story that has deep roots in a specific culture, while also attempting to create characters that were culturally neutral. It’s challenging to read a story based in Norse myth and not imagine the characters as white. Originally, I had selected Scandinavian names for characters to adhere to the troll story genre. But, after my mentor read it, and I reread it, we found that the names heavily restricted our ability to read the characters as non-white. I was much more attached to efforts towards inclusivity than any names, so I changed them to be as “culturally neutral” as possible. I’m hoping that anybody who reads it, but especially children, will see it as a fun adventure undertaken by potential peers, above all, and find at least one character to befriend, look up to, or relate to.

I’ve never written anything for children before, and I realize that the novel is nowhere near perfect. I really had fun writing the story, though, and I hope people enjoy reading it. I had some fun by inserting my own memories into the characters’ lives, and by using Norwegian words for locations. The Queendom of Midtvesten, for example, referencing the region of the States in which I live. Or Viljeertårn Mountain, referencing my home of Chicago (vilje er tårn =
It’s a tale of adventure, family, communion with earth and its life, helping others, and most importantly, trolls.

Works Cited

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A Gender-sensitive Guide to Some Children’s Novels:
Discussing twelve of the most popular chapter books of the last century
By Sonja Anderson

For the use of parents, guardians, and teachers, to bring up important issues and ideals with child readers regarding gender performance, standards, and norms. Organized chronologically by year published.

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911)

- Masculine/Feminine Expression
  - The character Colin is hidden away by his father because of his illness, which makes him appear sickly and unable to perform regular tasks. He cries constantly. When Mary, the protagonist, finds him, he explains, “‘because I am like this always, ill and having to lie down. My father won’t let people talk me over either. The servants are not allowed to speak about me. If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan’t live. My father hates to think I may be like him’” (96). Colin, as the only son (and child) of Mr. Craven, is supposed to inherit the estate after Craven’s death. Rather than try to nurse him to health, Craven stows him away because he is an embarrassment. This contrasts the treatment of Mary, who arrived at Craven’s a sickly, ugly girl, as Hodgson Burnett writes, but who was looked after and allowed out. Mary’s illness is supposedly less severe than Colin’s, but the ending of the novel suggests that Colin’s illness was more of the soul than the body, as he is cured by spending time in the garden and fresh air. A boy’s weakness is shameful and to be hidden, while a girl’s weakness is expected, though not praised.
  - Mr. Craven allows nobody to speak of or enter the garden because Mrs. Craven died while inside. Craven deals with the grief by hiding all memory of his wife. Mrs. Medlock, on the other hand, deals by wearing her dead husband. “She had on her best black dress and cap, and her collar was fastened with a large brooch with a picture of a man’s face on it. It was a colored photograph of Mr. Medlock who had died years ago, and she always wore it when she was dressed up” (86). When adults grieve for their spouses, the manly thing to do is lock-up memories and feelings, and the womanly way is to continue showing loyalty? It’s not fair that Mrs. Craven’s memory is treated like a shameful, hidden thing. She is not honored because her widower refuses to show his emotions. I don’t think this part would be taken as exemplary by children reading, but it’s interesting.

- Pronoun Usage
  - The cardinal in The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911) is automatically a he, although, it’s possible in this case that someone in the book judged by the slight color difference between male and female cardinals, though that is not mentioned. This is common in the books I studied: gendering most animals male.
Questions to ask:
- Do you think Mr. Craven would have hidden Colin if he was a girl?
- Though Colin and Mary are both “sickly,” Mary is allowed to walk around. Why do you think that is?
- Do you think it’s manly that Mr. Craven avoids his wife’s memory? Is Mrs. Medlock weaker or stronger than Mr. Craven, because she wears her husband’s image on a pin?
- Why is the cardinal a “he” and not a “she” or a “they”?

**Nancy Drew: The Secret of the Wooden Lady by Carolyn Keene (1950)**

- Gender Inequality
  - This is the 27th Nancy Drew book. The series serves as a clear counterpart to the Hardy Boys series. Nancy is eighteen years old, while Frank and Joe Hardy are around fifteen. Are boys ready for detective work three years before girls are?
- Feminine/Masculine Expression
  - Nancy has friends called Bess and George: one heavily masculine, one heavily feminine. “Bess and George were cousins, but there any likeness ended. Bess, blond and pretty, had a penchant for second desserts and frilly dresses. She shared Nancy’s adventures out of deep loyalty to her but was constantly fearful of the dangers involved. George was as boyish as her name. Her hair was dark, her face handsomely pert. George wore simple clothes and craved adventure” (20). The comparison calls George “handsome,” not “pretty.” These two characters are foils based on their respective conformance to female gender norms. Neither is “worse” than the other, and throughout the book, they both contribute to the mystery-solving. I do think their contrasting images of masculinity and femininity are a strange choice, but I don’t think they are very damaging. For the time period, merely humanizing a more masculine-performing woman was probably a victory.
- Naming
  - In *Nancy Drew*, George is the name of the more masculine female cousin. I wonder why these characters that tend to perform masculine expressions are named with “boy” names. Do their names clue-in readers to their difference?
- Questions to ask:
  - Which character is more girly: George or Bess?
  - Why do you think the author gave George, Nancy, and Bess those names?
  - Why did Keene make Nancy eighteen years old, while Dixon made the Hardy boys fifteen?

**The Hardy Boys: The Secret of Wildcat Swamp by Franklin W. Dixon (1952)**
This is the 31st Hardy Boys book. Only one woman speaks in the entire book. The mother is actually praised for quietness. “When they reached home, their quiet, pretty mother said she would leave the decision to their father. After the situation was explained to him that evening, the tall, well-built detective said…” (7). Mrs. Bailey is the only female speaker. We never learn her first name, with her identifiers being only “Mrs.” and “my wife.” Her impact on the case is her housework: “‘No, I washed every downstairs window today,’ Mrs. Bailey asserted” (19). As exemplified here, the woman’s role in this text is to stay out of important matters, clean, and belong to someone.

The men and boys are expected to be, and mostly are, strong and determined. The book begins with Joe and Frank Hardy doing manual labor: digging a hole for a pool. Their friend Chet, a cowardly, “effeminate” boy, is their foil. I view Chet as the comedic relief, but at the expense of respect for him. Chet’s character represents qualities that many boys do and should be able to have, but he is presented as the less-desirable example. Chet never saves the day like the Hardy Boys do. However, a Brandon Tensly offers a converse opinion in his article, “The Knotty Nostalgia of the Hardy Boys Series,” in The Atlantic:

“Chet has several distinguishing qualities: his skittishness, his where-does-it-all-go appetite, his playfulness, his sensitivity. These quirks—some of which American society tends to view as ‘effeminate’—offer up a more expansive vision of boyhood, one at odds with the traditional masculine ideal that prizes traits such as athleticism, unfeelingness, hard-nosed machismo, and, generally, being a man’s man (all to the detriment of boys as they grow up).

‘There was humor, there was friendship,’ [Marilyn S.] Greenwald told me in an interview, referring to the affable Chet. And in that way, she added, ‘there was a very minor subversive aspect to the books.’ Think of it like this: While the franchise is named after the Hardys, it’s Chet who gives the books heart—and who gave my scrawny, closeted adolescent self a different boyishness to embrace.”

Naming

The “Hardy” name is notable, as well, with the word literally meaning bold, brave, and robust (Merriam Webster). The Hardy Boys: the Castle Conundrum, a much later installment in the Hardy Boys universe, was published in 2001. It is significantly less gender-restrictive.

Questions to ask:

Why don’t we know anything about the Hardy boys’ mother? Do you think “quiet” and “pretty” mean that she’s ladylike?

How did Mrs. Bailey contribute to the case?

Is Chet less important than Frank and Joe because he is more sensitive?

Why don’t the boys have female friends?
○ Why are the Hardy boys detectives at fifteen years old, while Nancy Drew is eighteen?

*The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster (1961)

- Pronoun Usage
  ○ Pronouns of animals and un-gendered characters are very often he/him/his. In *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster (1961), the dog, “spelling bee,” and “humbug” are all he’s. Actually, most of the characters are male, save four. By the time we meet one female, we’ve met at least thirteen *hes*. That female we meet is a witch, or a *which*, as becomes apparent. The next female is a vengeful ruler of a colony, and the third and fourth are two beautiful princesses that must be rescued from the Castle in the Air. So, the story represents women/girls in only three forms. The witch/which in prison, who is a helpful sage, the tyrannical ruler of a small colony, and the beautiful princess in need of rescue by a young boy.

- Feminine Expression & Gender Inequality
  ○ The book is not egregiously misogynistic. The princesses in need of saving, though, is certainly a damaging trope. The princesses are the Princess of Rhyme and the Princess of Reason, who rule the Kingdom of Wisdom. Their valuable attributes are only used to resolve scuffles between two haughty brothers. They are described as the opposite of intimidating, and their authority is undermined. “Everyone loved the princesses because of their great beauty, their gentle ways, and their ability to settle all controversies fairly and reasonably” (Juster, 75). They are “pure” and “dressed in white” and their characters serve as symbols rather than actors. As representations of femininity, they provide an unfair standard of beauty, purity, and ideal dress and race. The princesses also exhibit a sorry lack of agency. They appear to exist mostly to provide for men (their tyrannical brothers). And, though they’re much older than Milo, and despite their attributes, they must rely on a little boy to rescue them.

- Questions to ask:
  ○ Could women have been the Queens of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis? Could boys have been the Princes of Rhyme and Reason? Why or why not?
  ○ Why couldn’t the princesses find their own way out of the Castle in the Sky?
  ○ What does it mean to be pure? Is purity ladylike?

*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume (1972)

- Parental Gender Inequality
  ○ At the very beginning, the father says that his boss/client is going to stay with them. The wife objects but is ignored. She then starts preparing the home: replacing bed sheets, fixing up a guest room, and, “she spent the day in the kitchen. She really cooked up a storm” (10). She does everything to prepare for
the father’s guests. “‘Juicy-O for everyone!’ my father told my mother. She went into the kitchen to get it” (15). She makes and pours the coffee. She cleans up the mess Fudge made. Besides these homemaking activities, she also goes shoe shopping and to lunch with the boys, and then, to visit her sister who recently had a baby. These are all of her activities. The father, meanwhile, is a white collar advertising executive. Peter and Fudge visit his office and Peter admires the large building and his father’s personal secretary. So, there is a clear power imbalance with the parents.

○ When the mother leaves to see her sister, the father is left in charge of the children. The mother says, “‘I’m not worrying. It’s just that Daddy is so...well, you know...he doesn’t know much about taking care of children’” (84). True to her prediction, the father is incapable of baseline parenting while the mother is gone. He fails to make any food, not even an attempted omelete. “Because as far as I know my father can’t cook anything. He doesn’t even know where my mother keeps the peanut butter; the dishes; or the pots and pans,” Peter narrates (103). “I don’t think my father even put [Fudge] into his pajamas last night” (98). He does bathe Fudge once, but decides the dirty dishes are too much. “He stacked them in the sink and left them for my mother” (106). When the mother is about to return, the father uses a fraternity bribe to keep the kids quiet about his incapability. “On the way there my father said wouldn’t it be fun if we kept all the things we did over the weekend a secret—just between the three of us—kind of a man’s secret.” I expected something like this of a book published in 1972, but that doesn’t make its outright sexism acceptable. If the reader pays attention to the mother, the book is an excellent example of the phenomenon detailed by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* nine years prior.

● Questions to ask:
○ Why does Peter’s mother do all the housework and not his father?
○ Which of Peter’s parents does more for their family?
○ Why can’t Peter’s father cook, clean, or care for his kids very well?
○ Why does Peter’s father ask him to keep the weekend’s details a secret from his mother?

**Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (1977)**

● Masculine/Feminine Expression & Gender Inequality
○ Jess cannot determine Leslie’s gender from a distance because of her androgynous appearance. Eventually: “girl, he decided” (Paterson, 22). “Leslie always wore pants, even to school. Her hair was ‘shorter than a boy’s’” (58). Leslie’s character is established by a masculine appearance. Leslie earns Jess’ respect by acting unlike all the other girls at his school. She beats all the boys in a foot race. She does not abide by conventions that Jess previously thought law-like. “Lord, the
girl had no notion of what you did and didn’t do” (36). Leslie’s character becomes more respectable because she performs male gender expectations in her appearance and her actions. Since she doesn’t perform femininity, she is more accessible to Jess as a friend. These circumstances make their boy-girl friendship possible, but why does Leslie need to “look like a boy” and compete against the boys to earn this spot? She is the only one of her kind. “The older boys always took the dry center of the upper field for their ball games, while the girls claimed the small top section for hopscotch and jump rope and hanging around talking” (4). Leslie crosses this divide, physically and symbolically, but the gains are only had by Leslie and Jess, not any of the other girls and boys. On page 53, an illustration of Leslie and Jess depicts them looking almost the same; in build, haircut, etc.. To even the playing field, the two can “forget” gender in their partnership. Except, they aren’t forgetting, they’re just both performing male. Why is that the default, and not long hair and a dress?

- **Masculine/Feminine Expression**
  - Leslie writes a composition about her hobby of scuba diving. The female teacher says, “it tells about an unusual hobby—for a girl” (42). Readers, I think, are meant to think of Leslie as a protagonist because she doesn’t fit into female standards of non-adventure, but as an example, I can see how the message would imply that a girl must be able to run faster than boys and do things like scuba dive in order to be respected. The “tomboy” identity may be born from examples like these. This is not to say girls who didn’t perform exclusively female didn’t exist before the “tomboy” label, but that girls began to see the label/identity as a solution for being mocked/excluded on the playground, and therefore embraced it and formed themselves inside it. This experience was partially my own in third through fifth grade, and once, when I mentioned the adoption of the “tomboy” identity in a presentation, over half the room raised their hands when I asked if they had identified as a “tomboy” at this age. What’s the difference between exploring gender performance and conforming to traits and values that boys value? The “tomboy” performance also sometimes leads to the disrespect of “girly girls” by other girls.

- **Naming**
  - The names Jess and Leslie are both generally unisex. *Bridge to Terabithia* centers around their friendship, which functions so smoothly because neither Jess nor Leslie have to pay attention to what others think of their own masculinity or femininity when they’re with each other. Leslie’s athleticism and adventurousness are admirable for Jess, and Jess’s art skills are valued by Leslie. Their middle-of-the road names are clues to their equalness. Leslie’s “masculine” traits and Jess’s “feminine traits” create a balance in which gender (sort of) disappears.
Most of their time together is spent in a mythical, imaginary world that’s private to the two of them. Can they only really be themselves in their imaginations?

- **Masculine Expression/Shaming**
  - Jess is scared by Leslie’s written composition. “His dad expected him to be a man. And here he was letting some girl who wasn’t even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater. Dumb, dumb, dumb” (43). “Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him” (42). Jess’ drawing hobby is a secret because of its “femininity.” His insecurities about his interests lead him to consciously perform his male gender by repressing his artistic talent.

- **Questions to ask:**
  - Why did the author choose the names Jess and Leslie, two names that are often used for boys and girls, alike?
  - Why does Jess decide Leslie is a girl from a distance? Would you make the same judgement?
  - What is a “tomboy”? Is Leslie a tomboy?
  - Is Leslie better than the other girls at school? Why or why not?
  - Why does Jess hide his hobby, especially from his father?

**Bill’s New Frock by Anne Fine (1989)**

- **Feminine/Masculine Expression**
  - *Bill’s New Frock* by Anne Fine (1989) is such an interesting book and fits perfectly with this topic. Bill wakes up one day and he is “a girl.” His mother gives him a pink dress to wear for the day. He stares in the mirror and sees “a girl with his curly red hair and wearing a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons was staring back at him in equal dismay” (3). The accompanying illustration shows Bill in his bedroom: an airplane hanging from the ceiling, toy cars and a dirty sock on the floor, a volleyball, a poster of a man kicking a soccer ball, and relatively short hair on Bill. It seems that the reflection has his face and his hair, but in a pink dress. Dress = girl. I don’t think there are any other parts of “waking up a girl” that are relevant to the story. The dress is the ultimate symbol of femininity in this text.
  - On page 38, Bill needs to go to the bathroom. He chooses the girls’ bathroom because of the privacy that the girls’ bathroom offers (stalls, not urinals), and because being caught in the boys’ in a dress would mean ridicule. The narration skips whatever happens inside the bathroom. This is normal for a text, but it also shows that the book doesn’t deal in genitals. Although Bill “wakes up a girl,” it’s never specified what Bill has down there. It doesn’t matter. Bill is a girl because of the dress.
● Gender Inequality
  ○ On page four, Mean Malcom whistles at Bill on his way to school. He blushes and “felt so foolish” (5). He thinks it’s what he was wearing that incited the catcalling? That sounds familiar. He/him/his pronouns are used for the entire book, although Bill is supposedly “a girl.” Two women tell Bill to keep his pretty dress clean (6-7). To protect his femininity, maybe?
  ○ Bill and Philip’s both exhibit messy penmanship and poor book organization (10-12). Teacher scolds Bill but praises Philip. “‘Well, girls are neater’” (12). When the teacher reads *Rapunzel*, Bill asks why Rapunzel didn’t just plan her own escape instead of waiting fifteen years for a prince. The teacher asks if Bill is feeling like themself (it’s unusual for a girl to question a princess story).
  ○ The dress causes many of Bill’s problems throughout the day. “It was the frock again! He knew it!” Bill narrates during recess, when the boys barred Bill from soccer (23). “A curse was on him. A pink curse” (35). “No one fights a girl in a pretty pink frock” (26). Later, he must carry tons of supplies from the office, and a disaster occurs because the dress doesn’t have pockets (a familiar problem for many women). “Bill was amazed. How was a person in a frock like this supposed to survive?” (42). Towards the end of the book, a fight occurs between Bill and Rohan over a comic book. Rohan kicks and leaves a mark on Bill’s dress. Mrs Collins sees that and then blames most of the fight on Rohan, though Bill hit first. Many/most of the gender-based disrespect and misunderstandings come from the adults in authority at the school.

● Questions to ask:
  ○ What evidence do we have that proves Bill woke up as a girl?
  ○ Why is Bill’s dress so important to the story?
  ○ What does Bill mean when he says, “it was the frock again!”?
  ○ What do you think Bill learns about being a girl from his day in the dress?

*Magic Tree House: Dinosaurs Before Dark* by Mary Pope Osborne (1992)

● Pronoun Usage
  ○ Most of the dinosaurs in *Magic Tree House: Dinosaurs Before Dark* by Mary Pope Osborne (1992) are he’s, with no evidence that anyone knows their sex. The “she” dinosaur is called that because she is protecting eggs.

● Gender Inequality/Stereotyping
  ○ Annie is more outgoing and daring than Jack. She is the first to climb the ladder to the treehouse. She approaches the dinosaurs, bravely. “Annie touched the Pteranodon’s crest. She stroked his neck. She was talking to him” (Osborne, 16). Jack, and sometimes the narrator, patronize these acts. “Annie was always trying to make friends with animals” (16). When Annie approaches a dinosaur, Jack yells to Annie. “‘Just promise you won’t pet him,’ Jack called down to Annie. ‘I
promise,’ said Annie. ‘Promise you won’t kiss him,’ said Jack. ‘I promise,’ said Annie” (24). Jack probably assigns Annie these nurturing actions because she is a girl. Jack needs to make sure her sensitivity toward living things won’t make her dumb in the moment and get them both hurt. When Annie gets too close to a duck-billed dinosaur, Jack tells her, “‘you have to use your brain, Annie’” (34). When Jack is in trouble, though, Annie saves him.

- Questions to ask:
  - Why are all the dinosaurs called “he” except for the one by the eggs?
  - Why do Jack and the narrator seem to find Annie naive, or un-thinking?

**Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren by Barbara Park (1996)**

- Feminine Expression
  - This book contains a clear lesson about not changing yourself for a boy. In the beginning, “Handsome Warren” is coupled with Junie’s friend, Lucille. Junie says of Lucille: “she is way beautifuller than me. That’s because her nanna buys her fancy dresses. Plus also she has lacy socks with ribbons on them” (1-2). The narration is very focused on physical attributes of the girls. Junie’s description of her other friend, Grace: “she has my favorite kind of hair. It is called automatically curly. Also, she has pink hightops” (2).
  - The three girls feud over who may “have” Warren as their boyfriend. Junie begins manipulating Lucille. “I kept on being nice to her. ‘Cause I wanted to meet that handsome boy, of course” (12). “‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Lucille. I am a big pig. And so how can I even steal your boyfriend?’” Junie tells her (14). Warren is initially uninterested in Junie because she’s too much of a “nutball,” opposed to the ladylike Lucille and even-tempered, fast-running Grace. Junie tries to dress so that Warren will like her, which humorously involves a dog collar, scribbling on her shoes, and a “princess dress.” At the end, Junie comforts Warren when he’s sad and makes him laugh with her nutball-ness. They become friends.

- Questions to ask:
  - How did Warren’s presence affect the girls’ friendships?
  - Why don’t Junie’s attempts to make herself more attractive work?
  - Is Lucille actually “more beautifuller” than Junie? Why or why not?

**Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000)**

- Feminine Expression/Development
  - There are many significant symbols of gender performance in this text. Esperanza wielding the knife on page four, a “job was usually reserved for the eldest son of a
wealthy rancher” (4). Later, Esperanza pricks her finger on a thorn while picking flowers (8). Flowers are commonly a symbol of femininity and fertility in literature. Is it significant that Esperanza does not cut herself on the traditionally masculine weapon, but on the thorn of a flower? For her birthday, Esperanza receives a copy of *Don Quijote* and a pretty doll. The former is a masculine account of a man who must be “chivalrous” towards women, and the other is a feminine toy representing beauty ideals for girls. This duality in the beginning of the book is a good depiction of diverse interests for girls, showing that they are capable of doing/appreciating both traditionally masculine and feminine things, but I think it leans masculine.

○ In the beginning of the book, Esperanza and her friends discuss their adult lives in Mexico: “after their Quinceañeras, they would be old enough to be courted, marry, and become *las patronas*, the heads of their households, rising to the positions of their mothers before them” (8). Later, at a labor camp in California, Esperanza must care for young children while the adults work. She’s exhausted by this maternal work, and it’s difficult for her to do an okay job. She’s surrounded by diapers and laundry. Esperanza then begins spending all her spare time crocheting a blanket which was unfinished by her grandmother. She wants to finish it for her own mother, creating a symbolic object for the matriarchs of her family. The earlier symbols were reflective of both masculine and feminine performance, but the symbols are mainly feminine by the end.

○ Although Esperanza’s life later in the text is largely cast with female characters who appear somewhat empowered, her role is restricted to the household, traditionally feminine. Esperanza does gain strength and character throughout. But, did the death of her father and absence of a male familial figure eliminate any blended performance opportunity? The main theme of the text is the growth of Esperanza from a girl to a woman. What might a young girl learn about maturing as a woman from this text? Does it mean developing maternal instincts and learning to crochet properly? Does the text suggest that someone of a higher socioeconomic class is allowed to have more gender fluid experiences than someone of a lower class?

● Questions to ask:
  ○ Why did Esperanza’s father trust her to wield the knife, though she is not his son?
  ○ Why does Esperanza’s male peer work in the fields, while she works as a caregiver for babies?

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* by David Kinney (2010)

● Feminine/Masculine Expression
  ○ Greg is jealous of Rowley going to a concert, early in the book. “But when I found out who was performing, I was glad I wasn’t invited.” The accompanying
drawing is a picture of a performer called “Joshie” with a heart above the i. There are roses on the stage. Screaming girls make up the entire crowd, except Rowley. Greg is disgusted by this scene. It likens Rowley to a crowd of girls who appear to be in love with the performer, presumably a musician who is also a cute boy. This trope exists currently. Boys and men very often refuse to even listen to bands or male musicians that girls and women really like. I’ve personally observed this over the years, especially in middle and high school, when boys I knew would say that other boys liking One Direction or Justin Bieber “were gay.”

- Gender Stereotyping/Shaming
  - After the boys are forced to learn about puberty at school, the teacher says the boys are required to shower after gym. None of them want to. “The only person who was OK with it was Roger Townsend, but he was held back twice and he’s practically a man anyway. So the rest of us decided we were gonna have to fake it” (47). The boys don’t shower because they’re afraid of showing each other their bodies, since they aren’t men like Roger Townsend. There’s some implied penis-envy and body insecurity here, and making it humorous could be damaging.

- Gender Inequality/Toxic Masculinity
  - Greg’s mother complains of urine on the bathroom floor, attributed to the males’ “lousy aim” (53). “Mom said the new rule was that us boys were gonna have to sit down every time we used the bathroom, no matter what. But none of us guys liked THAT idea” (53-54). The mother wants sanitary conditions, but sitting down to urinate is too emasculating for the boys. Message: not peeing like a girl is worth sacrificing both a dirty floor and your mother’s satisfaction. “For the record, I think it should be illegal for a boy to have to fold his mother’s underwear,” Kinney writes (63). Why is the mother so separated from the family? Because the three boys and the husband are male and she is female? The disconnect is based in simple rebellions to cleaning, cooking, chores, and doing anything else that whispers, “girl.” The separation is used for humor and completely normalized. I don’t think boys reading this book would gain any ideas about how to be empathetic, helpful, or even civil to women.

- Parental Gender Inequality
  - A very similar situation to Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing is depicted in the very recent and very popular first Diary of a Wimpy Kid book. Greg’s mother decides she wants to go back to school. The level of schooling and the field of study are unmentioned. Greg doesn’t like this idea. “But Mom said that after all these years of staying at home with us kids, she needs to do something that stimulates her mind. She said she’s gonna take classes for a semester and see how it goes” (55). Again, the mother usually does all the cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children. “Mom said us men are gonna have to make our own dinners a few nights a week and start doing chores that she usually takes care of herself” (56). She is
unfulfilled because of that. Again, the father has no choice but to care for the children. The result is disastrous, with the father attempting to cook dinner, but cooking the meat with the plastic still on and ruining it. They go to a restaurant and Rodrick twists his ankle in the parking lot. The situation is supposed to be funny, and it is a little funny. But it also relies fully on the notion that a father does not need to know how to cook for himself or his children—the outcome is therefore predictable, and because of the inserted humor, seems acceptable.

- The father cannot handle the cleaning, so the mother decides to hire someone. “The words Mom used were ‘domestic help,’ but I knew that was just code for ‘maid’” (119). Of course, Greg assumes the cleaner will be female. When the housekeeper, Isabella, turns out to be unsuitable, the mother stops going to school to return to her household duties, and everything goes back to “normal.” It is unclear whether or not she finished her degree, and it doesn’t seem she will be employed anytime soon. This story is a bit more progressive than *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, but the sexism in its structure is very similar. I bring up these two examples to show how the same misogynistic themes about what a woman’s role is have become disguised in the thirty-eight years between these texts. What kind of roles might a girl think are options based on these stories? Each story relies on an accepted truth that women are capable of cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, and men are not. Though attempting to be humorous, the stories affirm that the position of stay-at-home parent belongs to the mother by nature, when, of course, the women in these stories are only performing long-standing, not innate stereotypes.

- Questions to ask:
  - Why is Greg glad that he wasn’t at the Joshie concert with Rowley? What does Greg think about Rowley’s interest in Joshie?
  - Why don’t the boys want to shower after gym? Why don’t they want other boys to see them naked?
  - Why don’t the boys want to sit down to use the toilet?
  - Why can’t Greg’s father cook or clean for his kids? Is that funny?
  - Why was Greg’s mom forced to quit school? Is that okay?

*Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier (2014)

- Feminine/Masculine Expression
  - In *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier (2014), Raina visits her cousin, who has “grown up” in the time since they’ve seen each other. Lindsay, the cousin, gets back from the mall. She’s blonde and wearing high heels, makeup, and earrings. Later, she wears a pink blouse, a purple, leopard-print skirt, green tights, and pink socks. Her clothes are colorful and stylish, which is no issue. She does appear very concerned with beauty, though, which makes her seem older. For a girl, becoming
concerned with “improving” one’s appearance means growing up, according to media I read at that age. Later, Raina is in Lindsay’s bathroom. There’s tons of makeup, brushes, hair tools, and perfumes on the counter. The thought bubble says, “Lindsay sure had a lot of beauty products…” (131). Raina puts makeup and earrings on. When she walks out, her little sister Amara sees her and says, “Ew, what did you do to your face?!” (131). This is a confusing message about how to correctly perform female gender. Would girls read this book and think they should be like Raina and refrain from makeup, hair products, and flashy clothes? Or would they think they should be like Lindsay, who uses all of that stuff, and also holds the attention of male cousins and family members, exhibiting popularity? Though Raina is the protagonist, it’s really not clear which path is more desirable. Of course, neither option should be associated with a less mature, down-to-earth, or intelligent character. The substance of the person should do that. But, I don’t think any book should depict “beauty” products used to change a girls’ appearance as ideal and with rewards, as seems to be Lindsay’s case.

● Parental Gender Inequality
  ○ The father is laid off and the mother asks if she should go back to school. That idea is immediately shut down. Slight nod back to *Tales* and *Wimpy Kid*.
  ○ The mother takes the three young girls on a long road trip, in which they camp, hike, and deal with difficult weather. Before the trip, the father does not trust that the women are prepared for the trip, and asks many obvious questions to make sure they remembered everything. When the mom and girls are on their way home, the van breaks down and the mother must hitchhike to find a mechanic, leaving the two oldest in the immobile car. That decision may not have been the safest, but the book is set in a pre-cell phone time, and the mother did her best to adapt to a tough situation, then fixes it and gets her kids home safely. I think this is a good example of female empowerment and agency, contradicting the father’s doubt.

● Questions to ask:
  ○ Is Lindsay more “girly” than Raina? Why does Lindsay seem older?
  ○ Why do Raina’s male cousins pay more attention to Lindsay?
  ○ Who do you think is smarter: Lindsay or Raina? Why?
  ○ Did Amara react well to Raina’s new makeup look?

Works Cited

Equality Rubric
in which I’ve scored the books in categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality in question</th>
<th>0-3</th>
<th>4-6</th>
<th>7-10</th>
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| Parental equality/representation: Does the book balance power, intelligence, and worth equally between male/female parents? (None of the analyzed books included same-sex parents.) High scorers present a balanced parental relationship and potential role models. | - *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume  
- *The Hardy Boys: The Secret of Wildcat Swamp* by Franklin W. Dixon  
- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* by David Kinney | - *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier  
- *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan | - *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl |
| Equal ability among boy and girl characters: Are male and female characters represented with equal agency and potential for athleticism, problem-solving, etc.? High scorers present a strong sense of equality among male/female characters. | - *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson (for most girls in the novel)  
- *The Hardy Boys: The Secret of Wildcat Swamp* by Franklin W. Dixon  
- *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume (among the child characters) | |
| Representation of masculine and feminine symbols and characters’ presentation of them: Do characters strictly adhere to “traditionally feminine” or “traditionally masculine” clothing, appearance, actions, etc.? Are instances of non-adherence shamed? High scorers present critique of binary symbols or open-mindedness. | - *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett | - *Nancy Drew: The Secret of the Wooden Lady* by Carolyn Keene  
- *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan  
- *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier | - *Bill’s New Frock* by Anne Fine  
- *Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren* by Barbara Park |
| Intersectionality: representation of 0: any books not explicitly listed in this | 0: any books not explicitly listed in this | - *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan: tells | N/A |
interactions between race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, the number of people of color in these books is approximately two (Grace of Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren by Barbara Park and Little Bear of The Indian in the Cupboard by Lynne Reid Banks). There are no explicit mentions of non-heterosexuality.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>row</th>
<th>stories of non-White, non-Unitedstatesian women and girls experiencing both wealth and poverty</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>- Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren by Barbara Park: presents three girls, (two white, one Black), with equal “merits of attractiveness/desirability.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>- Sisters by Raina Telgemeier: family deals with joblessness, but not poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl: family deals with extreme poverty, starvation.</td>
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NOTES FROM THE RESEARCH:

Gender roles, performance, and expression in children’s novels: Analysis, themes, and symbols

The following is a rough report of some findings, with me trying to flesh out my thoughts and the texts. Below this section are the raw notes I recorded while reading.

The “tomboy” and performing masculinity in Bridge to Terabithia

- In Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson, Jess cannot determine Leslie’s gender from a distance because of her androgynous appearance. Eventually: “girl, he decided” (Paterson, 22). “Leslie always wore pants, even to school. Her hair was ‘shorter than a boy’s’” (58). Leslie’s character is established by a masculine appearance. Leslie earns Jess’ respect by acting unlike all the other girls at his school. She beats all the boys in a foot race. She does not abide by conventions that Jess previously thought law-like. “Lord, the girl had no notion of what you did and didn’t do” (36). Leslie’s character becomes more respectable because she performs male gender expectations in her appearance and her actions. Since she doesn’t perform femininity, she is more accessible to Jess as a friend. These circumstances make their boy-girl friendship possible, but why does Leslie need to “look like a boy” and compete against the boys to earn this spot? She is the only one of her kind. “The older boys always took the dry center of the upper field for their ball games, while the girls claimed the small top section for hopscotch and jump rope and hanging around talking” (4). Leslie crosses this divide, physically and symbolically, but
the gains are only had by Leslie and Jess, not any of the other girls and boys. On page 53, an illustration of Leslie and Jess depicts them looking almost the same; in build, haircut, etc. To even the playing field, the two can “forget” gender in their partnership. Except, they aren’t forgetting, they’re just both performing male. Why is that the default, and not long hair and a dress?

- In *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson, Leslie writes a composition about her hobby of scuba diving. The female teacher says, “it tells about an unusual hobby—for a girl” (42). Readers, I think, are meant to think of Leslie as a protagonist because she doesn’t fit into female standards of non-adventure, but as an example, I can see how the message would imply that a girl must be able to run faster than boys and do things like scuba dive in order to be respected. The “tomboy” identity may be born from examples like these. This is not to say girls who didn’t perform exclusively female didn’t exist before the “tomboy” label, but that girls began to see the label/identity as a solution for being mocked/excluded on the playground, and therefore embraced it and formed themselves inside it. This experience was partially my own in third through fifth grade, and when I mentioned the adoption of the “tomboy” identity in a Gannon presentation, over half the room raised their hands when I asked if they had identified as a “tomboy” at this age. What’s the difference between exploring gender performance and conforming to traits and values that boys value? The “tomboy” performance also sometimes leads to the disrespect of “girly girls” by other girls.

- In *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson, Jess is scared by Leslie’s written composition. “His dad expected him to be a man. And here he was letting some girl who wasn’t even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater. Dumb, dumb, dumb” (43). “Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him” (42). Jess’ drawing hobby is a secret because of its femininity? His insecurities about his interests lead him to consciously perform his male gender by repressing his artistic talent.

- The names Jess and Leslie are both generally unisex. Why choose these names? *Bridge to Terabithia* centers around their friendship, which functions so smoothly because neither Jess nor Leslie have to pay attention to what others think of their own masculinity or femininity when they’re with each other. Leslie’s athleticism and adventurousness are admirable for Jess, and Jess’s art skills are valued by Leslie. Their middle-of-the-road names are clues to their equalness. Leslie’s “masculine” traits and Jess’s “feminine traits” create a balance in which gender (sort of) disappears. Most of their time together is spent in a mythical, imaginary world that’s private to the two of them. Can they only really be themselves in their imaginations?

  ○ In *Nancy Drew*, George is the name of the more masculine female cousin. I wonder why these characters that tend to perform masculine expressions are named with “boy” names. Do their names clue-in readers to their difference?
Two series’ of detective stories: one for boys, one for girls

- *The Secret of Wildcat Swamp* by Franklin W. Dixon is the 31st Hardy Boys book, published in 1952. Only one woman speaks in the entire book. The mother is actually praised for quietness. “When they reached home, their quiet, pretty mother said she would leave the decision to their father. After the situation was explained to him that evening, the tall, well-built detective said…” (7). Mrs. Bailey is the only female speaker. We never learn her first name, with her identifiers being only “Mrs.” and “my wife.” Her impact on the case is her housework: “‘No, I washed every downstairs window today,’ Mrs. Bailey asserted” (19). As exemplified here, the woman’s role in this text is to stay out of important matters, clean, and belong to someone. The men and boys are expected to be, and mostly are, strong and determined. The book begins with Joe and Frank Hardy doing manual labor: digging a hole for a pool. Their friend Chet, a cowardly, “effeminate” boy, is their foil. I view Chet as the comedic relief, but at the expense of respect for him. Chet’s character represents qualities that many boys do and should be able to have, but he is presented as the less-desirable example. Chet never saves the day like the Hardy Boys do. However, a Brandon Tensly offers a converse opinion in his article, “The Knotty Nostalgia of the Hardy Boys Series,” in *The Atlantic*:

> “Chet has several distinguishing qualities: his skittishness, his where-does-it-all-go appetite, his playfulness, his sensitivity. These quirks—some of which American society tends to view as ‘effeminate’—offer up a more expansive vision of boyhood, one at odds with the traditional masculine ideal that prizes traits such as athleticism, unfeelingness, hard-nosed machismo, and, generally, being a man’s man (all to the detriment of boys as they grow up). ‘There was humor, there was friendship,’ [Marilyn S.] Greenwald told me in an interview, referring to the affable Chet. And in that way, she added, ‘there was a very minor subversive aspect to the books.’ Think of it like this: While the franchise is named after the Hardys, it’s Chet who gives the books heart—and who gave my scrawny, closeted adolescent self a different boyishness to embrace.”


- The “Hardy” name is notable, as well, with the word literally meaning bold, brave, and robust (Merriam Webster). *The Hardy Boys: the Castle Conundrum*, a much later installment in the Hardy Boys universe, was published in 2001. It is significantly less gender-restrictive.

- In this specific book, I did not encounter examples of racism, but I also did not encounter any non-white characters. Other *Hardy Boys* books are notorious for racist sentiments. Again, from Tensly’s *Atlantic* article:
  - “For instance, the 1935 version of The Hidden Harbor Mystery has as its archvillain a thickly accented black American man named Luke Jones, who’s the
leader of a gang of troublemaking young black men. (A typical line from Jones: ‘Luke Jones don’t stand for no nonsense from white folks! Ah pays mah fare, an’ Ah puts mah shoes where Ah please.’)”

○ “The Mark on the Door (revised in 1967), also has its cringeworthy moments as it follows the Hardys to a crime-addled Mexico to look into a cult of largely unnamed ‘renegade Indians.’”

- *Nancy Drew: The Secret of the Wooden Lady* by Carolyn Keene (1950) is the 27th Nancy Drew book. The series serves as a clear counterpart to the Hardy Boys series. Nancy is eighteen years old, while Frank and Joe Hardy are around fifteen. Are boys ready for detective work three years before girls are? Nancy has friends called Bess and George: one heavily masculine, one heavily feminine. “Bess and George were cousins, but there any likeness ended. Bess, blond and pretty, had a penchant for second desserts and frilly dresses. She shared Nancy’s adventures out of deep loyalty to her but was constantly fearful of the dangers involved. George was as boyish as her name. Her hair was dark, her face handsomely pert. George wore simple clothes and craved adventure” (20). The comparison calls George “handsome,” not “pretty.” These two characters are foils based on their respective conformance to female gender norms. Neither is “worse” than the others, and throughout the book, they both contribute to the mystery-solving. I do think their contrasting images of masculinity and femininity are a strange choice, but I don’t think they are very damaging. For the time period, merely humanizing a more masculine-performing woman was probably a victory.

- Kaite Welsh’s article, “A queer, diverse Nancy Drew: is this how to keep children’s classics alive?” in *The Guardian* says that a recent adaptation of Nancy Drew updated “the original cast of upper-middle-class, white heterosexuals to include an openly gay George – come on, we were all thinking it – who has a black girlfriend, and George’s cousin Bess, who is reimagined as a woman of colour.”

https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/jun/06/a-queer-diverse-nancy-drew-is-this-how-to-keep-childrens-classics-alive

The Domestic Mother and Working Father

- At the very beginning of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume (1972), the father says that his boss/client is going to stay with them. The wife objects but is ignored. She then starts preparing the home: replacing bed sheets, fixing up a guest room, and, “she spent the day in the kitchen. She really cooked up a storm” (10). She does everything to prepare for the father’s guests. “‘Juicy-O for everyone!’ my father told my mother. She went into the kitchen to get it” (15). She makes and pours the coffee. She cleans up the mess Fudge made. Besides these homemaking activities, she also goes shoe shopping and to lunch with the boys, and then, to visit her sister who recently had a baby. These are all of her activities. The father, meanwhile, is a white collar advertising
executive. Peter and Fudge visit his office and Peter admires the large building and his father’s personal secretary. So, there is a clear power imbalance with the parents.

- In *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, when the mother leaves to see her sister, the father is left in charge of the children. The mother says, “I’m not worrying. It’s just that Daddy is so...well, you know...he doesn’t know much about taking care of children” (84). True to her prediction, the father is incapable of baseline parenting while the mother is gone. He fails to make any food, not even an attempted omelet. “Because as far as I know my father can’t cook anything. He doesn’t even know where my mother keeps the peanut butter; the dishes; or the pots and pans,” Peter narrates (103). “I don’t think my father even put [Fudge] into his pajamas last night” (98). He does bathe Fudge once, but decides the dirty dishes are too much. “He stacked them in the sink and left them for my mother” (106). When the mother is about to return, the father uses a fraternity bribe to keep the kids quiet about his incapability. “On the way there my father said wouldn’t it be fun if we kept all the things we did over the weekend a secret—just between the three of us—kind of a man’s secret.”

- I expected something like this of a book published in 1972, but that doesn’t make its outright sexism acceptable. If the reader pays attention to the mother, the book is an excellent example of the phenomenon detailed by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* nine years prior. Interestingly, a very similar situation is depicted in the very recent and very popular *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* by David Kinney (2010). Greg’s mother decides she wants to go back to school. The level of schooling and the field of study are unmentioned. Greg doesn’t like this idea. “But Mom said that after all these years of staying at home with us kids, she needs to do something that stimulates her mind. She said she’s gonna take classes for a semester and see how it goes” (55). Again, the mother usually does all the cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children. “Mom said us men are gonna have to make our own dinners a few nights a week and start doing chores that she usually takes care of herself” (56). She is unfulfilled because of that. Again, the father has no choice but to care for the children. The result is disastrous, with the father attempting to cook dinner, but cooking the meat with the plastic still on and ruining it. They go to a restaurant and Rodrick twists his ankle in the parking lot. The situation is supposed to be funny, and it is a little funny. But it also relies fully on the notion that a father does not need to know how to cook for himself or his children—the outcome is therefore predictable, and because of the inserted humor, seems acceptable. The father cannot handle the cleaning, so the mother decides to hire someone. “The words Mom used were ‘domestic help,’ but I knew that was just code for ‘maid’” (119). Of course, Greg assumes the cleaner will be female. When the housekeeper, Isabella, turns out to be unsuitable, the mother stops going to school to return to her household duties, and everything goes back to “normal.” It is unclear whether or not she finished her degree, and it doesn’t seem she will be employed anytime soon. This story is a bit more progressive than *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, but the sexism in its structure is very
similar. I bring up these two examples to show how the same misogynistic themes about what a woman’s role is have become disguised in the thirty-eight years between these texts. What kind of roles might a girl think are options based on these stories? In *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier (2014), the father is laid off and the mother asks if she should go back to school. That idea is immediately shut down. Each story relies on an accepted truth that women are capable of cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, and men are not. Though attempting to be humorous, the stories affirm that the position of stay-at-home parent belongs to the mother *by nature*, when, of course, the women in these stories are only performing long-standing, not innate stereotypes.

- In the opposite situations, when the mother is left alone to care for the children, a couple of books present very trying situations. In *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000), the father dies at the end of the second chapter. Her and her mother are left to fend for themselves, and soon, the men of the town become threatening and dangerous. Esperanza and her mother flee, and her mother makes do by becoming accustomed to the new hard work in the United States. The mother stays strong and protects her daughter. In *Sisters*, the mother takes the three young girls on a long road trip, in which they camp, hike, and deal with difficult weather. On their way home, the van breaks down and the mother must hitchhike to find a mechanic, leaving the two oldest in the immobile car. That decision may not have been the safest, but the book is set in a pre-cell phone time, and the mother did her best to adapt to a tough situation, then fixes it and gets her kids home safely. And the previous fathers can’t cook a single dinner? So, the mothers must be apt to housework, cleaning, and keeping peace while home, but they must also be examples of strength in parenting in crisis. Where is the father’s responsibility?

- Greg’s mother complains of urine on the bathroom floor, attributed to the males’ “lousy aim” (53). “Mom said the new rule was that us boys were gonna have to sit down every time we used the bathroom, no matter what. But none of us guys liked THAT idea” (53-54). The mother wants sanitary conditions, but sitting down to urinate is too emasculating for the boys. Message: not peeing like a girl is worth sacrificing both a dirty floor and your mother’s satisfaction. “For the record, I think it should be illegal for a boy to have to fold his mother’s underwear,” Kinney writes (63). Why is the mother so separated from the family? Because the three boys and the husband are male and she is female? The disconnect is based in simple rebellions to cleaning, cooking, chores, and doing anything else that whispers, “girl.” The separation is used for humor and completely normalized. I don’t think boys reading this book would gain any ideas about how to be empathetic to women, or even helpful, or civil.

**Pronouns of animals & The Phantom Tollbooth**

- Pronouns of animals and un-gendered characters are very often he/him/his. In *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster (1961), the dog, “spelling bee,” and “humbug” are all he’s. Actually, most of the characters are male, save four. By the time we meet one
female, we’ve met at least thirteen hes. That female we meet is a witch, or a which, as becomes apparent. The next female is a vengeful ruler of a colony, and the third and fourth are two beautiful princesses that must be rescued from the Castle in the Air. The story represents women/girls in only three forms. The witch/which in prison, who is sort of a helpful sage, the tyrannical ruler of a small colony who eliminated sound, and the beautiful princess in need of rescue by a young, bright boy. It’s not egregious or very misogynistic, in my opinion. The princesses in need of saving, though, is certainly a damaging trope. Bill of Bill’s New Frock points out the illogic of a princess waiting many years for rescue instead of acting for herself. Especially in The Phantom Tollbooth, where the princesses are the Princess of Rhyme and the Princess of Reason, who rule the Kingdom of Wisdom. Their valuable attributes are only used to resolve scuffles between two haughty brothers. They are described as the opposite of intimidating, and their authority is undermined. “Everyone loved the princesses because of their great beauty, their gentle ways, and their ability to settle all controversies fairly and reasonably” (Juster, 75). They are “pure” and “dressed in white” and their characters serve as symbols rather than actors.

- Most of the dinosaurs in Magic Tree House: Dinosaurs Before Dark by Mary Pope Osborne (1992) are he’s, with no evidence that anyone knows their sex. The “she” dinosaur is called that because she is protecting eggs. The cardinal in The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911) is automatically a he, although, it’s possible in this case that someone in the book judged by the slight color difference between male and female cardinals, though that is not mentioned.

**Bill’s New Frock and the exploration of gender symbols**

- Symbols in Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000). Esperanza wields the knife on page four, a “job was usually reserved for the eldest son of a wealthy rancher” (4). Later, Esperanza pricks her finger on a thorn while picking flowers (8). Flowers are commonly a symbol of femininity and fertility in literature. Is it significant that Esperanza does not cut herself on the traditionally masculine weapon, but on the thorn of a flower? For her birthday, Esperanza receives a copy of Don Quixote and a pretty doll. The former is a masculine account of a man who must be “chivalrous” towards women, and the other is a feminine toy representing beauty ideals for girls. In the beginning of the book, Esperanza and her friends discuss their adult lives in Mexico: “after their Quinceañeras, they would be old enough to be courted, marry, and become las patronas, the heads of their households, rising to the positions of their mothers before them” (8). Later, at a labor camp in California, Esperanza must care for young children while the adults work. She’s exhausted by this maternal work, and it’s difficult for her to do an okay job. She’s surrounded by diapers and laundry. Esperanza then begins spending all her spare time crocheting a blanket which was unfinished by her grandmother. She wants to finish it for her own mother, creating a symbolic object for the matriarchs of her family. The earlier
symbols were reflective of both masculine and feminine performance, but the symbols are mainly feminine by the end. Although Esperanza’s life later in the text is largely cast with female characters who appear somewhat empowered, her role stays in the household, traditionally feminine. Esperanza does gain strength and character throughout. But, did the death of her father and absence of a male familial figure eliminate any blended performance opportunity? The main theme of the text is the growth of Esperanza from a girl to a woman. What might a young girl learn about maturing as a woman from this text? Does it mean developing maternal instincts and learning to crochet properly?

- *Bill’s New Frock* by Anne Fine (1989) is such an interesting book and fits perfectly with this topic. Bill wakes up one day and he is “a girl.” His mother gives him a pink dress to wear for the day. He stares in the mirror and sees “a girl with his curly red hair and wearing a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons was staring back at him in equal dismay” (3). The accompanying illustration shows Bill in his bedroom: an airplane hanging from the ceiling, toy cars and a dirty sock on the floor, a volleyball, a poster of a man kicking a soccer ball, and relatively short hair on Bill. It seems that the reflection has his face and his hair, but in a pink dress. Dress = girl. I don’t think there are any other parts of “waking up a girl” that are relevant to the story. The dress is the ultimate symbol of femininity in this text.

- On page four, Mean Malcom whistles at Bill on his way to school. He blushes and “felt so foolish” (5). It’s what he was wearing that incited the catcalling? That sounds familiar. He/him/his pronouns are used for the entire book, although Bill is supposedly “a girl.” Two women tell Bill to keep his pretty dress clean (6-7). To protect his femininity, maybe?

- Bill and Philip’s both exhibit messy penmanship and poor book organization (10-12). Teacher scolds Bill but praises Philip. “‘Well, girls are neater’” (12). When the teacher reads *Rapunzel*, Bill asks why Rapunzel didn’t just plan her own escape instead of waiting fifteen years for a prince. The teacher asks if Bill is feeling like themself (it’s unusual for a girl to question a princess story).

- On page 38, Bill needs to go to the bathroom. He chooses the girls’ bathroom because of the privacy that the girls’ bathroom offers (stalls, not urinals), and because being caught in the boys’ in a dress would mean ridicule. The narration skips whatever happens inside the bathroom. This is normal for a text, but it also shows that the book doesn’t deal in genitals. Although Bill “wakes up a girl,” it’s never specified what Bill has down there. It doesn’t matter. Bill is a girl because of the dress. The dress causes many of Bill’s problems throughout the day. “It was the frock again! He knew it!” Bill narrates during recess, when the boys barred Bill from soccer (23). “A curse was on him. A pink curse” (35). “No one fights a girl in a pretty pink frock” (26). Later, he must carry tons of supplies from the office, and a disaster occurs because the dress doesn’t have pockets (a familiar problem for many women). “Bill was amazed. How was a person in a frock like this supposed to survive?” (42). Towards the end of the book, a fight occurs between Bill
and Rohan over a comic book. Rohan kicks and leaves a mark on Bill’s dress. Mrs Collins sees that and then blames most of the fight on Rohan, though Bill hit first. Many/most of the gender-based disrespect and misunderstandings come from the adults in authority at the school.

Exhibiting femininity “correctly”

- In *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier (2014), Raina visits her cousin, who has “grown up” in the time since they’ve seen each other. Lindsay, the cousin, gets back from the mall. She’s blonde and wearing high heels, makeup, and earrings. Later, she wears a pink blouse, a purple, leopard-print skirt, green tights, and pink socks. Her clothes are colorful and stylish, which is no issue. She does appear very concerned with beauty, though, which makes her seem older. For a girl, becoming concerned “improving” one’s appearance means growing up? Later, Raina is in Lindsay’s bathroom. There’s tons of makeup, brushes, hair tools, and perfumes on the counter. Thought bubble: “Lindsay sure had a lot of beauty products…” (131). Raina puts makeup and earrings on. When she walks out, her little sister Amara sees her and says, “Ew, what did you do to your face?!” (131). This is a confusing message about how to correctly perform female gender. Would girls read this book and think they should be like Raina and refrain from makeup, hair products, and flashy clothes? Or would they think they should be like Lindsay, who uses all of that stuff, and also holds the attention of male cousins and family members, exhibiting popularity? Though Raina is the protagonist, it’s really not clear which path is more desirable.

- Junie B. Jones, on the other hand, has a clear lesson about not changing yourself for a boy. In the beginning, “Handsome Warren” is with Junie’s friend, Lucille. “She is way beautifuller than me. That’s because her nanna buys her fancy dresses. Plus also she has lacy socks with ribbons on them” (1-2). The narration is very focused on physical attributes of the girls. “[Grace] has my favorite kind of hair. It is called automatically curly. Also, she has pink hightops” (2). The three girls feud over who may “have” Warren as their boyfriend. Junie begins manipulating Lucille. “I kept on being nice to her. ‘Cause I wanted to meet that handsome boy, of course” (12). “‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Lucille. I am a big pig. And so how can I even steal your boyfriend?’” Junie tells her (14). Warren is initiallyuninterested in Junie because she’s too much of a “nutball,” opposed to the ladylike Lucille and even Grace. She tries to dress so that Warren will like her, which humorously involves a dog collar, scribbling on her shoes, and a “princess dress.” At the end, Junie comforts Warren when he’s sad and makes him laugh with her nutball-ness. They become friends. Junie attempted to increase her femininity and tone down her personality traits (which weren’t quite gendered) to impress the boy and compete with her girl friends. The narration makes it clear that those changes were unnecessary. Good?
Exhibiting masculinity “correctly”

- In *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911), the character Colin is hidden away by his father because of his illness, which makes him appear sickly and unable to perform regular tasks. He cries constantly. When Mary, the protagonist, finds him, he explains, “because I am like this always, ill and having to lie down. My father won’t let people talk me over either. The servants are not allowed to speak about me. If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan’t live. My father hates to think I may be like him” (96).

  Colin, as the only son (and child) of Mr. Craven, is supposed to inherit the estate after Craven’s death. Rather than try to nurse him to health, Craven stows him away because he is an embarrassment. This contrasts the treatment of Mary, who arrived at Craven’s a sickly, ugly girl, as Hodgson Burnett writes, but who was looked after and allowed out. Mary’s illness is supposedly less severe than Colin’s, but the ending of the novel suggests that Colin’s illness was more of the soul than the body, as he is cured by spending time in the garden and fresh air. A boy’s weakness is shameful and to be hidden, while a girl’s weakness is expected, though not praised.

Bereavement of spouses

- In *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911), Mr. Craven allows nobody to speak of or enter the garden because Mrs. Craven died while inside. Craven deals with the grief by hiding all memory of his wife. Mrs. Medlock, on the other hand, deals by wearing her dead husband. “She had on her best black dress and cap, and her collar was fastened with a large brooch with a picture of a man’s face on it. It was a colored photograph of Mr. Medlock who had died years ago, and she always wore it when she was dressed up” (86). When adults grieve for their spouses, the manly thing to do is lock-up memories and feelings, and the womanly way is to continue showing loyalty? It’s not fair that Mrs. Craven’s memory is treated like a shameful, hidden thing. She is not honored because her widower refuses to show his emotions. I don’t think this part would be taken as exemplary by children reading, but it’s interesting.

**Bullet Point Notes**

The rough observations that I recorded as I was reading.

Pre-1950:
The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911)

- Mary, the main character, is kind of a mini spinster
- 19: Martha says “a black”
- 19: “You don’t know anything about natives! They are not people” (India). very racist
- 28: “bird with the red breast” (robin) is automatically “he”
- Ben Weatherstaff works outdoors in the gardens, manual labor. Martha is a maid, governess, indoors.
- Mary hears a child crying many times, Martha does not hear the same sound/rejects the idea
- 84: Mary says of Dickon, “I think--I think he’s beautiful!”
- The garden is full of roses
- Bereavement of spouses
  - Mr. Craven allows nobody to speak of it or go inside it because Mrs. Craven died while inside it. She sat on the branches of trees and fell off one day, died from the injuries.
  - Mrs. Medlock - “She had on her best black dress and cap, and her collar was fastened with a large brooch with a picture of a man’s face on it. It was a colored photograph of Mr. Medlock who had died years ago, and she always wore it when she was dressed up” (86).
  - Craven deals by hiding all memory of his wife, Mrs. Medlock deals by wearing her dead husband - differences in vulnerabilities in pain/sadness. The manly thing to do is lock-up, the womanly thing is to continue showing loyalty (and possession of themselves by their dead husbands?)
  - 88: “It seemed hard for him to speak his dead wife’s name.”
- 94: Mary investigates the child crying noise in the night. Meets Colin Craven, Mr. Craven’s hidden son. Sickly looking boy, “crying fretfully.”
  - Colin: “Because I am like this always, ill and having to lie down. My father won’t let people talk me over either. The servants are not allowed to speak about me. If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan’t live. My father hates to think I may be like him.” (96)
  - Colin would be the Craven male heir. Rather than try to heal him and care for him, Craven hides him and lets him die. Shame of a sick son? Though Mary was ill and sickly, ugly looking, she is cared for. Her weakness is expected. His is a crime.
  - Foil to Dickon

Stuart Little by E.B. White (1945)

- 2: father makes stewart a bed, mother sews him a suit
- 17: Stuart uses a hat and cane at three years old
- Margalo the little bird - she
- 55-56: Stuart protects Margalo by shooting the cat with tiny arrow
- 62: Margalo rescues Stuart from a trash barge
- 106: Harriet Ames, a girl 2 inches tall

1950-1959:

**Nancy Drew: The Secret of the Wooden Lady** by Carolyn Keene (1950)
- Father/daughter. Mother dead.
- Nancy 18 v. 15 year old Hardy boys
- 20: Nancy’s friends Bess and George. “Bess and George were cousins, but there any likeness ended. Bess, blond and pretty, had a penchant for second desserts and frilly dresses. She shared Nancy’s adventures out of deep loyalty to her but was constantly fearful of the dangers involved. / George was as boyish as her name. Her hair was dark, her face handsomely pert. George wore simple clothes and craved adventure” (20).
- George gives Bess a ruby necklace she had.

**The Hardy Boys: The Secret of Wildcat Swamp** by Franklin W. Dixon (1952)
- Starts with the boys digging a hole, for a pool P.3-4
- Chet’s cowardice makes him the “female” ish counterpart to the Hardy Boys
- The literal name the Hardy Boys
  - adjective, har·di·er, har·di·est.
    - capable of enduring fatigue, hardship, exposure, etc.; sturdy; strong: hardy explorers of northern Canada.
    - (of plants) able to withstand the cold of winter in the open air.
    - requiring great physical courage, vigor, or endurance:
      - the hardiest sports.
      - bold or daring; courageous:
        - hardy soldiers.
      - unduly bold; presumptuous; foolhardy.
- Page 7: “When they reached home, their quiet, pretty mother said she would leave the decision to their father. After the situation was explained to him that evening, the tall, well-built detective said:”
- P 19: “‘No, I washed every downstairs window today,’ Mrs. Bailey asserted.”
  - Her housework is her effort towards the case
  - “My wife” “Mrs. Bailey” no name

1960-1969:

**The Phantom Tollbooth** by Norton Juster (1961)
- The Whether Man in Expectations
- Dog named Tock, him
- Get to Dictionopolis, gatekeeper a man, five royal advisors (all men) - advisors to the king (man)
- Marketplace selling words. Vendor “one man in a booming voice” (47).
- “The Spelling Bee” a giant bee, also a he (50)
- Humbug (man) (53)
- Officer Shrift (comes to clear market commotion) (man) (59)
- Milo gets put in jail (dungeon) (63). “Not much company, but you can always chat with the witch.”
  - First mention of any female
- “A very commendable ambition, young man,’ said a small voice from across the cell. Milo looked up, very surprised, and noticed for the first time, in the half-light of the room, a pleasant-looking old lady quietly knitting and rocking” (66)
- 67: “Don’t be frightened,” she laughed. “I’m not a witch--I’m a Which.”
- 70: “You may call me Aunt Faintly.”
- 73: “He took to himself a wife and before long had two fine young sons to whom he taught everything he knew so that one day they might rule wisely.”
- 74: The brothers have a natural rivalry. One made a town for words (Dictionopolis) and the other made a town for numbers (Digitopolis).
- 75: King. “His only regret was that he’d never had a daughter, for he loved little girls as much as he loved little boys. One day as he was strolling peacefully about the grounds, he discovered two tiny babies that had been abandoned in a basket under the grape arbor. They were beautiful golden-haired girls.”
- 75: “‘We’ll call this one Rhyme and this one Reason,’ he said, and so they became the Princess of Sweet Rhyme and the Princess of Pure Reason and were brought up in the palace.”
- 75: King dies, divides kingdom between two sons, tells them to care for princesses. “Everyone loved the princesses because of their great beauty, their gentle ways, and their ability to settle all controversies fairly and reasonably.”
- 76: “But always, with patience and love, the princesses set things right.”
- 77: princesses decide that numbers and words are equally important, brothers banish them
- Meeting more characters, all men, Chroma the Great, etc.
- 147-148: The Silent Valley was ruled by The Soundkeeper (she). Who was a very generous ruler until frustrations caused her to ban all sound. (vengeful woman)
- Rescuing the princesses. Castle in the air. 231: “At the far end of the hall a silver curtain parted and two young women stepped forward. They were dressed all in white and were both beautiful beyond compare. One was grave and quiet, with a look of warm understanding in her eyes, and the other seemed gay and joyful.”
- 232-233: they ask Milo to sit and immediately counsel him with moral lessons.
- They fly the princesses down and they reign in Wisdom again
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl (1964)

- “There are five children in this book” - boy, girl, girl, boy, and Charlie Bucket (The hero)
  - Charlie identified by hero, not gender pronoun like the others
- “Mr. Bucket was the only person in the family with a job.”
- Grandpa Joe and Grandma Josephine, Grandpa George and Grandma Georgina
- 28: Charlie addresses Grandpas before Grandmas
- 52: Veruca Salt finds second golden ticket. Her father: “I'm in the peanut business, you see, and I've got about a hundred women working for me over at my place, shelling peanuts for roasting and salting. That's what they do all day long, those women, they sit there shelling peanuts. So I says to them, "Okay, girls," I says, "from now on, you can stop shelling peanuts and start shelling the wrappers off these chocolate bars instead!" And they did.”
- 64: Violet Beauregarde: “My mother says it's not ladylike and it looks ugly to see a girl's jaws going up and down like mine do all the time, but I don't agree. And who's she to criticize, anyway, because if you ask me, I'd say that her jaws are going up and down almost as much as mine are just from yelling at me every minute of the day.”

1970-1979:

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (1977)

- Page 1: “Jess” is the male main character. 2: spends all summer running to be fastest
- 4 - “The older boys always took the dry center of the upper field for their ball games, while the girls claimed the small top section for hopscotch and jump rope and hanging around talking”
- Farm boy, drinks sugary coffee in fourth grade
- 11: Jess makes dinner for himself and the girls
- 16 - Miss Edmunds
- 22 - first Leslie appearance, androgynous. “Girl, he decided.”
- 25- “girls did more of the heart stuff in fifth grade than boys”
- 30 - “ladies first”
- 35 - Leslie wins the playground races - gains value because of traditionally masculine quality (physical strength)
- 36 - Leslie ignores or is ignorant of convention. “Lord, the girl had no notion of what you did and didn’t do.”
- 42 - “Jess had written about football, which he really hated, but he had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him.”
- 42 - “it tells about an unusual hobby---for a girl.” Leslie’s composition about scuba diving hobby
- 43 - “His dad expected him to be a man. And here he was letting some girl who wasn’t even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater. Dumb, dumb, dumb.”
Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing by Judy Blume (1972)

4: Peter wins a turtle, names him Dribble. Automatic “He”
8: Dad announces he is bringing business bosses to stay with them. Mother disagrees, asks why they can’t stay in a hotel. She is ignored/overpowered. Mother fixes up a guest room with fancy sheets
  ○ 10: “She spent the day in the kitchen. She really cooked up a storm.”
  ○ 10: mother sets the table
13: Mrs. Yarby immediately picks up Fudge. “I just love babies.”
15: “Mr. Yarby pounded his chest.”
15: “Of course!’ my father said, like he knew it all along. ‘Juicy-O for everyone!’ my father told my mother. She went into the kitchen to get it.”
16: “Isn’t it Fudgie’s bedtime?’ my father hinted. ‘Oh yes. I think it is,’ my mother said, scooping him up. ‘Say goodnight, Fudgie.’”
18: “my mother was pouring the coffee”
21: “It took my mother half an hour to peel off her trading stamps and clean up the Yarbys’ suitcase.”
32: Sheila, fellow fourth-grader. “My mother thinks Sheila is the greatest. ‘She’s so smart,’ my mother says. ‘And someday she’s going to be a real beauty.’ Now that’s the funniest! Because Sheila looks a lot like the monkeys that Fudge is so crazy about. So maybe she’ll look beautiful to some ape! But never to me.”
33: Sheila begs to look after Fudge
34: “Sheila’s sister Libby is in seventh grade. She’s about as beautiful as Sheila. The only difference is, she’s bigger.”
57: “Dr. Brown [dentist] has this rule about mothers in the examining room with kids--they’re not allowed! Mothers are a big problem, Dr. Brown told me once. I agreed.”
62: Shoe shopping. Mother sees Peter has a hole in his sock. “‘Oh...I’m so embarrassed!’”
  ○ “My mother sure worries about silly things!”
71: school project group of Peter, Jimmy, and Sheila. “Sheila thinks she’s smarter than me and Jimmy put together--just because she’s a girl!”
84: mom is leaving to visit her sister who just had a baby. “‘I’m not worrying. It’s just that Daddy is so...well, you know...he doesn’t know much about taking care of children.’”
84: “Outside my father hailed a taxi. He put the suitcase in first, then held the door for my mother.”
85: visiting father’s work. “My father has a private office and his own secretary. Her name is Janet and she’s very pretty. I especially like her hair. It’s thick and black. She has
the longest eyelashes I’ve ever seen. Once I heard my mother say, ‘Janet must have to get up at the crack of dawn to put on her face.’ My father just laughed when my mother said it.”

- 86: Janet babysitting the boys for father. “I nibbled while Janet fixed herself up. She had a big folding mirror in her desk drawer. She set it on top of her desk and went to work on herself. When she was finished she looked exactly the same as when we came in. But I guess she didn’t think so because she said, ‘That’s much better.’”
- 98: “I don’t think my father even put him into his pajamas last night.”
- 103: “Because as far as I know my father can’t cook anything. He doesn’t even know where my mother keeps the peanut butter; the dishes; or the pots and pans.”
  - Like Diary of a Wimpy Kid - mother leaves, father is helpless because he never does anything in the home
- 106: “After supper my father bathed Fudge. The only thing he decided not to do were the dishes. He stacked them in the sink and left them for my mother.”
- 106: “On the way there my father said wouldn’t it be fun if we kept all the things we did over the weekend a secret—just between the three of us—kind of a man’s secret.”
  - Fraternity bribe with sons for protecting his ego

1980-1989:

*The Indian in the Cupboard* by Lynne Reid Banks (1980)

- 3 - “he did like arranging things in cupboards and drawers and then opening them later and finding them just as he’d left them.”
- Omri and Patrick must find Little Bear a woman to marry

*Bill’s New Frock* by Anne Fine (1989)

- Book/author is English
- Page 1: Bill wakes up a girl. Staring in the mirror, but there’s no description of the reflection
- Page 1: “I never wear dresses,” Bill burst out. “I know, it’s such a pity.”
- Illustration on page 2: the only thing in the drawing indicating “girl” is the dress. Frilly, pink dress. The room is very “boy.” Airplane hanging from ceiling, toy cars on floor, messy, dirty sock, volleyball, poster of guy kicking soccer ball, relatively short hair on Bill.
- Page 3: mirror reflection. “In it, a girl with his curly red hair and wearing a pretty pink frock with fiddly shell buttons was staring back at him in equal dismay.”
  - The girl has his hair. No described difference in face or body. Only difference is the dress? Dress = girl.
- Page 4: Bill is whistled at on his way to school by Mean Malcom. He blushes and “felt so foolish” (5).
- Page 6: Bill is treated with more kindness than the late boys (although he is also late)
- Page 6 and 7: two women tell Bill to keep his dress clean
8: only boys are ever picked to lift the tables
10-12: Bill and Philip’s messy penmanship and books. Teacher scolds Bill but praises Philip.
12: “Well, girls are neater.”
Pages 14-15: reading Rapunzel. Bill asks why Rapunzel didn’t just plan her own escape instead of waiting 15 years for a prince. Teacher asks if Bill is feeling like themself (it’s unusual for a girl to question a princess story?)
23: Bill getting yelled at by the boys playing soccer. “It was the frock again! He knew it!”
24: “Why can’t you stay in your own bit of the playground?”
25: “Where are the girls supposed to play?” “You’re playing football all over every single inch of the playground!”
26: “no one fights a girl in a pretty pink frock”
35: “A curse was on him. A pink curse.”
Chapter called “No Pockets”
38: the decision to go in the girls’ or boys’ bathroom. He chooses the girls’ bathroom because of the privacy? And because being caught in the boys’ in a dress would mean ridicule.
38: skips the bathroom part, doesn’t deal in genitals. Purposeful. What does he have down there today? It doesn’t matter. He’s a girl because of the dress.
40: Headmaster says Bill looks very sensible and responsible, no dawdling. That’s abnormal for a girl?
42: has to carry all this stuff to the office, and looks in the dress for a pocket. No pockets.
  ○ “Bill was amazed. How was a person in a frock like this supposed to survive?”
Author does use he/him pronouns all the way through
46: Bill is almost to the office, trying to balance the ink bottles, keys, forms, and tennis balls. “My!” Mrs Bandaraina said, watching his snail-slow progress. “Aren’t you the careful one, taking such care not to spill coloured ink on your sweet little frock!”
  ○ As if the only reason for taking care during this errand was to protect and keep clean the dress - the symbol of femininity. Girls only care about what they look like.
55: Comic books. Bill ends up with a “Bunty” comic. (Wikipedia: Bunty was a British comic for girls published by D. C. Thomson & Co. from 1958 to 2001.)
  ○ “He firmly suspected that, if he had not been wearing the pretty pink frock, he would never have ended up with the Bunty.”
56: Bill reads the Bunty and enjoys it. Stories about girls.
  ○ 56-57: “He read the story about the brave orphan gypsy girl who led her lame pony carefully at night through a dangerous war zone.”
63: big fight between Bill and Rohan over a comic book. Rohan kicks and leaves a mark on Bill’s dress. Mrs Collins sees that and then blames most of the fight on Rohan, though Bill hit first.
“How could a little thump on the shoulder from someone in a pretty pink frock excuse a great big kick from someone wearing heavy Doc Marten boots?” (63)

Many of the gender misunderstandings come from adults in authority at the school

- 64: people tell Rohan he looks angry, but tell Bill he looks upset
- 67: Mrs Collins suggests races, and then starts to coordinate them. “’Those in frocks against those in trousers!’ roared Mrs Collins.”
  - Only Bill has a frock on, so she says forget it
- 72: the girls plan to let Paul win the race (Paul had a disease when a baby, can’t move that well)
- 86: Mean Malcom whistles again after school, and Bill stands up for himself.
  - “Because,” continued Bill savagely, “I am not a dog! I am not a--” “I am a person!”
- 88: As soon as he takes off the dress, he’s a boy again.
  - “Never in his whole life had Bill felt such relief.”
  - Bella the cat never notices the difference - at the beginning or end.

1990-1999:

**Magic Tree House: Dinosaurs Before Dark by Mary Pope Osborne (1992)**

- 2-3: Annie initiates climbing up to the treehouse - she is more daring? Jack is more practical (we have to get home, it’s almost dark, “we don’t know who it belongs to”)
- 5: Annie tells Jack the treehouse is full of books, that makes him climb up
- 8: Jack likes dinosaurs, Annie knows and gives him the dinosaur book
- 12: Annie automatically calls the Pteranodon “he”
  - Later Antosaurus is “she” because a mother protecting eggs, babies, nests.
  - Triceratops is “he” for no particular reason
  - Tyrannosaurus rex is “it” or “monster” (no pronoun)
- 15: “Annie dropped to the ground. She stepped boldly up to the ancient creature”
- 16: “Annie was always trying to make friends with animals” “Annie touched the Pteranodon’s crest. She stroked his neck. She was talking to him.”
  - Motherly?
- 24: “‘Just promise you won’t pet him,’ Jack called down to Annie. ‘I promise,’ said Annie. ‘Promise you won’t kiss him,’ said Jack. ‘I promise,’ said Annie.”
- 27: Triceratops encounter. “‘He looks nice, Jack,’ Annie said.” She is more optimistic, maybe naive?
- 34: duck-billed dinosaur encounter. Annie gets too close, dinosaur is mad, Jack “saves” her. “‘You have to use your brain, Annie,’ said Jack.”
- 50: Tyrannosaurus rex encounter: Annie takes action to save Jack. climbs down ladder, talks to Pteranodon
- 64: Teacher is “she”

• 1-2: “I have two bestest friends at that place. One of them is named Lucille. She is way beautifuller than me. That’s because her nanna buys her fancy dresses. Plus also she has lacy socks with ribbons on them. My other friend is named Grace. Me and Grace ride the school bus together. She has my favorite kind of hair. It is called automatically curly. Also, she has pink hightops.”
  ○ Most of the traits Junie names are physical, beauty-related.
  ○ Grammar is purposefully incorrect to mimic a kid
  ○ Then she says that Grace is a fast runner, “the fastest runner in all of kindergarten.”
• 6: Grace and Junie save Lucille from “the evil stranger boy”
• 7: Lucille says “WHY DID YOU CHASE THAT BOY AWAY? NOW YOU’VE RUINED EVERYTHING!”
  ○ Warren, handsome, been in a commercial
• 9: Junie says she “would like him for my new boyfriend”
  ○ 9: Lucille says angrily, “He can’t be your boyfriend. He can only be my boyfriend. ‘Cause I saw him first!”
  ○ Fighting over a male
• 12: Junie/Lucille. “I kept on being nice to her. ‘Cause I wanted to meet that handsome boy, of course.”
• 13-14: Junie manipulates Lucille by complimenting her beauty and socks and insulting her own
  ○ “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Lucille. I am a big pig. And so how can I even steal your boyfriend?” (14)
  ○ Never a description of what makes Warren attractive. Just “handsome”
• 15: “It was my teacher. Her name is Mrs. She has another name, too. But I just like Mrs. and that’s all”
  ○ Nameless teacher - she’s married, that’s all we know
• 25: That Grace was happy and sparkly, too. “He said he liked my high tops,” she told me.
  “He said he liked my dress,” said Lucille.
  ○ Warren only compliments their physical attributes/possessions?
• 37: Junie feeds the cereal she likes to her dog (the sugary kinds). Gets grown-up fiber cereal. “It worked, Grace! The fiber cereal worked! Now I’m not a nutball anymore! And so Handsome Warren will love me just like he loves you!”
• 38: Grace shows Warren her new shoes for running. “She was running in circles around that handsome guy.”
• 40: Lucille parades around Warren in expensive princess dress and he comments on her richness
  ○ Warren is sad and tells all of them to go away. Junie stays and annoys him, but then tells jokes and he warms up, then they laugh together.
• 70: “‘WE ARE BOTH NUTBALLS!’ he said.”
The principle is a “he”
Lesson: don’t try to change yourself to get a boy to like you

2000-2009:

**Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000)**
- 4 - Esperanza wields the knife. Year is 1930. She is almost 13. “This job was usually reserved for the eldest son of a wealthy rancher, but since Esperanza was an only child and Papa’s pride and glory, she was always given the honor.”
- Her friends. “When they were all together, they talked about one thing: their Quinceaneras, the presentation parties they would have when they turned fifteen. They still had two years to wait, but so much to discuss -- the beautiful white gowns they would wear, the big celebrations where they would be presented, and the sons of the richest families who would dance with them. After their Quinceaneras, they would be old enough to be courted, marry, and become las patronas, the heads of their households, rising to the positions of their mothers before them.” (7-8)
- 8 - Esperanza pricks her finger on a thorn while picking flowers (a symbol of femininity)
- 22 - Esperanza’s father is dead, by the end of the second(?) chapter. Now, the family is only female (her and her mother).
- Chapters are named after fruits: grapes, papayas - also symbols of femininity?
- 27-28 - Esperanza’s birthday gifts: the book Don Quixote (masculine) and a doll (feminine)
- 30 - father left the land to his brother, as women do not customarily own land
- 34 - men in power, her uncles, banker and mayor - restrict their lives. As soon as the man of the house is gone, they are helpless
- 59 - Esperanza and mother and hortensia smuggled underneath fruit in the wagon - it’s not safe for women at night because of burglars. Not said that they fear certain rape if men find the women
- 102- “They will only give one cabin for each man with a family. There is no housing for single women.” must have male head of household
- 108 - mother’s hair is in a long braid, instead of an up-do. Signifies her class as a working woman
- Crocheting her grandmother’s unfinished blanket is Esperanza’s way of helping her mother - it’s woman’s work.
- Abuelita finds a wounded bird who recovers the next day. It represents her daughter.

**The Hardy Boys: the Castle Conundrum by Franklin W. Dixon (2001)**
- France adventure.
- 15 and 18 years old
- Teens come from all over world to Frehel to work on restoring the village (6) - the finished project will house refugees
- P. 41 - Libby scared, Joe pulls her away
2010-2019:

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth* by David Kinney (2010)

- **13:** Greg jealous of Rowley going to concert. “But when I found out who was performing, I was glad I wasn’t invited.” [picture of performer “Josie” with a heart above the i. Roses on the stage. Screaming girls make up entire crowd except Rowley]
- **17:** teacher splits up boys and girls for health. Video for boys about puberty.
- **46:** Teacher says boys are required to shower after gym, but none of them want to. “The only person who was OK with it was Roger Townsend, but he was held back twice and he’s practically a man anyway. So the rest of us decided we were gonna have to fake it” (47).
- **50:** Greg recalls using drainage pipe to get to Rowley’s house, coming home stinky. Mom puts book called “What the Heck Just Happened to MY BODY?” on his bed with a stick of deodorant.
- **53:** mom calls meeting about bathroom situation, boys peeing on the floor, “lousy aim.” “Mom said the new rule was that us boys were gonna have to sit down every time we used the bathroom, no matter what. But none of us guys liked THAT idea” (53-54).
- **55:** mom told us she was going back to school. Greg doesn’t like that because she’s always there when he gets home from school. “But Mom said that after all these years of staying at home with us kids, she needs to do something that stimulates her mind. She said she’s gonna take classes for a semester and see how it goes” (55).
- **56:** “Mom said us men are gonna have to make our own dinners a few nights a week and start doing chores that she usually takes care of herself” (56).
  - It’s disastrous. They fail to make dinner, go to a restaurant, and dad twists ankle chasing Rodrick in the parking lot
- **63:** “For the record, I think it should be illegal for a boy to have to fold his mother’s underwear.”
- **85:** “Like last week, he told everyone at the lunch table that it’s medically impossible for a girl to fart.”
- **107:** “I noticed that all the girls in my Health class had gotten THEIR eggs to school safely. Some of the girls were carrying theirs around in little pouches they’d sewn, and a few of them had even accessorized their eggs with sparkles and glitter and stuff like that.”
- **110:** teacher throws eggs in trash. “Well, that sent Rowley and the girls into hysterics.”
  - Rowley is “emasculated” by exhibiting female traits. These are the reasons he is less cool and weird.
- **119:** “The words Mom used were ‘domestic help,’ but I knew that was just code for ‘maid.’”
  - Mom says she’ll hire someone to help clean, Greg assumes it will be a woman
  - It is: Isabella
- **155:** boys and girls split up for night
● 216-217: Rowley tries to give Greg a “Best Friends Forever” locket/necklace. “I told him I wasn’t gonna wear the locket, because it’s meant for girls

_Sisters by Raina Telgemeier (2014)_

● Sequel to “Smile”? Obviously, note that not a personally observed book, after my time.
● 1: father is naturally distrustful that mom and children are prepared for their roadtrip
  ○ Page 10: Mother holds up baby with pants off, showing Raina the baby’s nude front. Mother: “...Now you do believe she’s a girl?” Raina: “Yes.”
● 17: Raina offers baby Amara doll. She throws it across the room.
● 18-19: sequence. Raina offers activities to Amara which Amara continually rejects. Dancing, dress-up. Drawing, she likes
  ○ Amara has National Geographic magazines, pens, pencils, fruit snacks, bags, road atlas.
  ○ Rain has Lynda Barry comics, Teen mags, chips, walkman, tapes, pillows, bear
  ○ Little brother has skater magazines, cars, trucks, baby carrots, juice pouch
  ○ Mom has instant coffee in thermos, mom-bag, map
● 34: Amara jumps out to look at deer, establishes fondness for nature/woods/animals
● 48: Raina looks at storm aftermath, Amara picks up dead frog “Poor frog!” Raina makes disgusted face
● Dad is laid off, Mom asks if she should go back to school? (like diary of wimpy)
● 64: In Utah, souvenir shop. Little brother: “Awwh! Can I get this truck, mom!” Raina hold up a shirt to herself. Amara finds a back scratcher for her mosquito bites.
● 73: At zoo. Amara is excited by all animals, including snakes, from which Raina runs away screaming, “NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”
● 89: Raina is reading Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH by Robert C. O'Brien
● 116: Cousins Josh and Jeremy. “You don’t look like a Raina...I’m going to call you Penelope. Do you play cards?”
● 118: cousin Lindsay gets back from the mall. Blonde, colorful clothes, high heels, earrings, expecting a phone call
● 120: Lindsay performs karaoke. Pink blouse, purple leopard-print skirt, green tights, pink socks
● 131: Raina in the bathroom. Tons of makeup, brushes, hair tools, perfumes on counter. Thought bubble: “Lindsay sure had a lot of beauty products…”
  ○ She puts makeup and earrings on
  ○ Walks out, Amara see her: “Ew, what did you do to your face?!?”
CHAPTER ONE: Midtvesten

Once upon a time, in an old, windswept country, there lived a kind, intelligent queen called Ruth. She ruled over the queendom of Midtvesten, beloved by the people for her generosity and fairness. The queen lived in a castle on the edge of town, and she kept a sprawling, fruitful garden. Villagers and royalty, alike, planted and tended to the plants, and everyone reaped its rewards.
Midtvesten was a sweeping, green land. Trees were plentiful, and the warmth of each spring pulled millions of wildflowers up from the soil. It was a magical place, but it was not without danger. The queen had inherited her position from her mother before her, after growing up in Midtvesten, and she knew the folklore that originated in its countryside.

Her husband, King John, was a level-headed advisor and a loving partner. Together, they raised seven children: Frederick, Hannah, Olivia, Sage, Luke, Nadia, and Ava. The children grew up in Midtvesten among the people, and each were encouraged to find their unique passion.

CHAPTER TWO: Frederick

The first child, Frederick, was welcomed into the world by the town’s open arms. When he was born, the village brought endless gifts for the new parents and their child. For the first months of Frederick’s life, the front rooms of the castle were packed with tiny socks, pants, dresses, and hats. People sent homemade soups and fresh produce for the exhausted new mother. The King was often seen pushing little Frederick in a pram about town, greeting his subjects. The King wanted to be sure his child knew his people and home from a young age. As Frederick grew, he began jumping out of the stroller to investigate some sound or smell. Soon enough, the little boy was old enough to walk beside his father, grasping his hand. Frederick was constantly pressing his little face against the display windows downtown, and he often asked his father to buy him jewelry and silver spoons from the shops. The King often obliged his son, being partial to the happiness of his child, but he did so in moderation, trying to make sure Frederick knew the danger of attachment to material goods.

When they arrived home from their outings, Frederick sitting on the King’s shoulders, decorated in ruby earrings and necklaces, the Queen would look up from her work and smile.

Once, while the King and his son were out, Frederick spotted an exquisite pair of slippers in a window display. He broke free of his father, burst through the door of the shop, and got the attention of the artisan behind the counter.

The artist wore incredible robes of long, silky fabric. They bent over the counter, amused, to see the young boy, who gazed upwards at the artist.

“Something’s caught your eye, hasn’t it, little one?”

Frederick nodded quickly, suddenly very shy.

The artist’s eyes were lined with thin stripes of kohl, and the irises were bright green, with little flecks of gold. Frederick glanced at the lettering on the wall behind the counter. It said:
Leslie Luck’s Shop for Dancers

“Are you Leslie Luck?” Frederick muttered.

“Yes, your highness, I am,” they replied. “You can call me Leslie.”

“Are you a dancer, yourself?”

“Yes, I still dance. Not quite as much as I used to. I’m old now. See?” Leslie said, gesturing to the lines on their face.

Frederick looked there, too, but didn’t see anything to be upset about. He thought Leslie was one of the most beautiful and interesting people he’d ever seen.
Leslie had seen Frederick’s eyes enlarge at the sight of the slippers in the window, so they floated to retrieve them from the display, then instructed the prince to sit down on a stool upholstered in aquamarine satin. Frederick examined the pattern on the fabric: countless tiny, silver fish, swimming in orderly lines across the seat.

Leslie appeared in front of him with the slippers and a book of photographs. The pictures were of ballet dancers, mid-form, wearing tulle and tights and looking like music box dolls. They wore slippers like the pair in front of him. Leslie hummed and flipped the pages while Frederick watched, enraptured. Then, Leslie unlaced Frederick’s boots and eased the prince’s feet into the glowing, pale pink shoes, tying the ribbons around his ankles. Frederick stood up at Leslie’s request. The artist showed him how to position his feet and arms, and then did a perfect plie, instructing Frederick to follow suit.

“You are a natural, child.”

Frederick exited the shop with his new ballet slippers in tow, and the address of the local dance studio. The King stepped out of the shade in which he was waiting, and asked Frederick about his experience in the shop.

“Miss Leslie gave me these beautiful shoes and showed me the most wonderful pictures, father. I think I want to be a ballerina when I’m older.”

The King smiled with pride.

“That sounds like a splendid idea, Frederick,” he replied. “Leslie is not ‘miss’ or ‘mister,’ though, son. They just prefer Leslie, or ‘the artist.’”

The next day, Frederick began dancing ballet, and he did so for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER THREE: Hannah

After Frederick came Hannah.

The Queen’s second-oldest offspring was always up to no good. She was born just one year after her brother. On walks with her father and brother, she occupied the pram Frederick had grown out of, and stared out at the world with curious, mischievous eyes. Whereas Frederick was always a relatively well-behaved child, Hannah was what the Norwegians call a *jypling*, a whippersnapper.

Before Hannah could walk, she could climb. She crawled to the bases of furniture and clawed her way up to the top. Often, if the Queen left the room to retrieve a document or a cup of tea, she would return to find Hannah sitting on top of the Grandfather clock, her tiny feet swinging off the side. The Queen would gasp in worry, then scold her in anger. Hannah would just smile down at her mother, giggling, and then climb back to the floor.

As Hannah got older, she began to take her hobby more seriously. She snuck out of the castle at night to hike to the fjord, where she would attempt to summit small inclines on the cliffs. Her fingers grew calloused and her palms tough. Her toes became stronger, and her arms wider. Soon, she was strong enough to pull herself onto landings without grounding her feet on anything.
Her parents, the King and Queen, watched from the bedroom window after dark, and frequently saw her scurry across the lawn, some climbing rope in tow. They simply sighed and hoped she would be safe. There was no stopping her passion.

For her eleventh birthday, the Queen and King presented her with her very own, pristine climbing gear. The best there was. Hannah was overjoyed, and begged her parents to let her travel to Vesten, where, she had learned from the newspapers, east, professional rock climbers met for an annual festival and competition. They agreed to let her go after her fifteenth birthday, and Hannah began training.

CHAPTER FOUR: Olivia

After Hannah came Olivia.

Olivia was an attentive, analytical child. She waited to speak, and didn’t say a word until she was three years old. The King and Queen were patient. They talked to her, telling her about the country, her family, and the people of Midtvesten.

And, as they did with all their children, they read books for her. If an observer were to enter the castle on any given evening, they would see the Queen and King in the sitting room, their children around them, a fire burning in the hearth, and a book being read aloud. The children heard stories about people of faraway lands, about futuristic worlds, about animals and forests, and especially, about trolls.

Having listened for three years, when Olivia was ready to speak, she said:

“Father, may I please have a glass of water?”

Her parents stared, shocked by their daughter’s coherence.

Throughout her life, Olivia continued to strive for nothing but perfection. Her mother and father constantly tried to remind her that it is, indeed, okay to not be perfect. In fact, nobody is, they said. But, Olivia persisted in her ways. She was frustrated when things didn’t turn out in perfect order, or something didn’t go exactly as she’d planned.

Stains on shirts frustrated her. Loud noises overwhelmed her. She couldn’t understand why people didn’t understand her.

Eventually, while spending time in the village library, among shelves and shelves of quiet books, Olivia found a volume describing a topic she’d never heard of: physics. She sat down, right there, on the floor, and began to read. She read until darkness fell outside, and the librarian had to retrieve her from the stacks. She checked out the book, and read as she walked home, stumbling on roots and gaps in the cobblestones.

Centripetal force, kinetic friction, force, velocity, gravity.

It was all so sensical. Olivia went back to the library the next day to find more physics books, and soon, she had her mother take her to the laboratory in the local college. The Queen’s old friend, a lady who asked to be called Doctor Josephine, gave Olivia a tour of the facilities and agreed to let her observe lectures and experiments in the coming week.

Olivia did so, taking in every detail with awe and admiration. Doctor Josephine wore a pristine, white lab coat, and spoke with a calm, even tone. Olivia thought she must be the
smartest person on earth. When Olivia told her so, though, Josephine argued that such a title belonged to her wife, Gisele, the town’s most talented painter.

Over the years, Olivia spent more time at the laboratory, honing her talent for physical sciences, and began collaboration with Doctor Josephine on experiments.

CHAPTER FIVE: Sage

After Olivia came Sage.

Sage, the fourth child, loved food. They ate and ate and ate.

Sage’s siblings nicknamed them Butterball, after a character in one of their favorite stories.

When Sage was born, they drank as much milk as their mother’s breasts could produce. More than any of the other babies had. When Sage began eating mashed vegetables, they couldn’t get enough of them, either. Especially the carrots.

There was no need for the King to spin spoons of food around like birds flying into the child’s mouth. With Sage’s siblings, this was sometimes the only way to feed them. Sage slurped food from spoons, bowls, plates, and jars, with no persuasion necessary.

When Sage was old enough to get around by themself, they were free to find and eat all the carrots they could find. Their parents figured that, as carrots are vegetables, there was no harm in the child’s obsession.

Until, one morning, Hannah went to retrieve Sage from the kitchen.

She gasped, yelling, “Dad! Mother! Sage is orange!”

And indeed they were.

Sage was forced to tone down on the carrots, but they developed new food favorites: cinnamon buns, mashed potatoes, cooked greens, fried eggs, and so on, and so forth. Fueled by all the intake, Sage grew taller and taller, soon towering over her mother and father. Though his sisters were older, they often asked to sit atop his shoulders.

When Sage entered teenhood, the King began sending them to the market to fetch the groceries every week. Sage looked forward to these trips with incredible excitement. Each week, they rode a bicycle to town.

Sage would remember their first trip to the market for the rest of their life. At the market, there were countless vendors, each with a specialty food they grew, mixed, or baked. Sage walked the outdoor aisles, mouth agape at the colorful sights. People from town and country traveled to this square every Saturday to sell their items. Over time, Sage would learn all their names, become familiar with their trades, and become hungry, not only for their goods, but for their advice.

Sage stopped in front of a table covered in colorful spices. The person behind the table was reclined, their legs propped on a nearby stool, and their face hidden behind an open newspaper.

“Excuse me?” Sage said, shyly.
The newspaper shifted to the right, and a face appeared, fixed in anticipation. Sage saw kind eyes and a smile.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your reading,” Sage continued. “But I’d love to know more about these spices.”

That day, Sage learned all about curries, garlic, paprika, sage, oregano, turmeric, cloves, and cardamom. The vendor, called Frankie, explained the basics of each: flavor profiles, families, common uses.

The budget Sage’s father had given him might have to be reallocated.

The vendor made him a deal. Sage could have a discount, if when they cooked their first dish, they brought Frankie a plate.

The next day, Sage brought a sample of the dish they’d tried to create with a yellow curry mix. Though far from perfect, Frankie was very impressed.

“You’ve got a gift, kid.”

Sage spent more and more time in the kitchen, and was soon cooking meals for their entire family.

CHAPTER SIX: Luke


Luke was a very sentimental child. His emotions seemed to always hover just below the surface, accessible at any time. He cried, a lot, but they weren’t tears of insolence or greed. He cried when he saw others frown. If his mother smiled, he grinned. If she rubbed her back in pain, he burst into tears.

Luke was blessed with an incredible ability to empathize. He cared so much for others that his own emotions, the feelings coming from just him, were often indistinguishable from the emotions of others that he manifested.

Luke loved to watch his brother, Frederick, dance. At the dancers’ studio, once Frederick was old enough, he began teaching the younger children how to plie, stretch, and jump. Luke followed his brother to the studio and watched his brother instruct the young children, kids just a little younger than Luke. He was enamoured at the sight of it. Not because Luke was interested in dancing, though. He admired his brother’s talent, and like all the townspeople, was charmed by Leslie Luck, but what caught his eye was teaching.

Six pairs of eyes were glued to Frederick every Saturday morning. And by the end of every class, Frederick had helped those children learn a new skill, a new move, made them laugh, frustrated them. Luke wanted to have that kind of impact on kids when he grew up.

Luke decided early on that the thing he wanted most in the world was to be a father. To have kids of his own someday. On his sixth birthday, he received his most prized possession as a gift: a babydoll.

Luke cradled it in his arms, pretended to feed it and change its diaper, and put it to bed every night. His parents both chuckled at and admired their son’s care for his doll. Olivia, when she received a doll for her birthday, hurled it out the window and tried to calculate its velocity. In

“You know that stuff isn’t real, anyway, Luke!”

When Luke turned 15, he put up flyers around town, advertising babysitting services. He liked caring for kids, and he wanted some pocket money to take a girl to the theatre.

Soon enough, Luke was juggling clients, and most children around town flocked to him when he walked in the square. Usually, there was one on his shoulders and a couple in his arms, and sometimes, one clinging to his ankle. Luke was a tall, strong boy, so it didn’t bother him much. Girls at school fawned over his caring nature, prompting other boys to ask for advice about teaching and caring for their younger children.

Later, Luke would become the most celebrated kindergarten teacher the town had ever known. And much later, he became a father to a healthy brood of seven children, just like his mother had.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Nadia

After Luke came Nadia.

Nadia was a thinker. She was a quiet baby, then a quiet toddler, then a quiet child.

“Always in her head, that one!” her father used to say.

In that little head were maps, drawings, blueprints, great, big castles and skyscrapers. Ideas galore!

While her sister, Hannah, climbed, Nadia examined the rock face, or the side of the building. She imagined how it was built. Just how much weight could be placed on it before it fell down. Why did the builders choose bricks instead of metal beams?

When Hannah took her trips to the library, in tow of her older siblings, she, at first, spent her time in the storybooks. Once, she followed Olivia to the physics section, and from there, wandered the wings, examining aisle after aisle: sailing, painting, mechanics, geometry.

Finally, she found her aisle: architecture.

Nadia got lost in blueprints, sketches, photographs of towering structures and humble abodes. She learned about the process of creating a building, and why.

But the part that interested her most was design. She began keeping sketchbooks, and over time, filled book after book with sketches and ideas, becoming more and more detailed over time.

Nadia walked the streets and sketched the buildings she saw. She often went inside to ask about the building’s history, date of erection, and of course, Who was the architect?

One name cropped up many times in these investigations: Hans Kluber.

She went back to the library with the name written on a piece of paper. Eventually, she found an anthology, and it contained photos not only of buildings in Midvesten, but from all around the globe. Nadia immediately decided she must meet this Hans Kluber, who, as the book said, grew up not four blocks from where she stood.
Nadia loaned the book and brought it with her as she walked to Kluber’s old house. The building she came to was a humble, normal, brown house. Here, she found another plaque. It read:

*The ancestral home of Hans Kluber, 1801-1877.*

So, Nadia found, she could not meet Hans Kluber. Nevertheless, she took that book home with her and studied it. Kluber would become an inspiration in her career.

**CHAPTER EIGHT: Ava**

After Nadia, finally, came Ava.

Ava, the youngest of seven children, was the baby for a short time. But, unlike Frederick, for example, her days of pampering were short lived. There were six other kids to worry about, after all.

Her parents loved her very much, and they raised her with the same tactics they had used on all her siblings. Her siblings, though, parented her, as well. She grew up in the middle of a healthy, diverse brood, and very often, her siblings were tasked with watching over her, as they had been with each new addition.

As the older children involved themselves in games, little Ava usually found herself unsupervised, and free to wander off into the woods.

Since she was small, Ava adored plants and animals. She was a child of nature. Butterflies landed on her nose, birds on her toes. Her hands were usually covered in soil. She was not allergic to any living thing; not even poison ivy.

As she grew up, Ava continued to walk in the forest, spending hours and hours per day outside. She often sat down in the woods with her back against a tree trunk. She found, if she was very still, squirrels, foxes, and snakes would approach her with curiosity. It was as if they could sense that she wouldn’t hurt them. She only wanted to observe and respect her surroundings.

On the siblings’ regular library trips, Ava, of course, lost herself in nature books. Sketches, photographs, narratives, and facts about ecosystems, rare species, habitats, weather, and seasons. Everything in nature was connected, she thought, like a big, whooshing river that flowed in a perfect circle. Sadly, though, she also read about industry, smog, and pollution, and its impact on the earth she loved.

In the communal garden, Ava had the ultimate green thumb. By the time she was thirteen years old, she’d begun directing each planting season. Villagers came to her for advice about their own crops.

The bulbs she dropped in the earth always sprouted. Her touch comforted mares in labor.

Her parents and siblings were in awe of her natural abilities, her affinity for the natural world. She seemed like a conduit between people and the beautiful, wild earth.

**CHAPTER NINE: Setting off**
So the children aged, and matured, each nurturing their own passions, with their parents doing their best to nurture them.

If one were to walk about the house, they would find the Queen’s offspring spread about the halls and rooms, some with their noses in books, some stretching or lifting another, one creating concoctions in the kitchen, and a few waiting to taste test them.

The Queen and King loved their children dearly, but they knew the time had come for the kids to set out and find their own ways. With Ava having just turned sixteen, and Frederick nearing twenty-four years old, most of the children were, in fact, children no longer.

The kids, themselves, had started to get antsy. There was a big world outside Midvesten, and they wanted to see it. After speaking with their parents, as a family, they decided that all would leave together. Ava, though, was the youngest of all the children, at not yet seventeen. She begged her parents to let her go with the others.

“I will be perfectly safe in the company of my sisters and brothers!” she pleaded.

Her pleas were of no avail. She would have to wait until she was an adult, as her siblings were.

So, all the children were to set off and find their fortunes. Hannah planned to go to Edgewater Ridge, because it was a hub of climbing activity. Nadia was on her way to the big city of Damasiden, where the skyscrapers pierced the atmosphere. Frederick was planning on visiting the International School of Dance. Olivia was on her way to the Physics Institute, Sage to the Culinary Institute, and Luke to a teaching fellowship.

And so it came to be that on one spring morning, Ruth and John stood on their doorstep, waving to their brood. They each shed happy tears as they watched their children leave their childhoods behind, and set out to find themselves.

“Be careful!” John called to them.

“It’s all right, my love,” Ruth said. “They will be back, and they will be back with even more dreams.”

“Right, right. I’m still going to miss them,” John replied.

The queen looked at her husband and nodded, then they retreated into their now emptier home. Ava watched it all from her bedroom window, feeling defeated and a little lonely.

CHAPTER TEN: The Journey

The kids were planning on sticking together all the way until the ridge. They were to spend their nights in their tents, slowly trekking towards the edge of the kingdom, where they would go their separate ways. Each rode a horse from the Queen’s stables.

So they rode, and rode, and rode. Some of the siblings lost energy quickly and became irritable. Others were driven forward by the fresh air and the mountains. The peaks rose and fell, and the trail moved with them. Each incline took more time than the last.

The troop decided that at the top of the next hill, they would set up camp for the night.

As they made their way upwards, Nadia was the first to notice the towers of a castle.
“Look!” she pointed her finger upwards, where she could see the tippity top of a stone tower, peeking above the hill’s horizon.

The brood gasped in unison, then picked up their pace.

Wow!

At the top of the hill was a wide clearing, and to their left, the remnants of an ancient castle. It was built of dark grey stone and was covered in overgrown ivy and moss.

“It’s beautiful,” Nadia said.

“It looks dirty,” said Sage.

Hannah walked forward and touched the castle wall. It was slightly damp with evening dew. She looked up, figuring how she might scale it.

The siblings split up, wandering the property. Leading their horses, they wound their way around to the front of the castle, entering a massive courtyard. Frederick used the space to stretch his tired muscles, laying out in the grass.

Luke found the enormous, old front doors. He pulled their handles and found them unbudgeable.

“It’s locked!”

Frederick shouted back, “don’t, Luke. This could be somebody’s place still. Maybe it isn’t really abandoned.”

“If someone does still live here,” added Nadia. “They certainly don’t take very good care of their place. She picked up two bricks from the ground, which was covered in debris from the castle. Many storms and many northern winds had weathered its walls.

Suddenly, from behind them, sounded a great, booming voice.

“WHO DARES TRESPASS UPON MY LAND?”

The siblings whipped around to face the voice, and fourteen eyes widened in shock. Standing at a massive twenty feet tall, the unmistakable form of a troll loomed over them, casting a long, dark shadow. It stomped towards them at a slow, but steady pace.

“THIS CASTLE IS MINE,” it screamed. “IT USED TO BELONG TO A HUMAN LIKE YOURSELVES. I GOT RID OF HIM.”

The brothers and sisters were shocked and terrified. The troll had a lumbering, dark grey body, bulging eyes, and straggly hair.

“And I’ll easily do the same to you.”

At this last remark, the troll turned its bright, yellow eyes to Frederick. The beast’s gaze held Frederick’s until his body started to feel cold.

Frederick felt his muscles stiffen, his joints freeze, and his mouth dry up. His siblings watched in horror, as, within seconds, their dear eldest brother turned to stone.

Before they had time to scream, the troll had set his gaze on the rest of the clan. When he was finished, his courtyard was newly decorated with twelve very realistic statues: each brother, sister, and their horse. Their faces carved in horror.
The troll, satisfied, chuckled to itself. Then, it retreated to the castle, pulling the heavy doors open using its incredible strength. It disappeared behind them, off to eat some woodland animals or maybe a different unlucky traveler for dinner.

CHAPTER TEN: Bad News

Meanwhile, back home at the Queen and King’s castle, Ava passed her time in the garden. She was coping with her new only-childness. Having no siblings to hangout or argue with meant that she spent even more time outside and in the forest.

A few days after the children had left, though, a messenger arrived at the castle. He was red in the face, sweating, and looked terrified.

“Your highnesses!” he panted. “I have urgent and terrible news.”

The King and Queen were overcome with worry. Having overheard, Ava ran downstairs to hear the update.

“Your children,” the messenger continued. “Are in grave danger. I was riding between Queendoms, and my trail passed near to the old castle on Viljeertårn Mountain!”

The parents glanced at each other.

“In the castle’s courtyard, Your Highnesses, were seven stone statues. They looked exactly like your children. It was just like the old stories.”

The King burst into tears, and the Queen pressed her hands to heart, trying to catch her breath. Ava stood very still on the stairs, trying to comprehend this news.

“Whatever shall we do?” the Queen asked the messenger.

“I can ride to town and gather volunteers, then to the neighboring kingdom to fetch help. Once we have enough people, we could set out to Viljeertårn and try to save your children, Madame.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A Mission

The King and Queen were so distraught, they barely spoke for the rest of the day.

Ava’s mind, however, raced with adrenaline and duty.

The messenger’s plan will take much too long, she thought. What if it is too late by the time they get there? I will go.

She paced her bedroom, motioning with her hands, thinking.

Yes. I must go. I must try to save my brothers and sisters. They would do the same for me.

I can do this. I can. I must try.

So, it was settled.

After her parents retreated to bed that night, Ava quietly crept about the house, dressing in traveling clothes and packing a quick knapsack. She silently opened and closed the door behind her. Sneaking to the stables, she remembered that her siblings had taken all the riding horses on their trip. The one still there, asleep in the hay, was an out-of-commission mare. It was the oldest of the bunch, a skinny nag. The only available ride.

She climbed on, and they trotted off into the night.
---

After a day of riding, Ava and her horse encountered a raven. It was bunched up on the side of the road. It was very weak and its feathers were dull. Ava got off her horse to examine the poor bird.

“Please, miss,” the raven chirped. “Please give me some food. I am sick and starving. I can no longer fly for want of nutrients.”

Ava knelt next to the bird.

“I don’t have much food, little raven,” she said. “But I can’t bear to see you suffer.”

She reached into her knapsack and took out several pieces of bread.

As the raven ate, it puffed out and its feathers glossed with shine. Then, it flapped its wings and flew up over Ava’s head.

It perched on her shoulder and tickled her ear with its feathers.

“Young girl,” it said. “Thank you so much for your generosity.”

Then, it circled above her head and flew off over the forest.

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After another day of riding, Ava was passing through the woods. The sun cast speckled light through the trees and the forest was alive with sounds: crickets, birds, squirrels and chipmunks, and rabbits crossed her path. As she rode, she heard the sound of rushing water approaching.

A creek!

Ava was so relieved. She was incredibly thirsty, having run out of water. Her food was also very low. It would probably be gone by nightfall.

Approaching the little river, she saw a salmon lying in the middle of her path. Its mouth moved open and closed, gasping for the water.

“Oh! Please throw me back in the water, young traveler,” the salmon said. “I will soon die if I am left here.”

It flopped helplessly, unable to return to its home in the river.

“My! How did you get there! Must have done an untimely jump, hm?” Ava said, as she lifted the salmon in both hands. She walked to the water’s edge, then further, submerging her ankles, and lowered the fish gently into the current.

Once the fish was able to breathe again, it swam circles around Ava’s feet.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” said the fish. “You won’t regret helping me!”

---

The day after, Ava was riding on a long stretch of road, when she encountered a wolf. Like the raven had been, the wolf was very thin and weak. Its eyes were dim and Ava could see its ribs through its fur.

“Hello, young one,” the wolf greeted her. “Do you have any food to give me? I am famished. I have not had a bite for weeks.”

Ava opened her knapsack for the wolf to see.

“I’m sorry wolf. I have not a morsel.”
“Then, please,” it replied. “Give me your horse to eat.”
Both stared at the old mare, who was breathing deeply with exhaustion. It wasn’t in much better shape than the wolf.
“If I let you eat this horse,” Ava replied, “I will have no way to continue my journey.”
“You can climb on my back, miss,” said the wolf. “Once I have eaten, I will be strong enough to take you anywhere you want to go.”
The wolf begged and begged. Finally, with pain in her heart, Ava gave in.
Like the raven, once the wolf had eaten, its stomach grew and its muscles became stronger. Its fur thickened and shone again.
Satisfied, the wolf turned its back to Ava and she climbed aboard.
“What is your destination?” the wolf asked.
“I need to get to the top of Viljeertårn,” replied Ava.
The wolf turned its yellow eyes to her, surprised.
“You want to go there?”
“Yes. My siblings have been turned to stone in the castle courtyard. I must rescue them.”
The wolf nodded, “I know the place.” It sprinted off with Ava on its back, fast as lightning.
Within hours, they arrived at the old castle. From a distance, Ava could see the familiar forms of her siblings and their horses, all turned to grey stone in the yard.
“However am I to save them?” Ava moaned, suddenly struck with the impossibility of her errand.
“Do not fret,” said the wolf. “I know of the troll who lives here. If you can slay it, the curse on your brothers and sisters will be lifted. You must destroy the troll’s heart.”
At that, Ava heard booming footsteps in the distance. It was the troll. The grey, enormous body of long arms and legs lumbered into view, and Ava gasped, throwing her hand over her mouth. Thankfully, she was far enough away. The troll neither heard nor saw her. It crossed the courtyard, passing the forms of her siblings, and entered the castle.
“And how am I to do that?” Ava said. “My heart is sinking in my chest at the thought.”
“Ah, see, that’s the ticket. This troll has a heart too, but it doesn’t keep it in its chest, as you do.”
“Not in its chest? Well, then where does the troll keep it?” Ava asked.
“I, myself, do not know,” the wolf said. “That is up to you to find out.”
Ava sat on the ground and worked out a plan. She steeled herself and waited for nightfall.

CHAPTER TWELVE: A Break-in
The wolf agreed to wait in the forest as Ava executed her plan. She was to sneak into the castle as the troll slept and look for a record of where it kept its heart.
As the stars began to twinkle, and the moon showed its face, Ava crept from the forest to the castle doors. She gripped the knobs as tightly as she could, planted her feet, and pulled.
They didn’t move an inch.
Again, she pulled. And pulled again.
The doors were unmovable.
Ava took a lap around the castle, examining the walls and the grounds. Eventually, she spotted a small opening. Where the ground had sunk under the weight of the castle, and where an ancient flood had swept some of the bricks away, there was a gap. She crawled through it, the dew on the grass dampening her shirtfront.
Ava found herself in a small yard, which may once have been a garden. To her left, in the castle wall, was a door. To her delight, it had no lock. She pushed it open, slowly, to avoid creaking, and shut it behind her. She was standing in a kitchen. There was an old wood stove, a table, and tons of jars. Their contents were not fit for the page.
Ava ventured on into the next room, then the next. The castle was enormous and pitch dark. Rummaging in a drawer, Ava found a candle and lit it with a match. It illuminated her path as she began her search.
She opened books and more books, opened drawers, pulled up rugs, and climbed onto counters.
She sat on the floor next to an enormous desk, defeated. She was about to give up for fear of waking the troll, when she looked up and to her left. On the underside of the desk was a map! It was stuck there with adhesive, maybe troll spittle. She reached up and pulled it down, holding it under the candle to have a look.
This was the place the troll kept its heart. She was sure. The map and some text explained the location: it was a lake, far away, with an island in the middle, and a house on the island, and a well inside that house, and inside the well, a duck, and in the duck, an egg, and inside that egg, the troll’s heart.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Finding the Heart
Ava folded the map and put it carefully in her pocket. She snuffed out the candle, returned it to its place, and scurried out of the castle the same way she’d entered. But not before grabbing some bread and fruit from the counter and stuffing it into her knapsack.
Back in the woods, the wolf saw her approaching, and met Ava at the forest’s edge.
“What did you find?” it asked.
Ava showed the wolf the map. It nodded.
“Oh, yes. I know the place. Let’s make haste.”
Ava hopped on the wolf’s back and off they flew into the dark night.

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The journey to the lake was of great distance, but riding on the back of the wolf, it felt short. Ava gripped tufts of its grey, sleek fur and tucked her head into its ruff. It ran so smoothly that she almost fell asleep.
After they’d passed through many hills and valleys, Ava could see a patch of deep blue in the distance. It was the lake the map spoke of, the wolf told her.
At the water’s edge, Ava touched her fingers to the surface. Because the lake was fed by underground springs, it was icy cold. She paced a little on the sand.

“What are you waiting for?” asked the wolf. “Can you not see the island and the house?”

They both looked out to the center of the lake. Sure enough, there was an island exactly in the center of the lake, and on it, a house. Surely nobody had set foot in it for a thousand years, Ava thought.

“I—” Ava hesitated. “I can’t swim.”

There weren’t many deep lakes around where she grew up, and her parents hadn’t made it a necessary skill for her to learn. After all, it was hard enough just to pull her away from the forest or the garden. Faced with this task, now, though, Ava cursed herself for not knowing how to swim. She was ashamed to admit her shortcoming.

“Well, child,” the wolf replied. “Why did you not say so sooner? There is no shame in this. You must take pride in asking others for help. It is what makes the world go around.”

Ava smiled.

“Hop back on,” the wolf said, again turning his back.

She did, and the wolf walked into the water. It swam to the island with Ava on its back, carrying her. She stayed dry, except for her knees.

On the shore, the wolf laid down to rest, and told her it would wait until her task was done.

Ava thanked it again and again for helping her.

“We must all stick together when it comes to trolls, child,” it replied. “Besides, you helped me in my dire need. I will never forget it.”

---

Ava approached the house. Though it was old, it was very sturdy. The walls were made of stone, with no windows, and there was just one door. Ava approached and pulled with as much strength as she could muster. Like the doors on the troll’s castle, it would not budge.

Ava stepped back a few feet and started to think. How would she get in? It was cold on this lake, with no shelter from the winds. The house had to have a fireplace, if anyone had ever lived here. And if the house had a fireplace, it would have a chimney. Maybe she could find her way to the roof and shimmy down the chimney!

She looked up, and glimpsed a chimney. It was much too small, though. She would never fit.

But, wait! A glimmer of metal caught her eye. She stepped a little closer and squinted. It was a key. Hung on a hook on the wall of the chimney.

Ava let out an excited gasp. But then, she looked around the house. There was no safe way to climb to where the key was. If only Hannah was here, she would surely see a way.

Ava sat on the grass. Then, she remembered what the wolf said.

_Besides, you helped me in my dire need. I will never forget it._

Ava rose and stood on a nearby boulder. She put her fingers to her mouth and whistled. Then whistled again.
A few seconds went by. Then, flying over the nearest peak, she saw a black form gliding towards her. The raven.
   It flew two circles above her head, then softly perched on her shoulder.
   “What is it you need, my friend?” the raven said.
   “I need that key, up there,” Ava replied, pointing to the chimney. “I need to destroy the
troll who turned my siblings to stone.”
   “An honourable and brave task, young one.”
   The raven flapped its wings and easily retrieved the key in its beak. It flew over Ava and
dropped the key into her hands.
   “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Raven!” she cried.
   “You helped me in my greatest need, child. It is only right that I help you,” it cawed back.
   The bird flew two circles above the island and then caught the winds, disappearing over
the mountain.
---
Ava flipped the key over in her hand, examining it. She walked up to the house’s door,
found the keyhole, pressed the key into it, and turned. The door swung open.
Moss grew over everything inside. There was only one large room, and no furniture to fill
it. Only a very creaky floor, an old stone fireplace, and a well, directly in the center of the room.
Ava rushed to the well and peered into the hole. The water’s surface was just a few feet
down, and she saw a little duck floating on the surface, swimming in circles. Her affinity for
wildlife helped her, yet again, as she coaxed the duck towards where she stood. She bent herself
over the edge of the well, and stretched her hands down. She sighed with relief as her hands
cradled the duck and she began lifting it out of the water.
But, as she lifted the duck, it dropped its egg. She watched in horror as the egg fell and
disappeared under water, sinking further and further.
   “No!” she shouted, startling the duck, who she lowered to the floor beside her.
   She would never be able to retrieve the egg. There was no telling how deep the well was.
It would be too deep and long of a swim for anyone.
   Then, she remembered the words of the raven.
   You helped me in my greatest need, child. It is only right that I help you.
   Once again, Ava leaned out of the well, and again, she whistled. Once, then twice, then
three times.
   Almost a minute passed. Ava had begun to lose hope, when the well’s surface was
splashed by the emergence of the salmon.
   “Oh, salmon!” she exclaimed. “I’m so happy to see you again!”
   It swam a few circles, replying, “It took me a bit to get through the underground rivers,
child. What is your need? I am happy to help the one who saved my own life.”
   “I need this duck’s egg,” Ava replied. “It dropped the egg in the well, and I have no way
of retrieving it!”
   “A duck’s egg,” the fish chuckled. “I will see what I can find.”
It disappeared from view, swimming deep into the well. Within a minute, though, it was back, poking its head out of water. In its mouth, the duck’s egg. It gently released the egg into Ava’s hand.

“You thank you, thank you, thank you, Salmon!” she said.

To say goodbye, the fish splashed the water with its tail, then swam back down to the underground stream.

---

Ava exited the house with the duck in one arm and its egg in the other. The duck she brought to the lake, placing it on the shoreline. The bird fluttered its wings with joy and plunged into the fresh, cool water. She had freed it from its narrow trap.

The egg she took to where the wolf was napping. It roused from its sleep when it heard her approach, and saw the egg in your hand.

“You did it, child!” the wolf exclaimed. “Now, you must destroy the egg—it contains the troll’s heart. Take it in your hands and squeeze.”

Ava did as the wolf said, squeezing the egg.

From far away, they heard a great, booming roar.

“AHHHH! WHO HAS MY HEART?!” the troll screamed.

“It is I, Ava!” the girl screamed back, squeezing harder.

“What do you—AHHHHHH—WHAT DO YOU WANT?!”

“I want you to remove the stone curse you placed on my siblings and their horses!”

“Okay. Okay. It is done!” the troll yelled back. “NOW, SPARE ME!”

Ava felt a burst of pity. A troll is a living thing, she thought. But then, she remembered the people of Midvesten, and their safety. She thought of her mother, her father, her community, the travelers of this land, and of Luke’s future children.

And she squeezed the egg with all her might. It pulverized in her hands.

Ava and the wolf heard a final, painful roar, then a mighty crack, as the body of the troll exploded into hundreds of stone fragments.

Ava and the wolf jumped up and down together in joy. Ava hollering with relief, the wolf howling.

It turned its back, Ava hopped on, and the wolf again carried her across the water to the mainland.

It didn’t stop when they reached the shore, though. The wolf picked up its pace, running as fast as the wind back to the troll’s castle. Ava felt the wind blowing through her hair and the sun on her face.

When the castle came into view, her heart swelled. The wolf trotted to the edge of the property and knelt down, easing Ava off its back. Ava stood in front of her friend, looking into its bright eyes. She threw her arms around the wolf’s neck, burying her face in the soft fur.

“Thank you, my friend,” she said, holding back her tears.

The wolf bent its head down, so its neck embraced the girl.
“Always remember, child,” the wolf spoke. “If you put goodness out into the world, it will return to you. I’m glad to have helped you. I must now return to my family, as you must return to yours.”

Ava backed away, and the wolf turned, running towards the valley. After a bit, it stopped, turned around, and gave her one last howl. She smiled and waved goodbye.

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Ava ran to the courtyard. She was struck dumb by the sight of her siblings. Alive, colorful, and mobile as ever, they were milling about the yard, examining the new pieces of rock strewn about. One chunk of stone had a very realistic, very large eye carved in it.

They all looked up at the sound of her approaching.

“Ava?!” Frederick exclaimed. “What are you doing here!?”

She ignored him. She was too busy gathering all her siblings into an enormous hug.

“You’re alive! You’re all alive, and well!” she said. “My, do I have a story for you!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Coming Home

As the seven of them made the journey home, the siblings exchanged tales. Ava’s brothers and sisters told her of how they were startled by the troll, and the cold sensation they all felt. After that, though, none of them remembered a thing, until they woke up in the courtyard with the remnants of a troll scattered about.

Ava told them of her companions, her journey, and the heart of the troll.

“Do mother and father know where you are?” Olivia asked.

Ava looked away, feeling both mischievous and ashamed.

“No,” she replied. “I snuck out.”

“Well, they will have words with you, to be sure,” Sage said. “But we are sure happy that you did what you did, Ava.”


“I can,” Nadia chimed in. “We taught her well.”

“Hah! Just like you to take credit for her!” Hannah shot back, jokingly. Nadia playfully shoved her.

Ava just chuckled, observing her family.

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Back in the Queendom, the childrens’ parents had been distraught. Their entire brood, missing, for days. The Queen and King spent those days sitting in the front room, watching through the windows, waiting on the messenger’s supposed army.

They had just begun to plan their own journey to find their children—packing supplies, practicing combat, reading maps—when through the front window, they saw seven forms approaching the castle.

The King and Queen ran outside and through the yard. Many tears were shed by both as they embraced their children. The family was overjoyed to be back together.
By the fireplace, that night, the King and Queen started to scold Ava for sneaking out on her journey. But before they could say much, each sibling chimed in to defend her.

“If it wasn’t for Ava, we wouldn’t be here!”

“She saved us!”

To the King and Queen’s dismay, the siblings then began discussion about when they would set out on their next journey. After all, none had gotten to their desired location; none had seen their world. Out of all of them, Ava had certainly experienced the most.

The chatter continued as Ava sat quietly, knowing that her parents wouldn’t let her go along again because of her age.

So, Ava, the Queen, and the King all started when they heard Sage say, “And of course, Ava will come along. She can tag along with any of us!”

The King said, “No, no, no. She is still too young.”

The Queen nodded.

“But mother and father, she will be safe!” Hannah said. “She can come with me to the fjord!”

Ava smiled, thinking of all the different plants and animals she might encounter there. Her mother and father looked at each other. Their eyes made a silent agreement as they realized an important fact: there would be no keeping Ava where she didn’t want to be.

Simultaneously, they nodded their agreement. Ava jumped up and down in excitement.

“But!” the Queen said. “You all must promise to take care of your little sister. You must protect her.”

The siblings laughed.

“Oh, no,” said Frederick. “You are mistaken, mother. It is she who will be doing the protecting.”

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*Snipp, snapp, snute*

*Her er eventyret ute!*

*Snip, snap, snout,*

*This tale’s told out!*