In this issue’s Talking about Books column, the authors use an extended conversation about Karen Cushman’s (1996) *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* to engage in a broader discussion of literature that features strong female characters.

Where are the spunky female characters in children’s literature? That’s what we were looking for: girls and women who are feisty, daring, clever, creative, and insightful. In the beginning, we were not sure what we would find, but after a lot of reading and talking, we began to understand.

We are a group composed of university professors, classroom teachers, and media specialists who originally met to find top-notch literature for a gender section to be published in NCTE’s next edition of *Adventuring With Books* (forthcoming, 1999). We have continued to meet as we find more literature and explore more aspects of gender issues.

In this article, we share our criteria for evaluating female characters as positive role models in children’s literature. We then explore our criteria through an examination of Karen Cushman’s (1996) *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple*. Finally, we present other picture books and novels in which we have also found additional strong females in history, in contemporary times, and in fantasy. We found heroines who “take the life they have been given and look it squarely in the eye” (Cooper-Mullin & Coye, 1990, p. xiv).

**WHY IS THIS TOPIC IMPORTANT?**

Girls often have to “battle messages that tell them they are second best, or victims, or human beings measured by the beauty of their bodies and the pliability of their minds” (Bauemeister & Smith, 1997, p. viii). Sadker and Sadker (1994) have documented the negative effect that gender stereotypes have on the self-esteem and self-worth of girls. Our experience told us that positive images of girls can be found in children’s literature, but to find them we first had to better define what qualities we were looking for and then look to children’s literature for characters who are exemplars of those qualities.

Books play an important role in the development and growth of ideas. As Cooper-Mullin and Coye (1998) state, “Our future is shaped by our childhood, and the books of our childhood are such an important part of our journey” (p. xviii). We were committed to finding the best female role models in children’s literature to accompany our children on their journeys. We also knew that gender was not the starting point for us, instead, literature of quality was. We knew we...
wanted books with captivating plots, worthwhile themes, multidimensional characters, skillfully developed language, and if a picture book, outstanding illustrations. Only then would we include it in our list of recommendations.

**UNDERSTANDING POSITIVE GENDER CHARACTERISTICS**

We began looking for books that provided a positive, female role model for our children. This approach was initially valuable as we began examining books, but soon proved limiting. Our challenge was in defining what we meant by “a positive role model.” We looked to three sources for help as we expanded our definition: The Council for Interracial Books for Children’s (1980) “Ten Quick Ways to Examine Texts for Racism and Sexism,” (pp. 24–26), Frances Day’s (1997) “Evaluating Books for Bias” (pp. 5–8), and Joan Blasko’s (1996) “Images and Encounters Profile: A Checklist to Review Books for Inclusion and Depiction of Persons with Disabilities” (pp. 51–54). Each of these sources helped us look through an additional lens at the literature and helped us develop and refine our own evaluative instrument (see Figure 1). These evaluation criteria enabled us to move beyond looking solely for positive female role models to examining personal characteristics, issues, problem-solving methods, relationships, stereotypes, and underrepresented or misrepresented groups among young female lead characters in recent children’s literature.

**EXPLORING GENDER ISSUES THROUGH THE BALLAD OF LUCY WHIPPLE**

After agreeing to spotlight Karen Cushman’s *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* (1996) for this article, we all read the novel and gathered to discuss it. Chris, a former junior high English teacher, commented that “I started it once and put it down to read other books. But when I started it again, I couldn’t put it down.” The story of California Morning Whipple, who chooses the name Lucy in rebellion against her Mama’s decision to move the family from Massachusetts to California during the Gold Rush, makes for a carefully crafted, compelling “coming of age” novel.

Our first criterion for selection was for the book to be quality literature. Chris pointed out that *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* has a number of similarities to another classic coming of age novel set in a similar time period, Mark Twain’s (1996) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (original work published in 1884). Both novels use the first person point of view. Each is centered on a journey motif and includes a variety of complex characters that help the protagonists mature. Both are replete with vivid “local color” details that enliven the landscapes and people. Both authors are masters of the vernacular. Like *Huck Finn*, *Lucy Whipple* has examples of appropriate figurative language and descriptive phrases on virtually every page. Cushman’s language further serves to differentiate the many different characters and is so skillfully written that it “rings true,” as Frank described it during our group discussion.

Just as Twain’s (1884) novel was criticized for its vernacular language, *Lucy Whipple* could possibly come under criticism for the characters’ occasional salty language. For example, one of Mama’s borders says, “Dang hab it, little sister, it’s so cold in here, my britches is froze to my bum, pardon me altogether” (Cushman, 1996, p. 49). But Sylvia, a teacher of many years’ experience, commented that “I didn’t think there was any language here that kids haven’t heard already,” though she did think the novel was most appropriate for 4th graders and up. Pat noted that the miners moderated their language in deference to Mama and the children, and Frank said that “there is sometimes cussin’, but it’s cussin’ with inventiveness and humor—like ‘dag diggety’ and ‘thunderation’ and ‘gol durn’.”

**Personal Traits of the Character**

In our discussion, Sylvia described Lucy as a dynamic character who “holds onto her beliefs and traditions and the way things were so tightly at first. But what’s so neat about this book is that you see her changing.” Even before moving to the town of Lucky Diggins, Lucy prefers the safe and the known, although Pa tells her before his unexpected death that “there are more important things than being safe, daughter” (Cushman, 1996, p. 27). Throughout most of the book, Lucy is determined to return home. For instance, she hoards her profits from selling pies to the prospectors, saving each penny or pinch of gold dust for her return ticket.

Lucy’s growth is revealed to the reader through what Frank called “shocks of recognition, where she’s learning and understanding.” Lucy’s dynamic relationship with Mama is a good example of these revelations. While Mama looks on their new life in Lucky Diggins as an opportunity and adventure, Lucy initially chooses to see deprivation and isolation: “Mama works hard but sees only the mountains and big trees and clear blue sky and doesn’t seem to see the dirt. I myself am knee deep in dirt” (Cushman, 1996, p. 44).

When a homesick Lucy darns Snowshoe Ballou’s socks and thinks how he has “no kin but a dead duck” (Cushman, 1996, p. 44), she spontaneously hugs Mama and her family. Lucy
eventually accepts the idea of Mama remarrying, even though she tells Brother Clyde, “If I can’t have my real pa, I guess I’d rather you than anyone. But I can’t call you Pa” (p. 163).

Ultimately, as Pat said, “Lucy outgrows the safety of Massachusetts.” Her decision to stay in Lucky Diggins attests to her newly realized strength and maturity. Sandra felt that after all Lucy had been through, she couldn’t leave because she “feels like she has become an important part of Lucky Diggins, that it’s her real home now.”

So when Clyde and Lucy’s mother are ready to move on, Lucy realizes she is at last ready to stay. In her maturity, Lucy realizes that life was not as simple as she first thought and

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**Six Characteristics to Consider when Examining Children’s Books for Positive Gender Role Models**

Patricia Heine and Christine Inkster

A high-quality gender book provides the reader with a character who serves as a positive role model. The first consideration should be the quality of the literature itself. There should be a believable and interesting plot, complex characters, worthwhile themes, powerful language, and high-quality illustration, if it is a picture book. The next consideration should be the strength of the gender representation.

[When using the following guidelines it is important to remember that not every charter (or book) will exemplify all of the guidelines.]

1. **Examine the personal traits of the character**
   - Complex character
     - Does the character display a variety of emotions, abilities, concerns?
   - Dynamic character
     - Does the character change and grow throughout the book?
   - Admirable traits
     - Is the character perseverant, courageous, feisty, intelligent, spirited, resourceful, capable, independent?
     - Does the character wrestle with significant problems and issues?

2. **Examine the issues important to the character**
   - Gender issues
     - Is the character concerned with gender images, with determining what actions, attitudes, and roles are appropriate for females and males?
   - Body-image issues
     - Is the character concerned with body image?
     - Is physical beauty an issue?
   - Coming-of-age issues
     - Is the character facing experiences that help in growing up and reaching maturity?
   - Social, political, ethical, or moral issues
     - Is the character concerned with issues that make a difference in the world?

3. **Examine how the character solves problems**
   - Strength of character
     - Does the character use personal qualities such as humor, strength, intelligence, or cleverness to solve problems as appropriate to situation?
   - Initiative
     - Does the character initiate solving problems rather than waiting for someone else?
   - Inner strength
     - Does the character find strength and answers from within?
   - Variety of problem-solving strategies
     - Does the character use a wide range of strategies, including seeking help from others, discussing problems with family or friends, exploring solutions through writing and reading?

4. **Examine the character’s relationships with others**
   - Effort
     - Does the character put forth effort in establishing healthy relationships with others?
   - Characteristics
     - Are the character’s relationships with others based on or working toward admirable traits such as mutual respect, equality, loyalty, honesty, friendship, commitment, collegiality?

5. **Examine how the character departs from traditional stereotypes**
   - Typical female stereotypes
     - Is the character moving away from the following traits: passive, frightened, weak, gentle, giving up easily, unoriginal, silly, confused, inept, dependent, follower, conformer, emotional, concerned about appearance, innate need for marriage and motherhood, passive language and behavior?
   - Typical male stereotypes
     - Is the character moving away from the following traits: active, strong, brave, rough, competitive, logical, unemotional, messy, decisive, leader, innate need for adventure, aggressive language and behavior?

6. **Examine whether the character provides a voice for those who are often unheard in children’s literature**
   - Roles
     - Is the character in a role not usually found in literature such as male nurses, female inventors, females during the Gold Rush.
   - Parallel cultures
     - Does the character represent a cultural, religious, ethnic, ability, or socioeconomic group found infrequently in children’s literature?
finally recognizes the beauty in the place, the memories, and the people of Lucky Diggins. These people include, for instance, Jimmy Whiskers (who generously gives his solid-gold teeth to the family), Snowshoe Ballou (whose socks Lucy darns as a gift for carrying her letters over the mountains), the Gent (whose amorous intentions toward her mother opens Lucy’s eyes), Bernard (who gives Lucy an understanding of racism), and Butte (at whose death Lucy writes, “I didn’t know it but I loved him,” Cushman, 1996, p. 121). These characters lead Lucy to finally understand that “this glorious thing that Lucy’s looking for—her ‘heart’s desire,’ as she calls it—is right there in Lucky Diggins,” as Pat said in our discussion. Della agreed, noting that Cushman depicts Lucy as a complex character who “grows not just physically, but also in knowledge, relationships, and emotions.”

From the beginning of the novel, Lucy is, for the most part, a strong female character who does not overly struggle with gender issues. Raised to be competent and independent, Lucy is never coddled or overly protected by Pa or Mama. Their child-rearing philosophy gives Lucy the inner strength than hiding in the security of the familiar.

**Issues Important to the Character**

*The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* deals with serious moral and social issues that are still relevant today. Slavery, racism, and the nature of freedom are examined through the character of Bernard. Native Americans such as Snowshoe’s friend Henrut, are presented realistically. Ecological issues are included as well, such as the effects of mining on the landscape. Abusive relationships are the focus of a trial that forces the citizens of Lucky Diggins to struggle with reaching a fair decision. These issues are woven throughout the novel and contribute to Lucy’s growth into a complex, thoughtful, mature character.

**The Character’s Problem Solving**

Moving to the town of Lucky Diggins presents numerous problems for Lucy, and she tackles them using a variety of methods. Talking Butte into helping with her pie-selling scheme, for instance, takes intelligence and humor. During Mrs. Flagge’s trial, Lucy’s clever analogy of the ricocheting bullet in the song “The Ballad of Rattlesnake Jack” allows the community to agree on a verdict that satisfies their hearts as well as the facts. By refusing to solve any of Lucy’s problems for her, Mama helps her daughter become more self-reliant and inventive in her problem solving.

Lucy consistently turns to writing and reading when she has a problem. She frequently relates her own situation to those of the characters in her few beloved and tattered books, like *Ivanhoe* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But it is through her letters, frequently written to grandparents back in Massachusetts, that the reader sees Lucy’s gradual maturation: “It was a lot easier to write what I thought or felt than to say it out loud. I could write things I’d never say to someone’s face . . .” (Cushman, 1996, p. 40). Because Lucy doesn’t have a confidant in Lucky Diggins, her letters serve as Cushman’s device for letting us know her feelings. Frank commented that “the letters give us sort of touchstones to see what’s going on inside Lucy. They’re a means of self-discovery, a way for her to constantly reflect back and see what she was feeling and thinking at a particular time.”

**The Character’s Relationships**

Lucy’s relationship with Lizzie Flagge, the only other person her age in Lucky Diggins, develops from tentative caution into a sincere friendship. A victim of an abusive father, Lizzie shows Lucy another side of family life. In addition, Lizzie introduces Lucy to the natural beauty of the California mountains, which Lucy had been unable to appreciate because of her homesickness. Lucy’s courageous and ingenious comment at Mrs. Flagge’s trial about the possibility of a ricocheting bullet cemented the friendship between the two maturing girls.

Just as Lucy learns to value Lizzie’s friendship, so too she discovers the prospectors’ true nature. Early in the novel, Lucy views their “dirty boots and dirty sheets, loud voices and big appetites” (Cushman, 1996, p. 20) with distrust and disgust. But the generosity and faithfulness of prospectors like Jimmy Whiskers, the Gent, and Snowshoe Ballou help her to realize the essential humanity of these rough-hewn men. By borrowing Lucy’s books, lending them to others, writing notes about the characters, and even inserting little pouches of gold inside the books, the men help Lucy see them as individuals. When the fire devastates Lucky Diggins, Lucy is touched by those who have come to help:

Hairy, dirty, bearded men in flannel shirts and torn pants, men loaded with blankets and tools and bedrolls, onions and coffee and beans. Miners from the hills who had seen the smoke and flames and had come to help, stumbling and tumbling through pathless mountains, owning little but willing to share. (Cushman, 1996, p. 150)

This willingness to share and to be a part of each others’ lives helps convince Lucy to stay in Lucky Diggins and start a lending library for the townspeople and the prospectors.

**Departures from Traditional Stereotypes**

When Lucy first arrived at Lucky Diggins, she displayed many traditional stereotypes of girls. For instance, although Pa had taught both Butte and Lucy to shoot a gun, Lucy stubbornly sat on a stump for three days, too frightened to venture beyond the yard to find food for the family. Almost everything about California frightened her—the rough prospectors, the barren landscape, the tent home devoid of any familiar comforts. However, eventually, Lucy rose above these stereotypes.

After the death of her husband, Arvella Whipple moves from Massachusetts to Lucky Diggins, a California mining camp, in 1849 and opens a boarding house. The widow and her three children, Sierra, Butte, and twelve-year-old California Morning, all struggle to make a new life amidst the harsh realities of the mining camp. Book-loving California Morning longs to return to Massachusetts and she resists her mother’s domineering manner by changing her name to Lucy Whipple. This exuberant story, told through the eyes of Lucy herself, presents two strong, determined, and independent women and a cast of rugged, rough-hewn characters. The tall tales, yarns, and rich vernacular language that fill the book make it a wonderful read-aloud. The novel reflects much recent historical research that highlights the roles women played in settling the American West.

She became a strong young woman, willing and eager to stay in Lucky Diggins and make a contribution. As Frank said in our conversation about the book, “Lucy will have an impact on the community—she’ll be one of the civilizing influences.”

Lucy’s character is, in some ways, a combination of her parents’ temperaments. Pa was a dreamer, eager to leave the comforts of Massachusetts for the challenges of California. While Mama shared his dream, she was also a doer, moving the family even when Pa died. She started the boarding tent, cooked for the tenants, and made a home for her family. When Lucy decides not to go with the rest of her family to the Sandwich Isles, Mama says,

“I’ve never known quite what to make of you, girl. I was so afraid you were weak and dreamy like your pa . . . You’re just like your pa in some ways, my girl. Many of them good . . . But mostly you’re like me. Isn’t that a corker?” (Cushman, 1996, p. 173)

So, while Lucy is a dreamer, she is also a confident, secure person who can see her future contribution to the town as the lending library’s caretaker.

Like Lucy’s rising above the typical female stereotypes, the prospectors also reveal a non-stereotypical side. Their rough, unkempt exterior is contrasted to the their non-stereotypical attributes such as tenderness, gentleness, and genuine concern for others.

Unheard Voices

In her Author’s Note, Cushman mentions “an 1850 census that estimated that ninety percent of those who came to California to search for gold were male” (p. 189). Her wondering about the remaining ten percent—the wives, mothers, and daughters—led to the writing of Lucy Whipple. Cushman chose not to portray stereotypical Western women, such as prostitutes or barmaids. Instead, she focuses on an ordinary family that is brought face to face with life in Lucky Diggins. Lucy in particular grows into a confident, strong, and capable young woman through the events and people that she encounters. Della, an elementary media specialist, commented in our discussion that “it’s interesting how historical fiction seems to be a genre to feature strong girl characters. This kind of fiction often really appeals to kids in 4th, 5th, and 6th grades.”

The Gent explained a ballad to Lucy by saying, “Well, little sister, I’d say a ballad is a poem that tells a story of the extraordinary doin’s of ordinary folk.” The Ballad of Lucy Whipple itself is a ballad, with Karen Cushman masterfully portraying complex characters and vivid settings that allow the reader to experience the “extraordinary doin’s of ordinary folk.”

OUTSTANDING, RECENTLY PUBLISHED GENDER BOOKS

The books included here were selected by our group as the “cream of the crop” of recently published books that focus on gender roles by portraying strong females.

Strong Female Characters in History

Quality historical fiction and nonfiction breathes life into the past. It fills in the details: the feelings, the everyday events, the traumas, and the passions surrounding “the facts.” In her picture book Seven Brave Women, Betsy Hearne (1997) writes about all the women in her family that made history in other ways than fighting in wars, including immigrating to America, establishing a women’s hospital in India, and working as an architect. Students could be encouraged to find the stories of bravery in their own family’s history. Milton Meltzer’s (1998) Ten Queens: Portraits of Women of Power features ten brief biographies about such well- and lesser-known figures as Queen Esther, Isabel of Spain, Catherine the Great, and the “Warrior Queen” Boudicca. Meltzer presents the women in all of their personal and political complexity.

Patricia Curtis Pfitsch’s (1997) action-filled historical novel Keeper of the Light and Candace Fleming’s (1996) informative nonfiction book Women of the Light could be used together to explore the role of women as tenders of lighthouses on America’s coasts and the Great Lakes. In Keeper of the Light, Faith becomes the lighthouse keeper following the death of her father. Women of the Light focuses on the stories of four courageous
women who each braved isolation, battled severe storms, and kept machinery and lamps working.

More females can be found overcoming injustices and drawing on personal strength in several exceptional books. In the picture book *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* by Alan Schroedner (1996), we learn more about Tubman’s childhood and her determination to be free. Joyce Hansen’s (1997) chapter book *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl* could be used in combination with *Minty*. After Emancipation, Patsy teaches the plantation children basic skills to prepare them for their newly won freedom.

In *The Bobbin Girl* by Emily Arnold McCully (1996), Rebecca, a “bobbin girl” in a cotton mill, leads hesitant girls in her spinning room in a protest against unsafe working conditions and low salaries. The biography, *Mother Jones: Fierce Fighter for Workers’ Rights*, by Judith Pinkerton Josephson (1997) is a well-researched and documented biography. For six decades, Mother Jones was feisty and unflagging in her efforts to improve working conditions among America’s laborers.

A young heroine shows quiet strength and resourcefulness in *Nim and the War Effort* by Milly Lee (1997). The setting is San Francisco’s Chinatown during World War II. Nim struggles with cultural and family issues as she participates in the school paper drive and thus doesn’t attend Chinese school with her Grandfather. Another powerful heroine is found in the autobiographical novel *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji-Li Jiang (1997). Set in China from 1966–1969, this novel portrays what life was like for this bright and sensitive twelve-year-old girl during the period of the cultural revolution.

**Strong Female Characters in Contemporary Times**

Contemporary fiction and nonfiction allow us to delve into the lives of our contemporaries. Two picture books that highlight our endless potential are *Wilma Unlimited* by Kathleen Krul (1996) and *Grandmother’s Alphabet* by Eve Shaw (1997). The life of Wilma Rudolph (Krul, 1996) is an inspiring story of perseverance and inner strength as she overcomes the effects of polio to win three medals in the Olympic games of 1960. *Grandmother’s Alphabet* depicts a delightful, lively, and varied set of grandmothers. Bright pages show grandmothers who are in wheelchairs, in courtrooms, under the ocean, and in airplanes.

Readers of *Braving the Frozen Frontier: Women Working in Antarctica* by Rebecca Johnson (1997) might actually feel cold. The intense cold seeps into everything these women do, whether they are studying algae, nematodes, or Adelie penguins. In *A Desert Scrapbook: Dawn to Dusk in the Sonoran Desert*, author/illustrator Wright-Frierson (1996) invites readers into the world of the Sonoran Desert, as she watches javalinas, sketches bird eggs, collects rocks, and writes about the wonders she observes. Readers of all ages might be inspired to create their own special “scrapbook.”

The picture book *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* by Elinor Batezat Sisalu (1996) takes place in 1994 in South Africa. Even though she has not been out of the family’s yard for many years, the elderly Gogo makes the long journey to the balloting place. Nancy Farmer’s (1996) novel, *A Girl Named Disaster* introduces Nhamo, or “Disaster,” an eleven-year-old Shona girl who escapes her village in Mozambique rather than marry an older man who already has several wives. Nhamo’s journey is a harrowing and marvelous one during which her physical toughness and emotional depth are severely tested.

**Strong Female Characters in Fantasy**

Fantasy allows our imaginations to soar, entertains us, and promotes creativity. In the following rewrites of traditional folktales we find multidimensional, clever, brave, and adventuresome females. In *Caterina the Clever Farm Girl: A Tuscan Tale* by Julienne Peterson (1996), Caterina demonstrates to the king that she is indeed a clever, confident, and witty young woman. But these very traits pose problems when she rules with him and disagrees with some of his decisions. In *One Grain of Rice: A Mathematical Folktale* by Demi (1997), Rani proposes that the raja give her one grain of rice, then double the grains each day for a month. Demis female protagonist shows girls can not only be clever, but can also understand mathematics and bring about equality and social justice.
Master storyteller Robert San Souci (1998) combines several Armenian folk tales to create *A Weave of Words*. In this gripping adventure, Prince Vachagan is captured by the evil dev. His wife, the confident and capable Anait, saves him. In *Ella Enchanted*, a novel by Gail Levine (1997), the Cinderella-style character receives at her birth a “gift” of obedience. Ella goes on a quest to free herself from the curse and meets giants, ogres, wicked stepisters and, of course, a handsome prince.

The picture book *Raising Dragons* by Jerdine Nolen (1998) introduces an endearing young girl who finds an unusual egg, waits for it to hatch, and sets out to raise the resulting baby dragon. In the novel *The Music of Dolphins* by Karen Hesse (1996), thirteen-year-old Mila has been living among the dolphins for nine years in a small key off the coast of Cuba. When she is taken to live in a research facility, Mila struggles with important issues, such as what it means to be human. Eventually, Mila takes control of her own destiny when she returns to her marine family.

**PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES**


References


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