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# Whatever Will Be Won't Be For Me: The Girl Artist in Picture Books

Miriam Bat-Ami

I am a children's literature professor. I am a children's writer. I am a mother. And all these selves led me to examine a crucial question. When I discussed picture books with my students, the question would arise. When I read picture books to my small children, I found myself confronting the same issue. When I sat down to my typewriter and invented girl heroines, there it was again like a small stone lodged inside my shoe, maybe even in my sock. I could feel it somewhere where I couldn't reach, and I was irritated. I knew that there are many books devoted to boy artists, books such as Rachel Isadora's *Ben's Trumpet*, about a boy learning to be a trumpet player, and Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, about a boy who invents his world through drawings that he makes. Leo Lionni and Tomie dePaola, artists themselves, write about boys or boy mice (Frederick, the poet, and Matthew, the painter) who struggle to find themselves as artists. And Randall Jarrell, the poet, in his illustrated text *The Bat-Poet*, invented a bat who learns how to see and then write about the world in a unique way. I asked myself: "In all these stories that I read where are the mothers who are artists? Where are the daughters who are learning to be artists? Where are the girls who are simply doers?"

I asked this question because in the classes which I taught I would shut my eyes, and, sud-

denly, I'd see all these children, students of my students—young girls. And what if these girls felt as I did when I was a child? I was like the little girl who sings that tune, "Que sera sera." Sometimes I even imagine that my mother and I, like so many mothers and their daughters back in the fifties, sang a duet about our lives that replicated the words I so painstakingly learned: "When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother what would I be. Would I be pretty? Would I be rich? Here's what she said to me. 'Que sera sera. Whatever will be will be. The future's not ours to see. Que sera sera.'" My job was to sit. Patiently. Perhaps, in Cinderella fashion, I would bloom into a beauty. Perhaps someone rich and handsome would come to me. My job was to wait. Patiently. Whatever would be, would be.

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## **"Where are the girls who are simply doers?"**

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I wanted both my female and male students to see that there are so many options. It is not what will be. It is what I can be because of what I do. So I began searching out my question. I found that art, for many of the boy protagonists I read about, offers egress out of their oftentimes drab and threatening reality. Child heroes such as

Johnson's Harold leave what psychologists such as Bachelard, Erikson, and Burrows refer to as the safe and somewhat claustrophobic inner space of the home. They escape from those who might overpower them: their peers, a mass of mice, the grown-up world of convention and community. Outside the house the self creates a space in which it can play out mastery. Heroes become active rather than passive agents. Explorers and adventurers, they gain concepts of themselves as powerful beings through an exploration of their artistic abilities. If the heroes are like Lionni's boy mouse Frederick they create alternative visions of the world which save them and their community. If they are like Harold they experience fear and isolation: they become lost, but through their doing they see how they can save themselves and, in the process, reshape the world.

But what of the girls? In 1972 Weitzman et al., authors of the seminal article on sex roles in children's literature, stated: "It would be impossible to discuss the image of females in children's books without first noting that, in fact, women are simply invisible . . . . Most children's books are about boys, men, and male animals, and most deal exclusively with male adventures" (1128). In the early '70s young child-readers and listeners were confronted with girls and mothers who either weren't there or who were there but only in one place—in the kitchen, waiting for pies to bake, waiting on their futures.

In 1973 Stewig and Higgs confirmed Weitzman's findings saying that "women do indeed play a subordinate, home-related role" (47). Out of 154 picture books surveyed, the researchers discovered that 13 of the books had no female characters at all; many had only animals and 65 percent had women; but, of that 65 percent, 83 percent showed women as homemakers and "only 17 percent showed them in more professional roles" (47). An updated study (Stewig and Knipfel 1975) revealed "qualified progress toward a realistic role presentation": "Mother is out of the kitchen and in the world, but only in some parts of it" (151). There was still the invisibility problem first suggested by Weitzman et al. Of one hundred books published between 1972 and 1974 thirty-two books had no women in them. Yet, of the remaining 68

books, twenty-two included women in professional roles: six teachers, three doctors, one lawyer, and four musicians. However, of the female as artist or budding artist Stewig and Knipfel said, "Artistic expression . . . is seldom portrayed as a woman's role" (153). Passivity, first noted by Weitzman et al., continued to exist in 1975: "Many of the activities in which men are shown are active ones. In contrast, activities depicted for women are sedentary" (Stewig and Knipfel 154). More disheartening, the researchers noted: ". . . women are portrayed primarily in one of two ways: as housewives and mothers, doing dull and uninteresting tasks, or as professionals engaged in a limited range of occupations . . . typically considered appropriate for women" (154).

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**"...girl artists see themselves and their art differently than boy protagonists do."**

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Years later, in 1987, Williams et al. addressed the initial Weitzman article. Findings in this update revealed that there "has been a shift toward parity" in gender representation in picture books (152). Women are no longer invisible. However, females are still traditionally seen in passive, nonprofessional roles: "Females are more often shown as dependent, submissive, nurturant, and passive and more likely to serve others whereas males are more likely to be independent, competitive, persistent, creative, and active" (154).

Where does that place the female artist as protagonist in modern picture books? She's there, but not as often as the male. You have to search for female doers. This is a sampling of what I have so far. I pass this on to you, my readers, hoping that you will pass it on to your students and share with me your findings. What interests me is not only finding girl doers, particularly artist doers in picture books but seeing how, if at all, these girls perceive their art. It appears that, in the books which I have read, girl artists see themselves and their art differently than boy protagonists do. Also picture books and illustrated texts by Vera Williams, Barbara Cooney,

M.B. Goffstein, and Diane Engel might well allow us to see alternatives to the traditionally male notion of the artist in which art is an isolating activity that places the artist above family and community (Lionni's Frederick, Johnson's Harold, and Jarrell's bat.)

Williams' presentation of the emerging female artist in her Bread and Roses Trilogy (1982-84) points to a positive female image of the artist, an image which allows for family and artistry. The making of Williams' Rosa as artist occurs over three books. In *A Chair for My Mother*, the first book in her trilogy (1982), Rosa is merely presented as a good kid. She is the child who very early on learns to sacrifice the desires of the self for family needs. Rosa's family, an all-female three-generation family consisting of Rosa, her mother, and her grandmother, lost all of its furniture in a fire, and they are saving up to buy a chair. Inside the family, which offers a non-threatening security to its protagonist, Rosa grows. Rosa's outside world seems a reflection of inside. Outside is extended family: the city block wherein both men and women help each other out. On a double spread the block's residents are seen carrying much needed goods over to Rosa's new house. But Rosa and her mother and her grandmother "still have no sofa," and so they save pennies. At the end of Book 1 they finally buy the beautiful colorful chair.

Book 1 has to do with the family's needs. Book 2, entitled *Something Special for Me*, is devoted to the "Me," or Rosa, the narrator. It is Rosa's birthday, and the family decides that the penny jar needs to be used for Rosa. The girl protagonist has some trouble deciding what she wants: she tries on skates; she tries on dresses, coats, and shoes. She looks at "a blue sleeping bag," but Rosa keeps getting "that feeling again." None of the presents are right. Then, just before her birthday, Rosa hears an accordion player play, and she decides.

Rosa, the reader learns, comes from musician stock. Her grandmother played the accordion. As her mother says, "I remember people used to say she could make even the chairs and tables dance." Rosa imagines herself playing "while the chairs and tables danced." That she moves into family

to discover the artist-self, that she relies upon her mother's memory of her grandmother and sees herself within the tight knit circle of the female family unit reveals just how much the female-artist, Rosa, is not like many of her male counterparts. She sees her music in relation to community, although she doesn't stand above it and speak images as Lionni's Frederick does. She is the musician who stands inside community, a community of dancing figures.

Vera Williams draws Rosa on the center of one page. As she imagines herself, she is standing inside a yellow circle, like a yellow light. She is playing the accordion and smiling; and all around her boys and girls dance. A stool dances; and a chair dances, and a table dances; and the wonderful red and pink chair that Rosa helped buy for her family dances. The animate and inanimate world is filled with joy as it listens to Rosa, the artist-musician. Book 2 ends with the assertion of the female self as an emerging artist. Inside a yellow page bordered with flowers is the red accordion standing alone on the stool, looking as if it waits: "And right beside my bed was my own accordion waiting for me to make songs come out of it."

*Music, Music for Everyone* documents Rosa's life as a musician. In the beginning Rosa is seen in her music group. Again, unlike her male counterparts, Rosa is not the artist alone. She plays with three other girls: Leora, on drums; Mae, on flute; and Jenny, on the fiddle. The girls, practicing, use music to soothe Rosa's sick grandmother. In this way music continues to bind Rosa to the female side of her family. As her grandmother hears the accordion, she remembers "the village where she lived when she was a girl."

Linkage to female elders is strengthened when Rosa expands the circle of generational contact. One day, playing a tune, Rosa remembers about her other grandmother: how she played at parties and weddings; and Rosa decides that she can use her music to fill the jar that was first filled for the chair, and then for Rosa's present, and now needs to be filled because Rosa's grandmother is ill. Rosa's movement out to public expression of her art is directly connected to her private feelings about self and family. Her mother and her

grandmother, rather than representing threatening authority figures who one must escape in order to find self as artist, or representing the community as stifling self, represent what family can give to the artist. Family impels Rosa to produce.

Family also preserves and enriches itself, not only through music, but through stories which the females pass down to one another. Artistry in the Williams' texts is a multi-layered thing. Williams is a writer-artist who creates a story about the female artist who gains sense of self through the stories of her musician female elders. The whole story quite possibly is passed on to the child-reader, perhaps herself a female, by her mother. The child-reader is to see the female artist within a community which preserves and sustains itself through artistry.

Rosa's own emergence as community artist happens as a community event. Just as everyone had brought furniture to Rosa's house in Book 1, now, in Book 3, everyone brings food. Everyone dances. And Rosa's music communicates to everyone. It creates joy. In the end it gives Rosa money so that she can add to the family income.

Barbara Cooney, both in *Miss Rumphius* and in *Hattie and the Wild Waves*, explores the artist as female; and Cooney's artists seem much like Williams': they exist inside family. In *Miss Rumphius*, family, and family values, feed artistry. As Rosa inherits a need to make music in the world, Miss Rumphius also is given an inheritance. Miss Rumphius, as the young Alice, wants to be just like her grandfather: she wants to "go to faraway places," and when she grows old she wants to "live beside the sea." But her grandfather tells her, that though these desires are fine, there is something else Alice must do: "You must do something to make the world more beautiful." This is Miss Rumphius' inheritance.

Miss Rumphius grows up. She travels to faraway places. She goes to a tropical island, she climbs mountains, and she makes friends everywhere she goes. When she grows old, she thinks of that last thing she must do: she must make the world a beautiful place. Thus, Miss Rumphius' job as artist involves helping others or making others happy. Artistry is not simply self-express-

sion. It is bound up with community. Miss Rumphius becomes "That Crazy Old Lady," or the "Lupine Lady," scattering seeds all over. Her artistry is not what she paints on a canvas but what she plants inside of nature, painting the landscape with lupines.

Miss Rumphius passes on the inheritance to little Alice, narrator of the story. She tells her that the child must also beautify the world. What the child-artist Alice must discover is what is her way of doing that. The child-reader learns from this that the artist has both a personal and a social commitment. Art exists in society. It beautifies society. And the female artist, while quietly spreading her artistry, is a powerful force for change. Change, in fact, grows out of the female's understanding of what is and how that which is can be refashioned into a thing of beauty.

The young Alice might well be closely connected to Hattie, the girl protagonist in *Hattie and the Wild Waves*. Hattie is first seen as a child inside of an early twentieth century immigrant family. Immediately, she is perceived as somehow a girl oddity. Her sister's ambition is to "be a beautiful bride." Her brother's ambition is to "make lots of money," but she says: "I shall be a painter." Hattie's brother and sister laugh at her response, saying, "Girls don't paint houses!" But that is not what Hattie means, for as Cooney states: ". . . she was thinking about the moon in the sky and the wind in the trees and the wild waves of the ocean."

Throughout this text, Hattie displays unconventional female behavior. She cannot do needlework like her sister Piffi, and she hates being made into something pretty, an activity which, again, Piffi delights in. Throughout, the reader is aware of these things: (a) that Hattie exists inside of family, (b) that family means warmth and solidity and tradition, even while it is stifling for a budding female artist, and (c) that Hattie has inside of her the makings of an artist. Like Rosa, in Vera Williams' trilogy, Hattie comes from an artist family. Artistry is on her mother's side: "Mama's people were all musicians and artists." However, Hattie's mother is wife and mother first and pianist second. Moreover, Hattie's mother plays purely for others: for company and for her

children. There seems to be little of the ego or self as artist in the playing.

It is different for Hattie. As the story progresses, Hattie is seen involved in painting. She helps her Dad make houses to please people. Hattie knows what soothes the individual soul; and she paints to express herself. After she paints, she covers her walls with what she has seen in the world. Even in illustrations, Hattie is seen actively engaged: a hammer is in her hand, and she is nailing up a picture.

Life passes. Cooney's *Hattie and the Wild Waves* is about the passage of time and a family changing. Piffli does get married. Vollie does become a businessman, and he amasses wealth. They conform to the stereotypical male and female roles. Hattie stays with her parents. She does not explore the world alone or move into a fantasy world or kill giants. This is not the world of male artistry. Quietly, she paints. She watches; and then, hearing another woman singing her heart out at the opera, hearing another female artist, she realizes she must listen to her calling: "The time had come, she realized, for her to paint her heart out." The book ends with Hattie enrolling in the Art Institute. Ultimately, Hattie, inside of family, affirms the individual self. When she tells her family about her career, and her mother smiles saying, "Just like Opa" (the famous family artist), Hattie says, "No . . . Just like me." The text ends on this line. The reader is left thinking about Cooney's own mother, after whom the story is based: the reader is left thinking about the legacy given to Cooney and her own life as mother inside of family—as artist and as story creator. The legacy is passed on to mother and daughter story readers.

M.B. Goffstein's *An Artist* directly tackles artistic identity. However, this text deals with the male image of the artist, a creator who appears to copy the prime creator or God. Implied is that this male artist is made in God's image for he is "like God, but small." Implied is that Goffstein's God is a traditional image which is patriarchal in nature. The female writer and creator ignores the female artist. Yet female doers there are aplenty in Goffstein's works; and the doers, while not earmarked artists, are almost all artists of sorts. There is Goldie in *Goldie the Dollmaker*. Goldie is

an artist with heart and soul, and it is this soul that transmits itself from artist to artistic creation: it is done through the smile. The dolls Goldie makes have such smiles that they captivate everyone: "They said that if you looked at a Goldie Rosenzweig doll, you bought her, even if you weren't going to buy any doll in the first place. Because the truth about that smile was that it was heartbreaking" (13).

Like the other heroines discussed so far, Goldie works inside a community, but she doesn't have a family; and, like some of the male artists, she seems to lead an isolated existence. In a way, the dolls are her family. She says how she makes "little wooden dolls for friends" (55). What she allows children to see is how art gives meaning to life and how the artist, here a female, will sacrifice for beauty. What one also sees is how difficult it is to achieve a beautiful piece: Goldie works hard to get her dolls just right. She feels "responsible for the little wooden person who would not exist but for her . . ." (4). Goldie Rosenzweig is a wonderful doer. So is Debbie Weinstock in Goffstein's lengthier illustrated book *Two Piano Tuners*. Reuben Weinstock, Debbie's grandfather, wants her to be a "great concert artist" (5). Mrs. Perlman thinks she might become "a piano teacher" (5). But Debbie loves to watch her grandfather tune pianos:

Debbie loved to see the long row of hammers, with their thin shanks and workmanlike red and gray and white felt tops, flip up when Mr. Weinstock hit the keys. She liked the files, the grease, the needles, and all of the good little tools her grandfather might use if he took the action out of the piano. (26).

And one day Debbie tunes her own piano. Her grandfather is disheartened. It is so much better to play, he thinks. But Mr. Lipman, the concert pianist, knows: "Everybody should take the responsibility for finding out what it is he really wants to do" (50). Debbie says, "I want to be a piano tuner. And I want to be as good as my grandpa" (50). Both Goffstein's Goldie and her Debbie learn from inside the family; and, even while the first lives alone, both carry on family traditions. In fact Goldie is a finer artist than her parents: "In four years she had carved, painted and sold as many dolls as her parents used to do

in eight . . ." (3). Debbie has the strength to continue what she wants.

In the late '60s and '70s M.B. Goffstein writes of girl artists and doers, future piano tuners. She writes of women in non-traditional self-sufficient active roles. (The grandmother who fishes in her *Fish for Supper* is another such woman and reminded one of my male students of his grandmother and the way she fished.) In the '80s and early '90s, both Barbara Cooney and Vera William explore positive images of female artists. They redefine the female artist in terms that are non-traditional in nature. Diane Engel (*Eleanor, Arthur, and Claire*) continues this exploration while she tackles a very modern subject matter in picture books: the death of one's grandparent.

Engel's heroine is a girl-mouse called Claire. That she is a girl-mouse rather than an actual girl quite possibly makes the event of her grandfather's death less frightening to the very young child-reader. Each summer Claire visits her grandfather and grandmother. She is seen within the family structure. In fact, the grandfather says how Claire has his wife's hair. Grandma humorously replies: "The color my hair used to be. . . ." Claire's grandfather makes clay figures, which, translated into illustrations, capture the child-reader's attention: they are huge and fantastic looking. Engel says they are "of the most amazing design." Claire's grandmother, like her husband, is also an artist: she paints portraits and landscapes. The summer of this present visit she is starting one on her husband. In the first half of this book Claire lives with her grandparents, seeing them as real people. The child-reader is asked to see his or her own grandparents. They sing with Claire, they play "games of poker at night," and they quarrel. They also make up. Their way of making up involves giving special gifts to each other. Engel shows us these gifts through illustrations: they are art related. Art seems a part of family, a part of love. It defines the grandmother and grandfather as individuals while it also binds them together. One day the grandfather dies. A page is devoted to no words, just the illustration of Eleanor, the grandmother, crying. And then the last half of the book is devoted not to Eleanor and Arthur and Claire but to Eleanor and Claire. It is summer, and the two are together.

None of the rituals are the same: neither the poker playing nor the picnics. And so the two strive to help each other. Art becomes the medium for psychological renewal. It is not something either do to escape reality. It is not done as a solitary endeavor. Art binds and connects; and now it binds and connects the two females in the family. Thus, Engel's sense of art and the female artist is similar to Williams' sense of art. Here, though, the child Claire isn't helping her grandmother by collecting money. She is helping by bringing the grandmother back to herself as artist. Art also allows Claire to recapture her grandfather and so feel less loss.

Claire goes down to her grandfather's studio. Engel even says that the child "could imagine her grandpa standing next to her. . . ." He offers her a kind of spiritual strength. The grandmother goes back to her portrait of Arthur; and while she paints she also recaptures all those moments with the man.

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**"Art also allows Claire to recapture her grandfather and so feel less loss."**

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So, here in this book, art even does something else for the girl-artist. It becomes a means to preserve family. Perhaps it becomes a way to combat loss through death. What has passed already and what has passed which makes for family and family solidarity can be remembered and even re-invented through artistic creation. Art can even be a way of honoring the dead—honoring the family, and the self within family.

In the end Claire creates a clay sculpture of her grandfather. She gives it to her grandmother who gives her grandchild a portrait of her husband. The two gifts stand on the mantelpiece while grandchild and grandmother embrace. The final three pages point to not only a healing of spirit through art and family unity but a resurgence of energy. Claire takes home her grandfather's "clay and tools": "She would have a lot to show Grandma when she returned next year." The grandmother is involved in "planning a large landscape." The picture she envisions

unites family in a tight circle of love. It is "a scene of an old couple and a young girl who love each other very much, walking together in the woods."

Goffstein, Cooney, Williams, and most recently, Engel, all of them picture book writers and illustrators, talk of art and family. They do not think one must sacrifice oneself for family. Out of family has come the artistic sensibility. The girl-artist inherits her capabilities from the family; and sometimes that family nurtures artistic creation. Artistic life is also inside the real world. What the artist captures binds her to her family, her society, her natural world. Art, as in Williams' and Engel's works, actually emotionally strengthens familial bonds. Its healing powers finally are passed down from writer to reader through the art of story telling—an art which binds women, mothers and daughters, together—an art which allows us to teach alternative visions of the world to our female and male students. To live rich, full lives we cannot sing "Que sera sera."

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