

# WILLA

*A journal of the Women in Literacy and Life Assembly of the  
National Council of Teachers of English*

## Volume XIII 2004

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## **FROM THE EDITORS**

Again, we would like to begin with our thanks. Thank you to all the authors who share the articles you see here, and thank you to our editorial review board who always put in time at both summer session and throughout the fall helping to review articles and providing terrific feedback.

We believe this is a particularly strong issue, with much to offer all of our readers. "Stirring it Up with Poetry" offers a specific approach to teaching the intricacies of a poem, which can easily be extended for use with other poetry in the classroom, "I want to be like Mary-Kate and Ashley" considers the way pre-teen girls use popular texts to consider girlhood. In "To Teach the Truth" a teacher recounts one student's tragic experience and discusses ways to eradicate homophobia from our schools. Social concerns are also the key element of "Imagining Social Justice and Peace in a World Community," in which the author reminds us of Addams' work and how books honored by this award in Addams' name can help create further change. "Bringing Practice to Theory" steps outside the classroom to examine, in a case study, the impact of feminist thought on a Jewish women's only group. In an interview with the 2003 Rewey Belle Inglis Award Winner, Diana Mitchell, Diana shares her work, which led to this award and her continuing work. Finally, longtime WILLA Executive Board member Jo Gillikin shares a retrospective piece from her own experience growing up. These articles are book ended with some wonderful mother-daughter poetry, and followed by two interesting and informative columns from our representatives.

We hope you will enjoy this journal as much as we have enjoyed the process of bringing it to you. May you have warmth and comfort in this crisp season.

Best wishes,  
Rose and Hannah

## Two Poems

by Pamela Waterbury

### A Warning

This morning we sit on your bed  
exchanging dreams.  
You tell me of the princess,  
the perfect princess who as you watched  
vomited.  
I recall my dream of the princess of the  
Tarot cards  
whose long flowing hair becomes snakes  
winding about her body, tightly binding  
her.

I watch you paint your lips with mauve  
wanting braces to straighten crooked  
teeth,  
so patterned cheers flow smoothly  
from a practiced cheerleader smile.  
I want to warn you that the hair shielding  
your eyes  
and veiling your face will grow more  
opaque with time,  
gauze tightening to bandages  
wrapping about your head like an  
ancient Egyptian queen's.

Then even a surgeon's knife can not  
cut through invisible wires locking your  
jaw--  
generations of strictures  
silencing your voice to hisses  
through barriers of shoulds and smiles.

### Preservation

Quickly I rifle  
Through the photographs in hopes  
this hiking trip to Yosemite with my  
daughter,  
has been preserved.  
My daughter who for years hid behind  
her closed  
bedroom door, eyes shuttered against me  
and disappeared into secrets.  
Seeing none are ruined,  
I slowly spread them  
across the kitchen table  
like a display of precious stones.  
Here, she stands in Warrior pose on a  
flat rock.  
In the background  
the river rushes, ferns along its bank  
leached of sound and color.  
In the next, Sequoias  
and Ponderosa pines shrink into  
graininess;  
and in the final one she disappears into  
the other tourists  
as the spray and power of the falls fade  
into mountain surfaces.

No pictures of us  
lying on the banks of Merced River  
across from Bridal Veil Falls,  
its back splash growing,  
changing directions in afternoon  
light.  
No image of us  
hiking around Mirror Lake,  
water bottles empty as we, depleted  
approach the ninth mile.  
No photo captures  
her arms wrapped tightly  
around me beneath  
the wild rush of the lower falls.

# Stirring it Up with Poetry: "Gossip" by Judith W. Steinbergh

by Terry Martin and Holly Stevens

When students get involved in thinking about and discussing a feminist poem, interesting things happen. Many high school students, especially reluctant or less-skilled readers, don't understand that reading poetry, like writing poetry, is an active process. It's interactive, too. In order to understand a poem, they have to add to what the poet has written on the page-- filling in gaps, visualizing settings, characters, and events in their heads, moving into and around the world created in the text.

How do we go about inviting kids to enter a poem? Researcher Judith Langer sees the teacher's role as helping students develop their own understandings or "envisionments" about a text, through reading, writing, and/or discussion. In *Exploring and Teaching the English Language Arts*, Stephen Tchudi and Diana Mitchell explain that "Such envisionments are subject to change at any time as ideas unfold and new ideas come to mind. It is sense-making, since meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its understanding of a work. Thus it is the total understanding a reader has at any point in time" (164). Langer suggests that sometimes while students are developing their own "envisionments," teachers distract them from their thinking about literature by sticking

to an "understanding first" line of questioning.

We agree, in part. Certainly there is danger inherent in any kind of lockstep questioning strategy (as there is in any pedagogical approach, rigidly applied). But sometimes we find it appropriate (even necessary!) to help high school students read poems by beginning with facts or literal understandings, and then moving to other kinds of literary considerations and activities. In our classes, we find it useful to work with poetry from the inside out, starting with what the poem says and moving toward what the poem means.

We'll show you what we mean. We have found the poem "Gossip" by Judith W. Steinbergh, which examines and questions traditional assumptions about motherhood, to be well worth sharing with high school students. This feminist text can serve as a springboard for thought-provoking discussion of such issues as gender roles in families, conformity and rebellion, and individual freedom vs. responsibility to others. What follows are teaching suggestions designed to invite students to move into and around the world created within this poem, including discussion questions, writing prompts, and ideas for exploring beyond the text.

Terry Martin is an English Professor at Central Washington University, specializing in English Language Arts Education. Her work has appeared in over eighty journals, including *English Journal*, *ALAN Review*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. Holly Stevens is a graduate of Central Washington University. Living with advanced breast cancer, she engages in storytelling--both in telling her own and in drawing out those of others through workshops and interviews from her home in Oak Ridge, North Carolina.

## Gossip

She was a mother you could count on. She was like the sun and the moon, the seasons, the constellations, the orbit of Saturn, the laws of gravity. She could cope. Everyone took it for granted. She did this for years and years and years until it was like breathing, like getting up, like blood in the veins, and the husband came and went on the train or the plane carrying a briefcase or a suitcase. He was a footnote to the thesis of their lives. So when he left for the West Coast for six weeks, everything seemed as it always seemed, but back in the suburbs, she mailed the ticket to his mother in Wales, painted the trim, took his shirts to the cleaner, cooked a week of meals and froze them, booked one passage on a freighter with no return, and four days after her mother-in-law arrived and six days before her husband was due home, she left it all behind, ruining in one act a reputation it took her years to create, scandalizing a community, stirring up worse than dust, leaving husbands and wives sweating in their king-sized beds,

Judith W. Steinbergh

### Discussion Questions

Though written according to "levels," the following questions planned to spark class discussion never, of course, play out in the classroom in a linear way. Students will move into and out of them at various times--with or without our help! The key here is flexibility.

### Developing Literal Understandings

- What do the words *footnote*, *thesis*, *freighter*, and *scandalizing* mean?
- Are there any other words in the poem that are unfamiliar to you?
- Who are the "leading characters" in this poem?
- How is the mother described?
- How is the husband described?
- How long do you think the husband and wife in this poem have been married? What makes you think so?
- Where does this couple live? How do we know?

- What does the mother do that is so scandalous?
- Where is the mother going?
- What specific things does the mother take care of before leaving?
- Who comes to visit? From where? Why?
- What does the poem say that the mother ruins "in one act"?

### Interpreting

- Who do you imagine is speaking in this poem? How well do you think this person knows the woman? What makes you think so?
- What is the mother's most important quality? How do we know?
- Why is the mother described as being "like the sun/and the moon, the seasons, the constellations, the orbit/or Saturn, the laws of gravity" (1-3)? What does this contribute to our understanding of who she is, and what place she holds in her family?
- What does it mean for the husband to be "a footnote to the thesis of their lives"? To

whom does "their" refer here? if he was the footnote, who or what was the thesis?

--Why aren't the characters named in this poem?

--Why does Steinbergh refer to the woman as "a mother" and the man as "the husband," rather than referring to them as "mother and father" or "husband and wife"?

--Why does the mother leave?

--How could the woman's action scandalize a community? What did her action stir up "worse than dust"?

--Why is the mother's action at the end of the poem so scandalous? How did the beginning of the poem set that up for us? - How do you interpret the lines "leaving husbands and wives sweating in their king-sized beds"?

--Why do you think Steinbergh chose to write this as a prose poem, rather than as a formally structured poem? What does this choice of form contribute to the meaning? In what ways does form reinforce content here?

--Note the "column" shape of the piece. What do you know about gossip columns? -- Why is the poem so regular and uninterrupted? What does this suggest about the mother's experience in the marriage and family and suburbs?

--Why do you think the poem is titled "Gossip"?

--Read the poem silently again to yourself, and see if you can raise a question about it that you have now that you did not have about it at first.

### Relating

--How do you feel about what the mother did? Do you understand why she left?

--Do you feel differently about her leaving than you do about a father leaving a family? Explain.

--Do you agree that the mother "ruined" her reputation by leaving? Or does the poet mean that ironically? Look for evidence

near the end of the poem to support your view.

--With which character in the poem are you most sympathetic? Why?

--Identify some of the issues raised by the poem. Then think about and discuss whose issues they are.

### **Writing Prompts**

#### Relating

--Does the poet's description of the mother in this poem reflect qualities you see in your mother? Which qualities, exactly? Explain.

--In your family, does "everyone take it for granted" that Mom can "cope"? Think about times when everyone was sick (even your mom), or when lots of things had to get done all at once and your mom took care of everything.

--Are there any aspects of the poet's description of the husband in this poem that fit your dad? Which ones?

--Rewrite this poem in a different form and see what happens. Type it as a prose paragraph or draft it as a sonnet or haiku, for instance. Try rewriting it as a newspaper article. What happens to its meaning (and to your interpretation) when the form is altered? Why?

#### Analyzing

--Have you, or has anyone you know, experienced a parent walking out? What is your perspective on such an action?

--Have you ever felt like walking away from a relationship which had become routine or in which you felt you were being taken for granted? Did you stay or did you go? Why?

--Can you imagine that it would be possible for you to do something like the woman in the poem did? Under what circumstance? Why or why not?

--What do you think of "traditional" relationships in which a woman stays home to be a wife and mother while a man goes outside the home to work and support the

family? Is this what you want in your own future? Why or why not?

--Do you think the mother in this poem did "the right thing" by leaving? Why or why not? What do you think you would have done in her situation?

--What might be the husband's perspective on this relationship? Try to tell "This side" of the story using any clues you can find in the poem about his role in the family.

--Rewrite the poem from any one of the following points of view:

- The mother
- The mother-in-law
- The husband
- The children
- The neighbors
- The town gossip

--Can you think of someone you have known who took an action that went against the grain of his or her established reputation? What was the effect on that person? What was the effect on others?

### **Quotations Activity**

Hand out slips of paper with quotations that include the word "gossip." Ask students: Can you connect your quote with the poem? What ideas or insights come to mind that you can share with the whole class?

*Holla your name to the reverberate hills,  
And make the babbling gossip of the air  
Cry out, `Olivia!"*

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, I, v, 293

*I had rather take my chance that some traitors will escape detection than spread abroad a spirit of general suspicion and distrust, which accepts rumor and gossip in place of undismayed and unintimidated inquiry.*

Learned Hand (1872-1961) in a speech to the Board of Regents of the University of New York, October 14, 1952

*Gossip is mischievous, light and easy to raise, but grievous to bear and hard to get rid of. No gossip ever dies away entirely, if many people voice it: it too is a land of divinity.*

Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.) in Works and Days 1.761

*That most knowing of persons -- gossip.*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C. to A.D. 65) in Epistles , 43, 1.

Can you draw any parallels between that event and the occasion of this poem?

### **Ideas for Exploring Beyond the Text**

#### **Compose a Group Poem**

Have students write a group poem on "Gossip," using the five sensory sentence-starters below. Divide the class into small groups of 3-5 students and have each group complete the following phrases:

- Gossip is like (and odor) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a flavor) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a sight) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a sound) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a texture) \_\_\_\_\_

Select the similes and group them according to the senses they address. Then distribute similes of a single sense to each group and have them pick the ones they'd like to become part of the class poem.

*There are two kinds of people who blow  
Through life like a breeze,  
And one kind is gossiper and the other kind  
Is gossipees*

Ogden Nash (1902-1971) "I'm a Stranger Here Myself" (1938)  
in I Have it on Good Authority

*Letters of thanks, letters from banks,  
Letters of joy from girl and boy.  
Receipted bills and invitations  
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,  
And applications for situations,  
And timid lovers' declaration,  
And gossip, gossip from all the nations.*

W.H. Auden (1907-1973) in Night Mail

*Gossip is a sort of smoke that comes from the dirty tobacco-pipes of those who diffuse it: it proves  
nothing but the bad taste of the smoker.*

George Eliot (1819-1880) in Daniel Deronda

These then, are just a few ideas for introducing secondary students to the poem,  
"Gossip." We think you and your students will enjoy "stirring it up" in the classroom with this  
poem. Give it a try, and see what you think !

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## "I want to be just like Mary-Kate and Ashley": Young girls talk about popular teen icons in an after-school book club

by Mary Napoli

As I browsed the children's section of a major bookstore chain, I noticed two young girls, about nine years of age, in front of a towering cardboard display of Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen advertising their latest book in the "Real Books for Real Girls" series. While the girls enthusiastically talked about Mary-Kate and Ashley, I overheard the following conversation.

Girl #1: I absolutely love Mary Kate and Ashley.

Girl #2: Me too! Look! (pointing to the ad) You can win a birthday party.

Girl #1: Yeah I saw that on their TV show. Don't you watch their shows?  
Everything they do is so cool!

Girl #2: I'm going to ask my mom to buy this book for me.  
(Field notebook, 2001)

In an instant, they were off, giggling with excitement, book in hand, to ask their adult companion for purchasing power. Intrigued by this exchange, I became curious about the media's influence on young girls' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions.

More specifically, I wondered about the implicit messages that the Mary-Kate and Ashley brand sells to girls regarding the relationship of appearance to romance, happiness, and Success. Since I wanted to know how these products help young girls interpret and make sense of their world and themselves, I formed an after-school book club with a group of eight girls between the ages of 7-12. The book club convened over a period of four months during the fall of 2001 at a local public library. As a participant researcher, I facilitated book club discussions that provided insights about girls' desires to "be like Mary-Kate and Ashley." To present my findings, I will provide a brief overview of the brand and share data gathered through ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, interviews, and book club discussions.

### The Mary-Kate and Ashley brand

In terms of media coverage, the Olsen sisters have been among the most popular female personalities for young adolescents. Since making their debut at nine months old, sharing the role of Michelle Tanner during the late 80's on the television series Full House, the girls have continued to be very visible to a growing fan pool. They have appeared

Mary Napoli teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Children's Literature at Penn State Harrisburg. Her research interests include gender and culture in children's literature. Currently, she is working on a project to examine girls' responses to popular culture themes in children's literature.

on the cover of countless magazines, including *Seventeen*, *Teen People*, *Cosmo Girl* and their own short-lived magazine, *Mary-Kate and Ashley: Real Talk for Real Girls*. They are in control

of their billion-dollar empire, which includes direct holdings in their product line from fashion to movies. Mary-Kate and Ashley have been able to capitalize on their wholesome image by offering various products aimed at toddlers, preadolescent girls, and young adults. Each of their products is accompanied by the *Real Girl* slogan that silently communicates a particular subject position for the reader ... that of a girl and of a consumer. Similar to many other celebrity marketing campaigns, the Mary-Kate and Ashley products are advertised across their own media lines. For example, as readers examine the back of each book, they will notice advertisements and announcements about other products in the brand, including fashion (*Real Fashion for Real Girls*), cosmetics (*Real Beauty for Real Girls*), video games (*Real Games for Real Girls*), and dolls (*Real Dolls for Real Girls*). The products reveal patterns of socialization, body image, pleasure, and consumption and are accessible to many girls in Mexico, Germany, United States, London, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Their website, [www.marykateandashley.com](http://www.marykateandashley.com), receives over 270 million hits per year and features links which invite consumers to collect, read, and play with the various items in the brand. As Dan Hade (2001) indicated, "Brands represent ways of living. The brand does not represent the product, the product represents the brand and a book becomes one more kind of product that carries meaning" (161).

Upon close examination of Mary-Kate and Ashley as "texts," I noticed that the themes of beauty, romance popularity, self confidence, friendship, and empowerment intersect to offer particular messages about what it means to be a girl and, later, a woman. Given the importance of preadolescence as a period where girls are beginning to establish ideas about becoming young women, the implicit contradictions in the *Real Girl* message offered by this brand is curious. On one hand, the message celebrates girls by presenting empowering images of Mary-Kate and Ashley solving problems and winning competitions. Yet, the branding of fashion and beauty products reinforces a girl's desire for the ideal feminine image.

The Mary-Kate and Ashley after-school book club. In an effort to obtain insights about how the girls responded to the messages presented in the books, I established a community of readers with the girls who joined the Mary Kate and Ashley after-school book club. As a participant researcher, I also wanted to encourage the girls to begin to ask critical questions about the texts and to consider what the brand is selling to consumers. In the Mary-Kate and Ashley book club, the girls read eight titles from the comprehensive list of over 50 available books. The Real books for Real Girls series, aimed at preteen girls, offer formulaic structures with predictable solutions. The element of fantasy in these books offers girls an escape from the apparent contradictions of growing up female. Mary-Kate and Ashley present themselves as ordinary girls who struggle with the same concerns as the average teenager. Yet, Mary-Kate and Ashley live a 'fantasy'

lifestyle. They make their own movies, own their own fashion line and travel around the world. Even though they claim that they are `real' girls, their lifestyle is not typical of most preadolescent and teenage girls who consume their products. The books present characters who are focused on being popular and on meeting boys. In this sense, the books reinforce female stereotypes, limiting girls' perceptions about what they should look like and what they should care about. As Valerie Walkerdine (1984) suggests, "Popular cultural texts directed at young women position them to look for a `prince,' to look for an escape route from the tensions and contradictions of lived gender relations in a patriarchal society" (p. 175).

#### Girls constructing a sense of self

Throughout the after-school book club sessions, the girls shared various thoughts and perspectives about their sense of self and their ways of understanding their interest in Mary-Kate and Ashley and the brand. In the following excerpt, I invited the girls to consider the question, "What is a girl?"

Shana: Girls have to be popular like Mary Kate and Ashley. Everyone likes them and everyone wants to be their friend. I think that popular girls dress nice and have the latest fashions.

Chrissy: But what about us? We are girls who happen to like Mary Kate and Ashley, so doesn't that make us popular?

Amy: (Interrupted quickly) Yeah,

but that's a different kind of popular. I mean I don't have all that fancy stuff like some of the kids I know.

Tricia: Neither do I, but I think it would be nice.

Mary: So, are we saying that to be a girl you have to be popular and dress nice like Mary-Kate and Ashley?

Britney: Well, son of. I think that you have to be yourself, but sometimes if I have something really cool on, I feel really good about myself

Shane: I know what you mean. I think that wearing the latest fashions sort of makes you popular, but it's also other stuff too, like having the right friends and liking the right things. I don't know.

Chrissy: I don't know if it's really important to have the popular clothes to be a girl.

Shana: I know what you mean, but it just seems like it's really important in my class.

(Book club transcript 10/0 1)

In this exchange, Chrissy resisted the message of being popular solely on the premise of wearing the right clothing. Some of the girls wanted to dress like Mary-Kate and Ashley in an attempt to

become more like them and to become more popular. Research findings indicate a young girl's understanding of her place in the social world can be connected to the categories that are available to her in the contemporary discourse of girlhood (Gudgeon 1998). Moreover, young girls' interest in displaying the right clothing on their bodies can be defined within a discourse of owning a subject position and a culture, such as magazines, clothing, dolls, etc. (Driscoll 2002).

Scholars such as Beal (1994) and Brown and Gilligan (1992) have noted that socialization into femininity begins at an early age and that the transition from childhood to adolescence has been referred to as a "flight to femininity" where preadolescent girls become more focused on their appearance. Moreover, Brown and Gilligan (1992) have noted that girls begin to internalize cultural prescriptions for acceptable feminine behavior. "Feminine beauty" is held up as an ideal for which girls are to strive, but in terms of the lifestyle portrayed by Mary-Kate and Ashley, it is an ideal that few girls can ever hope to attain. As I worked with young girls who were interested in Mary-Kate and Ashley, I wanted to understand the nature of the phenomenon and how it operated to produce and regulate girls' construction of femininity. During a semi-structured interview, I had the following conversation with Ally.

Mary: So tell me why you like Mary-Kate and Ashley?

Ally: I like everything about them. They are the best and they help me to be confident.

Mary: Tell me one way that they help you to be confident.

Ally: Well, there was this one time I had to do chores around the house and I didn't really want to, so I thought about MK&A (that's what I call them for short) and I was like, well, what would they do?

Mary: So, you imagined that Mary-Kate and Ashley had to do chores and that helped you make a decision?

Ally: Yeah.

Mary: How do you know that Mary-Kate and Ashley do chores?

Ally: They do the same things that we do. It's on their television shows and sometimes in their books.

Mary: So, do you think that reading the books or watching the shows helps you to be confident?

Ally: Yeah, I do, My mom thinks that they are good role models, so I think I learn a lot of good things from their shows and books.  
(Interview 12/01)

In this conversation, Ally uses her connection to the Mary-Kate and Ashley texts as a way to construct herself, especially in terms of an increased self-awareness. Ally views Mary-Kate and Ashley as positive role models for establishing her sense of self. I

wondered what aspects of Mary Kate and Ashley she viewed as empowering. In what ways do Mary-Kate and Ashley serve as role models for young girls? These questions needed further consideration, so I asked Ally to articulate her thoughts about my queries:

Mary: Ally, I'm wondering what you mean when you say that Mary-Kate and

Ashley are role models? Tell me what you think makes a good role model?

Ally: Well, in school, I learned that when people do good things for others, like if they are important, like my teacher or the principal that you can learn from them. I'm not sure what you learn, but I know that you do.

Mary: Tell me a little more about how Mary-Kate and Ashley are role models for you.

Ally: Well, they are successful. I mean they own their own fashion line and have been in lots of movies. And they are pretty, cool, and confident.

Mary: How do you think that they became so successful?

Ally: I think that they have to work really hard.

Mary: So, what can you learn from

them?

Ally: I guess to work hard and to do my best.

(Interview 12101)

This excerpt illustrates that Mary-Kate and Ashley have a powerful effect on the formation of this young girl's identity. As role models, Mary-Kate and Ashley have been described as "trendy, wholesome, and empowering." This is supported by Ally's earlier statement that her mother also views the twins as positive role models. Ally's idea that she needs to work hard to be successful may have been influenced by watching the television shows or by reading the books. However, she also links being successful to her interactions with individuals in her school and home environment.

"I want to be like, Mary-Kate and Ashley"

Providing the book club participants with various opportunities to discuss and respond to the books in the Mary Kate and Ashley series allowed the girls to consider their own world and its construction as they compared themselves to the world of the twins. As girls explored their own ideas about the books and their own topics of interest based on the readings, they acted as agents by expressing their own opinions and attitudes about the books.

In the following excerpt, the girls shared their responses to the movie novelization entitled, *Winning London* (2001). The book offers young female readers certain subject positions, ways to look and behave that make them "girl-like" as defined by Mary Kate and Ashley.

Trica: I liked the book, but I wish that I could be like [Mary

- Kate and Ashley] them. They always get to travel and go to parties and meet cute boys.
- Chrissy: Yeah, but we don't know if they are cute. We only know it `cause of the movie. (Points to the video on the table).
- Britney: I think that it could happen because people go on trips all the time.
- Holly: But we are kids and we are not famous.
- Shana: I know what you mean, but I think it's still cool that Mary Kate and Ashley made a book about their trip; I learned a lot about London when I watched the movie.
- Ally: Me to. That why I love their books `cause I can imagine myself being them, you know what I mean?
- Amy: Yeah. I think I know what you mean. I sometimes get my friends to play Mary Kate and Ashley with me and we pretend to live in a rich house and meet cute boys and stuff

This brief exchange serves as yet another example where girls expressed their individual ideas about the book and explored their connections to the twins. Each girl served as an agent in voicing

Her own opinion and offered important points about how she wanted to act and who she wanted to be. The girls identified with Mary-Kate and Ashley's social connections with families or friends. In short, this conversation became a good example to illustrate how fictional texts work to construct the girls' subjectivity. As the girls and I read several other titles within the Mary Kate and Ashley book series, I discovered that the texts fueled their fantasies. The blurring of the personalities of the popular teens with the literary creation of the characters. in the books remains problematic. The images and the story lines present a script of life, the way a girl's life could be and the way some girls would envision life to be.. The fluid and often contradictory identities that many young girls are constructing based on their response to reading the books illuminates Margaret Meek's (1983) statement that reading itself becomes a source of pleasure, play, and desire. Yet, within the context of the book club, I encouraged the girls to resist and challenge the implicit messages that were presented in the stories. Weedon (1987) noted that within social settings, readers operate as agents on their own behalf, while simultaneously being subjected to the powerful discourses and practices that construct them as subjects. In the next conversation, the girls responded to *School Dance Party* (2001). In this story, Mary-Kate and Ashley are twelve years old and want to attend the fall dance, but they are not able to find dates. The story explores their boy problems as they try to find dates to the school dance.

Mary: Do you think that it's important to have a school

dance when you are only twelve?

Britney: Well, I think that it would be fun, but I don't think that I would want to go with a boy.

Ally: Yeah, no way.

Shana: In my fifth grade class, they want to have a dance for us:

Chrissy: Yeah, my brother told me about it. He went last year and said it was dumb. I'm not sure if I want to go.

Tricia: Do all the boys go to the dance?

Chrissy: Yeah. Some of them go with girls. It's a big deal.

Mary: Shana, do you think that it's important to have a dance at school?

Shana: No. I think dances are for older kids like my babysitter who is in high school.

Britney: I think it would be fun, but not if boys go.

Mary: Anyone else? Okay. Let's talk about this some more. Why would Mary-Kate and Ashley write a book about going to a school dance then?

Holly: I don't know. Maybe they had a dance at their school.

Tricia: Yeah. Since they are popular and famous, they probably go to dances.

Mary: Okay, these are good ideas. But, if we think that going to dances is for older kids, then why do you think Mary-Kate and Ashley would write this book for younger girls?

Shana: Well, I'm not sure, but I guess going to dances are a big deal when you are a teenager. I know my babysitter talks about what she wants to wear and stuff like that.

Amy: Yeah, they [Mary-Kate and Ashley] talked about going shopping for new clothes and stuff in the book.

Britney: But, if you aren't old enough to go to a dance, then why did they write a whole book about it?

Chrissy: Yeah, why don't they write about stuff that we know about?

Shane: Yeah, that's a good idea.

Book club transcript (11101)

The girls exercised agency in order to critique themes of romance and beauty that are associated with going to a school dance. They considered whether going to a school dance was relevant to their own lives and Britney even questioned the intent of the book The

opportunity for girls to talk about the stories and situations in an after-school setting provided them with a site to negotiate their position in relationship to the dominant patterns of power, their environments, and their sense of self. Young girls need opportunities to enable them to understand, to engage with, and to potentially transform what limits and harms them (Basow & Rubin, 1999).

#### Final thoughts

As I continued to interact with the book club participants, I noticed that their discussions became webs of intertextuality. The girls became more cognizant of issues relating to class and wealth, commenting for example, about the teen icons' access to possessions while at the same time, expressing dreams of becoming famous or wanting to purchase items to be more "like" the twins. Many of their comments led me to consider how the marketing concept situates the girls as consumers. The Mary-Kate and Ashley phenomenon attracts a group of young girls who are

lured by their fashion line, by their popularity and by the fantasy of living out their lives. The ideological messages suggest that the products are created for real girls by real girls (who just happen to live fantasy lives). Creating a space for girls to discuss their interests is a powerful pedagogical tool to launch critical conversations that negotiate and interrogate the messages in the texts. Girls become socialized into gendered identities long before they enter school and/or join after school book clubs. In a media-saturated society, it becomes critical to encourage students, such as the girls in my after-school book club, to become more cognizant of the implicit messages embedded in cultural texts and to offer them opportunities to resist them. Educators can encourage students to examine how they are positioned by texts within a variety of contexts. When given the opportunity, children can be very critical in their interpretations of popular culture,

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# To Teach the Truth

by Ruth McClain

Just after midnight, Sarah quietly slipped the rope over her head, took that one step from the chair, and hanged herself in the dorm room of her university. In life, her smile had been warm and infectious. She had been my former student in high school taking all five of my courses and, in one, after a discussion of a short story in which a principal character struggles with his own sexuality, had outed herself to a roomful of students she had known most of her life. No one said a word as if in doing so, they would have diminished, almost profaned, her confession.

In those moments of silence, I envied her courage and honesty knowing full well that, in a small rural school, being gay was a subject rarely discussed except in locker rooms and small hallway conversations safe from the prying ears of faculty. And now, for the first time in thirty-seven years of teaching experience, one of my students had simply faced an audience of her peers to say she fully understood the struggle of the character for she, too, struggled and had finally admitted even to herself that she was gay and that she could no longer remain hidden.

The students sat muted, some with folded hands, some with eyes turned toward me as if seeking a response. Finally, one of the students in the back of the room broke the silence.

"I never knew you were gay, Sarah, but it's OK, You're still the same person I've always known, and I don't care if you're gay or straight." And so, the period concluded, and students filed out to their next class.

Two months later, Sarah brought her girlfriend--Sarah in a tux, her girlfriend in a formal--to the prom. Had my class not watched the prom tape the Monday after, I would have never been aware of an occurrence so blatant that it prompted a class discussion. On that spring prom night, as students filed into the school lobby to purchase their tickets, a school administrator videotaped them in all their evening finery. As Sarah and her girlfriend approached the ticket table, he turned the camera toward another couple following them all the way down the hall until the camera revealed that Sarah had passed, at which time, he resumed the filming of all those in line after Sarah. As we watched this tape in my class that Monday after prom, I was not the only one cognizant of this action; it was visibly clear to the entire class.

In private, Sarah asked me whether or not she should confront him. My feeling at the time was that she should not, for she had not been denied the privilege of attending the prom, nor had her civil rights been denied. Without question, he would have denied

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any intent to overlook Sarah and her partner nor would any discussion change his mind about how he obviously felt toward same-sex couples. In retrospect, I'm not convinced that my advice was right.

The week after prom, I received a phone call from Sarah and another student asking me to meet with them. They were both gay and felt that I was "someone in whom they could confide." And so, for several mornings, these students and I met in my classroom before school. They spoke freely of their concerns about being openly "out" with their orientation, their fears, their desires and, sensing a sympathetic and knowing ear, they asked my help.

After graduation, Sarah enrolled in an out-of-state university. Two months later, she was dead and, as I paid my last respects at her funeral, I was acutely aware of the anger obvious on my face. Here lay a young woman, rejected by her family and, for the most part, by the community. My only thought in those moments was whether or not I had done all I could to help her. Had I listened carefully enough? Had I offered the right advice? Had I been too cautious and fearful for my own teaching position? Had I raised enough issues related to the educational and social

needs of gay and lesbian students, or had I merely been falsely content to insert those issues every now and then into the literature I was teaching?

My school district had not grappled with the reality that gay and lesbian youth were among its students. It had simply avoided the issue altogether and, so, for reasons which include my own lack of courage, it failed to address the educational and social needs of not only those students but also the education of the faculty as well. For all of us, opening the classroom closet is a complex process that involves several different, yet integrated, steps-steps that should and must allow schools to become truly accessible to both self identified and closeted gay and lesbian youth.

The foremost of these steps is the inclusion of gay and lesbian literature that reflects the experiences and culture of gay and lesbian writers. Yes, while it may be true that the works of writers such as Whitman, Dickinson, Lowell, and Tennessee Williams are frequently included in the high school curriculum, it is rare that teachers discuss the contributions of those writers in the context of their lives as gay people. In On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Adrienne Rich writes:

Emily Dickinson--viewed by her bemused contemporary Thomas Higginson as 'partially cracked,' exercised her gift as she had to. In her white-curtained, high ceilinged room, a red-haired woman with hazel eyes and a contralto voice wrote poems about volcanoes, deserts, eternity, physical passion, rape, madness, separation, and suicide. In that room, Dickinson knew "freedom" and "organized her life on her own terms. The terms she had been handed by society--Calvinism, Romanticism, the nineteenth century corseting of women's bodies and choices" caused her to "retranslate her own unorthodox propensities into metaphor--to tell the truth, but tell it slant. It is always what is kept under pressure in us...that explodes in poetry. (Rich 160-161)

Indeed, Dickinson's life, like Sarah's, had stood "a loaded gun,"-a "lethal weapon that, without a possessor is condemned to remain inactive while its stored energy belies a dangerous and painful way to live" (Rich 174).

While Emily Dickinson's work is almost always included in the canon of American literature, seldom is the content of her poetry directly connected to the severe loneliness she must have felt in penning, "One sister have I in the house and one a hedge away." Our classrooms are full of students whose search for expression parallels that of Dickinson, who secretly pen their fears in their private journals; who sometimes rage and ultimately explode in their search for acceptance. When we fail to address the needs of gay and lesbian youth through the connection of literature to life, we send a very clear message of shame and denial and miss the opportunity to provide them with authentic role models.

A second point must also be addressed. To say that teachers need to be comfortable in talking about gay and lesbian issues is to dream that nothing bad exists in the world. The truth is that while some educators may discuss such issues, most will not. The truth is that it is difficult for most to truly adopt an objective stance for they view being gay as perverse and sick. The truth is that for years, our fears have been exacerbated by tension rising from reprisals by parents and communities bent on "rooting out" gay and lesbian teachers or those who address gay and lesbian issues. Perhaps we need to embrace a different approach and let the facts speak for themselves. The text is not always between the covers of an anthology. The text is the faces of those

who sit before us in the classroom--that "great cloud of witnesses" who simply exist.

I am reminded of a small poem entitled Incident by Countee Cullen.

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out His  
tongue, and called me, "Nigger." I saw  
the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

Here, a small wide-eyed boy looks at the city, eyes filled with wonder, heart open to possibility. Only when the ugly word is spoken, does he turn inward and realize that the world has suddenly become a dangerous place. It is this assault to the soul through a word and a look that brings a world of shame slicing through a small boy's summer. Of all that he saw in his visit to Baltimore, the derogatory word remains foremost in his thoughts to denigrate the joy the trip could have afforded. I've no doubt that, like the small boy in Cullen's poem, Sarah had encountered ugly looks and uglier words in the crowded hallways of her high school and viewed the world as a dangerous place.

My classroom had been, for the span of an hour, a haven where issues involving all students had been raised to a level of awareness. But, Sarah could not stay there forever. While she yet lived, she was a participant in those "teachable moments" where she did not have to worry about finding an

acceptable environment in a more often than not hostile world. Our gay and lesbian students exist and ask nothing more than to be treated equitably and fairly, but most of all, to be acknowledged.

Finally, we who teach must either educate ourselves or learn from those who already know that, by discussing gay and lesbian issues in a positive way, we do not cause our students to become gay or lesbian. Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of our culture is the recognition that students' lives, which should be filled with the discovery of their own identities, are too often mired in shame and self loathing. Without question, it is imperative that we move beyond thinking that all our students and teaching colleagues are heterosexual. And, yes, while it may be difficult to find an accepting environment in the teenage world, it is equally difficult for the closeted teacher to find that world.

I am becoming more acutely aware of the power of personal story. Adrienne Rich writes, "A life I didn't choose chose me." It's about time we get over the idea that we can rest in the luxury of ignoring our gay and lesbian students. To continue a pattern of averting our eyes from all that threatens gay and lesbian youth is to not only do them a tremendous disservice but also to deny their very existence. We like things to be black and white. The truth is that most of our lives are lived in a hazy gray area where the edges are blurred. "O you," writes Rich, "who love clear edges more than anything/watch the edges that blur" (Rich 312).

I wish Sarah's story had been one of success--one where she grew to womanhood, found happiness with a

partner of her choice, and became a productive, accepted, and respected member of her community. That did not happen. And so, I am left to wonder who will come forth and initiate the necessary changes in our schools that will make them safe places for gay and lesbian students and faculty. In pondering the question, the only answer that makes any sense to me at the moment is that it is I who must be among those who press for change. My own courage seems small when compared to this enormous task.

Sarah's story is one of despair, but it is also one of courage on many levels. In becoming, each of us is pressed, molded, and shaped into a character whose testimony and legacy are found in our diverse individualities, and it is this diversity we must embrace if we are to encounter humanity face to face. Margaret Mead says it well: "If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so we weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place" (Mead).

### ***Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students***

The issue of sexual orientation is one of both personal and public importance, and one of the most compelling reasons to address this issue straightforwardly, is that young people are asking about it. Silence communicates as loudly as does responding.

#### **What Can We Do?**

Of utmost importance is to recognize the truths regarding sexual orientation:

-- Approximately 1500 gay and lesbian teens take their own lives each year.

- Gay and lesbian youth are two to six times more likely than other teens to attempt suicide.
- Eighty percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth report severe isolation problems.
- Ninety-seven percent of students in public high schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth pose a greater risk for truancy, deteriorating school performance, running away from home, substance abuse, consultation with mental health professionals, juvenile prostitution, violence, dropping out of school, and confinement in a psychiatric hospital (Youth Pride, Inc.).

### **The Truth About Sexuality**

#### Orientation

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual people cannot be identified by certain mannerisms or physical characteristics.
- Sexual experiences as a child are not necessarily indicative of one's sexual orientation as an adult.
- Homosexuality is not a type of mental illness and cannot be "cured" by psychotherapy.
- There is NO definable gay "lifestyle." All educators desire to create a safer environment for students but are often in a quandary as to how to do this very thing with regard to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

#### Some Suggestions

- Make no assumption about sexuality: If a student has not used a pronoun when discussing a relationship, don't assume one.
- Have something gay-related visible in your office—a sticker, poster, flyer, brochure, book, button. This will identify you as a safe person with whom to talk.

- Support, normalize, and validate students' feelings about their sexuality. If you cannot be supportive, please refer to someone who can be.
- Do not advise youth to come out to parents, family, and friends as they need to come out at their own safe pace. Studies show as many as 26% of gay youth are forced to leave their homes after they tell their parents.
- Guarantee confidentiality with students.
- Challenge homophobia. Encourage in-service trainings for staff and students on homophobia and its impact on gay and lesbian youth.
- Combat heterosexism. Include visibly gay and lesbian role models in the classroom.
- Learn about and refer to community organizations. Become also aware of gay-themed bibliographies and refer to gay-positive books.
- Encourage school administrators to adopt and enforce anti-discrimination policies for their schools or school systems which include sexual orientations.
- Provide role models. Gay and straight students benefit from having openly gay teachers, coaches, and administrators. Straight students are given an alternative to the inaccurate stereotypes they have received and gay students are provided the opportunity to see healthy gay adults.
- Stop referring to gay and lesbian youth as "they, " and study, for example, the gay rights movement in the context that other civil rights struggles are studied. (*Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students: A Resource Guide for School Staff*).

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- Caywood, Carolyn. "Reaching Out to Gay Teens." *School Library Journal* (1993): 39-50.
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- Webunder, David. "Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction and Nonfiction: An Annotated Bibliography." *Alan Review*, 23 (1996): 40-43.
- Williams, Robert F. "Gay and Lesbian Teenagers: A Reading Ladder for Students, Media Specialists, and Parents." *Alan Review*. 20 (1993), 12-17.

### List of Books Appropriate for Classroom Use:

#### **Picture Books and Books for Beginning Readers:**

- Newman, Leslea. *Too Far Away to Touch*. New York. Clarion, 1995.
- Quinlan, Patricia. *Tiger Flowers*. New York: Dial, 1994.
- Valentine, Johnny. *One Dad Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994.
- Vigna, Judith. *My Two Uncles*. Morton Grove, IL.: Albert Whitman, 1995.
- Weeks, Sarah. *Red Ribbon*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Wickens, Elaine. *Anna Day and the O-ring*: Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994.

#### **Middle Grade Books:**

- Coville, Bruce. *The Skull of Truth*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1997.
- Harris, Robie H. *It's Perfectly Normal*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 1994.
- Kaye, Marilyn. *Real Heroes*. Fairbanks, AK: Gulliver, 1993.

Salat, Christina. *Living in Secret*. New York: Bantam, 1993.

### **Intermediate and Young Adult:**

- Bauer, Marion Dean, ed. *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Crutcher, Chris. *Athletic Shorts*. New York: William Morrow, 1991.
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## **Pressed Leaves at Morningstar**

**by Pamela Waterbury**

Morningstar is a spirituality retreat for women in northern Michigan.

Parchment thin skin, veins visible,  
you press together in decay.  
Your skin  
forms a new pattern,  
more elemental -- a wasp-nest skin  
as each distinct leaf -- oak, elm, beech --  
bleeds into the other, becoming earth,  
reminding me of my cheek pressing  
into my mother's, pressing  
into my grandmother's,  
as my daughter's presses into mine,  
becoming Woman.

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## **Bringing Practice to Theory: A Case Study of Language Use in Jewish Feminist Worship**

by **Karen Englander**

"It is in this everyday world that I curt certain ideas and theories matter, because with each dirty dish that I wash as I talk and listen, I experience how they affect my life. "

-- Irena Klepfisz

Feminism has affected North American religious practice for three decades, and as a result, the language of worship is being transformed. Practices in Judaism are no exception. While neither feminism nor Judaism is monolithic, the impact of the former on the latter is demonstrable. The more liberal denominations (Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative) now accept women as leaders and rabbis within congregational life and so previously silenced and marginalized voices are now heard. Although Orthodoxy and Hassidism still offer women no such public role, "there is no going back on the feminist revolution" (Greenberg qtd. in Umansky 207). Several scholars have outlined the impact of feminist thought on the different Jewish denominations (e.g. Peskowitz & Levitt, Umansky). Jewish feminists have also produced important books of critique (Adler, Heschel, Plaskow), re-interpretations of sacred texts (Frankel, Goldstein, Gottlieb) and guides for whole new rituals (Adelman, Berrin). However, little has been written which explores how Jewish feminists actually use these new insights.

One phenomenon has been the creation of feminist women's only groups. These groups are formed by women from different denominations (typically Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and non-affiliated) who meet together to explore Judaism and worship as feminists.

Feminist activists "frequently... pursue two related goals - the privileging of previously silenced voices and the transforming of dominant representations that reproduce systemic inequalities" (Ashcraft 3). This paper presents a case study of the worship of one Jewish feminist group during one weekend retreat in which I was a participant. The two feminist goals of voicing and transforming are reflected in the language of worship. Feminist theory and dialogic construction interact on this occasion to manifest those feminist goals. "Language is not property of the individual, but of the community" (Labov 52) and so language as it is used in this particular community is the focus of this investigation. Language - who speaks, what is said, and who determines these things - is examined as voice and transformation.

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## **The Case: Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh**

Jewish feminists who comprise the Jewish Women's Center (JWC) of Pittsburgh have been meeting for ten years. The JWC, like other Jewish feminist groups, is not affiliated with any denomination within Judaism. Because it is outside the sanctions of mainstream Judaism, the members hold a special social identity and they come together as a community of practice. Eight women, including me, came together one weekend in October, 2002, to engage with Judaism. They agreed to allow me to tape-record our activities and participate in the weekend's events as a case study. Three religious services were held:

Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat, Saturday Shabbat morning service, and Saturday Shabbat evening service. No rabbi or other sanctioned leader was present, only us as Jews and feminists, among our other identities in our professional and familial lives.

### **Constructing Worship**

Each worship service is conducted with its own photocopied "prayerbook," which consists of a dozen or so pages containing songs, drawings, decorative designs, prayers (in English and Hebrew), and meditative and informative texts. The end pages in the Sabbath morning and evening prayerbooks contain a list of citations of the texts within. Women writers, rabbis, poets, and artists from disparate times and geographic locations contribute to the worship. The language of the prayerbook is not anonymous - as prayerbooks so often are, and where that anonymity lends an aura of truth and immutability - instead, it is a social construction via a collection of traditional and women's voices. One member of the

group had created each prayerbook and made copies for us.

Despite the existence of the prayerbook, it was not wholly followed, as can be seen in the following instruction from Clara<sup>1</sup> who lead the Saturday morning Shabbat worship. As we gathered after breakfast, Clara said, "So what I was thinking we could do with the service this morning is, as a community, make our service." She divided us into two groups and each was to be responsible for half the service. To do so, we followed Clara's instruction, "incorporate some of [our] values into how we do the service this morning." She had prepared a prayerbook, but she told us, "you don't have to use it. You can pick some of the things to use, you can add other things that you want, you can take out; whatever you want to do... ."

Clara brought prayerbooks which adhere to the traditional structure of the Sabbath morning service including feminist renderings of those traditional elements. Nonetheless, she informed us that the prayerbook was not to be viewed as fixed. We were to "pick some", "add other things" or "take out" from that which was therein. Clara was asking us to fundamentally follow these questions: "What does it mean to honor a text as sacred... What is the effect of a worshipful stance? Does it open the doors to wisdom -- or close the doors to some of our truths?" (JWC morning service, unpaginated).

In fact, when we reconvened our two groups to continue the morning service, we had already spoken deeply about the content of the prayers and service, added our own commentary, eliminated some text, and identified

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<sup>1</sup>This and all other participants' names are pseudonyms

songs to sing. The group I hadn't been part of chose to open the formal worship service by looking at and discussing a piece of artwork that was on the back page of our prayerbook. And so we did, much like the ancient rabbis said, "Turn it (the Torah), and turn it, for everything is in it" (Sayings of the Fathers V:26), but we also found that "not all is in it. We find we have more to add" (JWC morning service).

### **Naming History/Herstory**

The notion of naming has deep significance for Judaism and for feminism. Judaism understands that the events from the past are not simply history, but have importance for the contemporary era of each generation. Because the power of the past shapes the present, naming our biblical predecessors is an integral part of worship. A prayer of traditional Sabbath services begins: "Praised be thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... ."

Feminists have pointed out that God is not only a God of our fathers but also our mothers. God is not only the God of the patriarchs, but also the matriarchs. Thus we read in the JWC Sabbath morning service, "Blessed are You, God of our mothers Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, and God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob<sup>2</sup>.." This is

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<sup>2</sup> The inclusive language which is discussed, in some cases, can also be found in the congregational prayer books of the principle denominations which have been issued since the 1970s. However my interest here is to examine the JWC prayerbook in light of more traditional observance as a reflection of how feminist women pray together.

consistent with Judith Plaskow's injunction that "we must render visible the presence, experience and deeds of women erased in the traditional sources" (28).

Another blessing in the JWC prayerbook reads, in part:

"May God bless you  
With the strength and vision of Sarah,  
With the wisdom and foresight of  
Rebecca,  
With the courage and compassion of  
Rachel,  
With the gentleness and graciousness of  
Leah."

In this case, the biblical women are called upon as exemplars, furthering the notion that supplementing the prayers with **women's stories makes the connection** between the past and the present real for worshippers today. Through the prayer, we are attempting to fulfill another supplication, "Refine our appreciation of the models who preceded us" (Agus, unpaginated).

Reference specifically to Jewish women's contributions in history occurs in the evening Sabbath prayerbook where five women are named who died during that month in previous years, including Rachel, the biblical wife of Jacob; Rachel Yanit Ben-Tzvi, founder of Israel's women's labor movement; and Anzia Yezierska, an American novelist of the early 20th century. A feminist critique of traditional Judaism points out that "the recording of Jewish pasts has transmitted the texts and experiences of male authors and actors" (Peskowitz 22). The JWC prayerbook engages in the important task of recovering and honoring Jewish women's history.

God is spoken of in new terms as well in the JWC prayerbooks. Instead of

referring to God as Lord, Almighty, King and Father which denote maleness and domination, God is called The Eternal, or simply You. God is attributed with feminine qualities. For example, the prayerbook says, "Yours are the cradling Arms of our life and the Womb of our safe deliverance" (JWC morning service, 16), which is distinct from a traditional prayer which reads, "Thou art the Strength of our Life and our saving Shield" (Birnbaum 356).

The traditional blessing form begins, "Blessed are You, lord our God, king of the universe," which some feminists abhor because it is "sexist, hierarchical, and idolatrous in its fixedness" (Plaskow 142). The JWC instead adopted the blessings created by Jewish scholar Marcia Falk. They begin, "Let us bless the source of life." With this phrase "the act of blessing [refers] to the community of human beings that blesses, at the same time the community acknowledges its connection to a deeper, underground reality" (Plaskow 142). The relationship between the congregation and God is emphasized as life-giving rather than controlling.

### **One Voice among Many**

The prayerbook we used are compilations from many sources and many eras. There are prayers, songs, poems and commentary. This variety creates a dialogue among many disparate voices within the worship service itself. At one point in the Sabbath morning service Rivka stopped to ask what was the source of a piece of artwork. Clara responded that she had been "at a women's psychology conference and there was a group of Jewish women who met for (worship) services Friday night and this is from the [prayerbook] that one of them put together... and it was like

this, a homemade thing." We continue to add to each new experience, in part, by including meaningful elements from previous ones, creating a new legacy for feminists.

In the context of worship, we have not only a listener in God, but we listen to each other, and respond. There is a line in a piece of the liturgy that reads that we "shall keep the Sabbath, observe it in a way which befits each person's needs" (JWC 15). During a discussion that took place during the worship service, Sarah commented on that statement saying, "I think what it's saying is wrong. I know we have choices, but... ." The following exchange ensued:

Clara: I see. We have choices but we don't have every choice. We have a number of choices.

Sarah: Yeah, we still need to adhere to the tradition. I know that the commandment says to rest on the Sabbath, and if you exercise the right discipline you can observe the commandment.

Moira: Pm not a hundred percent sure that discipline is the right virtue.

In worship we hold conversations which keep our personal practices vibrant.

### **Integrating Feminism and Judaism: A Continuing Discourse**

A feminist first must "critique the masculine origins of received texts and traditions" writes Peskowitz (26). Although she is writing of Jewish women's history, surely her demand is relevant to creating Jewish women's ritual when she says that the feminist critic must then "reconstruct... with new sources or through new readings of old sources" (26). The prayerbooks of the JWC fulfill this requirement by

reinterpreting and privileging the biblical women through feminist eyes and by including writings by other women who had never entered the mainstream Jewish worship texts.

Further, Bekerman states that Judaism must alter efforts from the "inculcation or transmission of values, historical facts, ritual knowledge and social purposes to their *production in social settings and through discourse*" (Bekerman 469, my emphasis). The worship service leader made this transformation possible by giving to us the responsibility for creating the service using the material she provided as a resource. We created "the shared experience of intimacy in women's prayer community" (Breitman 77) by making a communal prayer service. All the JWC worship services were variously interrupted, discussed, questioned, and instantaneously and collaboratively created. The format of a leader-led service with a compliant congregation as occurs in most synagogues was wholly transformed to right systemic inequality and domination. In the JWC worship all the participants had voice, opinions,

experiences, contributions and insights. Individuals' voices were valued and they counted in the discourse of worship.

When women make a place for themselves in an androcentric tradition such as Judaism, there are "roughly three possibilities," says Tamar El-Or. "They can accept and internalize male-defined practices; they can reread, deconstruct, and read again; or, they can resist and reject them altogether" (El-Or 65). To a great degree, the women of the JWC have abandoned the first, embraced the second, and refused the third. I, and others at the Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh, am much like those "many individuals [for whom]...the only way back into the Jewish liturgical cycle is through experimentation -- by including new prayers or revising old ones, through song and dance and... by expanding Our images of God" (Staub qtd.in Zaidman 62). The JWC is a case where the practice of worship uses language to amend who gets to speak and what gets said. It seems this is a useful case for considering how the feminist goals of voicing and transforming are realized in practice.

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## **Gender Balance Problems in Tracked High School English Classes** by Maureen Dolan, High School Representative

My high school has three levels for English classes - honors, "A," and "B." Students enter this tracking system in 9th grade after being homogenously grouped in the middle school. I personally don't like the system and am advocating for just two levels-honors for the gifted, highly motivated students; and A for all the rest. My reason are the same as others who argue for heterogeneous classes: It affects students' self n to be placed in a "low" class; if expectations for these students are low, then their achievement will be; and there is less opportunity for students to learn from each other. Since there is a preponderance of boys in B classes, as well as high numbers of girls in the honors classes at my school, gender balance is another compelling reason to do away with the lowest tracked classes,

Last year my 9B class had only twelve students, with nine boys and three girls. Pulling them into groups was a problem as they objected to a mix of boys and girls. I spoke with an equally frustrated 10B teacher this year who has a class with only two girls and 13 boys. These girls (not my former students) were in an English class last year as the only two girls in a roomful of boys.

If we did away with the B classes it wouldn't help us with the problem in the honors classes, as this disparity exists at the honors level as well. One of our 10H sections is composed of 20 girls and 5 boys. The teacher in that class says the discussions become less concrete, and more "touchy-feely," while the boys become alienated.

One theory is that boys are placed in B classes for behavior issues only; their ability is A level or even higher. Another theory is that teachers are more prone to recommend girls for honors classes, and that our teaching style appeals to girls more.

Our department has been brainstorming ways to deal with this problem. If anyone has any suggestions on how to achieve a better gender balance in English classes, please email me at [MDOLAN@wi.com](mailto:MDOLAN@wi.com).

## A Conversation with Diana Mitchell: 2003 Rewey Belle Inglis Award Winner

by Gina DeBlase

Rewey Bette Inglis, who, in 1929, became the first woman president of the National Council of Teachers of English, was a visionary teacher, writer, and observer, and her extraordinary contributions continue to influence our profession. Each year WILLA presents the Rewey Belle Inglis Award to an outstanding woman in English and/or English education. Since its inception, recipients of the award have been women whose scholarship on literacy teaching and learning and service related to English language arts have made outstanding contributions to the role and image of women in the profession and in NCTE.

Diana Mitchell has served as an inspirational mentor and role model for many of us in the field of English and English Education. At the 2003 NCTE national convention in San Francisco, the Rewey Belle Inglis Award was presented to Diana for her exemplary service and commitment to our profession. Diana, a secondary school teacher for thirty years, is a past president of ALAN (The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents), served from 1998-2002 as a member of the NCTE Secondary Section Steering Committee, and was a member of the Conference on English Education Executive Board from 1996-1998. She has also held several leadership roles in WILLA, including the role of Chair. In addition, she is widely published and is the author of several books, including

*Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World* (with Pamela Waterbury and Rose Casement, 2003); *Both Art and Craft: Teaching Ideas that Spark Learning* (2000); and *Exploring and Teaching the English Language Arts* (with Steve Tchudi, 1999).

In September, I asked Diana if she would agree to an interview to talk about her career and her impressions of teaching and learning in the language arts.

**Gina:** Your contributions to English Education have included consulting, writing books for teachers, NWP (National Writing Project) co-director, and various NCTE leadership roles. When did your passion for this profession begin?

**Diana:** I have been an avid reader who checked out four books a week from the library since my early elementary school days. I approached school writing assignments with energy and thought the whole process was fun. It took me awhile to link this love of literature and writing with my professional career since my first eight years in secondary education were spent teaching social studies. Through a series of serendipitous events, I ended up going back to school in the evenings and summer to get certified in English.

Once I started teaching English, I knew I was in the right place. I absolutely loved matching students with books they could read with zest and loved the challenge of helping students discover their writing voices. My passion for teaching the English

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language arts seemed to spill out as I talked to teachers and I soon found myself deeply involved in English education, although I remained a high school teacher.

**Gina:** Was there a particular experience or person that contributed to your passion for teaching, your interest in children's and young adult literature, and gender issues in education?

**Diana:** Just before I went back to school to get certified in English, I teamed in a social studies/language arts class with a magnificent language arts teacher, Pamela Dail Waterbury, who was a young teacher at the time. She had sensitivity to and a love of the English language arts and I saw, through working with her, how expansive English could be and how it provided a wonderful forum through which I could reach my students. When I returned to Michigan State University, I had excellent teachers in English Education, including Susan Tchudi (Koch, then), Marilyn Wilson, and Steven Tchudi. They opened up a new world of possibilities for me and I began to get a glimmer of what was possible to accomplish in the classroom.

I have always loved children's literature and every Christmas my daughters and I exchanged picture books, no matter how old they were. I began to read young adult literature avidly at the nudging of twin girls I had for ninth grade English in 1980. When they found out how little I had read beyond Paul Zindel and Paula Danzinger, they began bringing me four to six books a week. By the end of the school year, my education had begun and I just gobbled up the literature after that. The bonus for me was that I could talk to my students about it and help them find books they could read enthusiastically.

I did not get very involved in gender issues until I began my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Diane Brunner. I had always considered myself a strong woman and didn't really see what all the fuss was about! I knew I wanted to address values in young adult literature, but as I read books to analyze I found many of the values revolved around gender bias. I read everything I

could get my hands on and soon understood what all the fuss was about and what gender issues were. I didn't realize until I read Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, how subtle but pervasive gender biases were and how much responsibility women were assigned throughout our culture for the happiness of men and children. Once I understood the psychological effects of gender assumptions throughout my socialization, I became very passionate about helping my students learn to uncover societal gender expectations that they had been taught to believe were natural.

**Gina:** Your book, *Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World*, is your most recent contribution to the field of children's and young adult literature. To some extent, this genre continues to be undervalued by teachers and parents alike. In your opinion, what makes these genres such powerful tools for reaching out to young readers?

**Diana:** In my thirty years of experience in secondary schools, I found that students want to read and write and talk about issues and ideas that are relevant and accessible to them. These issues do not have to be personal, teenage issues, such as how to keep friends, but they do have to be presented in such a way that students can understand and grapple with the issues. Young adult literature provides such a venue. Contemporary language makes the books immediately accessible since students don't have to leap across language barriers to get at the heart of the book. Action begins immediately and teens don't have to wait around until the book gets interesting. Because so many young adult books have diverse characters and social classes in them, students can readily identify with the characters. Books with characters that make visible the racial or economic or familial aspects of who students are, affirm and validate that aspect of students' lives. Young adult novels don't try to work against the nature of their readers or tell readers what is good for them; they work with the reader by using their skills to pique and keep students' interest. The literary quality and depth of so much in this field makes the

literature usable and appropriate for students throughout middle and high school.

**Gina:** Who in the field inspires you?

**Diana:** People who love what they are doing and impart their passion to others inspire me. Authors I particularly love are Madeleine L'Engle, Tom Barron, Chris Comer, Gary Paulsen, Jacqueline Woodson, Han Nolan, and Virginia Hamilton. I love educators who remain immersed in the field and don't simply "tell" about it. Some of these educators include Janet Allen, Tom Romano, Leila Christenbury, Teri Lesesne, and Pat Kelly. I like researchers who also help teachers see how they can use the new findings in their classrooms. Among those I admire are Judith Langer, Arthur Applebee, Jeff Wilhelm, and Kylene Beers.

**Gina:** What are some of your favorite professional books?

**Diana:** Two books that helped me understand what it really meant to teach English were *How Porcupines Make Love*, by Alan Purves, and *Explorations in the Teaching of English*, by Steven Tchudi. Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way* demonstrated how I could integrate meaningful writing opportunities in the literature classroom. Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* affirmed what I had come to believe about the importance of the heart in teaching. Janet Allen's *It's Never Too Late* helped me reach more students and involve them in reading. This brief list only scratches the surface of the wonderful advice and support I have gotten through reading extensively.

**Gina:** In your opinion, how has the field of English Education changed in the last ten years?

**Diana:** Wonderful work has been done in this field and its value can be seen in how teacher-educators are helping their students engage in the classroom community. There is much deeper understanding of the complexity of the classroom and that different strategies and materials must be used to reach as many students as possible.

The only change that I find a bit worrisome is the extreme emphasis on research and the way that research has been elevated as the be all and end all. Being "cutting edge" seems to have become the most important value, especially in what is recognized in the field as worthy of winning a publishing award. I worry that our professional journals and even our teaching sometimes may get too far ahead of our audience. What seems like "old hat" to us is, after all, new information to our students.

**Gina:** What are your current projects?

**Diana:** Because I am retired, I travel for fun about half of the time and also spend time visiting our three grandchildren. I am currently writing an article on spirituality and young adult literature for a column in *English Journal*. Because I love the field and also because I will have to revise my children's literature book periodically, I keep up on the literature in the field and read widely in children's and young adult literature. I also volunteer monthly in the classroom of my daughter who teaches fourth grade. It is stimulating to read to the class and listen to their responses and to find out what they are reading.

**Gina:** What are some of the things you enjoy most about working in this field?

**Diana:** This is a field full of generous people who will help you in any way they can. They don't forget that their purpose is to help teachers reach as many students as possible and they know that the sharing of ideas and information is essential to reaching this goal. I also love the subject matter and never tire of reading about the teaching of literature and writing, and of reading the literature itself. This is a field with a heart. Most of us love literature and writing because it touches the core of our humanity. I loved teaching teachers and those studying to be teachers because they responded so positively when they found they could transfer successfully what they were learning and experiencing in their classrooms.

## Imagining Social Justice and Peace in a World Community: The Jane Addams Children's Book Award

by Susan C. Griffith

We have learned as common knowledge that much of the insensibility and hardness of the world is due to the lack of imagination which prevents a realization of the experiences of other people. (Addams, 1902/2002, p. 8)

Fifty years ago, pacifist and activist members of the Jane Addams Peace Association, the educational affiliate of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, created the Jane Addams Children's Book Award. The award has been presented annually since then to the children's book of the preceding year that most effectively promotes the cause of peace, social justice and world community. The award seeks to bring to public attention children's books that invite young people to think imaginatively about questions of utmost importance: How can people of all races, cultures, nations and economic systems live together peaceably? How can we begin to think more creatively and humanely about injustice, past or present, real or fictionalized (Official Guidelines, 1994)? Fifty years later, books commended by the Jane Addams Children's Book Award form a body of work distinguished as literature, a body of children's literature that counters what Addams saw as a source of "insensibility and hardness" in the world--namely, "the lack of imagination which prevents a realization of the experiences of other people" (Addams, 2002, p. 8).

As a member of the 2004 Jane Addams Children's Book Award Committee, I delved into the work with a sense of honor and purpose, more than pleased to focus my efforts on a project that furthered the legacy of a woman I have long admired. Here I share my experience with that project. The following discussion explores connections between Addams' own life and philosophy and the children's books that are honored in her name. I provide both relevant biographical information and draw on recent scholarship about Addams' work by philosopher Charlene Seigfried (1999, 2002) and historian Jean Bethke Elshtain (2002) to outline the thrust and shape of Addams philosophy. Then I concentrate on Addams Award Winners of the past ten years', looking at them in light of Addams' most widely recognized accomplishments--the ones that she requested be noted as an epigraph on her grave marker:

Jane Addams  
Of  
Hull House  
And  
The Women's International League  
For  
Peace and Freedom,

Finally, I look closely at two of the 2004 Addams Award Winners and Honor Books to describe how their literary conception reflects the tenets that guided Addams' thinking.

### **Jane Addams, Activist, Pacifist, Philosopher, Thinker**

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<sup>1</sup>Twenty books have been distinguished as Addams Award Winners since 1994. Two books per year, in two categories--Picture Books and Books for Older Children--have been named. The process allows for Honor Books to be named as well but here the focus is on the award winners only.

Jane Addams was an inspired activist who struck at the roots of social injustice through astute, persistent, thoughtful action during the first decades of the twentieth century. Born to a prosperous, white, middle-class family in Cedarville, Illinois, Addams was a serious child whose childhood was marked first, by the death of her mother when she was two, then, by the death of her father just as she entered adulthood. Her father's death triggered a prolonged grief and depression that provoked years of soul searching. Dissatisfied with the prospects and parameters that society offered her as one of a small but growing number of middle class, college-educated, white women, she sought a way to loam from life and contribute to it that went beyond individual goals and family obligations.

While traveling in Europe after her father's death, she realized the devastating effects of urban poverty. In London, she also witnessed the efforts of the staff of a pioneering social enterprise-the settlement house. Addams observed the workers at the Toynbee Hall settlement house as they worked alongside the poor to better living conditions and to improve the quality of education. Returning to Chicago in 1889, she and her friend Ellen Gates Starr rented a "decaying mansion in the midst of a poor immigrant community" (Alonso, 2004, p. 4). Here they set up Hull House, one of the first settlement houses in the United States. Collectively working with other women like themselves, she and Starr lived at Hull House and worked with and for neighborhood people. In a recent portrait of Jane Addams, Harriet Hyman Alonso (2004) notes:

Within four years of its inception, Hull House boasted an array of clubs and functions, a day nursery, gymnasium, dispensary, playground and a cooperative boarding house for single working women, known as the Jane Club. (p. 4)

People from all over the world revered Addams for the work of Hull House-work that continued for decades beyond her death in 1935. They admired the energy and tenacity she brought to battles with Chicago's municipal government and to those with the Illinois legislature as an advocate for reforms in child labor, sanitation, housing, and work conditions. Addams biographer Jean Bethke Elshtain (2002) notes that Nearly every major piece of social legislation or civic initiative having to do with the well-being of children from 1890 to the New Deal bears the Hull-House stamp in one way or another. (p. 122) Addams was also an ardent pacifist.

On the brink of World War I, in 1915, she, along with women peace advocates from many countries, founded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WI PF). While her work at Hull House never ceased, her work toward international peace dominated the last twenty years of her life. During World War I, her criticism of the war and her efforts to bring its devastation to light were interpreted by the public as misguided at best. Most, however, considered them unpatriotic or traitorous. In spite of being censured for her views during this war, she later-in 1931-was honored as the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, an award she shared with Nicholas Murray Butler.

Eishtain's (2002) and Seigfried's (1999, 2002) analyses of Jane Addams' work reveal important characteristics 'of her philosophy, her writing, and her vision of democracy. Her philosophy is noteworthy for its basis in experience. Her writing is distinctive for its reliance on storytelling. Her vision of democracy is remarkable for its insistence on the inclusion of all people in both the process and outcome of responsible human action.

Addams, like her friend pragmatist

philosopher John Dewey, sought to find the origins of understanding life in the experience of living everyday life itself. She grounded her activism firmly in her own life experience and in her observations of the common daily experience of the working class and poor people who surrounded her. All of her ideas and theories grew from what she called perplexities, i.e. particular situations that engender clashes of beliefs, habits and interests endemic in diversified societies (Seigfried, 2002). Experience itself was not enough, however. Philosopher Seigfried (2002) points out what Addams held true: "Experiences cannot ... just be taken at face value or else they will lead us astray. Conclusions based upon them must be critically tested, revised, and retested (xi)"

Addams' contemplation and explication of her experiences yielded twelve books and over five hundred essays, speeches, editorials and columns (Elshtain, 2002). It is in this writing that she developed a cohesive sense of purpose and the philosophy that guided her actions. Her philosophy shares the hallmarks of pragmatist thinking - namely, linking theory and practice, facts and values, experience and experimentation (Seigfried, 1999, p. 217). Her analysis is distinctive, however, in that it draws nearly exclusively on the experience of women and children, especially those white middle-class women like herself and the women and children of diverse ethnic backgrounds who were her Chicago neighbors (Seigfried, 1999, p. 221).

Addams told and reflected upon the stories of life that surrounded her to explore and illustrate her understanding of the world Framed by incisive analysis, the stories she told are the fabric of her thinking. In terms of research today, Addams was a natural qualitative researcher, working from the ground up, focusing on telling incidents, representing them in vivid detail followed by critical

analysis to build theory grounded in the real world. In Elshtain's words (2002), Addams was "attuned to narrative structure, the requirements of drama and the need to tether important ethical decisions to concrete and vivid events" (p. 17).

For example, Addams ponders the effects of forcing women to leave their children untended to work for long hours at low pay through this story:

I cannot recall without indignation a recent experience. I was detained late one evening in an office building by a prolonged committee meeting of the Board of Education. As I came out at eleven o'clock, I met in the corridor of the fourteenth floor a woman whom I knew, on her knees scrubbing the marble tiling. As she straightened up to greet me, she seemed so wet from her feet up to her chin, that I hastily inquired the cause. Her reply was that she left home at five o'clock every night and had no opportunity for six hours to nurse her baby. Her mother's milk mingled with the very water with which she scrubbed the floors until she should return at midnight, heated and exhausted, to feed her screaming child with what remained within her breasts. (Addams, as cited in Elshtain, 2002, p. 106)

Addams explored the perplexities of linking individual and family life with the larger social life through pointed, reflective, vivid narratives like this story of the overworked mother. This kind of thinking through narrative propelled the development of her philosophy which demanded that private life be brought into the realm of what she called the social claim, that is, the public world of responsible human action.

She saw democracy as a way of life that was always a work-in-progress, forged from reflections on, and results of, the experiences of all. Democracy requires people who are "widely at home in the world" (Addams, 1902/2002, p. 96). Enlarging consciousness so that the social claim encompasses the claims of family and of individual goals was a guiding force in the ongoing work of democracy. She challenged educators to give children's own experiences a social value, to show them how to direct their own activities, and to teach them to adjust their activities to those of other people (Addams, 1902/2002, p. 81).

The spirit of Jane Addams' civic work and her international work for peace lives in the Addams Children's Book Award winners of the past decade. Like Addams, the books focus on lives limited by injustice and misunderstanding in the world. All illuminate the resilience and tenacity of children whose spirits or circumstances are akin to those of the poor, working class, common people who shared their neighborhood with Addams and her colleagues. Each raises important questions about what it means to live honestly and thoughtfully in the world today.

### **Carrying On the Legacy**

With an underlying vision of a socially just world, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award Winners explore the effects of racism, injustice, war and repression in the lives of children in the past and in the present. The stories these books tell are stories of people much like those Addams encountered in Chicago and around the world. The books bring to life the issues faced by Addams, her colleagues and their neighbors, including child labor, sanitation, housing, work conditions, hunger and the effects of war. Like most children's books, these twenty books focus almost exclusively on the experiences of children. They do so in five categories: historical documentaries

of children's experiences, stories of individual lives, historical novels portraying racism in the United States, international stories chronicling the effects of war and repression and stories that underscore the importance of working for peace. (See Appendix for complete list of award winners.)

Books like *Growing Up in Carl* Country by Susan Campbell Bartoletti (1996) document the actual history of children. Drawing on written and photographic primary source material, the books in this grouping give a genuine sense of the way children experienced conditions or events of a specific historical era. In Bartoletti's book (1996), the work of children in the mines of Pennsylvania at the turn of the last century takes center stage.

Individual picture book biographies place the accomplishments of people who publicly fought injustice in light of their childhoods. 2004 Award Winner *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003) traces the life of Cesar Chavez, from his secure childhood in Arizona, to his days as a migrant worker, forward to his life as union founder and organizer. This group also includes artistic autobiographies like George Littlechild's *This Land is My Land* (1993). In a series of deeply personal reflections on a collection of his own collages, Littlechild's art and words speak loudly and clearly of richness and limits of Native American life in the unjust world of contemporary society.

Ten works of fiction burrow into children's encounters with injustice, using children's eyes to create the viewpoints in each story. These include works of historical fiction set in the United States that explore the effects of racism, like *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), a novel about a wealthy Mexican family who become migrant workers in California in the nineteen-thirties. Several works of contemporary international fiction explore the effects of war and repression in the

lives of children today: *Habibi* (Nye, 1997) set in the Middle East, *Parvana's Journey* (Ellis, 2002) set in Afghanistan, *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo, 2000) set in Nigeria and London and *The Composition* (Skarmeta, 2000), set in an unnamed South American country.

Three books can be categorized as books that illuminate the need to work for peace in the world. *Seven Brave Women* (Heame, 1997) and *Sub's Secrets* (Nye, 1994) focus on the peaceful lives of women and children. Each of these two books subtly yet purposefully juxtaposes the creative, life-affirming activities of women and girls with references to wars happening at the same time, showing by contrast and implication the deleterious effects of war.

The third book in this group, *Patrol: An American Soldier in Viet Nam* (Myers, 2002) is distinguished as an Addams Award Winner on two counts: its protagonist is not a child and its subject matter is combat itself. Myers' lyrical, haunting poem sears through a soldier's experience on patrol in Viet Nam to raise the question, "Who is the enemy?" Framed and deepened by landscape collages by Ann Grifalconi, this picture book startles because it pushes parameter in both form and content,

Addams' notion that people need to be widely at home in the world underpins the spirit and purpose of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, too. The award winners of this past ten years traverse the distance from the immediate life of the child's first ventures outside the family—as an immigrant going to school in *Painted Words/Spoken Memories: Marianthe's Story* (Aliko, 1998) or as a poor child reporting for work in a cannery in *Kids at Work Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* (Freedman 1994) -- to the experiences of children whose lives are engulfed by war and repression, for example France Temple's *Taste of Salt: A Story of*

*Modern Haiti* (1992), the story of Djo, a boy who labors in sugar cane fields in the midst of physical abuse and political repression. As a body, the books seek to enlarge children's consciousness so that the social claim informs and extends their individual and family lives.

Individually, each intertwines and melds the individual, family and social claims, as Addams called them, more or less effectively. While the success of placing a particular story in a larger social context—or within the social claim—is not a specific criteria for the award, the issues of contextualization do arise in discussion. How should books for children with historical approaches connect the past with the present? How should books about individuals show the lives in light of the larger world? How, and when, should books make clear that individual and historical tragedies link directly to larger repression and violence present right now as we read this article?

Two books for older-children commended by the 2004 Jane Addams Children's Book Award meld the individual, family and social claims exceptionally well: one of the 2004 honor books, *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmet Till Case* (Crowe, 2003) and the 2004 award winner, *Out of Bounds: Seven Stories of Hope and Conflict* (Naidoo, 2003). Each of these books also powerfully stretches the tragic history it illuminates so that readers can see its presence in the present and feel the urgency of placing their own lives within the larger social world.

Chris Crowe's thorough, unflinching chronicle of Emmet Till's life, his lynching and its repercussions, masterfully places this explosive, heart-rending tragedy historically and, more importantly, contemporarily. Throughout the book, Crowe carefully shows just how the Emmet Till case relates to past and future events in the struggle for African American civil rights in this country.

Through careful, respectful attention to the courage, resolve, actions and words of Emmet's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, Crowe shows deep connections between family and social claims. In the book's concluding paragraphs, Mrs. Bradley's words followed by Crowe's stunning economy of words unite individual, family and social claims past and present:

In a newspaper interview a month after the conclusion of the trial in Sumner, she told reporters, 'Two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South, I said, 'That's their business, not mine.' Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.'  
It is still the business of us all.  
(Crowe, 2003, p. 120-121)

Beverly Naidoo's short story collection *Out of Bounds: Seven Stories of Hope and Conflict* melds individual, family and social claims powerfully and poignantly. Naidoo's seven chronologically sequential short stories that take place in South Africa unravel the perplexities of life under apartheid from 1948, when the first story is set, through 2000, when children and naive readers might think apartheid's deadly ramifications would be over. Each story

reveals its message through vivid details and telling incidents, just as Addams' stories and vignettes made their points. Each is a short, purposeful story of ordinary life constricted by larger social conditions, just as Addams' stories are. And, each, like Addams' stories, invite discussion and interpretation in order to understand the way in and the way out of the tangle of competing claims they convincingly represent.

Like Jane Addams' philosophy, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award Winners are grounded in the experience of women and children. Like the stories that are the fabric of her writing, they crystallize ordinary experiences of life with telling details, a sense of drama, and narrative structures that give immediacy to the stories as they unfold. Motivated by a vision of a socially just world, nearly all of the books from the past decade address issues of social justice by exploring the effects of racism, injustice, war and repression in the real and imagined lives of children in the past and in the present. Jane Addams Children's Book Award Winners and Honor Books offer young readers the opportunity to stretch their imaginations beyond their individual and family lives. As a body and individually, they also seek to create children who are widely at home in the world and who understand the social value of their own experience.

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**All About "Ms." -- An Interview with Alma Graham**

by Dure Jo Gillikin, Retired Teacher Representative

In 1972, Alma Graham became the first lexicographer to put the courtesy title "Ms." into a dictionary. To find out how and why this term originated, how it was popularized, and how it should be used, I asked her the following set of questions.

**Who originated the term "Ms." as a courtesy title? When and why was it first used?**

The eleventh edition of Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary gives the date of origin as 1949. I remember reading--perhaps in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*--that "Ms." was first used in the 1940s by people who prepared mailing labels for magazines and advertisements. With many women working outside the home during World War II, taking over jobs traditionally done by men, a female householder's marital status couldn't simply be assumed. Since "Mr.," the abbreviation for "Master," didn't reveal marital status, the bulk mailers blended "Miss" and "Mrs.," the two abbreviations for "Mistress," into a shorter form parallel to Mr.: Ms. So it seems that the origin of Ms. was purely commercial. (I'd hoped to be able to research this further on a Google search; but all I turned up was multiple sclerosis and Mississippi.) Those who say that Ms. is an abbreviation of nothing are simply ignorant of etymology.

**How successful is the use of Ms. now, and why? How is Ms. correctly used?**

Given the widespread acceptance and use of Ms. now, it's funny to remember the resistance we encountered in the 1970s. A. M. Rosenthal--who exerted editorial power over *The New York Times* throughout the '70s and served as executive editor from 1977 to 1986--forbade the use of Ms. during his tenure. Israel Shenker managed to sneak it past him, though, when he was a *Times* columnist. In

the early '70s, when I was associate editor of the American Heritage Dictionary, Shenker interviewed me for a piece he was writing on trademarks. He quoted me as follows: "I want to see the day when I can write Jell-O with a lower-case letter," said Ms. Graham (who boasts that she was the first to put Ms. into a dictionary.) If Ms. Graham will be good enough to consult the Random House Dictionary, she will find the gelatinous answer to a maiden's prayers, jello in letters small but firm." Daring as Shenker was at the time, he couldn't resist getting my marital status in there with "maiden."

*Ms. Magazine*, first published in 1972, was instrumental in popularizing Ms. Ultimately, it was widely adopted because it filled a real need in the language. More and more, as women claimed careers of their own, many resisted being labeled according to whether or not they were married. Originally used only when marital status was unknown, Ms. came to be used when such status was considered irrelevant. Some mistakenly thought it was to be used if a woman was divorced, but the whole point of Ms. is that it says nothing about a woman's marital status. The biggest faux pas is using it before a man's name as a substitute for Mrs., as in Ms. Frank Mitchell. Ms. should always be followed by a woman's name: first and last or last name only, as in Ms. Jo Gillikin, Ms. Gillikin. Informally, it may be followed by a woman's first name only, as in Ms. Jo.

**How did the title Ms. get into the dictionary? Israel Shenker said you boasted you were the first to put it in.**

That's right. Actually, many people are involved in the decision to put a new word into a dictionary. There are the citation readers who scan publications for new words and new senses of existing words. Then come the editors who determine when a word has come into general circulation. Finally, a lexicographer has to define it based on the contexts in which it appears. *The American Heritage School Dictionary*, published in 1972, was the first dictionary to include the title Ms. Our usage editor, Bruce Bohle, came to me one day and said he thought the term was in sufficiently wide use to be entered. We discussed the fact that a standard pronunciation had not yet been agreed upon, so we covered that in a note. I defined *Ms.* as "An abbreviation used as a title of courtesy before a woman's last name or before her given name and last name, whether she is married or not." The note observed that "Ms. has yet to find an agreed pronunciation: (mis), (miz), and simply (em es) seem to be the possibilities." Of course, usage soon determined that it would be pronounced (miz). Our dictionary broke new ground in eliminating the sexist stereotypes that we found throughout the schoolbooks of the 1960s, a process I described in "The Making of a Nonsexist Dictionary," which appeared in *Ms. Magazine* in December 1973 and was reprinted in *ETC. A Review of General Semantics* in 1974.

**That was very informative. Thank you.**

Thank *you* for asking, Ms. Gillikin.

# White Gloves and Collard Greens: One Southerner's Contradictory I

(Delivered at a conference of the CUNY Women's Coalition held at Barnard College in 1982)

by Dure Jo Gillikin

*White gloves are who they want you to be.  
Collard greens are who you are.*

Wear white gloves and you become socially correct.

Wear white gloves and you show that you know (or your mother knows) what is proper and right--not only what is right, but who is right.

Wear white gloves and you are Miss Right with the other Miss Rights, sipping tea and not rattling the 'cup against the saucer; speaking proper English, forgetting about "ain't I" and being uncomfortable with "aren't I."

Wear white gloves and you are a lady, the top of the ladder, the essence of femininity.

Being invited to a place where other females wear white gloves means your family has money or connections; that you've got a bloodline, though poor; that you live in a nice place and take dance and piano lessons--or that some day you will have or be all of these things.

Wear white gloves when you're young and one evening you'll meet Mr. Right, not at the tea party but at the country club dance on Saturday night, and then you'll be Cinderella with her prince.

Wearing white gloves, then, meant that you had accepted society's standards for your role as female, as human being; it meant that you had agreed to go along with society's version of who you should be.

In the world of the spirit; white gloves helped you make it with God. To make it with God or Mammon, you had to dress for it. White gloves meant that you were chaste, were pure, were innocent. Just as no decent male would come calling for the improperly dressed female, so God didn't deign to drop in on--much less eternally save--females not wearing their Sunday best, females not sitting rigid on the hard wooden pews on Sunday morning and Sunday night. In that time and place, the only perfect girl was a girl who knew nothing, said nothing, did

nothing--especially about sex until the wedding night. The Southern belle, then, was as good as dead, as well-dressed as a corpse.

But those white gloves also meant something else and what it meant was this: there is a best you, and that best you wears clothes that show you off on Sundays and on social occasions. It showed that there was something inherently wrong with the way you were during the week, that there was something inappropriate about the girl who was active, who wore jeans and a plaid shirt, who had mean thoughts sometimes, who ate collard greens, who drank Pepsi-Cola as if it were water, who dared to think on her own. Growing up Southern meant that there was always this sharp, almost irreconcilable tension between who you were supposed to be, to God and to others, and who you really were.

The world of collard greens is the real world, the world of everyday, the world in which food has a bad smell, the world in which people go to the bathroom, blow their noses, have body odor, and occasionally curse like sailors. The world of collard greens is the natural world, the world in which you plant strawberries in the rain, smell wisteria outside your window when you wake up on a spring morning, see your reflection in a magnolia leaf, hike ten miles to the beach with your girlfriends and then jump in the ocean with all your clothes on.

In the world of collard greens, you wear the clothes of your choice when and where you want to, be they evening gowns or bikinis, jeans or jogging shoes, in this world you love women as well as men, use your brain as well as your body, achieve yourself rather than waiting for your husband to do so. In the world of collard greens, you feel integrated, at one with yourself and with others. It feels good to be you

Yet collard greens are looked down on or not known about. Collard greens are traditionally the vegetable of the lower class in the South, yet there is no vegetable healthier for you. They don't look delicious, they don't smell good cooling and they don't smell good leaving your body. All Southerners, rich or poor, if you punch them in the belly button in the middle of the night and ask them if they love collard greens, will smack their lips before opening their eye and say, "Why, yes, of course. What makes you ask? Better than chatcubriand or turkey or steak is a opt of collard greens, touched by frost, cooked with fatback streak of lean or ham, and doused with hot pepper vinegar. And don't forget the cornbread And, oh, the juice left in the pot, the pot liquor! Ambrosia may

have been the food of the classical Greek gods, but to southerners, your True Southerner, that is, the pot liquor from collard greens, well, now, that beat ambrosia all to hell and gone. But, then, we don't mention that when we have our white gloves on.

In the world of collard greens, sex and violence are almost one. In the world of white gloves, body was ethereal. There, they dewed the world of collard greens just as they denied sex, but it always burst through. Sex didn't exist for the white-gloved. Mothers never came right out and said the word sex. How could they? No such word existed. But silently mothers zinged these words out to their daughters on The Righteous, Fearful Mothers Network--first of all, you don't have a body. And if you do find out one day that you do have a body, don't ever let anyone else know it. And, furthermore, don't come to me on the day you do discover that you've got another body growing in yours and tell that the boy who put it there has fled. Well, the mothers never let on that they knew what sex was, not officially, that is. But as we sat in our pretty little dresses on Sunday morning listening to the beautifully coifed and clothed Sunday school teacher, we remembered the whispers of our mother and fathers about her part in the divorce of her next-door neighbors. We also knew the woman across the road from the church who shot herself one summer night because she had too many children and one more was on the way across the highway, aimed his rifle and shot her in the back; he shot her in the back at high noon because she had dared to reject him for someone else.

In the South, violence is up close and personal, the people who love you best kill you first. We knew that sex was deadly, that we females possessed something that males wanted and would kill to keep. But our mothers told us nothing to assuage our fears, how to protect ourselves. A Southern girl of the 30's and 40's walked a ragged, almost impossible, razor's edge and walked it blindfolded because her mother kept her in ignorance. But, not to worry, we found out through trial and error, by exchanging rumors on those long Sunday afternoons, mixing talk of God's wrath and our fear of death and eternal punishment, with talk of menstrual periods. Do you wash your hair when you've got yours? Can I go horseback riding, or swimming? What do you do about cramps? In those days, the answers were all a hazard and guess. When it came to sex itself we experimented in the bus near the schoolyard, kissing one another, not on the lips but on the hand held over

the lips until finally we ventured to meet lips with lips. And there were, of course, those birthday parties, given with full parental approval, where we played spin the bottle and kissed very boy there, in every way there was to kiss. Always, as ever, the contradiction: sex didn't exist, yet they dumped us into this pleasurable, fiery cauldron and left us to cook ourselves into womanhood.

Here is the photograph of the white-gloved world, the attractive, but artificial world that did its best to lock me into the world of the Southern Belle. There I stand, seven years old, wearing:

A lacy, white blouse with puffy, short sleeves  
A green, shiny jumper with straps crossing my heart  
White sock  
Black, patent-leather shoes with straps  
Hair in corkscrew curls just below my shoulders  
A big, red Kitty Higgins bow ribbon in my hair  
My head slightly bowed to the right and resting on my breast  
My white gloved hands rigid by my sides  
And on my lips a questioning, a somehow protesting smile.

This is what you want me to be, the smile said--pretty and nicely dressed, and that's okay. I like the texture of the clothes, but if they will keep me immobile, silent, mindless, well I'm not sure I want them.

The photograph I prefer of my ideal world of the collard greens, the world of the natural and the free is this:

Children and parents, on a Saturday in spring, in a former collard patch across from my house, playing a pickup game of softball, hitting, running, sliding, laughing, free and easy. I wouldn't say that I necessarily have the skin you love to touch, but it is so white that on the day not only my knees were knotted with dirt and grime, but the dirt was in-between my barefoot toes, in the bends on my elbows and knees. In the ridges under my neck, under my eyes, and in my nostrils and ears, and over my hair and the rest of my skin were several blankets of dirt, All riddled with rivers of sweat. Fifty years after my death, I may, just may, be as happily at one with nature and with people as I was on that day. As you can see, I have taken a bath since

then, but that world of activity, of communion was the natural world, the world of my choice.

Fortunately for me, the Southern world left little girls, free, except of Sundays and for rare teas and social occasions where everyone was so class-conscious, clothes-conscious, beauty-conscious that the blood froze. By the time I reached adolescence, the time when the South gets deadly serious about your assuming the role of lady, I was already too in love with being independent, with the joy of knocking the hell out of a softball to be physically or mentally paralyzed by my peppermint-striped evening gown.

But in this world of the Southern Belle, no excess, no excelling was allowed. It did not matter that for years I had a .500 batting average and a field expertise to match. It did not matter that the first full set of tennis I ever played I beat the North Carolina Junior Champion. There was nobody to spot the physical talent and push it. Forget about fame and fortune. And as for mind, what was that? At least a body could be seen.

It was not until my junior year in high school, when I made the National Honor Society that my mother saw that I might just possibly have a mind to use. That didn't keep her, however, from making a match with another mother from our church whose son was an alcoholic, who was a brawler, whom I was to save from ruin just as he was to save me from a fate worse than death--the single life, or ever worse than that. The match-making still rankles, still stuns, as I imagine how my mother must have feared for my womanhood. I went along with it even to the point of ruining my reputations with church members and members of the community until one evening I was almost unable to resist his sexual attractiveness. That was an experience so entirely new to me, so powerful that I knew that if I didn't stop this pleasing of the mothers that I would have to give up my plans for my life, my education, my achieving anything on my own. The next time I knew he was coming to call I ran away, ran away into the dark and fell into a ditch full of water rather than tell him to his face that I didn't

want to see him anymore. Such is the extent of Southern courtesy, or shall I call it cowardice? After that baptism in ditch water, I determined a face-to-face confrontation was best. And he didn't die for love of me; he married, had children, died of alcoholism years ago. And I, 1 of 15 North Carolina to do so, received a full, four-year scholarship to college, found there my own true love, came to New York City, and here I am living with reason as well as with love.

To show you the limits of my Southern world, I never saw a painting until I went off to college, never talked about the meaning of a poem or a novel with anyone, never had the experience of sharing thoughts about politics or art. There was, however, the joy of sitting on my father's lap and having him read poetry to me, of listening to the drama of sermons and week-long revivals where my soul was damned one night and saved the next. There were making yourself and the world the best it could be, with love as well as with threats. When I became part of the women's movement, I brought that idealism with me, that we could change things; that same feeling of working and loving with others to accomplice something worthwhile carried over into feminism.

White gloves are not all bad, not if you see them in another light, certainly not the light in which they were once intended to be seen. White gloves can stand for what you aspire to, to a goal you plan to attain. And the communion of the white-gloved female saints and sinners in that gray-shingle, stain-glassed church of my childhood was doing just that--praying and hoping for the best though it was for a better world in the sweet bye and bye, not the painful and pleasurable here and now. Those white gloves which my mother taught me to wear, did instill in me a sense of what is right and the desire to make wrong right. After all, isn't the hoping for and the working for equal rights for women a dream of human responsibility that is based on the world of the collar patch, a world that sees being human as a fallible condition, a condition that can be rectified in this world, the here and now?