Author Profile: Mem Fox is an excerpt from Beauty, Brains, and Brawn: The Construction of Gender in Children's Literature by edited Susan Lehr.
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I think my statement to young girls is the old cliché, that girls can do anything. Girls can do anything and there are a lot of American teachers whom I meet, who are predominantly female, who haven't heard that message. I think our Australian girls have a lot of fun. They're much less conditioned into their gender roles, particularly the generation in their twenties and thirties. They're almost terrifying. They're encouraged to be widely and deeply aware that gender doesn't have to make a difference. I'm really impressed by it.

My relationship with my daughter is very open and loving. We're very good friends and I think the depth of the relationships that I write about occurs because my own family—my husband, my daughter, and I—have such a strong relationship with each other: very loving. Tempestuous, but very loving! Like Koala Lou and her mother.

The theme in *Koala Lou* (1989) arises from a deep and hidden wound. Koala Lou began as a male character and it did not become a real character to me until I made her female. She did not become a true character until I made her the oldest character in the family, which is me. I basically made her me. My mother was not affectionate—well, not overtly affectionate. She loved me and I knew that and she still does. You know, she's eighty-five and I'm fifty-four and you would think that I would have got over it by now, but no, I haven't. She would not say that she loved me under any circumstances because she would think it unnecessary. She thinks that I ought to know that she loves me. Deep down there is this anguish in my own view of the relationship between my mum and me, so some of the relationship themes in my books are quaintly sad. But you know the world that we live in now is different, more open, thank heaven.

After writing *Koala Lou* I realized from then on, if I could possibly do it, if it fitted, I would make the main character a girl, to show people that girls could be active and interesting. Not could be, but just are active and interesting, courageous, feisty people. I think one of the most important things that women need to be is interesting. So many women subsume their own personalities under other people, either their husbands’ or their children’s. One of the reasons why women aren't liberated is because they're often boring, because they're too frightened to be interesting. They are so beautifully brought up they don’t want to stand up to be challenged or anything like that.
My parents had three girls and they were incredibly interested in sexism and feminism before those terms were really obvious. When my mother was a young girl, Christobel Pankhurst, the niece or the daughter of Emily Pankhurst who fought for the woman’s vote in England, stayed in my mother’s house on a tour of Australia back in the 1920s when Mum was a girl. My mother is the fiercest feminist that you can imagine and so is my sister. When my father left Africa in 1990 he set up a fund for education, specifically for women in Africa who want to be teachers. Some of the people my father educated are in the highest positions in Zimbabwe at the moment, which is a testament to him. He was the principal of the Teacher’s Education College, a college for African people only.

I’m married to an absolutely adorable, completely unambitious man who is perfectly happy with his position at the university and never plans for a promotion, and couldn’t be bothered. He loves his work, and one day we were checking in at the airport and of course my card says Professor M. Fox and of course they turned to my husband. And we just laughed and laughed. And my husband said, “She’s the professor, I’m the lecturer,” and the man apologised profusely, but it’s just ridiculous, you know, it goes on and on. There are times when I really do bristle and others when I find it funny. I try to just laugh about it. Life’s too short.

I guess my respect for the old came about because my grandfather was absolutely alert, sharp, and brilliant at ninety. He wasn’t floundering in any way in his brain, nor his ability to speak about matters ranging from an ant to world politics. He lived in a retirement home, which had various stages of care. He was living in a completely self-contained unit and I would visit him once a week. I’d be almost terrified by his intellect, really, he was so wonderful and so funny. Then the nurses would come to his room and say in a singsong patronising voice: “How are we today, Mr. Partridge?” You know, treating him as if he was one of the demented inmates. That just used to drive me insane. I do have an incredible affinity with the elderly. I adore them, but I also have a massive respect for them. That is really a part of who I am.

In the state of South Australia, we do overt teaching about gender. It’s part of the active curriculum. When kids are just five years old, the teachers will read a book and say, “Kids, don’t you just love the characters in this book? What a great story! Isn’t it fabulous? Now I wonder if we could read it again and if we could just notice what the mother does and what the father does. Is that really how mothers and fathers act these days?” Gender is actually part of the curriculum; it is embedded in the curriculum. In teaching language arts to university students it’s a topic that has to be covered: we have to teach preservice teachers how to do that.

I think you can ruin a good book by too much analysis of sexism because a book may have a great many other wonderful attributes that are swept under the carpet simply because of one aberrant piece of sexism. You’ve got to look at the whole book and say, “Well, for this reason and this reason, this is a great book and it’s a pity they slipped up here.” From the time that they start school, and that’s five years old in my state, we want to make children more aware.
We have a lot of research about boys who are now doing so badly, particularly in their last days of high school. We're now saying to ourselves that if girls are doing so well, then what is happening to boys? They are increasingly doing very badly at school in relation to girls. It's absolutely astounding and it's a serious problem. The exam results come out in mid-January, and now there's always the question of why are boys doing so badly. In Australia now girls are so fantastically confident that boys are withdrawing as a form of self-protection. They are just so confused about who they are and what they're supposed to be that they're not making an effort, because no matter what they do, they can't do the right thing. The right role is so indistinct for guys. It must be a very confusing age for them to live in the world as we currently know it.

There's been a lot of research about girls and education, about the amount of attention given to boys in the classroom instead of girls. I still think in every single classroom that you'd come across in Australia that boys would get more attention than girls, because boys are allowed to be interesting and you pay attention to the kids who are more interesting. Girls are still toeing the line even though they've become more confident and more aggressive. I think they turn into more interesting women but I don't know that they're naughtier in school than boys. And of course it's the people who attract the attention that get the attention.

My daughter Chloë was born in 1971 so she was twelve in 1983 and starting high school. I said to her the night before she started high school, "Chloë, you must be as bad as the boys; you must make noise in the classroom; you must draw attention to yourself, because then you will get the kind of attention that the boys get. If you receive any aggression from boys I give you total permission to answer them in kind. You can either use words or you can actually hit them if anyone touches you. Please be as aggressive as you like. I give you permission to be physically violent!" Of course she never was but she still remembers that conversation. She was a live wire in school and has continued to be one. I was aware of the research then, and I knew that if you were not noisy you wouldn't get any attention; the brilliant ones get attention and most of the girls in the middle range of a class don't.

I remember a particular book called something like Colleen the Question Girl that Chloë had when she was little—it was an Australian feminist book for little girls. It was so overtly sexist that she threw it against the wall and said: "It’s all so stupid, they think that we can’t see through them," because its intention was overtly to make girls think that they were okay. I think when literature is as crass as that it's particularly useless. I have noticed “good antisexism attitudes” in many of the books I've read, which have been marvelous about sexism because the antisexist attitudes have been embedded in the text. It’s been so much part of the text that it's not something that leapt out of the text because the text itself was so good.

I talk a lot about censorship and sexism in the United States; if you let this get a hold, where you end up eventually is the Afghanistan situation, where women are enshrouded from top to toe, where they cannot be educated, and where they can scarcely leave their homes. We need to be very careful because such a scenario is a
creeping thing, you don't realize it's happening and if you let something pass and then you let the next thing pass, the sexist power brokers have control and you're finished.

I was in Yemen shortly after Christmas on vacation and we passed a girls' high school as we were driving home from the center of the city. All these girls were talking and laughing with each other, as any high school kids would around the world, but the difference between these and any high school kids around the world was that they were covered from head to toe in chador. You couldn't even see their eyes. We were flabbergasted. We were absolutely flabbergasted. There are physical, climatic advantages to it, which have been appropriated by men to become a source of subjugation of women. I'm sure that when the chador was invented there was a good reason for it physically in those climates.

My liberated friends are interesting people because they work hard and their minds are active and they don't mind speaking out. Being opinionated is interesting, really; it shows a mind that isn't flabby or compliant. I like a woman to have an opinion and not to be afraid to speak out rather than being just a biddable little woman.

It's my hope that through the things I write I'll be able to give a glimpse of a liberated and interesting world to all the girls who read my books.

Children's Literature

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