

# A feminist at five, and other stories

## Oh Boy!

A few little men are blurring the gender divide

MEHER MARFATIA

What would you do if your best friend died in a car accident? Suppose you were just a kid and right there when it suddenly happened. It's Jacqueline Wilson to the rescue for children who're wise enough to be this gifted writer's devotees. In *Vicky Angel*, the story of a girl forced to find her own path in life, Wilson makes a hero out of the class clown, Fatboy Sam, who is sensitive to feminine needs. He is a listener, the only person who understands what Jade is feeling. Yet, he makes her realise that she relied too much on dead Vicky Angel and needed now to develop her individuality. He dependably sticks around Jade, even though she is mean to him in those initially distraught days.

Classics as far back as Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* and *The Happy Prince* have awed us with the gentle, egoless ways of the boy characters. Another life-changing example beloved by young and old is *The Little Prince*, French aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupery's profound novella. Ostensibly for children but rich in wisdom, the story is an idealistic look at human nature, its loveliest truth distilled in words the fox says to our eponymous hero: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Elsewhere, equally mystic young men manage to make meaningful journeys, their sense of wonder intact. They triumph through inner conflicts and war zones. In Anne Holm's *I Am David* and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, little boys tug at expectations of justice in an unfair world, one ending happily, the other more tragically.

Child heroes subjected to tribulation are

Writer Manjula Padmanabhan's 'Unprincess' tells tongue-in-cheek tales of spirited heroines. Ten-year-old Kavita (right) calmly confronts a giant bully while boys around her dither submissively

The heroines of children's books are shunning propriety and platitudes for tougher, smarter personas



ILLUSTRATIONS EXCERPTED WITH PERMISSION FROM PENGUIN BOOKS INDIA FROM UNPRINCESS! BY MANJULA PADMANABHAN PUFFIN INDIA

MEHER MARFATIA

'You're supposed to identify with the girl who curbs her rebellious streak. You're worried because the character — all ambitious, assertive, not a man-fixated pushover basically — is one you see yourself in... I would pick up another book hoping for a different ending, a more forgiving perspective, but I can count on my fingers the books where I found this.'

— Shock of Recognition by Deveshe

When writer Deveshe was growing up, the reading choices available to children were hopelessly limited to stories with girls who were obedient, beautiful and kind. Three years ago, Deveshe recalled these early face-offs with literary stereotyping, as one of eight authors whose accounts of personal journeys were published in a volume disturbingly titled *Scar Tissue: 8 Lives, 8 Young Women* (published by Women Unlimited).

While *Scar Tissue* reaches out to a teen and young adult audience, children's literature in India too has been going through some long overdue corrective surgery. It has emerged the richer for its scars. Kids once content with the predictable adventures of Disney maidens or mythological deities can look beyond Pocahontas and the Puranas to appease a newer, deeper hunger today. Even the candy-floss Disney factory has cottoned on to the currents of change. Alice, in Tim Burton's recent cinematic adaptation of Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland*, is a plucky teenager who slays the dreaded Jabberwocky, turns down a marriage proposal from an insufferable young lord, blithely setting forth, alone, to distant China as a fearless merchant princess. Ritu Menon, founder of Women

Unlimited, says, "Girls today deal with diverse real life complexities, so their print heroines must be resourceful, even maverick."

The world over, children's fiction has grown darker, the sunlight more dappled with shadow than ever before. The nuances are a reflection of the fact that childhood today is no more an idyllic cocoon where tots can endlessly romp and play. Conventional, happy relationships are hard to come by and families are being fragmented by divorce and custody battles. As a result, several children are in therapy for depression and anxiety. All this social turmoil spills boldly into children's fiction, creating characters who tackle challenging real-life situations that have nothing to do with slaying dragons and demons. The change is amply evident in the brave, new heroine portrayed as someone who refuses to stay straitjacketed by received notions of propriety and is all set to defend herself against bullies and bandits.

Rashna Desai, a language teacher in Mumbai, points out that in her generation perhaps the only

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'different' girl was hot-headed George from Enid Blyton's Famous Five series. Might we add that George too was a victim of stereotype — to be convincing, she had to saw her name from Georgina to George, crop her curls and constantly despise herself for being a girl. The trappings of a tomboy were necessary to convey daring, with gentle Cousin Anne providing the perfect feminine foil. Characterisation today is infinitely more complex and graded.

Writer Manjula Padmanabhan's *Unprincess!* tells tongue-in-cheek tales of three lively heroines soaring on light sassiness. Non-conformist, articulate, quirky, 10-year-old Kavita calmly confronts a giant bully while boys around her dither submissively; fearless Sayoni has the nerve to creatively redirect nightmares into exciting dreams; and Urmila the Ultimate, whose ugliness makes people faint, deftly converts her handicap into an advantage.

Change is inevitable, girls and boys learn as they trip through school in Bula Basu's spirited

trilogy, *It Happened that Year, Up to the Nines and On Top of the Tens*. The entirely believable, this-is-what-we're-really-like chronicles catch the highs and lows of an Infamous Five gang of highly plausible, rounded characters. One of them is Amita, who is given to scribbling edgy Sylvia Plath lines — "Tomorrow I will be sweet, God, I will set them free. The box is only temporary" — but is equally embracing of her softer side.

Basu believes that while Indo-English writing for kids has shown an improvement from absolute zero, "most of its children are still absurd 'how to' capsules of morality". What is significant, though, is that this kind of fiction is avidly read by girls and boys alike. This is crucial — feminist literature should touch both sexes alike. It may not be imaginative enough to just divert girls from princess fairytale endings. The emotional intelligence quotient for boys gets upped as well, when gender-neutral plots cover vistas beyond pirate exploits and space travel sagas.

It's never too early to alter budding mind space, feels Benaifer Kutar, vice-principal of Mumbai's JB Petit School for Girls' primary section. She and her staff encourage girls in Classes 2 and 3 to think independently. A sense of empowerment is hammered in right from the time they lisp their first rhymes. Rashna Desai, faced with a sluggish set of girls some mornings, enthruses them to recite with unabashed pep: "I'm active, attractive and in control!" The English readers in these schools choose progressive stories like Ruskin Bond's insightful *Chachi's Funeral* (where a girl ingeniously sets up a mock killing of a character to bring out her true worth) and Astrid Lindgren's stories of the orphaned but highly individual Pippi Longstocking. Left to herself, the nine-year-old develops a strong self-identity and behaves badly only in the presence of pompous, condescending adults.

Robust anti-heroines are also stepping out to push limits in verse. Contemporary poets like Mamta Kalia in Eunice de Souza and Melanie Silgado's anthology, *101 Poems for Children*, shun good looks in lines from *Made for Each Other*: "You were elated to see me/In an ill-fitting kurta/A fag and minus-four glasses./You said you hated pretty girls/They were dull, silly and egoistic." Quite a delicious subversion of Dorothy Parker's already ironic couplet: "Men seldom make passes/At girls who wear glasses."

Poetry or prose, any encounter with words can sensitise the young. It could come in kitschy form, as it did for me one night with a doll-hating toddler daughter. Tucked into bed after her favourite *Thomas the Tank Engine* episode read by Ringo Starr, she smiled as she slipped into sleep...with cloaked Batman clutched tight between pudgy fingers.

Thank God for little girls not made only of sugar, spice and all things nice. ■



JOHN BOYNE  
THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS  
"It haunts the mind for days after!"  
THE AUSTRALIAN

enjoying a soaring popularity. Not long ago, Philip Pullman's stirring trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, outsold competitors like JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* and the *Prisoner of Azkaban*. Figures from BBC's Big Read Top 100 then placed Pullman's fantasy universe, with witches and armoured polar bears, some 2,000 copies ahead of Harry's escapades.

Never mind polls, 11-year-old Kabir Karamchandani is a Potter fan for interesting reasons. "Harry is the kind of boy who respects girls like Hermione and Ginny, not because they're pretty but they're so smart." The Mumbai boy's other favourite, *Eragon* from the pen of Christopher Paolini, "is a guy who always asks the opinion of women!"

Young voices like Shibumi Desai explain their choices. Applauding boldness over fear, her vote in Eva Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea* goes to homesick troupe actor Clovis "for daring to help a friend even when he's scared of the consequences".

All of eight, Karun Krishnamurthy points out how so-called "boy books", like the Alex Rider series, have a deplorable lack of girls. Tintin comics suffer similarly. Shunning their sexist slant, Karun is the proud author of *Death on Christmas Night*. Santa may be bumped off here, but Basanti, his strong girl character, is inspired by her spirited film namesake from *Sholay*.

A few good men like that could keep us steadily turning the pages. ■

