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Children's Literature as a Catalyst for Social Change

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THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis is the amalgamation of a creative writing project and an exploration of the ways that children's literature influences and draws from social justice causes. It started after reading *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and realizing that children's books are not as simple as I remember them being. This book inspired me to consider the power of children's literature to push young readers to be aware of and thoughtfully engaged with political, social and cultural conversations. The first phase of my thesis was exploring the relationship between social justice and children's books by reading scholarly materials. In these materials and through experiences in an English course about children's literature, I gained a better sense for the field and a foundation in the concepts and trends that are prevalent in books. The next phase was reading a broad selection of children's books that are characterized by a message related to a social issue. These books were selected from many sources; librarian recommendations, scholarly article references, news articles and awards lists. I read books that addressed issues such as sexuality, gender identity, race relations, drug use, immigration and mental health. In my reading, I tried to cover a diverse spread of books, ones from varying publication years and written in varying structures.

The books were both a source of information and inspiration that lead to the final phase of my project, creating my own children's book. In this phase, I focused on writing a story dedicated to feminist themes and I explored different styles and forms for the story. With the feedback of my directors and second reader, and the support of a friend with artistic skills, I came to the final stage where I have a manuscript of a children's book and a few sample illustrations. Each phase was a stepping stone to the next phase and ultimately the project has built upon itself to result in a better understanding of how impactful children's literature is on social justice. With this thesis, I have demonstrated

the power children's books have to give children an honest and thought-provoking perspective on the world they will grow up in.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, it was estimated that only 19 % of people older than 15 will read for pleasure on a given day (American Time Use Survey). Literacy is a defining aspect of youth in America, but as we age, reading becomes less of a pleasure and more of a pain. Reading as an adult looks and feels entirely different than reading as a child, especially because of the difference in materials. Children read colorful books with rhyming lines, vibrant illustrations and happy endings; adults read novels with drama, mystery, romance, death, sorrow and triumph and we often think of these categories of books as being entirely distinct from one another. It is easy to believe that children's books, especially picture books, are a simple form of storytelling, one that cannot support a story of much weight. Adults often think that children cannot handle anything too complex, so their literature must also be simple and lighthearted. The reality is that this is just not true. A good picture book can elicit the same level of emotion and thought that a good novel is expected to create in a reader.

The mistake of underestimating the power of children's literature is common. Parents and teachers do it all the time. Reading is more than just a necessary life skill, reading is a chance to develop a clearer sense of self, an opportunity to connect ideas and explore new trains of thought. Children benefit from having these interactions and they develop more holistically through reading. But all too often, parents and educators think they must find cute stories with colorful pictures to keep a child's attention and convince them reading is fun. We underestimate the power of books and the capabilities of children when we think this way. One of the great strengths of children's literature is the fun, free-spirited nature of a lot of the stories, but this does not define the genre. Children's literature is much more powerful than adults typically acknowledge. More than just a fun

way to help children become literate, more than just a mode for enhancing a child's social and emotional learning, children's literature has the power to promote a social conscience in children and give them an awareness of the issues of social justice around them.

There are trends in the history of children's literature towards increasing representation of marginalized communities and telling more diverse stories. It is important to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these books that challenge social norms and promote diversity and social change, so their impact on children can be understood. Before discussing the work that went into creating my story, I will address some general topics on research in children's literature as a whole to contextualize the work of this thesis. In addition, to provide insight into the background for the creation of my children's book, I will describe a selection of the books I read in preparation for writing my own. I will highlight some of the characteristics that stood out to me and detail the ways that these books influenced my own writing. To fully explicate the work that went into creating my story, I have included each of the six versions I wrote. While there were drafts in between these drafts, the versions included here represent the most refined forms each story reached. Finally, there is an extensive detailing of my challenges and triumphs throughout the writing process. Being my first real attempt at writing a children's book, reflecting back on the writing process allows me to recognize some of the patterns that developed as my work evolved. The final draft of my children's book is also included with some sample illustrations to show how the words and pictures interplay to tell the story.

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature plays an important role on the development of young minds. It is recognized throughout the scholarly literature that the books children are exposed to as they grow up will contribute to their social and emotional development and their socialization into the culture around them. The caveat to this is that the cultural lessons that books share with children are the ones adults have selected. Publishing is run by

adults, school curriculums are written by adults, book purchases are made by adults, even if they are influenced by children's wishes. I am not arguing these decisions should be made by children, but I do suggest that we recognize the power adults have over the development of children who are not their own. Children's books teach children to have certain expectations and beliefs about culture, but they teach it based on the preferences of the adults (O'Neil, 2010). Therefore, there are trends in children's literature that reflect trends in societal values. Post-modern children's literature is most closely aligned with the style of books that inspired this project. Post-modern picture books emphasize critical thinking and asking questions in a way that has not been present in traditional books. These books can serve as an experimental space for children to practice interacting with diversity and thinking through uncertain situations. Another important characteristic of post-modern books is that the storylines are written to counteract stereotypes and give agency to people of typically marginalized backgrounds (O'Neil, 2010). These elements that define post-modern children's literature are ideas I wanted to incorporate into my own writing. A book that promotes social justice will inherently be grounded in the need to question norms and respect differences, ideas that define the post-modern category of children's literature.

Another relevant style of children's literature is what is called radical children's literature. According to Mickenberg (2017), children's literature is radical when its form or topic is characterized by a rejection of traditional social rules. The lines between adult and child are blurred in these stories and there are less defined borders between what is appropriate and inappropriate to address in a story. This aspect is another crucial characteristic in books that promote social justice causes because to do so an author must be allowed to address whatever issue they deem worthy. Historically, children's literature promoted the values of a majority culture and rarely left space to refute or counter those values. The trends in children's literature, whether we label them as post-modern, radical

or a different name, all suggest that books are moving towards more inclusion and diversity. This shift is one part of how children's literature is connected to social justice, and it is such a major topic in the field of children's literature that a whole initiative and organization called We Need More Diverse Books has formed. The group is dedicated to getting more books with diverse characters into the hands of every child. The very existence of this group suggests that social justice is becoming more deeply intertwined with children's literature. The intersection of these two areas creates a space for children to engage thoughtfully with the world around them, a space that has not always been there in generations prior.

The early roots of children's literature are in promoting religious education. Most early-reading books were retellings of significant biblical stories. Children's books were used to socialize children into their religion and develop their societally appropriate belief system from an early age. Over time various social movements have impacted children's literature. For example, during the time when political action was being taken to outlaw child labor, children's literature was blossoming into a substantial form because society was choosing to idealize and protect the innocence of childhood. Since then children's books have become more progressive and more diverse in who's writing them and what they are writing about. The historical development of children's literature is much too complex to address entirely in this thesis, but it is important to acknowledge that the observable trends of today are distinct yet grounded in trends of the past.

REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT WERE SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Part of the background research that helped me prepare to write my children's book was reading a plethora of already published books that address social issues. The books I read were either recommended to me by librarians or educators and the majority

of them were published in this millennium. These books were all found in local libraries and therefore can be considered common and easily accessible to an average young reader. I read these books through a couple different lenses to gather the most information I could. First, I was considering the topic of the book, how the author handles it, how the message aligns with or contradicts mainstream beliefs and how directly or indirectly the topic is discussed. In some books, like *I am Jazz*, the book uses adult level terminology to describe the topic at hand. *I am Jazz* is about a young girl who is transgender and it seeks to explain and normalize this concept to children. The authors explicitly define and use the word “transgender” as part of the story so that children can be exposed to the word and its meaning in a controlled and healthy way. This book is explicitly about a person who is transgender which is not something that many readers will have personal experience with so the directness that is used to discuss the topic ensures that children will not miss the message. Another example of being more direct with social justice vocabulary is *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales. Morales retells her personal story as an immigrant mother and while she is not directly political in the book, the title and the storyline all suggest the social and political values of respecting and appreciating immigrants. While Morales herself was not a “dreamer,” her story illustrates the story of many immigrants in that it shows the challenges they overcome to achieve happiness in the US. Children may not be intimately aware of what “dreamers” means and the political implications of the word, but they will certainly be familiar with people they know who immigrated to the US and this book encourages acceptance and tolerance towards those people.

Other books were less explicit in attaching themselves to buzzwords related to certain social issues. *Charlotte the Scientist is Squished* is about a young girl rabbit who is a scientist and is distinctly rooted in feminist ideas and the idea that STEM fields need more women but the story itself never mentions the word feminism. Other examples of this type of book are *Prince and Knight* and *Worm loves Worm*, which both have stories

about homosexuality. In neither book is the word “homosexual” or “gay” used to describe the characters, and yet both are clearly about normalizing the fact that love comes in many forms. *Worm loves Worm* shows that two beings that are the “same” can still be in love and get married, which allows children to generalize and make the connection to human relationships. *Prince and Knight* describes a man who was supposed to find a princess to be his bride, but he fell in love with a knight instead and the message to children is that this love is just as real and beautiful as a heterosexual love. Whether the book chooses to use keywords related to an issue or not, the message is still clear to readers about the topic they are addressing. In reading books with an eye for their content, I recognized many different ways to enrobe a moral about a social issue in an engaging story that children will love to read.

I also read these books with an eye for their form and style. I considered the diction and voice of the author, and the use of extended metaphors as narrative tools. *A Boy and A Jaguar* is an autobiography by Alan Rabinowitz and is therefore written in first person to express the author’s experiences as a child with a stutter and the way he learned to handle his different ability. However, a similar book, *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures*, is a biography about Temple Grandin, a woman on the Autism Spectrum who contributed innovation to the livestock industry, and it is therefore written in third person. Even in nonbiographical stories authors still make choices about using first- or third-person voice. *Grace for President* and *Amazing Grace* are examples of stories that talk about their character in third person. The reader knows the character’s name and knows their thoughts and feelings from an observer’s perspective which creates a different feeling than stories that are told in first person. In *My Many Colored Days*, *One of a Kind* and *I am Enough* the voice is first person and the reader feels like they are the main character because the person is never named, they only speak in first person.

Some books do not even use a character to tell their story; examples of this style are *She Persisted* and *All are Welcome*. Chelsea Clinton's *She Persisted* retells short biographies of empowered women to illustrate the main idea that women may be discriminated against, but they still achieve great feats. The voice of an unnamed narrator is used to introduce the story and to conclude the story but there is no main character involved in between each woman's biography. *All are Welcome* functions without a main character because it more about describing a space than describing a certain person. This story is about appreciating everyone's difference and creating an environment with a welcoming and open-minded culture. The author does not need one specific character for the reader to follow, instead the author describes the feelings of a space that welcomes diversity. As I began writing my story I found these structures most influential because I enjoyed the openness the reader feels when the story is not tied to a certain character. My first draft is most clearly influenced by this picture book structure but in later drafts I shifted to writing in third person and developing characters more. It was an interesting experiment to write stories of such different structures and see how differently they convey a message and impact a reader.

One common structure I noted in reading these books was the use of animal interactions as an extended metaphor for the social issue being discussed. *Worm loves Worm* does this for homosexuality, *The Rabbit Listened* does this for mental health and emotional awareness, and *Neither* does this to talk about gender identification and nonconformity. In each of these books the main characters are animals (*The Rabbit Listened* also features a young child character who interacts with the animals) and it is the animals who are personified to tell stories that illustrate a topic. *Neither* is a great example of how using animals helps an author simplify a complex topic to help children connect with it. At a young age words like transgender and non-binary will overcomplicate the main idea that we should be open to people identifying their gender in the way they choose.

The book describes a dichotomy between the birds and the rabbits, a parallel for the traditional divide between boys and girls, but it introduces a character that has wings like the birds but ears like the rabbits and they do not know where they fit in. Using animals helps children recognize that they should not create divisions between people. The metaphor also allows the lesson to be generalizable beyond gender identity, so the point can be applied to discussions of bullying and inclusion as well. In general, using animal characters seems to weaken the social justice power of a children's book because it oversimplifies and minimizes the topic. Children have the capability to be thoughtful and insightful about the world around them, so their literature should give them a chance to fully experience it. While the animal metaphor structure has strengths, it was not something I chose to incorporate in my writing process.

Although there are a multitude of topics to share with children in the realm of social justice, it is also crucial to show that these ideas do not exist in vacuums. Social justice is strongest and most significant at the intersection of ideas. In my research, I found books that captured the intersectionality of many social issues. *Julian is a Mermaid* is about a young boy of color who enjoys dressing femininely, thus touching on both the idea of gender fluidity and the importance of having book characters represent children of diverse backgrounds. *Tía Isa Wants a Car* tells a story about the camaraderie of a young girl and her aunt and shows that the aunt was passionate about her goal to own a car and driven enough to achieve it. It was written by Cuban-American author, Meg Medina, and incorporates ideas that uplift women and people of color, and people at the intersection of both identities especially. *Amazing Grace* is also about the challenges of being from a marginalized group in multiple aspects of one's identity. Grace aspires to be Peter Pan in a class production of the play, but she is told she cannot do it because she is a girl and she is black, and Peter is neither of those. Grace ends up overcoming everyone who doubted her and showing that her identity is powerful, something to be proud of and not hindered

by. Books like these are an important part of the conversation about social justice in children's literature because they illustrate the ways that different beliefs, identities, and social issues are interrelated and thus show children an honest representation of the complexities of the world.

Early in my research I read a broad variety of books that touched upon a number of social issues, and as I narrowed my intentions and chose to write a book promoting feminist values, I also narrowed the scope of books I read for research. I sought out other examples of books that promoted feminist values and the librarians were helpful in suggesting a diverse selection of books. *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*, from 1939, is an example of a book that promotes feminism even before our modern definition of feminism was created. The book describes a rabbit who dreams of being the Easter Bunny, but she never thought it would be possible because she has to raise her children. The story ends up showing that because she is a mother, she actually has the best skills for being a perfect Easter Bunny. Even a modern child could benefit from hearing this story because it gives power and worth to the mother figure that society often undermines. An important part of feminism is empowering every woman, whether that means they want to be CEOs or mothers, and this book highlights the bravery and strength of being a mother, that other books do not always portray.

A classic way feminism is presented in children's books is by rewriting the princess archetype. Instead of damsel-in-distress stories, books are giving princesses agency and power over their own fates and in doing so they are promoting feminism to children. An example of this is *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* which shows various young girl characters who play sports and get dirty and wear any style of clothing but still wear a "sparkly crown." This book breaks down the expectation that girls must be pretty and perfectly manicured all the time to protect their femininity and it teaches children that being a girl can look different for everyone. *Loud Emily* is another great example of

feminist children's literature because of the way the girl character overcomes rejection and disapproval from other characters. Emily is a young girl with a loud voice that bothers everyone around her, but when she finds out that her voice has a purpose, others around her begin to respect her. This idea of a girl finding her voice and making herself heard has a lot of power in children's literature and helps show young girls the power in their own voices. These books and many others contributed to my writing process by offering different ways to tackle the topic I wanted to address. Throughout the development of my story, I found different ways that the books I had read could inspire my work. By having an understanding of the current children's books that promote stories of social justice, I was better prepared to write my own story. As each draft evolved, I drew from new influences, I tried new structures and new voices and ultimately ended up with a story that strives to achieve the ideal balance these other books achieve of being thought-provoking and fun for children.

DRAFTS OF CHILDREN'S BOOK MANUSCRIPT

First draft: Girls Should

I am a girl, but am I the right kind of girl? People say girls should be many things, it can be so confusing. (a girl amidst a group/crowd of other feminine figures)

Girls should be sweet and gentle, but also tough and strong. They should be confident and bold, yet humble and careful. (left page a girl playing with dolls, and then doing karate; right page a girl opening a mysterious door, and then standing behind the lower bodies of adults)

Girls should be artsy and creative, and critical and analytical. They should know how to cook and use makeup and how to build bridges and write laws. (a girl painting, a girl coding, a girl in the mirror with makeup, a girl in a business suit)

Girls should lead others but sometimes they should follow. They should speak their minds but sometimes wait and listen. (a girl speaking to a crowd, a girl looking up to another speaker, a girl speaking to another person in a loud way, a girl reflecting on the other person's thoughts)

Girls should be emotional and reasonable. Girls should want children and a career. (a girl crying in bed, a girl with a straight face, a girl holding a baby and a laptop)

Girls should be able to do it all. (various girls doing various activities)

But how can one girl be ALL those things? A girl CAN be all these things or none of those things. (girl from first page feeling surrounded, overwhelmed by the girls around her doing the various activities)

The best things a girl can be is herself. Girls should be whoever they want to be. Real and true and full of authenticity. (a light is around the girl and now she rises above the others and celebrates herself in a confident pose)

Second draft: Becoming a Woman

Sometimes I wonder what kind of woman I will be? (girl in bed daydreaming, quizzical eyes, viewed from above)

When I wake up in the morning and get dressed in my cutest outfit, I think maybe I'll be like Audrey Hepburn, a beautiful woman who stuns others with her style, grace and glamour. (girl's closet, she could be facing a mirror or facing the reader)

But at school, when I change into clothes for gym class, I think I could be a strong woman who perseveres, sweats, bleeds to accomplish her dreams like Serena Williams. (school pe class, playing a sport or running)

In class if the teacher asks a question and I answer it, I feel confident that I'll be a bold woman, like Elizabeth Warren, who speaks her mind and pursues her ambitions. (teacher asking questions, and she raises her hand excitedly among other student's hands)

But sometimes I don't speak up and I wait for others to and I wonder if that means I'll be a gentle woman who doesn't need to be loud to be a silent leader, the way that Angela Merkel leads Germany. (teacher asks questions and girl looks over to her classmate who is raising his hand)

During art I test my skills at painting and I imagine I'm a woman whose creative juices run wild and free the way Frida Kahlo's do. (girl is painting a water color that is vibrant).

During science I wear my goggles and work on an experiment. This makes me feel like I am a thinker, who uses my brain to accomplish wonders like Mae Jemison did. (girl is wearing goggles and holding a ruler at a black lab table).

As I leave school, I see my friends getting picked up by their parents. I wonder if I am a woman who will be a mom who stays at home to raise her child, like my friend Amy's mom. (girl walks past cars in the lane in front of school).

While I walk home I pass a house where a woman drives home from work and meets her children at the door. Maybe I will be a woman like her, a mom who works hard for her children, the way Sheryl Sandberg does. (girl looks toward a house where a woman in a suit opens the door to her kids).

At my house I see my mom, she is cooking dinner. I would love to be a woman like her, she can do wonders in the kitchen. (girl faces her mom's back as her mom works at the stove).

On TV there are women who all have unique bodies. My body is not done changing so I have no idea what kind of body I will have as a woman. (look from girl's view at the tv while she is on the couch and see a model-esque woman in a bikini).

Sometimes, if I have a bad day I feel upset and I hide in my room and cry. On those days, I wonder if I'll be an emotional woman, someone who feels for others the way Oprah does. (girl has her head under the pillow, maybe we see an open journal or tissues).

But there are also days when I am calm, even if my brother annoys me. And I also wonder if I'll be the woman is always composed, cool, and logical even under stress, like Hilary Clinton. (boy sits near girl at dinner table and is unphased by his poking).

When I lay in my bed at night, I dream of all the women I know. All the inspiring female figures I can think of come to mind. These women are all special and all magnificent. I wish I could be a woman who is all of those women (return to opening image, add photos of famous woman role models that she daydreams of).

But no matter what kind of woman I become, the best one I can be is me. The women around me inspire me, and I will inspire others too.

****Alternative ending:** But no matter what kind of woman I am, no matter if I smile, sing, cry, laugh, speak, read, travel or rest I am a woman and I am the best.

****Third alternative ending:** But I know if I am a woman who is true to herself then everyone, man, woman, and in between will be inspired by me.

Third draft: Inspired

"Good morning everyone! Today we are going to start our creative project about inspirational people. Remember you must choose 5 people to invite to a dinner party and decide what the theme of the party will be" said my teacher, Ms. Thomas.

I was excited to start working. I already knew the first person on my guest list.

"Ruth Bader Ginsburg." I can't help but utter her name aloud in awe.

"Darth Vader who?" My friend Rachel asks.

No! Ruth Bader Ginsburg! She is the COOLEST. She's a Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States. She has been fighting for women's right her whole life.

"Whoa! I want to fight for women!"

And in that moment, I knew my dinner party's theme. The power of women. Everyone invited would be an influential woman and they could talk about the ways that girls can rule the world.

Ruth made the guest list, but now I had to think of four more powerful women who should come to the table.

The list of options is long. Women have been making impacts in everything they do. There are powerful women scientists, politicians, educators, activists, athletes, artists, business leaders and more.

Maybe Ruth would like to eat with Serena Williams? Serena is a star athlete with a record breaking history in tennis. But she is more than that. She is a symbol for the strength it takes women to balance motherhood with their passions.

With Serena and Ruth, my dinner party is on its way to being very exciting. Next, I wanted to invite someone from far away. Malala Yousafzai would be perfect.

She is brave, bold, and passionate about educating women. And most importantly she is YOUNG! At dinner with Ruth and Serena, she will have a chance to learn from their experiences while she shares her own.

“Now remember at least one of the people you invite must be dead now. It makes it more interesting.” Ms. Thomas made a timely announcement that helped me decide that my next guest would be Marie Curie.

Marie Curie was a thinker. And I like to think too. Sometimes thinking makes my brain hurt, but it’s like a workout, it makes me stronger! Marie Curie must have had the strongest brain of her time because the work she did on radioactivity won her two Nobel prizes. She is a perfect guest for my dinner party because she triumphed in an area dominated by men. I have one more seat at the table. One more woman who inspires me and can inspire others. I sat and thought for a while.

Then it hit me. The obvious answer.

My mom! It doesn’t take being world famous or winning a prize to be an inspirational person. My mom deserves to be at this dinner party because she has defined her values and always stayed true to them.

In a world with complicated expectations for women; what they should be, how they should look, and the ways they should behave, my mom is always herself and she doesn't let people change her.

And with those five women, I know the dinner party would be perfect. Each woman has something to share with the others. Each woman has something to learn from the others. I couldn't help but smile as I thought of the brilliant ideas these women could share. Marie would be so excited to see how far women have come since she was alive, and the ways Ruth has protected women's rights and Malala has protected their education. Serena could talk to my mom about the challenges and joys of raising children. They could all bond over the ways they fought for what they believe in.

If I were at the table, I would be inspired. Inspired to be a woman who pursues her passions and inspires others. This dinner party might not be real, but there are still tons of inspiring women around me. Today, I am just a girl, but someday I will be a woman too. I will be wise like Ruth, strong like Serena, brave like Malala, intelligent like Marie and loving like my mother. I will be an inspiration to others just like these women are to me.

Fourth draft: The Book Report on Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Julia loves competition. In the morning she races her brother to get ready. At school, she tries to be the smartest in the class. On the basketball court, she works hard at practice so the team wins games.

But sometimes other people have a problem with her love for competition.

Some mornings, Julia's mom yells "Eat like a lady Julia it's not a race."

And in class sometimes her teachers say, "Julia be quiet and read please if you're done with your work."

And when other kids see her playing basketball they shout "Ew Julia's sweaty!"

But Julia still loves competition. She loves showing off when she can do something well (even if it's just slurping up cheerios in one gulp).

She could never figure out why her brother Andy never got yelled at in the mornings. Or why her friend Justin doesn't get in trouble for talking when his work is finished. Or why all the sweaty, stinky boys playing football don't get teased.

One day she was reading a book for her social studies class in the library. Her homework was to write a biography of one important person.

She was determined to pick the best person and write the best report so she could impress everyone and give the best presentation tomorrow.

Julia picked up the first book that impressed her. There was a woman on the cover in long dark black robes, wearing a huge sparkly necklace and big glasses. Julia thought "this woman looks powerful, smart and cool, she'll be perfect to write about!"

The book Julia chose was about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, today she is a US Supreme Court Justice, but her journey there wasn't always smooth. Ruth was a bright student, in college her grades made her the highest ranking female in her class. Then during law school she tied for first in her class!

Julia realized Ruth must be pretty competitive too. Her whole life Ruth competed against men for things that women rarely ever got. Some people wouldn't hire her because she was a woman. And when she was hired, she was paid less than men who did the same job. Ruth must love competition just like Julia because she kept trying to win.

"I wonder if anyone ever told Ruth to be polite or to sit quietly and read" thought Julia as the bell rang. Julia packed up her things and carried the book home, still thinking about Ruth.

That night while competing with Andy over who could finish their homework first, Julia continued reading about Ruth.

"Andy, have you ever heard of Ruth Bader Ginsburg?" Julia asked.

"Darth Vader who?" Asked Andy.

"Nooooooo, Ruth Bader Ginsburg?"

“Nope don’t know, now be quiet and stop distracting me.”

Julia rolled her eyes and kept reading. Andy finished his work first, but Julia wasn’t mad because there was still so much to learn about Ruth.

As she read, Julia became more and more excited. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a fighter. She was dedicated to fighting for women’s rights. She believed the law should protect people from being treated differently because of their gender and it was her hard work that made gender discrimination illegal.

Julia realized the same way she wants to be the best at everything, Ruth must have wanted the same thing. But more than being her best, Ruth wanted everyone to be the best they could be. She wrote everything she had learned about Ruth in her biography, and then she went to bed.

Ruth made her voice heard. She made men listen when she argued for equal rights. Ruth dedicated her career to protecting the voices of other women and making sure they are respected as equal to men. Julia realized she wanted to make her voice heard too.

The next day in class, Julia raised her hand FIRST to present. She couldn’t wait to share Ruth’s story. She retold everything about Ruth’s life and the many great accomplishments she has made.

“...And because of what Ruth Bader Ginsburg did to protect the rights of women, we are closer to the goal of equality for all.”

The class clapped. The teacher said, “Julia, that was incredible insight and detail, thank you for your hard work.

Julia smiled. She was glad she knew so much about Ruth Bader Ginsburg because now she knew that her drive, her love for competition did not have to be stopped by what people say. She could do anything as long as she worked hard.

**alternative ending

“...Can you tell me one thing you can learn from Ms. Ginsburg’s story?”

Julia smiled. She knew exactly what to say, “Ruth was competitive and hardworking, but she knew that winning didn’t have to mean taking someone down. I learned that fighting for women’s rights doesn’t mean taking rights from other people, but giving more rights to more people. She showed me that the best win is one that’s a win for everyone.”

Julia smiled. She knew exactly what to say, “Ruth was competitive, she was going to be the best at everything she did even if people told her she couldn’t. I learned that you can’t let other people take away your dreams.”

Julia smiled. She knew exactly what to say, “I learned that being competitive, driven, and passionate makes anything possible, as long as you don’t let people silence you.”

Fifth draft: The Book Report on Serena Williams

Same beginning as fourth draft...

...Julia picked up the first book that impressed her. There was a woman on the cover in a tight white uniform, with luscious dark hair and strong, athletic arms. Julia thought “this woman looks powerful and cool, she’ll be perfect to write about!”

The book Julia chose was about Serena Williams. Today she is a world-renowned tennis star, but it wasn’t an easy road to becoming a champion. Ever since she was a little girl Serena practiced long and hard at tennis so she could be the best tennis player in the world.

Julia realized Serena must love competition too!

“I wonder if anyone ever said she was gross for being sweaty.”

Julia continued to read about Serena and she wrote down everything she learned.

She was surprised to learn that Serena was also a mom! She balances practicing and training with caring for her children.

“I can barely balance my basketball practice and my homework” thought Julia, “Serena really is incredible. I can’t wait to tell her story tomorrow!”

The next day in class, Julia raised her hand FIRST to present. She was so excited to talk about how cool Serena Williams was. She retold everything about Serena's life and the many great accomplishments she has made.

"...And Serena Williams has become a symbol for strong woman. She shows the world that nothing is impossible for a woman."

The class clapped. The teacher said, "Julia, that was incredible insight and detail, thank you for your hard work. Can you tell me one thing you can learn from Ms. William's story?"

Julia smiled. She knew exactly what to say, "Well right now I'm just a girl, but someday I'll be a woman. And reading about Serena taught me that the world has complicated expectations for women; what they should be, how they should be look, the ways they should behave, but I decide what it means to me, just like Serena decided for herself. When the world told her she couldn't be a mom and an athlete, she never gave up. When the world tells me no on something I believe in, I'll never give up too."

Sixth draft: The Tea Party

Julia and Nellie were sisters. Everything Julia did, Nellie wanted to do too. When Julia learned how to read, Nellie tried to also. When Julia decided she wanted to play basketball, Nellie decided she wanted to also. Nellie thought Julia knew everything.

"How far away is the sun?" Nellie asked

"Really, really far away!" said Julia.

"Where do chicken nuggets come from?" Nellie asked with a chicken nugget in her mouth.

"They kill a chicken, remove the skin and feathers, mush up the meat and the fry them!" said Julia as she bit into her own chicken nugget.

The two sisters loved to play together. They played board games, card games, hide and seek, tag and other games together. They played house, doctor and patient, grocery store, and dress up together. One of the sisters' favorite games was tea party. Julia would plan the tea party and Nellie would be one of the guests.

“Nellie, I’m having a tea party this afternoon, will you come? You have to wear your best clothes it’s a very special event.”

“oooooh who else will be there?”

“I can’t tell you it’s a surprise, but I really think you’ll like them!”

Nellie put on her favorite blue striped dress, the one she wore on the first day of school, and went to knock on Julia’s door.

“Julia! Can I come in?”

Julia opened the door and welcomed Nellie into the room. At the table were four other guests, a teddy bear, a stuffed dolphin, a toy cat, and a fluffy dog.

“Ladies, this is my sister Nellie. Nellie, these are our guests, Malala Yousafzai, Marie Curie, Serena Williams and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”

“Darth Vader who?” Nellie asked, confused.

“No silly! Her name is Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Here come sit next to her.”

Nellie went to the open seat next to the dog, whose name was apparently Ruth.

“Hi Ruth, I’m Nellie!”

“Ruth is a Supreme Court Justice for the United States, do you know what that means Nellie?”

Julia explained that Ruth makes really important decisions about the laws of the country.

“She is really really smart, and she always wanted to be a lawyer, but she had trouble following her dreams because the boys didn’t think she could do it. She got turned down from jobs, and she got paid less just because she was a girl, but do you know what she did? She figured out a way to fight for women’s rights and make it illegal to discriminate because of someone’s gender! Now everyone, boy, or girl, or anything in between is protected thanks to Ruth!”

“Wow!! That is so cool, she didn’t let any boy stop her!” said Nellie amazed.

Julia continued to explain who each guest was, next she pointed at the cat and said,

“This is Malala Yousafzai, she is from a far away place called Pakistan. She is only 21 years old but she has already done so much to bravely fight for education for young girls. You know not everyone is as lucky as we are to go to school but Malala is trying to change that?”

“And this is Serena Williams, she is a world famous tennis player who works hard every day for her dreams. She proved to the world that a woman can pursue her dreams and be a mother.”

Julia said as she pointed to the stuffed animal dolphin. Her smile was bright as she introduced these women to Nellie. Nellie’s eyes were as big as two full moons as they soaked up Julia’s knowledge. The two sisters were full of excitement and love.

Julia introduced the last guest, Marie Curie the teddy bear to Nellie,

“Marie Curie was an award winning scientist at a time when most men didn’t think women were smart enough to be scientists. She was a thinker, and she made the men recognize her great work and intelligent mind.”

And as Nellie reached over to shake Marie’s paw, the girls’ mother knocked on the door,

“Nellie! Julia! What are you two doing in here?”

“Perfect timing Mom! Welcome to our tea party, you are our guest of honor!” said Julia.

“Mom is the guest of honor?” asked Nellie.

“Yes, she’s the most important woman in our lives and she’s taught us the importance of being true to yourself, and that’s the best lesson for a girl to learn, right Mom?”

Julia looked over to her mom who nodded and smiled,

“I’m flattered Julia, and who are our other lovely guests?”

Now it was Nellie’s turn to explain each guests’ incredible story while they drank tea and nibbled cookies. The tea party was a success. Nellie and Julia couldn’t wait to have another one.

SUMMARY OF THE WRITING PROCESS

The evolution of my children's book manuscript began with deciding what social justice issue I wanted to tackle. After reading books about immigration, drugs, sexual preferences, mental health, gender and race issues, it became clear that it is possible for any challenging topic to be presented in the form a children's book. I am most passionate about feminism and conversations about gender roles and my motivation for writing a children's book about these themes is the hope that we can reshape how young girls define themselves. My goal in writing my children's book was to encourage a reader to dream big and to feel comfortable breaking away from the confines of traditional gender stereotypes. In order to address gender stereotypes, I considered the stereotypes that I am familiar with and the ways they shaped my thinking about my identity.

The first draft of my story was an exploration of the many ways society's expectations of women are contradictory to each other. For example, we are expected to be perfect and beautiful, but using too much makeup is deemed unnatural. This story also considered the dichotomous way traditional feminine values are pitted against modern feminist values. If a woman wants to pursue her career, she is seen as cold and unfeeling for not being a mother. On the contrary, if a woman wants to be a stay-at-home mom, she is seen as backward and weak for not pursuing her ambitions. The complex nature of the expectations placed on women leads to many young girls feeling perplexed and confused by the thought of becoming a woman. I wanted the first story to challenge these expectations and juxtapose contradictory statements on femininity, ultimately concluding with the idea that a girl decides for oneself what femininity means.

In writing the first draft I was challenged to think about how the statements I made about various expectations associated with femininity could be illustrated in a book. Some of the ideas like being brave or being soft-spoken are abstract and hard to connect with images so I found it helpful while writing to imagine the illustrations that could be paired

with the words. However in later drafts, I focused less on the illustrations and more on strengthening my storytelling in the text. Another challenge I faced in writing the first draft was how to effectively implement parallelism and rhythm in my words, without making it sound forced and inorganic. I wanted the story to read like there were a few introductory lines, then a series of pages detailing different stereotypes and expectations all beginning with the phrase “girls should...” and then it would end with a few concluding lines. This structure helped link each idea about femininity to the next, but it ended up feeling redundant and stilted after a few iterations. In reviewing the first draft, it was suggested that while there can be some benefit to speaking generally, the story would be stronger if it followed a single character with a distinct narrative.

Based on this feedback, my goal in the second draft was to create a story that follows one specific character through a series of events and still explores the complexity of femininity. In the second draft there was one main character and the reader followed her throughout a normal day and heard her inner dialogue about the way she thinks of herself in the future as a woman. I found that I could write very visually about women exemplifying the ideas I wanted to explore in the first draft, and have my character react to these woman role models. One strength I found in this draft was that my writing was more descriptive and illustrative. I found ways to describe scenes and behaviors more clearly and my words were able to stand alone better than the way the first draft relied on pictures to enhance the words. The second draft also showed that a story would be stronger if it could use action to describe an aspect of femininity and womanhood instead of just making explicit statements as the first draft did.

One challenge that the first draft had and the second draft made more obvious was that I did not have a clear understanding of who my main character was. The main character in the second draft was thinking about how her present-day experiences will shape her into a woman. She was defining and exploring her identity as a woman in the

future, but the reader does not get a deep enough insight into her as a young girl to be able to connect with her visions of womanhood. While I hoped keeping the character vaguely defined would allow any reader to see themselves in her and feel encouraged to ponder their feminine identity, in reading the first and second draft it became clear that a vague character cannot carry a story. My goal moving into the next draft was to really explore my main character and what she thinks and feels about being a girl in the modern world.

Another challenge in the second draft was finding the way to effectively order the ideas of femininity that the character explores. I wanted the story to follow the natural chronology of a young girl's day but some of the aspects that she considers in women around her are more closely related to others even though they come at different times in her day. Although the second draft differed from the first in that it followed a character through a day, the second draft still relied heavily on the general statements about different expectations and aspects of a woman's identity. The plot of the second draft was weak and therefore it still felt similar to the way the first draft just made statements and did not come together into a narrative. In future drafts, I continued to develop the plot and steer further from the first draft so the story was more engaging and would be more likely to capture a reader's interest.

One important idea that evolved in the third draft and worked so well that it carried through into the final draft was the integration of real women role models as an inspiration for the characters in the story. In a conversation about ways to develop my story further, I was challenged to think about who I find inspiring to my own personal feminine identity and why. In the third draft of the story I created a school assignment for my character in which she is tasked with answering that question herself. One excellent way to explore one's gender identity is to consider the role models around them. For this character it seemed most organic for a school assignment to prompt her exploration of people who represent the strength of women. The main character was still weakly developed, but the

ideas of femininity were presented even more strongly when tied to a real woman who embodies them.

Choosing the women role models was driven by a goal to cover a diverse spread of character traits and backgrounds. My personal inspirations are Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Serena Williams, so in all of the subsequent drafts that describe a real person I included them both. I also added Malala Yousafzai to represent the younger generation and someone of non-western background. Marie Curie was added to represent a woman from a historical era and show that feminist icons have been around forever. I also wanted to capture the sentiment that a girl's mom is just as inspiring as a world-famous athlete or scientist. In all the drafts that reference real icons, I also bring in the character's mother to show a relatable, "typical" way that feminism can appear in a child's life. My goal with this book is to encourage children to construct their own relationship with their gender identity by considering the examples around them. The third and subsequent drafts focus on teaching children to learn from the example of others, both the shining stars with celebrity status and the everyday sources of inspiration in our lives.

The third draft's plot was founded on a school assignment, but the idea seemed stilted. In the fourth draft I changed the school assignment from throwing a dinner party to writing a book report. This type of school assignment feels more natural and relatable, but it limits the amount of real people I can address in the book. Instead of sharing four famous women's stories, in the fourth and fifth drafts my character learns about one famous woman and finds a personal connection to her. The fourth draft is where the main character was most developed. Julia, the main character, was created as a young girl clearly struggling to understand how she is different and still the same as other girls and boys around her. I focused specifically on the competitive spirit, something that is often criticized in women but applauded in men, and how Julia's understanding of her own ambition and drive is impacted by the gendered feedback she receives. This story

highlights the dichotomy in how adults treat young girls and young boys and calls for a critical inspection of how these interactions perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Julia represents a typical young girl who has a desire to be the best but is sometimes rejected or deterred by others. In the book report assignment, she researches Ruth Bader Ginsburg (or Serena Williams in the fifth draft) and realizes that the challenging experiences she has had are unfortunately common and pervasive. Without explicitly stating it, this story addresses the double standards that are present in our society. The uplifting realization that Julia makes while researching her book report is that she, like women before her, can triumph over the obstacles that she faces because she is a girl. This experience is one that many children will relate to. A child typically finds one person, or maybe many people they aspire to be and regardless of the reasoning, they begin to see themselves in those people. The narrative in drafts four and five creates this relationship between the main character and Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Serena Williams by highlighting how the challenges they faced in their careers parallel the challenges Julia faces in her daily life. I chose this structure so that readers would see parallels between themselves and Julia and in turn, see the link between themselves and the inspiring women. One of the most impactful ways to talk about feminism with children is through real experiences. Children will be less captivated by hypothetical ideas of female empowerment, like the structure of the first draft, than by the true stories that exemplify female empowerment, like those Julia learns about in the fourth and fifth draft. The shift to including real women in the story was one of the most effective decisions I made throughout the writing process and it caused my story to evolve the furthest from its original form.

My biggest challenge in creating the fourth draft was that I started the story intending to have my character, Julia, research Ruth Bader Ginsburg for her book report, but by the time I developed Julia's character, it did not parallel Ginsburg's as organically

as I intended to. I started developing Julia with the idea that she loves competition and everything she does is something she is trying to win. As I envisioned what Julia's competitive drive would look like and how people around her would react in gendered ways, I found similarities to experiences I or my friends had growing up. The remarks that Julia's mom, teachers and classmates make are all things I can picture hearing in my childhood. Julia then felt very realistic and well developed but linking her to Ruth Bader Ginsburg was hard. Ginsburg's reputation and history are marked by perseverance and cleverness. At junctions in her life where her gender was an obstacle, she never gave up and she reconstructed the world around her, so she could change the gender stereotypes that prevented her from achieving her goals. Julia was able to learn about Ginsburg's tenacious spirit and her accomplishments, but it seemed like the motivators that drove Ginsburg were not the same as those that drove Julia. I ended up creating a few different endings for the draft with Ginsburg but none of them fit right. Instead of rethinking the way Julia's character was developed, I decided to rethink the role model she was researching and that was when the decision to change it to Serena Williams was made.

The fifth draft of the story then was very similar to the fourth in that Julia was developed in the same ways and she was tasked with the same school assignment but this time she decided to write about Serena Williams. My intention with choosing Serena Williams was that the parallel between her and Julia would be more obvious. Julia is a competitive girl who wants to win everything and Serena, being a world-famous athlete, can also be characterized by a strong desire to win and a competitive spirit. Serena represents strength and empowerment in different ways than Ginsburg because she is both a woman and a person of color. And while Ginsburg competed directly against men for the same jobs and accolades, Serena Williams was only directly competing against other women although the sport of women's tennis can be seen as competing with men's tennis for the fans' attention. Williams is someone young girls can aspire to be because

she, like Ginsburg, has not let other people turn her gender into a handicap. She has shown that a woman can choose to be a mother and still achieve her own professional goals. She has refused to be known simply as a beautiful woman, she demands respect for her accomplishments and she will not be underestimated. These traits were more fitting for Julia to admire in a woman she was writing a book report about so I found that the making this change in the fifth draft was effective.

The sixth, and what ended up being the final, version of the story borrowed elements of previous drafts that were strong and improved upon elements that were weak. In the sixth draft I returned to a narrative where the characters learn and discuss multiple inspiring female role models. I improved upon the structure in the third draft so instead of a school assignment to plan a dinner party driving the plot, I created a situation where two sisters are having a pretend tea party. This change had two major benefits on the storyline. The first was that the plot felt more organic because two young girls using pretend play to have a tea party together is more realistic and relatable than having a school assignment as vague and non-academic as the dinner party idea. The second was that it resolved a struggle I had been facing throughout the writing process with the age of my main character. In every previous draft I was envisioning the characters as late elementary and early middle school, approximately 11 years old, however the voice and writing style I used did not fit well with this type of character. In the sixth draft I created two characters, an older sister who is about 13 or 14 years old and a younger sister who is about 8 or 9 years old. This dynamic allowed the older sister to embody the mature and informed role in the story and the younger sister to be childish but curious about what the older sister knows. I hope for this story to be able to resonate with children of any age, very young readers might even be read the story by their older sisters. The sister-to-sister relationship adds another layer to the idea that women can be inspired by each other so

even though they are having the tea party and discussing impactful women, the reader can notice that the older sister is an inspiration to the younger sister.

Another way the sixth draft was influenced by previous versions is the character development. As mentioned earlier, the first few drafts were weak on character development and the fourth and fifth draft were strong in the way that the character Julia was developed. I was reluctant to leave Julia behind when I began writing another version of the story, but with the two sisters I found that there could still be substantial character development. Instead of focusing on one sister or the other and reaching the same depth of Julia's development in the fourth and fifth stories, I tried to highlight the relationship between the sisters and the way they were defined by it. Although the reader connects less with each sister individually, they can understand the camaraderie and love between them and they can see how both sisters help each other learn and grow. Regardless of whether the reader has a sister, this dynamic demonstrates the power of having positive role models in a child's life. Role models can be from magazines and TV, or from one's own family or school. They can be similar to oneself in many ways, or different in many ways but ultimately what matters is that the person makes you a better version of yourself. In the context of my story I am specifically exploring and highlighting the power women have to help other women be the best versions of themselves. Even without in-depth character development of the sisters, the story shows that they lift each other up and their relationship is something to admire.

The sixth draft is a culmination of the work that went into each draft before. Some of the elements of the sixth draft can be traced back to the original story and others were something I created for the first time while writing it. One pervasive challenge in every draft and something that is not entirely resolved in the final version of the story is how to write at the level of a picture book without losing meaning. The impetus for this thesis project was the amazement I felt when reading modern children's books and realizing that

they are discussing more than just what we'd call "kid stuff." It is an impressive feat when a picture book captures aspects of the human experience in a way that preserves the depth but still makes it approachable for children. In my work leading up to and throughout the writing process, I read many books that found the masterful balance it takes to deliver "adult" messages and themes in a children's book form. My intention was to emulate these authors, however my stories, even the sixth version, rely on language that is not typically the style of picture books. As I expected, creating a children's book that addresses social issues is not as easy as it may seem. Throughout the writing process I have been working to evolve towards a story that finds the balance I had seen other books achieve, and although the sixth draft is closest to this goal, it is still not exactly what I hoped.

Overall, I have been impressed by the evolution of my children's book. In reflecting on my early drafts and how I arrived at my latest version, I see the ideas and brainstorming that led to each draft and how the feedback I received helped the story morph into new and better forms and grow throughout the process. I set out to write a story that addressed a social issue in a way that children could connect with and consider how the issue is related to them. As the story evolved I gained a clearer understanding of the message I was hoping to impart to children. I wanted to do more than just help children consider what it means to be a girl or a woman; I wanted children, of every gender, to recognize that the stereotypes, expectations and norms society places on genders are counterproductive and unhealthy. My goal was to write a story that made children feel empowered and capable of taking down any barriers they face because of their gender identity. One excellent piece of advice I revisited throughout the writing process was to avoid trying to "do it all." When addressing social issues in a children book, an author must remember that there is not enough space to make a statement on every cause out there. In the case of my book, gender is a complex issue. Today's society is redefining the categories people identify as, the expectations of someone who identifies as a man or as a woman, the way each gender is

treated by the others and many other areas of how gender plays a role in our world. My children's book could not attempt to share thoughts on everything with children, but in its final form it achieves the original goal of sharing a story that empowers children to define their gender for themselves.

CONCLUSION

There has been a steady amount of growth and evolution from start to finish of this thesis project. From the inception of the idea, when I first realized how interesting it is to read children's books through adult eyes, to the final stages, where I was editing and refining my own children's book manuscript, I have seen my understanding and appreciation for the power of children's literature increase. Throughout this project I have seen how complex and provocative a children's book can be. To the untrained eye, children's books seem like a simple form, they must be easy to think of, easy to write, and as long as they make kids smile, they must be good. However, my research during this project and my experience of the writing process are a testament to the opposite. The simple form of a children's book, specifically a picture book, is actually the source of its power. An author is challenged with distilling their main idea into a story that children will be interested in, without losing any of the significance of the idea. It is an impressive feat.

While there is nothing wrong with a book that tells a cute story, there is something to be admired with a book that tells a cute story and makes you think. I have now been exposed to many examples of the latter, and some books that do not even disguise themselves as cute but still strive to make readers think. In reading these types of books I have come to see that children are meaningful agents in their lives, so their books should treat them as such. Children need to be exposed to the beauties and the ills of the world and encouraged to question their place among it all. Books are a perfect space for children to wonder, ponder, dare and dream. Children's literature is influenced by social justice in

that a book can promote a certain message or a certain value related to a social issue. But children's literature is also influencing social justice because the ideas that books share with readers will contribute to how readers think, feel and act toward social issues. Although my exploration of the picture book writing process is a small contribution to the body of socially impactful children's books, it has been an insightful journey to create it.

FINAL DRAFT OF STORY AND SAMPLE ILLUSTRATIONS

Everything Julia did, Nellie wanted to do. When Julia learned to read, Nellie tried to. When Julia played basketball, Nellie did to. Nellie thought Julia knew everything.

"How far away is the sun?" Nellie asked

"Really, really far away!" said Julia.

"Where do apples grow?" Nellie asked, as she bit into an apple.

"They grow on apple trees!" said Julia as she took a big chomp.

The two sisters loved playing together. They played board games, card games, hide and seek, and tag together. They played house, hospital, grocery store, and dress up together. But their favorite thing to play was tea party.

"Nellie, I'm having a tea party this afternoon and you're invited, but you have to wear your best clothes. It's a very special event" said Julia.

"Ooooh. Who else will be there?" replied Nellie.

"I can't tell you, it's a surprise!" answered Julia, with a sneaky smile.

Nellie put on her favorite blue striped dress, the one she wore on the first day of school, and went to knock on Julia's door.

"Julia! Can I come in?" Nellie called as she knocked.

Julia opened the door and welcomed Nellie into the room. She had prepared the perfect tea party for her sister. Four other guests were already at the table, a toy cat, a stuffed dolphin, a teddy bear and a fluffy puppy.

“Ladies, this is my sister Nellie. Nellie, these are our guests, Malala Yousafzai, Serena Williams, Marie Curie, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”



“Darth Vader who?” Nellie asked, confused.

“No silly! Her name is Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Here, come sit next to her.”

Nellie went to the open seat next to the stuffed puppy and said “Hi Ruth, I’m Nellie! It’s nice to meet you!”

“Ruth is a Supreme Court Justice for the United States. Do you know what that means Nellie?”

“No but it sounds super important! What does she do?”

“She makes really big decisions about the laws of our country. Her whole career has been dedicated to fighting for gender equality because she thinks it’s unfair to be treated differently just because you’re a boy or a girl.”

“She’s right!” said Nellie. “And who’s this?” She asked as she pointed to the toy cat.

“This is Malala Yousafzai. She is from Pakistan.”

“Where’s that?” wondered Nellie.

“It’s a country in South Asia, many miles from here. You know not every girl there is as lucky as we are to go to school?”

“No school? But Mom says we have to go to school!”

“She’s right! Everyone should go. And that’s why even though Malala is only 21 years old, she is fighting for more education for girls.”

“21? That’s close to you Julia, you could be just like her and fight for girl power!” and with a smile Nellie high-fived the toy cat’s paw and Julia’s hand at the same time.

Nellie looked over to the dolphin and asked, “How did you get invited here? Are you as cool as Ruth and Malala?”

Julia answered, “Of course she is Nellie. Everyone here has done something great! This is Serena Williams.”

Nellie reached out to shake the dolphin’s fin and said “I’ve heard of you! You play tennis!”

“Yeah she does but did you know she’s won over 900 matches”

“900?!”

“She’s a star. And more than being good at tennis, Serena is a symbol of strength for many people because she’s a woman, an athlete, and a mother. She is dedicated to her dreams and she lets nothing stop her”

Nellie’s jaw dropped. “Wow. I hope she keeps winning, maybe she can reach 1000!”

“Maybe! Now we have another guest named Marie Curie, she’s sitting right over there.”

Julia pointed at the teddy bear.

“Who is she? An actress? An astronaut? A business lady?”

“Good guesses Nellie, but no, Marie Curie is a famous scientist. Have you heard of the Nobel prize?

“Yeah! It’s a very special award!”

“Exactly, and Marie won it twice for her research, at a time when most women were not allowed to go to college!”

Nellie’s eyes got big. And then someone knocked on the door,

“Nellie! Julia! What are you two doing in here?” called the girls’ mother.

“Perfect timing Mom! Welcome to our tea party, you are our guest of honor!” said Julia.

“Mom is the guest of honor?” asked Nellie.

“Yes, she’s the most important woman in our lives. Think of everything she’s taught us... how to be kind to others, how to make our voices heard...”

“How to make pizza and tie our shoes!” shouted Nellie.

Julia laughed. “Yes, that too. And most importantly, how to be true to ourselves.” Julia looked at her mom and saw her smiling.

“Well I’m flattered girls, and who are our other lovely guests?”

Now it was Nellie’s turn to explain each guests’ incredible story while they drank tea and nibbled cookies together. Nellie and Julia couldn’t wait to have another tea party.

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