

Faerie Tales From the Rainbow Library



BY NETH URKIEL-TAYLOR

When I was a child there was a children's album I spent a lot of time listening to: *Free To Be You And Me*. The title song had lyrics that were very inspiring and memorable to me: "There's a land that I see where the children are free and I say it ain't far to this land from where we are ... Every boy in this land grows to be his own man. In this land, every girl grows to be her own woman."

Three children's books from the same era feature this theme: *The Girl Who Would Rather Climb Trees* by Miriam Schlein; *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola; and *Jesse's Dream Skirt* by Bruce Mack. These three books encourage children's approaches to resolving conflicts, freedom of self-exploration, tolerance and respect of gender role differences.

Just by looking at the cover of Miriam Schlein's book, *The Girl Who Would Rather Climb Trees*, you can see that the main character, Melissa, is a no-frills kind of gal. Melissa is happy to read, play ball, do puzzles, watch birds, bike ride, jump rope and climb trees. She is very confident in these activities. We might refer to her, although the book does not, as a tomboy.

The question for Melissa is what to do with the dolly presented to her by the female adults in her life. After numerous awkward attempts to play with the doll, she solves her indifference in a very practical manner. In this story, Melissa tries out but cannot actively engage in the role that she is expected to accept as a female in her family.

Jesse, the boy in *Jesse's Dream Skirt*, is challenged in a similar way. Jesse desires more than anything in the world to create a skirt for himself to wear everywhere he goes. This is accomplished with the help of his mother Jean.

Jesse is a younger character than Melissa; therefore, he seeks security and support from his pre-school teacher, Bruce, in order to solve a peer conflict that arises around his skirt-wearing. Bruce encourages open discussion of the feelings the other children have about Jesse's dream skirt. During the preschoolers' discussion a classmate named Sarah says, "My mother told me that a long time ago girls weren't allowed to wear pants." (By the way, that story is depicted in the children's book *Bloomers* by Rhoda Blumberg.)

From the first illustration in *Jesse's Dream Skirt*, illustrator Marian Buchanan shows us a diversity of male "dress" that spans multiple cultures and colors. In this story the natural and inquisitive child finds support. Children who would rather not take part in the experience of skirt dressing are allowed that option too. It is okay for children to watch and not say anything at all. Unfortunately, this book is out of print, and

despite three unsuccessful attempts I have been unable to locate the parties originally involved in its creation. I found my copy at Recycle North in Burlington, Vermont.

A third book, *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola, is another wonderful example of a character who successfully makes the transition from being misunderstood and unappreciated to being more fully accepted by the people in his life. Unlike Jesse's mom Jean, Oliver's mama and papa do not accept Oliver's behavior. Initially, his family is negative and unhealthy in their approaches to change Oliver. This book combines the ideas that the other two books demonstrate – help and encouragement in the situation from a mentor, and self-perseverance in order to solve one's own problems.

Oliver Button is a STAR is a 2001 video release by the TCGMC/Oliver Project and Vermont filmmaker John Scagliotti. The documentary – based on dePaola's book – was aired as a PBS Family Special on bullying, tolerance, and youth empowerment. It employs an innovative mix of live performance, traditional storytelling, animation, musical adaptation of *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, film clips, classroom footage, home movies and childhood memories from Tomie dePaola, dancer Bill T. Jones, arctic explorer Ann Bancroft, and makeup artist Kevin Aucoin to explore bullying and gender differences in children.

Both Jesse and Oliver are boys who participate in activities commonly referred to as feminine. Yet, neither thinks of himself, as far as the reader is told, as being a girl. The expressions of their gender and the behaviors that their families and friends see do not match Jesse's, Oliver's or Melissa's gender identities. Each child's self expression and/or participation in activities outside a traditional gender role does not necessarily carry over into the way each child identifies themselves mentally, sexually or emotionally as a male or a female.

The messages in all three of these books are very enabling – excellent examples of youth that are self-aware and resilient. It is important that anyone reading books like the three above understand and be able to explain the difference between gender role, gender expression and gender identity.

"And you and me are free to be you and me." ▼

Neth is currently involved in The Rainbow Library, a reference library and Vermont resource for queer-themed picture books, videos, and family information. Library staff is willing to facilitate reading circles with your friends and family, group, school or organization. Call 652-0878 to learn how you can become involved, to get a bibliography or to learn more about the library.