

ARMIN A. BROTT

ARMIN A. BROTT is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. Born in 1958, he received a BA in Russian from San Francisco State University and an MBA that he calls “less useful than the degree in Russian” before embarking on a career in marketing. He turned to writing when his first child was born because he “wanted to be an active, involved father.” Since that time he has contributed to the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Family Circle*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Playboy*, and other magazines. He treats issues that affect men: education, health, and especially fatherhood. His books include *The Expectant Father* (1995, with Jennifer Ash), *The New Father* (1997), *A Dad’s Guide to the Toddler Years* (1998), *The Single Father* (1999), and *Throwaway Dads* (1999). Brott also hosts a weekly radio show in San Francisco, *Positive Parenting*.

Not All Men Are Sly Foxes

In this essay from a 1992 *Newsweek* magazine, Brott offers a different view of men from that taken by Judy Brady in the previous essay. While acknowledging that women and men are not yet equal in child care, Brott holds that children’s books are hardly helping. He uses analysis to show that the Sly Fox remains much more common than the Caring Dad.

If you thought your child’s bookshelves were finally free of openly (and not so openly) discriminatory materials, you’d better check again. In recent years groups of concerned parents have persuaded textbook publishers to portray more accurately the roles that women and minorities play in shaping our country’s history and culture. *Little Black Sambo* has all but disappeared from library and bookstore shelves; feminist fairy tales by such authors as Jack Zipes have, in many homes, replaced the more traditional (and obviously sexist) fairy tales. Richard Scarry, one of the most popular children’s writers, has reissued new versions of some of his classics; now female animals are pictured doing the same jobs as male animals. Even the terminology has changed: Males and females are referred to as mail “carriers” or “firefighters.”

There is, however, one very large group whose portrayal continues to follow the same stereotypical lines as always: fathers. The evolution of children’s literature didn’t end with *Goodnight Moon* and *Charlotte’s Web*. My local public library, for example, previews 203 new children’s picture books (for the under-five set) each month. Many of these books make a very conscious effort to take women characters out of the kitchen and the nursery and give them professional jobs and responsibilities.

Despite this shift, mothers are by and large still shown as the primary caregivers and, more important, as the primary nurturers of their children. Men in these books—if they're shown at all—still come home late after work and participate in the child rearing by bouncing baby around for five minutes before putting the child to bed. 3

In one of my two-year-old daughter's favorite books, *Mother Goose and the Sly Fox*, "retold" by Chris Conover, a single mother (Mother Goose) of seven tiny goslings is pitted against (and naturally outwits) the sly Fox. Fox, a neglectful and presumably unemployed single father, lives with his filthy, hungry pups in a grimy hovel littered with the bones of their previous meals. Mother Goose, a successful entrepreneur with a thriving lace business, still finds time to serve her goslings homemade soup in pretty porcelain cups. The story is funny and the illustrations marvelous, but the unwritten message is that women take better care of their kids and men have nothing else to do but hunt down and kill innocent, law-abiding geese. 4

The majority of other children's classics perpetuate the same negative stereotypes of fathers. Once in a great while, people complain about *Babar's* colonialist slant (little jungle-dweller finds happiness in the big city and brings civilization—and fine clothes—to his backward village). But I've never heard anyone ask why, after his mother is killed by the evil hunter, Babar is automatically an "orphan." Why can he find comfort only in the arms of another female? Why do Arthur's and Celeste's mothers come alone to the city to fetch their children? Don't the fathers care? Do they even have fathers? I need my answers ready for when my daughter asks. 5

I recently spent an entire day on the children's floor of the local library trying to find out whether these same negative stereotypes are found in the more recent classics-to-be. The librarian gave me a list of the twenty most popular contemporary picture books and I read every one of them. Of the twenty, seven don't mention a parent at all. Of the remaining thirteen, four portray fathers as much less loving and caring than mothers. In *Little Gorilla*, we are told that the little gorilla's "mother loves him" and we see Mama gorilla giving her little one a warm hug. On the next page we're also told that his "father loves him," but in the illustration, father and son aren't even touching. Six of the remaining nine books mention or portray mothers as the only parent, and only three of the twenty have what could be considered "equal" treatment of mothers and fathers. 6

The same negative stereotypes also show up in literature aimed at the parents of small children. In *What to Expect the First Year*, the authors answer almost every question the parents of a newborn or toddler could have in the first year of their child's life. They are meticulous in alternating between references to boys and girls. At the same time, they refer almost exclusively to 7

“mother” or “mommy.” Men, and their feelings about parenting, are relegated to a nine-page chapter just before the recipe section.

Unfortunately, it’s still true that, in our society, women do the bulk of the child care, and that thanks to men abandoning their families, there are too many single mothers out there. Nevertheless, to say that portraying fathers as unnurturing or completely absent is simply “a reflection of reality” is unacceptable. If children’s literature only reflected reality, it would be like prime-time TV and we’d have books filled with child abusers, wife beaters and criminals.

Young children believe what they hear — especially from a parent figure. And since, for the first few years of a child’s life, adults select the reading material, children’s literature should be held to a high standard. Ignoring men who share equally in raising their children and continuing to show nothing but part-time or no-time fathers is only going to create yet another generation of men who have been told since boyhood — albeit subtly — that mothers are the truer parents and that fathers play, at best, a secondary role in the home. We’ve taken major steps to root out discrimination in what our children read. Let’s finish the job.

Journal Writing

Do you agree with Brott that young children are strongly influenced by the books parents or teachers read to them? In your journal, list particular books from your childhood that stand out in your memory. What made these books come alive so that you still remember them today — the story, the illustrations, the language? (To take your journal writing further, see “From Journal to Essay” on the facing page.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What is the **THESIS** of Brott’s essay? Where is it stated succinctly?
2. What does Brott **ASSUME** about his **AUDIENCE** in this essay? To what extent do you fit his assumptions?
3. Brott points out a difference between the illustration of the little gorilla with his mother and the one of him with his father (par. 6). Why is this difference significant?
4. What is the **EFFECT** of Brott’s concluding sentences: “We’ve taken major steps to root out discrimination in what our children read. Let’s finish the job”?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. What principle of analysis does Brott use in examining the children’s books? What elements does he perceive in these books?

2. What purpose does paragraph 7, with its reference to books for parents, serve in this essay about children's books?
3. **OTHER METHODS.** In paragraph 4, Brott provides vivid DESCRIPTION of Mother Goose's and Sly Fox's homes to show the differences between the two parents. What CONCRETE details help explain these differences?

Questions on Language

1. What is the difference between "caregivers" and "nurturers" as Brott uses the words in paragraph 3?
2. How would you analyze Brott's TONE? Give specific words and sentences that you think contribute to the tone.
3. If some of the following words are unfamiliar, look them up in a dictionary: discriminatory (par. 1); stereotypical, evolution (2); goslings, neglectful, hovel, entrepreneur, porcelain (4); perpetuate, colonialist (5); meticulous, exclusively, relegated (7); albeit, subtly (9).

Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY.** Working from your journal entry (previous page), write a brief essay that explores the messages sent by one of your childhood books. Did the book contain positive role models? negative ones? moral messages? values that you now embrace or reject? Did you learn anything in particular from this book? Based on your recollections, come to your own conclusions about what's appropriate or not in children's books.
2. Write an essay that analyzes another type of writing by examining its elements. You may choose any kind of writing that's familiar to you: news article, sports article, mystery, romance, science fiction, biography, and so on. Be sure to make your principle of analysis clear to your readers.
3. **CRITICAL WRITING.** "If children's literature only reflected reality," Brott claims, "it would be like prime-time TV and we'd have books filled with child abusers, wife beaters and criminals" (par. 8). However, Brott also suggests that "reality" contains a significant number of responsible, loving fathers. Does the claim about "reality" being "like prime-time TV" detract from Brott's argument on behalf of good fathers? Write an essay in which you explain how (or whether) Brott resolves this contradiction in his essay. It will probably be helpful to provide a clear DEFINITION of *reality* in this context.
4. **CONNECTIONS.** Look over Judy Brady's "I Want a Wife" (p. 320) and make a list of her implied complaints about the traditional roles of a wife. Now make a list of the responsibilities that Brott implies a good father is happy to take on. How could Brott's essay be viewed as a sort of response or solution to some of the problems Brady raises? Write an essay explaining the changes in traditional gender roles suggested by "I Want a Wife" and "Not All Men Are Sly Foxes" together.