50. Ibid.
51. Jones, 382.
52. MacDonald, 115–16.
53. Laurents, 1–3.

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*Chapter 5*

# Mommy and Daddy Were Married, and Other Creation Myths in Children's Books About Sex

Brett L. Lunceford

The one question that a child can ask to strike fear into the hearts of his or her parents is a simple one to which all parents actually know the answer: "Where do babies come from?" From the parent's perspective, this question—fraught with peril and fear—is so ubiquitous that it's simply known as "the talk." Parental trepidation comes from a host of issues, including concerns over what is age-appropriate information for young children, general squeamishness around discussions of reproduction, and deeply held taboos over sexuality in American culture. Janice Irvine observes that "since the earliest calls for sex education in the public schools at the turn of the twentieth century, the phantasm of the innocent child being dangerously stimulated by sexual talk has provoked controversy and fueled efforts to regulate or silence sexual speech with children."[1] But if there is a perception that the child is completely asexual, this is not upheld by research into children's behavior. Scholars have noted that even very young children (those in preschool) sometimes engage in some forms of sexual play, although this is usually limited to curiosity about their own genitalia and the bodies of others.[2] This runs contrary to Marsha Heiman and her colleagues' description of how "remnants of a romanticized image of children as innocent and pure, and therefore, devoid of any sexual desires, arousal, or erotic interests remain deeply embedded within the culture and the psyche."[3] Still, these perceptions of the innocent child shape parental expectations and parents sometimes agonize over how much information to provide and, if possible, try to dodge the subject, kicking the can down the road for another time. Others turn to children's books to help explain the intricacies of human reproduction, or at least the birds and the bees.

Children's literature is an important means of socialization into society as a whole and particular ways of seeing gender. This socialization into gender is significant because, as Judith Butler observes, "we regularly punish those who

fail to do their gender right."[4] Books can be a powerful means of socialization; thus children's books are always rhetorical artifacts. As Peter Hunt explains, children's books "are overtly important educationally and commercially—with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority of those in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development."[5] To put it another way, what is learned in the cradle is taken to the grave.

In this chapter, I will consider how children's books about reproduction function rhetorically. As Edwin Black observes, in any rhetorical discourse, there is not only an imperative to do something, but to *become* something, stating that "the critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become."[6] For Black, this implied ideal auditor, for whom the discourse is designed, can also be linked to a particular ideology.[7] As such, it is of prime importance to uncover the unspoken ideologies within children's books that discuss sexuality and reproduction in order to understand what these books would have children become. I argue that these texts do much more than simply describe the "facts of life" in the colloquial sense. Rather, they explain the facts of life in an ideological sense, prescribing gender roles and norms and establishing value judgments concerning gender and sexuality. This cultural education that takes place through children's literature is important to examine because, as William Friedrich and Sarah Trane make clear, "children acquire social and cultural roles very early in life. These rules include sexuality, and children learn at young ages that some types of behavior are meant to occur in private settings, if at all. They learn these rules via modeling, shaping reactions from adults and others around them, as well as language used to describe behaviors as acceptable or not."[8] Children's literature does much more than educate readers on the mechanics of sex; it also proposes a framework through which children should view sex and reproduction.

Thomas Benson explains that "Rhetoric critics inquire into meaning, not simply in an artifact but also in the pragmatics of that artifact: that is, in how a human being can, or did, or should use that artifact."[9] Put another way, Stephen Lucas writes, "The benefit of close textual analysis is that it allows the critic, in essence, to 'slow down' the action within the text so as to keep its evolving internal context in sharp focus and to allow more precise explication of its rhetorical artistry."[10] The work of the rhetorical critic, then, is to examine how the text unfolds rhetorically and to illuminate the ideologies and arguments embedded within it. By closely examining these children's books, we can gain greater insight concerning the kind of people that the authors of these texts would have the readers become and the ideologies and values that they should hold.



In this chapter, I examine two specific texts within the genre of sexual education picture books for children, one representative and the other transgressive. The first book is *Where Did I Come From? The Facts of Life without Any Nonsense and with Illustrations*, by Peter Mayle and Arthur Robins.[11] I have chosen this one because it is similar in style and content to other children's books on reproduction. Moreover, it has proven a commercial success as it remains in print and has sold over two million copies. As I examine this text, I will also reference similar textual features found in other children's books.

The other text I will examine is *Show Me!: A Picture Book of Sex for Children and Parents*, by Will McBride and Helga Fleischhauer-Hardt. This text features explicit photographs of sexual intercourse with simple explanations of sexual anatomy and behavior. Although the text was published for teaching children about sex, it pushes the boundaries concerning what constitutes children's literature. It is long out of print because of legal challenges, despite the publisher previously defending it against obscenity charges; Thomas McCormack, president of St. Martin's Press, the publisher, stated, "It's the first time in my memory that a book already judged not to be obscene, libelous, plagiaristic or guilty of any other breach accepted as not being protected by the First Amendment is nevertheless suppressed by court order."[12] Yet despite the stark stylistic differences between these two texts, they share commonalities, which I will explore in this chapter.

## *WHERE DID I COME FROM?:* THE FACTS OF LIFE WITHOUT ANY NONSENSE AND WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

*Where Did I Come From?*, like many others in the genre of sexual education picture books for children, resorts to cartoonish figures in order to depict body differences, in this case using two rubenesque figures that, while anatomically correct, are rather goofy looking. This strategy seems to be a common one in these kinds of texts. For example, *What's the Big Secret?* also has cartoonish images that provide both internal and external views of the sexual organs.[13] However, *Where Did I Come From?* lacks any information on internal organs and only shows frontal views of cartoonish genitals. *Where Did I Come From?* is also quite heavy on text, in some cases having entire pages of text with a picture facing the opposite page.[14]

### Textual Descriptions of Sexuality

*Where Did I Come From?* provides an accurate description of intercourse, and even alludes to the process of orgasm: "When the man and the woman have been wriggling so hard that you think they're both going to pop, they

nearly do just that. All the rubbing up and down that's been going on ends in a big lovely shiver for both of them."[15] However, the description of orgasm in *Where Did I Come From?* perpetuates some myths of love and sex. First of all, the woman *has* an orgasm. Raymond Rosen notes that "sexual dysfunctions are highly prevalent, affecting about 43% of women and 31% of men overall."[16] Moreover, Laura Carpenter, Constance Nathanson, and Young Kim observe that "many women require manual or oral clitoral stimulation, instead of, or in addition to, vaginal intercourse to achieve orgasm" and Ridwan Shabsigh reports that "between 30% to 40% of women are unable to achieve orgasm without concurrent clitoral stimulation or through coitus alone."[17] Second, the orgasm is implied to be simultaneous, which taps into a mythic sexual script that persists across many media and genres.[18] Such depictions may promote unrealistic expectations of sexual behavior for both boys and girls, who may wonder what is wrong with their bodies—or the bodies of their partners—when their experiences do not measure up to these depictions.

*Where Did I Come From?* is heavy on figurative language, such as describing orgasm as the pleasure experienced in a sneeze and describing sexual thrusting as wriggling, which makes sense when the audience for the book has not experienced sexual intercourse. Other books take a more clinical approach in describing sex. *How Was I Born?* states, "Inside the mother's belly are tiny eggs. In the father's testicles are sperm, which are even smaller. For a new baby to start growing, an egg and a sperm have to meet. They do this when the mother and father have intercourse. This means that the father puts his penis inside the mother's vagina and many sperm come out through his penis."[19] However, it is useful to note here that *How Was I Born?* was originally published in Sweden, where taboos surrounding discussions of sexuality may be less pronounced, and this cultural difference is likely reflected in their children's literature.[20] *Made With Love* also provides an adequate description of sexual intercourse: "The dad and the mum hold each other close so the dad's penis can fit into the mum's vagina. The sperm come out of the penis into the vagina."[21] *What's the Big Secret?* combines an impartial description of intercourse—"Usually the sperm and egg meet during sexual intercourse, when a man and a woman fit his penis into her vagina"—with the assumption of love—"It feels wonderful to share this special closeness when you love someone."[22]

*Where Did I Come From?* reinforces the idea that the child was brought into a family by a loving mother and father: "The man loves the woman. So he gives her a kiss. And she gives him a kiss."[23] After describing the man getting an erection, they continue, "By this time, the man wants to get as close to the woman as he can, because he's feeling very loving to her. And to get really close, the best thing he can do is lie on top of her and put his penis inside her, into her vagina."[24] *Where Did I Come From?* explains that "It's called making love because it all starts with the man and the woman loving each other."[25] Other children's books take a similar approach in connecting love and sexuality. For example, *Made with Love* explains, "When a dad and a mum love each other and want to make a baby, they make love. This is also called having sex."[26]



But there is more here than just the statement that they love each other. In *Where Did I Come From?* the locus of desire is firmly on the man; the woman's contribution to the transaction is a mere kiss. This is a reflection of how we view femininity generally and feminine sexuality specifically. As Emily Martin observes, "In our cultural tradition, passivity is a quintessential female attribute, activity a male one."[27] In fact, Martin notes, such descriptions are present in scientific books that describe the egg as "large and passive" and the sperm as "invariably active."[28] Lissa Paul notes that this is evident in children's literature as well: "The female reproductive system is described in terms that underscore the idea of women as lazy, sedentary, and wasteful—as just waiting, in contrast to those marvelous, energetic, active little sperm eagerly moving along doing their important thing."[29] We can see this in *Where Did I Come From?* when they write, "after a while, the man's penis becomes stiff and hard, and much bigger than it usually is. It gets bigger because it has lots of work to do."[30]

In addition to the notion that reproduction takes place between two people who love each other, there is also the notion that the child is loved and desired. In *Where Did I Come From?* the book concludes with "You may think it sounds like a lot of hard work for such a little person. . . . It was all done for you."[31] Others take a similar approach. *Made With Love* features an illustration of a couple in bed facing each other and holding hands with the caption, "I wonder if we've made a baby? I hope so."[32] Later, the couple in the book states, "We loved you very much from the moment we saw you. And we always will!"[33] In *How Did God Make Me?* the child asks, "Did you love me when I was so small," and receives the reply, "Oh yes. Daddy and I loved you. God made you special right from the start."[34] Although this can be reassuring for the child, it may not be consistent with his or her reality. There are children that do not come into a family that wanted them; these books ignore this reality. I am not arguing that children's books on reproduction is the place to describe this reality, only that these books portray a very specific kind of sexuality and thus reinforce the idea that sex equals reproduction and that this reproduction is welcome.[35]

At some point, the metaphoric language and focus on love obscures certain realities of reproduction. For example, even the process of fertilization is sometimes placed in romantic terms in *Where Did I Come From?*: "If a single sperm meets one single egg, they have a romance of their own." In a

biological sense, however, what takes place during the process of fertilization involves hundreds of sperm working to break down the defenses of the egg (which is an active participant in the interaction).[36] As such, the metaphor of romance between one sperm and one egg does more to reflect cultural values regarding human relationships than it does to accurately reflect a biological process.[37]

One aspect in which *Where Did I Come From?* excels is in its technical terminology for anatomy. They chose to do so in a way that brings a lighthearted feel to it, such as its explanation that the woman "has a little opening called a vagina (it rhymes with Carolina)." In other books there seems to be a taboo on the words "penis" and "vagina." These books explain that the sperm transfers from the man's body into the woman's body while ignoring the means by which it arrives there. For example, *Inside Mom* provides a diagram of a woman's reproductive system; the arrow pointing to the vagina carries the caption, "vagina, where father puts the sperm."[38] Using the term "father," rather than the more neutral terms "man" or "male," reinforces the family-building ends of sexuality, which is consistent with other children's books on reproduction. However, in *Inside Mom* there is no discussion of sexual intercourse and the word penis is never mentioned in the book; there is also no accompanying diagram of the male reproductive system. As such, a child would be hard pressed to explain exactly how the father put the sperm in the mother's vagina. *How Are Babies Made?* explains that "a tiny sperm from the man's body has to join up with a little egg from the woman's body," yet likewise neglects to explain how the two come together.[39] Rather than using the term vagina, they explain that "the baby squeezes out of the opening between the mother's legs."[40] *How Did God Make Me?* likewise eschews the terms penis and vagina, although they do use the term "birth canal" and "uterus."[41] As such, *Where Did I Come From?* is exceptional in its textual descriptions of sexual anatomy.

## VISUAL DEPICTIONS OF SEXUALITY

In children's literature, visual representations of concepts are of considerable importance. Margaret Higonnet suggests that "As critics, we tend to privilege verbal narratives, but we need to keep in mind as well the different powers of visual narrative. . . . Visual narratives are more immediately accessible to preverbal and preliterate children."[42] Thus it is illustrative to consider how sexuality is depicted in these texts. Where sexual intercourse is depicted, the missionary position is subtly portrayed as the norm. As noted above, *Where Did I Come From?* explains, "To get really close, the best thing he can do is lie on top of her and put his penis inside her, into her vagina."[43] One can see the interplay of text and image in this instance, as the man is depicted on top of the woman. As Perry Nodelman observes, "Without a text to complete it, . . . people tend even to misinterpret the visual information in these pictures in ways that reveal how fragmentary that information is."[44] The image reinforces the sexual norm as the text declares that it is the "best thing he can do." *Made With Love* also visually depicts a man and a woman in the male superior position, reinforcing this norm.[45]



There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with male superior sex positions, but the singular reliance on such imagery subtly reinforces the passive role of the female in sexuality described above. For example, *Where Did I Come From?* states in their description of orgasm, "At the same time, a spurt of quite sticky stuff comes from the end of the man's penis and this goes into the woman's vagina. Well, believe it or not, this sticky stuff is how you and I and all of us started."[46] Semen, according to this narrative, is the genesis of the human race, rather than the egg. The imagery reinforces the primacy of the sperm and the passivity of the egg in this narrative. The sperm is depicted holding a rose and wearing a top hat and bow tie holding onto a red heart with the other hand. The caption reads, "How could an egg resist a sperm like this?"[47] However, the egg is not depicted at all in the image, nor anywhere else in the book—only the sperm. In short, the woman's contribution to conception is erased in the images, existing only in the text.

It seems that the authors made a conscious effort to make all of the images as cartoonish as possible. Perhaps this is to avoid accusations of salaciousness, but they take it to an extreme. The man is short, balding, overweight, and has bulging eyes at the top of his head. The woman fares only slightly better. This artistic strategy may make the subject matter slightly less threatening for the parents and children, but it leads to some omissions; one area where the visuals are lacking is in female anatomy. A child reading this book would likely have little conception of how a baby would come out of the woman's body. The text states, "What the mother has to do is push the baby out through the opening between her legs," but nowhere in the book is this opening shown.[48] The accompanying images regarding childbirth involve depictions of the fetus in the womb, with the last panel showing the opened cervix from the side view. As such, the artistic strategy in some cases detracts from the educational purpose of the book. Such a lack is also problematic in a culture where even "women are often ignorant about their genitals and their functions."[49] Omitting depictions of childbirth as it actually occurs through the vaginal orifice also reinforces taboos surrounding the female body.

### *Show Me!: A Picture Book of Sex for Children and Parents*

Peter Hunt defines children's literature "in terms of the implied reader. It will be clear, from a careful reading, who a book is designed for: whether the book is on the side of the child totally, whether it is for the developing

child, or whether it is aiming somewhere over the child's head."[50] The issue is both more complex and heightened when addressing age appropriateness of sexual imagery and content. One may rightfully question the wisdom of handing a child a copy of a pornographic magazine like *Hustler* as a form of sexual education, in addition to or separate from its graphic sexual content, because of the sexual attitudes revealed within the text.[51] The issue is more vexing in the case of *Show Me!* From a visual perspective, *Show Me!* pushes the envelope concerning what constitutes children's literature. The graphic depictions of sexual activity are particularly jarring when juxtaposed against the childish language of the text and the images of the young narrators. But this is not only children's literature; from the authors' perspective, there are two interconnected audiences—the parents and the children—with the main text geared toward the children and the afterword describing strategies for using the text.

Because of its frank sexual content, *Show Me!* was challenged repeatedly. The *New York Times* reported that "In two pre-trial hearings and an actual trial in New Hampshire, judges ruled that as a matter of law the book was not obscene," but that in light of a 1982 law that "prohibits the production and the sale of such films and photographs, applies whether or not the material itself meets the legal test of obscenity," the publisher, St. Martin's Press, decided to stop producing the book.[52] The book is still causing controversy. In 2006, a man was charged for possession of child pornography when his house was searched, but the judge found the defendant not guilty because the book "was published three years before anti-pornography laws existed."[53] Even though it is fairly common to see children's books challenged and banned, it seems clear that we are not dealing with a typical children's book.

## TEXTUAL DESCRIPTIONS OF SEXUALITY

In contrast to the wordiness of *Where Did I Come From?, Show Me!* takes a much more stripped down approach to the text, letting the images do much of the educational work. The text is framed as a dialogue between two children—a boy and a girl who seem to be about five years old—who provide commentary on the sexual behavior playing out before them. There are also various interruptions and asides from others, including the parents of the children, but the main commentary belongs to the children. The commentary is simple, with only a few words on each page, leading to a rather long book. Even so, the narrative seems a bit forced and outside of the realm of five-year-old vocabulary. For example, one child says "she has an ORGASM then," with the other replying "that's BEAUTIFUL."[54]



Although the images seem shocking, the ideology put forth in *Show Me!* shines through in the text. The older adults are depicted by McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt as stodgy and unenlightened, with grimacing faces and comments such as "Obscene,"[55] "Disgusting,"[56] and "This has to STOP!"[57] in response to the sexual acts playing out on the page. The children, on the other hand, respond "What an old crab! And just 'cause those two are in love and making out with each other, and because she's kissing his penis."[58] Later on in the book, the older man is depicted with the caption, "DREADFUL, the things they tell children these days,"[59] yet he has already been held up for ridicule by the laughing children. The implicit message is that the author of the book knows best (even better than the child's own parents) and that anyone opposing such instruction is simply too old fashioned and unenlightened.

In the afterword of the book, McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt state that "This book is aimed at open-minded people who are prepared to rethink and perhaps even question their own attitude to human sexuality."[60] Yet they are rather naïve when they assert that "in no way can looking at the pictures damage a child, even if he or she does not yet understand them."[61] Thus, they both embrace the potential influence of the book while denying that the influence may be negative or even have unintended consequences. For example, few would propose normalizing sexual relations between adolescents and prepubescent children, but there are two images that depict just such an act.[62] As such, the text reinforces a commitment to the kinds of sexual freedom found in the images and a desire to change social norms to reflect this vision.

### Visual Depictions of Sexuality

The constraints on children's books are especially apparent when one encounters a text that transgresses the norms of the genre. First of all, *Show Me!* is much longer than a traditional children's book. Even so, it is written in such a way that it seems geared toward children. But far more important than the structural differences are the differences in content, specifically its stark depictions of sexual behavior. *Show Me!* features naked children and adolescents throughout and depicts adolescent sex acts in graphic detail, including both male and female masturbation, fellatio, cunnilingus, and sexual intercourse with a full centerfold close-up shot of penetration. Some images seem to be more along the lines of what would now be considered child pornography,[63] with images of a boy with an erection touching an adolescent girl's breasts and the caption "When I touch your breasts my penis gets all stiff"[64] and one with the girl laying next to the boy holding his penis and the caption "It's fun holding on to your penis," and the boy replying, "I think it's FUN too."[65] The couple depicted engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse seem to be adolescents as well.[66]

In *Where Did I Come From?*, the anatomy depictions were cartoonish and vague. In fact, one would have little understanding of the female anatomy from reading the book. In contrast, *Show Me!* features rather graphic photographs of anatomy, sexual touching, and intercourse. For example, a girl's vulva is displayed from behind with the caption "I think my VULVA'S much nicer than your PENIS,"[67] although such an image is troubling because the pose is standard fare in traditional pornography. Another image has a boy with an erection and the caption, "When my penis is stiff it FEELS GREAT."[68] This is all consistent with the book's mission to provide "an explicit and realistic presentation of sex."[69]

The story, if we can call it that, shifts quickly to conception and childbirth. However, the erotic nature of the sexual act is disconnected from the reproductive aspect. The book moves directly from intercourse to a pregnant woman, does little to make the connection between the two events explicit. In the text directed toward parents in the back of the book, there is discussion of conception and pregnancy, but this is of little use to the children who may read the book on their own. The child reading the book is left to deduce the connection enthymematically. It is not until the final pages when the boy states, "as a grown up I want to be a FATHER," and the girl replies "and I a MOTHER,"[70] that we see this clear connection. Moreover, for all of its superrealism in regard to sex, *Show Me!* glosses over the pain of childbirth: "Sometimes it hurts a lot, because her vagina has to stretch all the way open so the baby can get out. But pretty soon it's all over. . . . The baby's come, it doesn't hurt any more. The mother's VERY HAPPY."[71] Yet the images show only the woman's face, grimacing in pain and then smiling. This child is not present in the image for his or her birth. Other children's books likewise romanticize the pain of childbirth, as in this passage from *Inside Mom*: "Perhaps you have read a story or seen a film where the heroine gives birth, writing in pain and agony, and sometimes dying in the attempt. It's true childbirth can be painful, but most films and books are produced by people with no actual experience. The pain of childbirth is special too, because it's not the pain of illness and there will be something to show for it at the end. . . . Anyway, the pain of childbirth is pushed aside by joy, and forgotten completely."[72] As with *Where Did I Come From?*, the baby is desired. "A whole new life has started and the baby has a mother and a father he can rely on, and THAT'S THE MAIN THING."[73]

On the surface, *Show Me!* seems to break most of the rules of children's literature, such that it could hardly be called a children's book, despite the fact that it was ostensibly written for children. But examining it a bit closer reveals some similarities between it and other children's books about reproduction. Perhaps part of this comes from the content itself. The mechanics of sex are fairly straightforward if one is talking about a typical heterosexual sex act



aimed at reproduction: insert Tab A into Slot B; repeat until ejaculation takes place. *Where Did I Come From?* glosses over this part, choosing to explain it in figurative language while obscuring the visuals of the act, but *Show Me!* glosses over what happens afterward, giving short shrift to the process of conception. Each book tries to write in a child-friendly way and each tries, in its own manner, to normalize the sex act. Finally, each makes the tie between love and sex explicit and even the desirability of the child. Some have suggested that *Show Me!* is not quite as change-oriented as it appears; Lutz D. H. Sauerteig argues that "In many ways, *Show Me!* represented sexuality in an open and very positive and joyful way involving pleasure and fun; its images gave the book a progressive attitude towards sexuality, acknowledging children's sexuality and encouraging them to sexually explore their bodies. But a closer reading reveals another layer of a rather traditional attitude toward gender roles."[74] Sauerteig explains that the prime goal of the book appears to be socializing boys into fatherhood and girls into motherhood.[75] Where *Show Me!* departs from the other books is in its ideological commitment to sexual freedom, but the ends to that freedom remain the same as in other books—parenthood.

## WHY DO THESE BOOKS MATTER?

Children's literature tells us much about a society's perception of childhood. Beliefs concerning what constitutes appropriate behavior for boys and girls are reinscribed through children's literature; as Amanda Diekman and Sarah Murnen state, "The books that a culture offers children both reflect and perpetuate existing social conditions."[76] One can see this especially in the case of children's books on sex. Paul argues that "Until recently, there has been only one exception to the 'instruct and delight' rule of children's literature: books on sex education. Sex education is not about delight. Or toys. Only instruction—and the more clinical the better."[77] By taking a clinical approach, it seems, one can attempt to remove the eroticism from sexuality by reducing it to a biological function akin to eating or defecation. However, this does not seem to be the case in the books I examined. Rather, there is a heavy undercurrent of love and emotion displayed in these texts and an openness to the eroticism found within sexual behavior. The sex act itself is still portrayed in a rather traditional manner in both of these texts, describing a very specific kind of sex; this kind of sex takes place between two people who love each other and have the desire to create a child. These texts deny the possibility of same sex parents, single parents, or adoptive parents. In essence, the sex act is a means to an end—procreation. Although each alludes to the pleasure of sex, the eroticism is the act is sublimated in the end result. Thus, even attempts

to create a radical sexual education book, such as *Show Me!*, do not stray far from the dominant ideology.

These texts also have much to say about the roles males and females ought to play within society. Such socialization has been a concern for those who study children's literature; Elizabeth Segel argues that "our most difficult but nonetheless essential task concerns those who call for a return to restrictive sex roles in books and in life. We need to reassure them that wider options for girls and boys are not incompatible with a stable and nurturing family life."[78] To that end, Segel suggests that "we need to let publishers know that the call for nonstereotyped material wasn't a passing fad, that we still seek books that depict varied sex roles and a balanced representation of female and male characters and experience; we still object to books that restrict children's options on the basis of gender."[79] In these books, we can see some hints concerning sex roles. For example, *Where Did I Come From?* subtly propagates the notion that the man is the desiring party in the sexual interaction and reinforces the ideal of the passive woman.

Still, there seems to be a general uneasiness with the mechanics of sexual behavior, and examining the differences between *Where Did I Come From?* and *Show Me!* illustrates how and, potentially, why children's books about reproduction often opt for cuteness over accuracy. In *Where Did I Come From?*, the sex act is depicted mostly beneath the covers. It seems that there should be some middle ground between this strategy and the centerfold with a close-up of penetration found in *Show Me!*. However, this is unlikely to happen so long as parents shy away from any discussion addressing sexuality. Although it may be uncomfortable to discuss sexuality with one's children, abdicating that responsibility will not make it any less likely that they will learn about sex—whether that information is correct or not.[80] Societal attitudes concerning the purity of children help to explain why parents sometimes fight to shield their children from any information concerning sexuality, regardless of its accuracy or sensitivity in conveying the information. For example, parents in Hammond, Indiana picketed a public library for carrying *A Kid's First Book About Sex* by Joani Blank in its collection.[81] Thus, children's literature carries with it particular constraints concerning what can be written, especially in the realm of sexual information. In some ways, adults seem to adopt what media effects scholars refer to as the "third-person effect," in which individuals perceive that others will be more affected by mediated messages than themselves. Richard Perloff writes, "The 'third person' term derives from the expectation that a message will not have its greatest influence on 'me' (the grammatical first person), or 'you' (the second person), but on 'them'—the third persons. Individuals may overestimate the impact that media messages exert on others, underestimate media effects on the self, or both."[82] In this case, third-person status is always bestowed upon children;



they are viewed as too suggestible and "not ready" for such prurient material as the mechanics of sexual reproduction.

Sexuality is an essential part of life and, in Western culture, it is surrounded by a considerable wall of taboos and imperatives. However, education concerning sexuality is one of the most important roles in parenting and the desire to outsource instruction concerning sexual matters reveals deeply held uneasiness with the subject. If one wishes to dodge the "sex talk," one can simply give the child a book and have him or her read it. However, this tactic may prove to be counterproductive. As Michael McGee notes, it is no longer the speaker who constructs the message, but rather the listener, who pieces together the message along with prior knowledge, experience, and other discourses.[83] The problem with such a state of affairs is that children can be woefully uninformed in matters of sexuality in ways that go far beyond belief in a stork.[84] Thus, one must guide the child in order to avoid the construction of a confusing pastiche of information and misinformation concerning sex.

Parke Burgess suggests that "the strategies and motives of any rhetoric . . . represent an invitation to a life-style, an invitation to adopt a pattern of strategies and motives, verbal and nonverbal, that determine how men and women will function together in culture."[85] The messages found in these children's books are not only descriptive, as in the explanations of genitals and their function, but also prescriptive, explaining the correct use of sexual expression. In these texts sexuality is generally performed discreetly in the bedroom, within the boundaries of marriage (although *Show Me!* is an exception in only this aspect) by committed partners that want to procreate. Sex feels good, the books observe, but it is there to generate life—presumably the life of the child that is reading the book. In a way, such a message promotes a kind of underlying narcissism; the sex act was done for the sole purpose of bringing into the world the very child reading the book. All of the pain, pleasure, and gestational time took place because the parents knew that they would welcome that child into the family. However, this is easy to do when the child is like the one in the book. One must examine not only what is found within the text, but also what is missing. Through omission the authors implicitly suggest that those babies that are desired are those that are desirable. These texts ignore the potential for children that are mentally disabled, born with birth defects, born to single or teenage parents, or simply unwanted. By ignoring those that are born into less than ideal circumstances, they likewise suggest that babies born into stable, loving, married relationships are those babies that are desired.

Kenneth Burke notes that "any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality."[86] These books are not merely neutral purveyors of information. Rather, they help shape our perceptions of the world in which we live. Walter Fisher suggests that "recounting and

accounting for are stories we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life world."[87] These texts help to shape perceptions not only of sexuality, procreation, parenthood, and the place of the child in the world, and these books share a remarkable range of similarities in ideology, if not in style. As such, these books have important implications for how these children will form and manage relationships and raise their own children. The children's books that children read help to shape the world in which they will eventually live.

## NOTES

1. Janice M. Irvine, "Doing It with Words: Discourse and the Sex Education Culture Wars," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2000): 58.

2. See Sally Lloyd Davies, Danya Glaser, and Ruth Kossoff, "Children's Sexual Play and Behavior in Pre-School Settings: Staff's Perceptions, Reports, and Responses." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24, no. 10 (2000): 1329–43; Gail Hornor, "Sexual Behavior in Children: Normal or Not?" *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 18, no. 2 (2004): 57–64; Sharon Lamb, *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do-Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Floyd Mansfield Martinson, *The Sexual Life of Children* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994); N. Kenneth Sandnabba, Pekka Santtila, Malin Wannäs, and Katja Krook, "Age and Gender Specific Sexual Behaviors in Children." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27, no. 6 (2003): 579–605.

3. Marsha L. Heiman, Sandra Leiblum, Susan Cohen Esquilin, and Laura Melendez Pallitto, "A Comparative Survey of Beliefs About 'Normal' Childhood Sexual Behaviors." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 22, no. 4 (1998): 290.

4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.

5. Peter Hunt, "Introduction: The Expanding World of Children's Literature Studies," in *Understanding Children's Literature: Key Essays from the Second Edition of the International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt, 2nd ed., 1–14 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

6. Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 113.

7. Ibid., 112.

8. William N. Friedrich and Sarah T. Trane, "Sexual Behavior in Children across Multiple Settings." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 26, no. 3 (2002): 245.

9. Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *Primate*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71, no. 2 (1985): 204.

10. Stephen E. Lucas, "The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 2 (1988): 249.

11. Peter Mayle and Arthur Robins, *Where Did I Come From? The Facts of Life without Any Nonsense and with Illustrations* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993). Subsequent references will come from this edition. This book is unpaginated.



12. Edwin McDowell, "Picture Book on Sex Is Withdrawn." *New York Times*, September 19, 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/19/books/picture-book-on-sex-is-withdrawn.html.

13. Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Tolon Brown, *What's the Big Secret? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997), 10–11, 22–23.

14. Mayle and Robins, *Where Did I Come From?*

15. Ibid.

16. Raymond Rosen, "Measurement of Male and Female Sexual Dysfunction." *Current Psychiatry Reports* 3, no. 3 (2001): 182.

17. Laura Carpenter, Constance Nathanson, and Young Kim, "Physical Women, Emotional Men: Gender and Sexual Satisfaction in Midlife." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2009): 90; Ridwan Shabsigh, "Prevalence of and Recent Developments in Female Sexual Dysfunction." *Current Psychiatry Reports* 3, no. 3 (2001): 190.

18. Tinashe Dune and Russell Shuttleworth, "'It's Just Supposed to Happen: The Myth of Sexual Spontaneity and the Sexually Marginalized." *Sexuality and Disability* 27, no. 2 (2009): 100–101.

19. Lennart Nilsson and Lena Katarina Swanberg, *How Was I Born?* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1994).

20. Ingbeth Larsson, Carl-Göran Svedin, and William Friedrich, "Differences and Similarities in Sexual Behaviour among Pre-Schoolers in Sweden and USA." *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 4 (2000): 255.

21. Kate Petty and Charlotte Middleton, *Made with Love: How Babies Are Made* (London: Macmillan Children's Books, 2003).

22. Brown and Brown, *What's the Big Secret?* 22. Also of interest here is the qualifier of "usually."

23. Mayle and Robins, *Where Did I Come From?*

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Petty and Middleton, *Made with Love*.

27. Emily Martin, "Body Narratives, Body Boundaries," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, 409–23 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 412.

28. Martin, "Body Narratives, Body Boundaries," 412. The scientific literature likewise suggests that the egg cell is an active participant in conception, sending out chemical signals to the sperm cells. See Michael Eisenbach and Ilan Tur-Kaspa, "Do Human Eggs Attract Spermatozoa?" *BioEssays* 21, no. 3 (1999): 203–210; Dina Ralt, Mordechai Goldenberg, Peter Fetterolf, Dana Thompson, Jehoshua Dor, Shlomo Mashiach, David L. Garbers, and Michael Eisenbach, "Sperm Attraction to a Follicular Factor(s) Correlates with Human Egg Fertilizability," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 88 (1991): 2840–44; Polina V. Lishko, Inna L. Botchkina, and Yuriy Kirichok, "Progesterone Activates the Principal $Ca^{2+}$ Channel of Human Sperm," *Nature* 471 (2011): 387–91.

29. Lissa Paul, "Sex and the Children's Book," *Lion & the Unicorn* 29, no. 2 (2005): 230.
30. Mayle and Robins, *Where Did I Come From?*
31. Ibid.
32. Petty and Middleton, *Made with Love*.
33. Ibid.
34. Matt Jacobson, Lisa Jacobson, Linda Weller, David Danz, and Lennart Nilsson, *How Did God Make Me?: The Miracle of Birth* (Sisters, OR: Gold'n'Honey Books, 1996), 8.
35. Of course, birth control has decoupled sex and reproduction, which has allowed women a greater degree of freedom concerning their sexuality. See Valerie V. Peterson, "Birth Control: An Extension of Man." *Explorations in Media Ecology* 9, no. 1 (2010): 1–20.
36. Paul R. Gross, "Bashful Eggs, Macho Sperm, and Tonypandy," in *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths About Science*, ed. Noretta Koertge, 59–70 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
37. For more on this idea, see Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991): 485–501. For a critique of this work, see Gross, "Bashful Eggs, Macho Sperm, and Tonypandy."
38. Sylvia Caveney and Simon Stern, *Inside Mom. An Illustrated Account of Conception, Pregnancy, and Childbirth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 11.
39. Alastair Smith and Maria Wheatley, *How Are Babies Made?* (New York: Usborne, 1997), 5.
40. Ibid., 12.
41. Jacobson, Jacobson, Weller, Danz, and Nilsson, *How Did God Make Me?*, 40.
42. Margaret R. Higonnet, "A Pride of Pleasures," *Children's Literature* 28 (2000): 33.
43. Mayle and Robins, *Where Did I Come From?*
44. Perry Nodelman, *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 195.
45. Petty and Middleton, *Made with Love*.
46. Mayle and Robins, *Where Did I Come From?*
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. V. Braun and S. Wilkinson, "Socio-Cultural Representations of the Vagina," *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2001): 19.
50. Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 64.
51. Laura Kipnis demonstrates that there is much more to *Hustler* than simply displaying nude women. She demonstrates that there is a host of attitudes and ideologies that are revealed and propagated. See Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), chap. 4.
52. McDowell, "Picture Book on Sex Is Withdrawn."



53. Gabrielle Banks, "Retiree Cleared of Pornography Charges for a 30-Year-Old Book," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 26, 2006, http://www.post-gazette.com/frontpage/2006/07/26/Retiree-cleared-of-pornography-charges-for-a-30-year-old-book/stories/200607260169.
54. Will McBride and Helga Fleischhauer-Hardt, *Show Me!: A Picture Book of Sex for Children and Parents*, trans. Hilary Davies (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 82–83. Throughout the text, I will leave the words capitalized as they exist in the text.
55. McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt, *Show Me!*, 92.
56. Ibid., 94.
57. Ibid., 97.
58. Ibid., 98–100.
59. Ibid., 118–19.
60. Ibid., 171.
61. Ibid., 143.
62. Ibid., 66–67, 156. Although the ages of the youth depicted in this text are not revealed, I make this judgment based on the fact that the girl has pubic hair and small, but developing breasts, while the boy has not developed secondary sex characteristics. In clinical terms, the girl seems to be at Tanner Stage III or possibly IV), while the boy is prepubescent.
63. Despite the uneasiness that both the author and the general public may experience with such images, this is a book that is available from the Library of Congress, which is hardly a repository of child pornography, as well as in many other libraries across the country. I acquired the copy of the text that I used for analysis through interlibrary loan. Moreover, this book was a bestseller when it came out, selling over 100,000 copies. See Paul Okami, "'Child Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse': The Emergence of a Problematic Deviant Category," *Journal of Sex Research* 29, no. 1 (1992): 117. Even so, David Sonenschein notes that "St. Martin's Press removed *Show Me!* from distribution in late 1982 because they and their booksellers became open to criminal charges in 20 states." David Sonenschein, "Breaking the Taboo of Sex and Adolescence: Children, Sex, and the Media," in *Forbidden Frujts: Taboos and Tabooism in Culture*, ed. Ray B. Browne, 111–32 (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1984), 126.
64. McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt, *Show Me!*, 63–64.
65. Ibid., 66–67.
66. Although not as problematic as childhood sexuality, there remains considerable cultural angst regarding adolescent sexuality as well. See Brett Lunceford, "Sex in the Digital Age: Media Ecology and Megan's Law," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 9, no. 4 (2010): 239–44; Brett Lunceford, "The New Pornographers: New Media, Sexual Expression, and the Law," in *The Ethics of Emerging Media: Information, Social Norms and New Media Technology*, ed. Kathleen German and Bruce Drushel, 99–118 (New York: Continuum, 2011).
67. McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt, *Show Me!*, 38–39.
68. Ibid., 46–47.
69. Ibid., 3.
70. Ibid., 154–55.

71. Ibid., 125–31.
72. Caveney and Stern, *Inside Mom*, 68.
73. McBride and Fleischhauer-Hardt, *Show Me!*, 134–37. In this case, the use of masculine pronouns to describe the baby is specific to the child depicted in the image.
74. Lutz D. H. Sauerteig, "Representations of Pregnancy and Childbirth in (West) German Sex Education Books, 1900s-1970s," in *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in 20th Century Europe*, ed. Lutz D. H. Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, 129–160 (New York: Routledge, 2009), 152.
75. Sauerteig, "Representations of Pregnancy and Childbirth," 153.
76. Amanda B. Diekman and Sarah K. Murnen, "Learning to Be Little Women and Little Men: The Inequitable Gender Equality of Nonsexist Children's Literature." *Sex Roles* 50, no. 5/6 (2004): 382.
77. Paul, "Sex and the Children's Book," 222. The idea of "instruct and delight" is prevalent in children's literature. It is not enough to simply give information; the author should do it in such a way that reading the text is also enjoyable.
78. Elizabeth Segel, "Picture-Book Sex Roles Revisited." *School Library Journal* 28, no. 9 (1982): 31.
79. Ibid.
80. See Mariamne H. Whatley and Elissa R. Henken, *Did You Hear About the Girl Who—? Contemporary Legends, Folklore, and Human Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
81. Bertha M. Cheatham and GraceAnne A. Decandido, "Hammond, Ind. Demonstrators Protest Sex Ed Book for Children," *School Library Journal* 33, no. 5 (1987): 10.
82. Richard M. Perloff, "The Third Person Effect in Media Effects," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 489–506 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 490.
83. Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 286–88. See also, Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48.
84. See Anne C. Bernstein, *Flight of the Stork: What Children Think (and When) About Sex and Family Building*, Rev. ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Perspectives Press, 1994). Indeed, even adolescents and young adults tend to believe in some pervasive urban legends concerning sexuality, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. See Whatley and Henken, *Did You Hear About the Girl Who—?*.
85. Parke G. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 120.
86. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), 59.
87. Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 6.

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