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Words that can change our world

MODERN MIND

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SEARCHING for 12 books that changed the world, Melvyn Bragg wanted texts that "changed, rootedly, the lives of people and the reach of (their) minds and ambitions".

They were mere ink on paper but each of the works Bragg chose for his Twelve Books That Changed the World set off a "conceptual chain reaction" that did indeed change the world, or the way we understand it: from electricity to evolution to equality.

More modestly, we all have a personal short list of books that have changed our worldview, books read to the noisy clatter of scales falling from the eyes. Certain books serve as binoculars. Suddenly we can see things - unquestioned assumptions, fault-line cracks in reasoning, hidden vices or virtues - that were previously invisible.

This transformative effect of books, writ small, begins early. The humble picture book can gently cast - but also loosen - the net that contains behaviour at a tender age. For example, preschoolers in Taiwan find calm activities and smiles more appealing than do their more rambunctious European and American counterparts. Best-selling picture books in Taiwan reflect (and probably promote) this propensity towards more peaceful forms of happiness.

In Taiwanese picture books, expressions are calmer, smiles less wide and activities less arousing, compared with American bestsellers, according to a report last month in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.

Yet the same researchers also found that when they read a story of excitedly frenetic adventures to Taiwanese and American children, both groups became more attuned to the pleasures of a quick-paced life. Called on to design an ideal playground soon after the reading, these children were more likely to incorporate exciting activities.

By contrast, a story showing the reward to be found in a gentle stroll and genteel turn on the swing left preschoolers from both countries hankering for quiet serenity in their perfect playground. These simple stories subtly altered perspective, highlighting the happiness to be had from different preschooler lifestyles.

Parents of small children may be disconcerted to learn just how malleable young minds are to colourful books on shelves. My children are well used to verbal annotations of stories, designed to counteract unspoken messages of which I disapprove. Even on the 20th reading I confidently assert that even though Mother Bunny is cooking the family breakfast today, it will be Father Bunny's turn tomorrow.

Sandra Bem, a psychologist at Cornell University, took the perils of picture book inequality more seriously still. For her, Father Bunny's persistent failure to help out in the kitchen would be an offence worthy of banishment from the bookshelf.

In her autobiography *An Unconventional Family*, she also describes adjusting the demographics of her children's picture books (overrun with boys, men and male animals) by using white-out and markers to change characters' names and appearances from male to female.

Creating an egalitarian picture-book world might seem like a pointlessly effortful task. Yet fictional characters that buck gender expectations can, at least temporarily, broaden the

horizons of the young people whom they entertain.

A recent study, published in the journal *Sex Roles*, scrutinised the play of eight preschoolers, who were specially selected because they reliably spurned toys traditionally played with by the opposite sex. These children were then entertained with carefully constructed tales - for example, the exuberant Sally Slapcabbage and her pilot mother - that exploded gender stereotypes at every turn.

Thanks to the stories, two of the four boys overcame a little of their reluctance to explore their "feminine" side on the playmat, venturing to play with the sorts of toys they would normally ignore. Yet most remarkable was the inspirational effect of Sally Slapcabbage and company on three of the four girls.

After one or two readings of the counter-stereotypic stories, these girls abandoned stroller, baby doll and ironing board in order to experiment with fire-trucks, blocks and helicopters. By the last days of the experiment these girls were spending most of the carefully observed playtime with the "boys' toys", objects they previously would have ignored.

Sally Slapcabbage arguably owes her fictional existence to one of Bragg's world-changing books, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Bragg chose Wollstonecraft's 18th-century feminist treatise because of its role in kick-starting the battle for equality for women. The story of MsSlapcabbage is just a momentary jostle in the centuries-long struggle that Wollstonecraft began.

And yet Sally Slapcabbage, humble though she is, also offers testimony to the power that even the simplest book can exert on the imagination. After all, for three small girls in a kindergarten, Sally changed the reach of minds and ambitions. On a miniature scale, for a moment, she achieved a little of what world-changing books are supposed to do.

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