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'Toys and Tools in Pink. Cultural Narratives of Gender, Science, and Technology'

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REVIEW

When girls and women make education and career choices, why do they shy away from STEM fields? For those women in STEM fields, why is the attrition rate so high? Surely much of the blame for the "leaky pipeline" problem, as it is known, are stereotypical cultural narratives—in films, books, and television shows—that portray women scientists and mathematicians as undesirable and that girls grow up with and women are reminded of these throughout adulthood. Even children's toys promote narratives that encourage girls to value physical appearance and social skills to the exclusion of investigation and invention. Colatrella brings her expertise in 19th- and 20th-century European and American literature and film to bear on this discussion. While a current conservative trend wants us to revert to the identification of the "female brain" as the problem, cultural critics continue to insist that "it's the culture, stupid." That's a reminder we can't get often enough.

With a focus on the genre of realism, Colatrella uses texts as diverse as Emile Zola's novel *Fécondité*, Katherine Hepburn films, and the animated television series *Dexter's Laboratory* as enactments of girls' and women's banishment to the sidelines of scientific endeavor.

While other scholars have done the same for different groups of texts, Colatrella's unique interventions are her comparative abilities and her up-to-the-minute analyses. She jumps easily from Balzac to *The Powerpuff Girls*, by way of the novel *Dracula*. Furthermore, she emphasizes research in the social sciences—especially communication and media studies—to comment on the real-world gender politics of STEM fields. If you were disgusted by Lawrence Summers 2005 talking points about why women are not in STEM fields, then this book will give you talking points of your own.

Colatrella highlights communication studies research on how children view television and other media and the effect of this viewing on their career choices. The combination of this research and humanities insights into narrative is the book's strongpoint. "'Toys and tools in pink' describes technoscience coded as feminine" (p8)—certain toys and certain tools are appropriate for girls and women and are marketed as such. Colatrella's comments about the gendered marketing strategies of LEGO toys are especially informative, if somewhat brief, in this respect. Toys, tools, and technology are on a continuum that girls only access if they are offered objects they can tinker with, not merely dress up in frilly clothes. The television series *Home Improvement*, for example, translates the identification of tools as masculine (although the show has its ambiguities) into an adult narrative of women's problems with the construction of things. Colatrella casts a wide net, pun intended, identifying the Internet as a "tool" (in the film *The Net*, for example) that women may appropriate, but always within strict limits.

One of the best chapters of *Toys and Tools in Pink* considers women, mothering, and the profession of medicine. How women negotiate the role of medical doctor is an eternally vexing problem since the doctor's primary responsibility is to care for others. Colatrella passes from the women doctors in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short stories, which work to naturalize women as doctors, to the mother figure in the 1992 film *Lorenzo's Oil*, who treats her child's illness with alternative medicine, thereby bucking the system. Colatrella shows that modern reproductive technologies, products of tinkering, owe their acceptance in large part to cultural narratives already established in romantic and realist texts of the 19th-century that merged positivism, medical education, progressive politics, and the maternal image as icon of the nation's future.

Colatrella is not overly-impressed with the apparent increase of women scientists in cultural narratives. One could well argue, in fact, that the film *Madame Curie* (1943) and the children's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) do a better job of encouraging girls to pursue scientific careers than do contemporary stories. The latter continually re-inscribe the "babe scientist" figure, although today's attractive women in the lab are at least, to some extent, intelligent. They may also have a "feeling for the organism," although Evelyn Fox Keller's term for biologist Barbara McClintock often merely reinforces the old slogan of female intuition. Colatrella is right that contemporary representations of women scientists "only slightly rais[e] the consciousness of film audiences about gender equality in STEM" (p132). I'm left with the feeling that we should all spend less time watching TV and going to the movies and more time tinkering with the marketing of toys and tools.