

Boston Globe

How to get to Stereotype Street

By Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown | August 10, 2006

AT LONG LAST there's a new girl moving to "Sesame Street." The hopes of mothers everywhere rest on her little shoulders. Will she be smart? Will she be computer savvy? Will she love sports or play an instrument? Will she explore like Dora or love books like Hermione? What will she teach our daughters about growing up girl in the new millennium? Bring her on, "Sesame Street." We've been waiting for decades.

Alas, all the creative minds at PBS, all those educators who supposedly care so much about kids, all the king's horses and all the king's men -- and all they can come up with after nine months of research is a pink-skinned fairy in a little petaled dress, with sparkly pompoms for hair? A fairy?

It's true. Abby Cadabby is being sold with gusto in the same way stereotypes are sold everywhere to girls -- as a choice. "If you think about 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show,' some girls relate to Rhoda, who's our Zoe, and some girls really relate to Mary, who's a girly girl," said Liz Nealon, executive vice president and creative director of Sesame Workshop. Just about as soon as the phrase "girl power" was invented, marketers and the media have been using those words to mean the power to choose while shopping or the power to choose between a few stereotypical girl "types." Help us, please, if the only types that still exist for girls are Rhoda and Mary!

Girly is more than a type these days, though -- it's a lifestyle. And PBS is banking on the fact that little girls will choose its version of a girly fairy over, say, Disney's or Mattel's version. Because if they do, what comes down the glittery pike are tons of toy sales, complete with all the pink and frilly things they can possibly attach to little Abby.

And what do the little girls watching get out of the deal, other than glitz? Abby's a "fairy in training" ready to make all those cute little mistakes girls will soon read about as preteens in the "Traumarama" section of Seventeen magazine. She's designed to appear "vulnerable looking," in case any girl might get the outlandish notion that being strong or sure of herself is a good thing. To top it off, she can hover only when she's happy, lest girls imagine a world in which they don't have to smile all the time to be successful.

Fairies are a bit like pretty-in-pink princesses but with the power to -- what? -- sprinkle fairy dust on someone? Look around children's media, the morning cartoon shows, the tween movies; look at all the gadgets, swords, cameras, and binoculars boys get to use in order to act in the world, while girls, with a few exceptions, are still mainly spectators. When girls are given power, it's typically magic power, not real power to act and change the world. And, incidentally, we all know what happens to girls with magic powers after a while -- either they morph into the characters from "I Dream of Genie" and "Bewitched," using their powers to keep their "masters" happy or they disappear without a trace.

Nealon told The New York Times that girls can be pink and powerful: "My daughter is comfortable with clothes and hair and makeup and totally embraces her femininity" while still remaining a

powerful girl. But why does femininity have to be framed so narrowly as pink and sparkly or as loving clothes, hair, and make-up? Why don't we ever see a tuba-playing, basketball-tossing, pink-loving, science nerd, who also likes to play around with her hair and loves to read sci-fi novels -- that is, a girl who's real, and complex, and interesting. Because in inventing *her*, and we're quoting Nealon on this one, the producers wouldn't be "as absolutely broad-based as [they] can be." That's a clever way of saying stereotypes sell.

Sharon Lamb, author of "The Secret Lives of Girls," is a professor of psychology at Saint Michael's College. Lyn Mikel Brown is a professor of education and human development at Colby College in Maine. ■

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