

Guns and Spinning Wheels: Gender in Walter D. Edmonds' *The Matchlock Gun*

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Contents

1. A Controversial Award Winner
2. An Oedipal and Female Boys' Book
3. Rereading *The Matchlock Gun*

1. A Controversial Award Winner

Walter D. Edmonds' short juvenile novel *The Matchlock Gun* (1941) recounts an Indian attack on the British colony of New York in the Hudson Valley during the French and Indian War (1754-63). At the beginning of the story Teunis Van Alstyne leaves his family for two nights to patrol with the local militia because French Indians are raiding the area. While he is gone, his wife Gertrude puts on a brave face for her children, ten-year-old Edward and his little sister Trudy, and conceives a plan by which Edward

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will shoot Indians with the matchlock gun when she calls his name. In the harrowing climax, five Indians attack and wound Gertrude as Edward fires the gun, killing three warriors, crippling a fourth, and scaring away the fifth. Designed (according to the back cover) for readers aged eight to twelve, *The Matchlock Gun* won the Newbery Medal, "the most coveted American award to children's books, given annually for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published during the previous calendar year" (Carpenter and Prichard 376), and has stayed in print ever since, a perennial strong seller read by many school children. The Newbery Medal is the seal of approval from the American mainstream arbiters of literary taste, entertainment, and education for children, the Association for Library Service to Children branch of the American Library Association.

Certainly *The Matchlock Gun* is well written, telling a compelling story in ten chapters, sixty-seven pages, and about 6,700 words (including the Foreword). Edmonds' writing is concise and evocative, using spare and vivid strokes to delineate character, establish historical authenticity, and build drama, as when Edward tries to go to sleep while hanging "hams, white in their flannel wrappings, [look] like French soldiers in white uniform coats, marching single file" (12). Edmonds also uses humor to relieve the suspense of the story, as when, during the build up to the climax Gertrude is practicing with Edward what he must do when she calls his name, and she believes he is really going to touch the candle flame to the priming of the gun, so she shouts, "No, NO! You must not touch anything," while Edward, who was of course not going to fire the gun then, reacts indignantly, causing Gertrude to ease his wounded pride by hugging and kissing him

(41). The moment is humorous, touching, and real, for children dislike being accused by their parents of doing foolish things they had no intention of doing.

Appearing on nearly every page, the black and white illustrations by Paul Lantz enhance Edmonds' text. Their convincingly realistic and appealingly idealized images evoke the time and place of the story and the personalities of the characters, with the Indians generic and demonic and the Van Alstynes expressive and fair. The drawings increase the suspense and excitement of the story, as when Gertrude reassures Edward that "There is nothing to be worried about" because there are no Indians nearby, but the illustration at the bottom of the page shows a tomahawk wielding Indian sneaking towards the house (22). At the end of the story, when Teunis and the militia arrive to find the house burnt to the ground and Edward and Trudy sitting with the wounded Gertrude, the picture at the bottom of the page shows a cozy house nestled by a fence and trees and flowers, alluding to the future health and happiness of the Van Alstynes (62).

In addition to being well-made, *The Matchlock Gun* is controversial. Many readers like its exciting teaching of American history and the importance of bravery, independence, obedience, and family ties. In 2002 on September 17, Constitution Day, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) inaugurated a "We the People" program "designed to enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history, culture, and democratic principles" ("About"), including a "Bookshelf" component by which the "NEH has delivered free sets of classic books, based on themes central to American history and culture, to more than 9,000 school and

public libraries nationwide" ("Bookshelf"). One of the texts for grades four to six in the "Courage" list of the Bookshelf is *The Matchlock Gun*. Of thirty-eight Amazon.com reader reviewers of the book, twenty-three rate it four or five stars (out of five) and praise it as a "timeless," "true," "wonderful, elegantly written, spare and gripping . . . story which should interest any young reader," as "a terrific way of teaching children about the history of the 1700s that reflects day to day life, yet with all the excitement a child needs to keep their attention," and as "a simple but suspenseful tale" that "touches on such themes as . . . the impact of war upon families," and "the inborn desire of people to be free to follow their own dreams and pursue happiness in their own way, reflect[ing] America's proud heritage of goal-setting and physical hardship in order to carve one's path out of the wilderness." (All reviewer quotations are from Amazon.com's website.) Regarding the depiction of Indians as "bad guys," the positive reviewers say things like, "We Americans must defend our homes and our way of life against those who would take it away from us," and "we get a view of exactly how it was in the 1700s," so the novel is "historically correct" and hence "immune to [the] political correctness" of readers who "wouldn't have lasted a day in the early West."

Since the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s and the subsequent increase of interest in ethnic cultures and minority perspectives, including the growth of Native American political power, on the other hand, many readers have condemned *The Matchlock Gun* for its stereotypical Indians. As Marilyn F. Apseoff says, "savage Indians on the warpath attacking innocent people may now seem one-sided from the perspective of the 1980s because social attitudes have changed a great deal" (341). Of the three main

stereotypes used to characterize Native Americans, "(1) savage, depraved, and cruel, (2) noble, proud, silent, and close to nature, or (3) inferior, childlike, and helpless" (Norton 583), Edmonds' Indians are appalling examples of the first: savages out to murder a mother and her children. Edmonds describes the Indians as bloodthirsty animals: "They hardly looked like men, the way they moved. They were trotting, stooped over, first one and then another coming up, like dogs sifting up to the sent of food" (48). Because the "food" is Edward, his mother, and his sister, the Indians would be cannibals if they were not canines. Edmonds never narrates his story from the perspective of Indian characters and never individualizes them, leaving them nameless and tribeless. Nor does he explain that in the eighteenth-century both the French and British had Native American allies attack each other's colonies. According to Doris Seale, "This may very well be one of the worst descriptions of Native people in children's literature, certainly in the 20th Century," because "it eulogizes an American past in which the indigenous populations were regarded as sub-human, and every effort made to exterminate them" ("Avoid").

The fifteen negative one to three star Amazon reviews of *The Matchlock Gun* criticize its depiction of Native Americans: "the European invaders . . . killed the natives who wanted to keep the land they'd lived on for centuries," so that if Indians attack white settlers they are defending their own homes, and "who is the terrorist in this case?" A teacher writes, "we were uncomfortable about having our students identify only with the so-innocent mother and children as she was so brutally pursued by savage Indians illustrated in the most stereotypical manner complete with darkness, fire, and the white woman victim." Interestingly, whereas the

majority of the adult Amazon reviews of *The Matchlock Gun* are favorable, the majority of the "Kids' reviews" are critical, saying things like, "Indians shouldn't be called savages because the Indians are just like us—flesh and blood." Perhaps American children are being taught today to see more than the white point of view of American history.

While two-thirds of the thirty-eight Amazon reviewers like *The Matchlock Gun* for being well-written, exciting, and historically accurate, and one-third dislike it for being negative and one-sided regarding Indians, only one review mentions its depiction of gender: "Edward, the little boy who fires the ancient matchlock gun, performs his duties with courage, but it is his mother, Gertrude, who is the real hero." In this paper I would like to explore the treatment of gender in Edmonds' novel. I believe that if *The Matchlock Gun* were only a well-written depiction of savage Indians attacking noble settlers, it might have suffered the fate of its contemporary, James Daugherty's *Daniel Boone* (1939), which is also a well-written account of "red varmints" aggressively attacking heroic settlers and being righteously killed for their villainy, but which has been out of print for about thirty years. I hope to demonstrate that although gender issues may avoid the radar of many readers, one reason for the continued popularity and classic status of Edmonds' novel is its complex depiction of gender, which complicates the apparent heroism of its manly violent conflict.

2. An Oedipal and Female Boys' Book

One of the most fascinating aspects of gender in *The Matchlock Gun* is that its packaging places it squarely in the boys' historical adventure fiction sub-genre (with a young male protagonist who matures through

adventures in an exotic setting), while its contents tell a more complicated story. The title refers to an unusual firearm, focusing the aim of the book on a male artifact that makes a loud noise and often causes exciting and righteous destruction when fired, the dream of many an American boy. In Lantz' cover illustration a wide-eyed boy experiencing an adrenalin rush sits at a table holding a long, bell-mouthed gun, obviously the gun of the title. The cover implies that the boy is the hero of a book whose climax involves his firing the gun at something or somebody. Reading the text on the back cover confirms that impression:

Even Father had never used the matchlock gun.

In 1756, New York State was still a British colony, and the French and the Indians were constant threats to Edward and his family. When his father was called away to watch for a raid from the north, only Edward was left to protect Mama and little Trudy. His father had shown him how to use the huge matchlock gun, an old Spanish gun that was twice as long as he was, but would Edward be able to handle it if trouble actually came?

The survival of Edward and his mother and sister will hinge on whether or not he can effectively use the gun, something that even his father has never done. The back-cover text emphasizes the gun through repetition, while the back-cover illustration places it protectively among some bean vines before a little house.

Confirming the impression given by the front and back cover that Edward is the protagonist and the gun his vital tool, the first chapter of *The Matchlock Gun* is narrated in the third person limited mostly to his point of view, as on a rainy night he observes his parents discussing rumors

of Indian raids before his father Teunis goes on patrol. At this point it seems as if the main conflict of the novel will be between Edward and the Indians, who must inevitably attack while Teunis is away. The story, however, also plays out an Oedipal triangle between Edward, his mother Gertrude, and Teunis. Rey Chow summarizes Freudian thought regarding human development, sexuality, and gender:

In the case of the male, the key is the Oedipal stage, during which the little boy, still bound to his autoeroticism, sexually desires his mother and, out of jealousy, wishes to kill his father. The intensity of this Oedipus complex is eventually dampened by another emotion, the fear of castration. As he is threatened with the possibility of losing his own penis, the little boy learns to identify with the authority of the father and gives up his autoeroticism, including his desire for his mother, which is gradually transferred to other women. (95-96)

If we do not insist that Edward consciously wishes to kill his father and sleep with his mother or literally matures by coming to dread castration, the above summary of Freudian thought describes much of *The Matchlock Gun*.

From the opening pages of the novel, Edward "intently" watches his father and mother interacting with each other, especially their bodies (1). He is proud that Teunis is Captain of the Guilderland militia, but disappointed that he always takes his musket on patrol rather than the impressive Spanish Gun (1). A description of the antique gun follows, focusing on its extreme size, being "longer than a grown man . . . and more than twice the length of Edward, who was ten years old, with long legs,

dark hair, like his mother's, and serious eyes" (2). Edward measures himself against the gun and his father, admiring it for what he lacks in size, and identifying with his mother. The gun, which belongs to Gertrude's family, is a target of mild scorn for Teunis, who teases his wife "about it, asking whether she had brought the gun with her to kill Indians" (2), implying that both she and her gun are unfit to do so. As Teunis reaches for his musket, Edward asks, "Aren't you ever going to take the big gun, Father?" (4) Teunis explains why he prefers the musket, lifting the Spanish Gun down from its pegs over the door, "so heavy that a man could hardly hold it" and Edward "could not keep both ends off the floor together" (4), reasoning that because, unlike the self-firing flint weapon, the old gun requires a flame to be touched to the priming in order to fire, it is "a nonsensical, old-fashioned kind of a gun" (5). Edward is still disappointed because he believes the matchlock gun is "magnificent" due to its size and decorated brass bindings (5). "Never mind," Gertrude encourages Edward, "your Great-Grandfather Dygert brought it all the way over from Holland with him" (5). Because Indians may be near, Teunis says good-bye to Gertrude with unusual passion, putting his arm around her and kissing her on the mouth, while she puts both her arms around his neck and the children watch them "with interest" (8). Uncomfortable, Edward watches "the wind [sweep Gertrude's] skirt back from her legs" (10), hears Teunis "roar like a bull" as he shouts to his militia friend, and sees his father's "stout legs" as he leaves the house (8). As the children are about to go to bed, rather than worrying about his father, Edward wants to protect his mother, but the obvious demonstration of his parents' intimacy has intimidated him. "He kept watching his mother. He wanted to say he would

look after her; but he felt shy of saying anything to her after the way she had kissed his father" (10-11).

As he says his bedtime prayers in the second chapter, Edward continues to be shy with and attracted to his mother, and puts a line in his prayer for his father, "hoping his mother would take notice of it" (13). Edward wants to make Gertrude praise him and to relieve her anxiety for Teunis. As Gertrude pulls the blankets over her children, Edward smells on her "the clean buttery smell from the churning she had done that afternoon," and "She kisse[s] him swiftly and hard" (14). When Gertrude sings a lullaby, Edmonds writes a sensual description: "Her voice under the low roof was soft and sweet. Her dark hair took inky shadows from the candle flame, and the long fingers, hardened by her work, shaped themselves to his cheek" (14). Edward, no longer shy (for his mother has kissed him as well), says, "If the Indians come, call me, Mama. I'll come down and help" (16), and observes his mother sensually descend the stairs:

Gertrude went down the steps one at a time, softly. A moment arrived when just her head and shoulders showed, the smooth line of her throat disappearing into the wide neck of her home-spun dress. The light of the candle shone upward against her face. She stopped for an instant to look back towards the bed, brown-eyed and tender. Then the light grew dim, picking out faintly a square of the roof boards. It went out with a soft sound of her breath. Her feet passed over the floor below. (16)

Edward continues monitoring Gertrude, aware that were his father home the scene would end in the usual private intimacy of his parents: "Edward listened intently. Tonight her clear voice was not answering his father;

there was no reassuring laughter from his deep voice to be shut off by the closing of the bedroom door" (16).

From the third chapter on, the standard boy's historical adventure story with Oedipal overtones is complicated when the narrative point of view shifts to that of Gertrude. Indeed, Edmonds develops another important dramatic conflict, one between Gertrude and her mother-in-law, the Widow Van Alstyne, that actually drives the surface conflict between Edward and the Indians. The conflict has been initiated in the first chapter when Teunis reassures Gertrude that "There's no real chance the Indians will carry so far as this" (7), but that if she becomes "lonely" (i.e., "afraid"), she can "go over to the brick house. It's like a fort and Mother has guns for the negroes" (7). Gertrude is unenthusiastic: "I won't go over there. . . . Unless there are Indians" (7). The narrator explains the bad feeling between Gertrude and her mother-in-law: "He [Teunis] knew how she felt about the Widow Van Alstyne. The older woman made no bones about telling him what she thought of Gertrude, either — 'a black-haired Palatine wench with no Van to her name'" (7-8). Caught in the middle and appealed to by both women, Teunis understands their mutual enmity and appreciates why Gertrude would dislike his mother for being scorned as a Palatine German "wench" (rather than loved as a Dutch lady), for he has obviously learned not to expect his wife to become too beholden to the older woman, so that he does not urge Gertrude to take the children to the stronger and safer house after her initial refusal. Being denigrated by the Widow Van Alstyne for her heritage partly explains why Gertrude wants to maintain Edward's admiration for the matchlock gun, for it is a symbol of her family and its history. Gertrude's pride makes her reluctant to go as a supplicant for

shelter to the older woman's house.

From the third chapter on, then, Edmonds shifts almost completely to Gertrude's point of view as he advances the conflict between the two women and at the same time develops the Oedipal triangle and the looming conflict between Edward and the Indians. The next morning finds Gertrude trying to come to terms with her husband's absence.

Gertrude looked northward as she came in with the milking pail, and the house seemed solitary in an abandoned world. She had had a restless night; it was seldom that her husband had been away overnight — three times since they had been married, she could name each one — but . . . He had never stayed out before on militia duty. (19)

Then Gertrude notices that Edward has risen early to freshen the fire. "She thought quickly that with a son it was not as if she were alone. There was Trudy also, of course; but Trudy was too young to notice things" (19). This image of Trudy as being too young to be helpful will be undercut by future developments, but for now it seems as if Edward is getting his wish to fill his absent father's role. Breakfast is cheerful, with the children laughing about the foolish cows outside, until Edward asks Gertrude whether he should take the butter she has churned to the Widow Van Alstyne, because "Grandmother will be angry if she doesn't get her butter" (21), and his mother's reaction surprises him. "Gertrude said, 'No,' suddenly and firmly, so that he stared at her for a long time, and she made a lame explanation of wanting him around the farm to help her with the wood, since Teunis was away" (21). When Trudy wishes that they could live in Grandma's big house, Gertrude remains silent, implying that the idea has been rejected in

the past, so then Trudy asks, "Why don't you make Grandma live here, then?" to which Gertrude disingenuously replies, "One has to be nice to old people" (22). Persistent, Edward asks, "Why don't we all take the butter over together, Mama?" Gertrude again refuses: "I am going to stay here, and so are you, Edward" (22). When she rejects Edward's suggestions, Gertrude is "flustered" because she is beginning to fear that Indians will raid their community, but she does not want to seek succor in the Widow Van Alstyne's house (22).

In the fourth chapter, a man named John Mynderse sent by Teunis to check on the family tells Gertrude that Indians are burning settlements and killing people and that although the militia will surely stop them from advancing further south, "Teunis thinks maybe you had better go over to the big house" (24). But Gertrude says, "Tell him not to worry about us. We are fine," and when Mynderse looks away from her (uncomfortable, perhaps, to witness Gertrude's rejection of Teunis' advice), she "square[s] her shoulders," setting her mind to stay with her children where they are (25-26). No sooner does Mynderse leave than Gertrude and her children see smoke in the distance, signifying Indian attacks on settlers in the area, so she finally tells Edward that she thinks the Indians are near (the condition under which she has told Teunis that she would go to his mother's house), but when Edward says, "Why don't we go over to Grandmother's?" Gertrude rejects the idea for the fifth time, saying, "It is better here," and, thinking of an "excuse," explains, "If Papa comes back, he would want to find us at home, Edward" (31). In this time of danger and tension, she surprises and confuses Edward with the vehemence of her rejection of his suggestions to go to Grandmother's house. Although Edward cannot

understand the enmity between his grandmother and mother, he may feel that Gertrude is using him as an excuse to avoid her mother-in-law rather than as a replacement for Teunis.

In the fifth chapter Gertrude rationalizes to herself that staying where they are is better than going to her mother-in-law's, because their own house, being smaller and set away from the main road, will be more likely to escape Indian attention than the big brick house. "She knew that she could not help the grandmother, who would not want her help in any case, and she thought only of the best way to keep the children safe" (32-33). Inspired by Trudy, who has been shouting, "Bergom op Zoom," the name of the place in Holland where Great-Grandfather Dygert bought the Spanish Gun, Gertrude conceives the trap by which she justifies staying with the children in their unprotected home. She recruits Edward, saying, "I want you to be a brave boy and do everything I tell you" (33), for she will need him to fire the matchlock gun. She then inserts gunpowder and wadding and bullets, nails, pebbles, and brass buttons into the weapon, stabilizes it on the kitchen table with her flatirons, chops out a corner of the window blinds to make a shooting hole, primes the weapon and places the candle next to it, and puts Trudy and a doll in another room.

In the sixth chapter Gertrude explains to Edward that he must fire the gun only when she calls his name, not any others she may shout, and praises him ("Good, brave boy") and rewards and encourages him in a way reminiscent of her good-bye to Teunis: "She leaned down from behind and put her arms around him and kissed him" (41). After he repeats her instructions, Gertrude again compliments Edward ("smart boy") and fires his imagination: "Do you know, even Papa has never fired that Spanish

Gun?" (42) When Edward asks his mother if the gun will "make an awful noise," she answers, "Yes, it will scare the Indians, and Papa will be so proud" (42). Gertrude tactfully focuses Edward on making his father proud by surpassing his achievements while hiding the fact that firing the gun should injure the Indians. In doing all of the above, contrary to the back cover text, Gertrude, not Teunis, shows Edward how to use the gun.

Gertrude leaves the house in the seventh chapter to watch for Indians and lure to the house any that might appear so Edward can fire the gun at them. While she is outside, Gertrude worries about the strain under which she has put her ten-year-old son, but is "still persuad[ing] herself that she had been right in considering her own house the safer place" (44). When she looks in the direction of her mother-in-law's house, Gertrude sees flames, thinking, without concern for the older woman's welfare, "She had been right, then. Van Alstyne's was afire" (47). But she then realizes that the Indians must have made it past the militia into the community and that Teunis cannot help her. And then she sees a band of five Indians.

In the chapter eight climax of the book, Gertrude courageously forces herself to count to five to ensure the Indians will follow her closely enough to fall into her trap and then starts running towards the house and the waiting Edward. Calling out the names of her husband, her father, and two militiamen, presumably to make the pursuing Indians think there are men around, thereby putting great faith in Edward not to shoot too soon, Gertrude reaches the stoop, shouts the name of her son (placing him in that group of men), and is struck from behind in the shoulder by a thrown tomahawk. Just before losing consciousness, she observes that Edward has fired the gun: "A tremendous flash, a roar that shook the stoop under her,

and a choking cloud of smoke removed them [the Indians]. She saw the leader cave in over his own knees and the next two flung back on their shoulders. She saw nothing else at all, but she knew that Edward had touched off the Spanish Gun" (53).

Now that Gertrude is unconscious, Edmonds returns to Edward's perspective to narrate the ninth chapter, but, interestingly, he begins at the point where Gertrude is running towards the house shouting out names, until the boy hears his own and fires the gun, whose recoil knocks him out. Trudy's screams wake him up to a nightmarish scene: the front stoop is burning while Trudy is tugging at the tomahawk lodged in the shoulder of their corpse-like mother. Edward is not now watching his mother as a sensual object of love, but instead is thinking of how to save her life. At this point, for the first time, he does more than obey his mother and assumes command: he orders Trudy to let go of the tomahawk and to help him drag their mother's body away from the flames, pulls the tomahawk out of her body, stuffs Trudy's shirt into the wound, tells Trudy that their mother is still alive, and sends Trudy inside to get blankets. He sits on watch all night over his sleeping sister and unconscious mother, three dead Indians in plain sight, the matchlock gun lying across his knees. Edward thinks, "Such a wonderful gun to show *his* grand-children, maybe" (60).

The tenth and final chapter continues the male perspective, Edmonds narrating it from the point of view of Teunis and the militia as the next morning they kill the Indian crippled by the matchlock gun and ride past the Widow Van Alstyne's house, which turns out not to have burnt down (only its barns having been set afire). Teunis picks up Gertrude, while the other men admire Edward for his Indian killing. When Mynderse asks,

"Who shot them, Edward?" Edward replies, "I did. With the Spanish Gun," and the man says, "You've killed more than all the rest of us put together!" (62) It is an interesting resolution to the story, because Edmonds keeps not only Gertrude silent (presumably still in shock) but also Teunis, whom we might expect to praise Edward. By having his father's friend laud Edward and by leaving Teunis silently caring for Gertrude, Edmonds, perhaps, is resolving the Oedipal conflict. Edward has been attracted to his mother's body and has wanted to help and protect her, while part of the resolution of the novel involves his beginning to mature and to feel his own worth as a young man. By firing the gun Edward has saved the day, surpassed the achievement of his father, been accepted by the fraternity of militiamen, and imagined his grandchildren.

Setting aside its Oedipal triangle, the plot of *The Matchlock Gun* possesses many of what Donna E. Norton describes as "the ingredients of outstanding adventure literature" typically associated with boys, like *Treasure Island* (1883) by Robert Louis Stevenson: "action, mystery, and pursuit and evasion in authentic historical settings" (80). When Edward develops beyond simple (though brave) obedience to take charge of Trudy and Gertrude in the aftermath of the climax, he is growing into an expectable hero for a boys' book. Although *The Matchlock Gun* appears to be a standard boys' historical action novel, however, as we have seen the case could be made for Gertrude being its primary protagonist. According to X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, the protagonist of a story is "The central character. . . . [who] usually initiates the main action of the story, often in conflict with the antagonist" (830). It is Gertrude's conflict with the Widow Van Alstyne that leads to the crisis (turning point) in the plot, at which

Gertrude decides to stay at her own house rather than to seek refuge in the fortified house of Teunis' mother, which in turn leads to the climax, the triggering of her trap. By "winning" her conflict with her mother-in-law by remaining in her own home with her young children, Gertrude puts Edward in the position to "win" his conflict with the Indians by firing the Spanish Gun. In addition to its Oedipal triangle, then, *The Matchlock Gun* has a triangle in which Gertrude competes with the Widow Van Alstyne for Teunis, but whereas Edward begins to mature and to become easy with himself and his parents, there is no sign that Gertrude will be on better terms with her mother-in-law, whom we may imagine saying, "Why didn't you bring my grandchildren to my house?" And although Gertrude may have won her conflict by staying in her house and saving her children, she has lost something as well, for she is terribly injured, and Edmonds reveals that the Widow Van Alstyne's house is untouched by the Indians, leading us to imagine that had Gertrude swallowed her pride and gone with her children to her mother-in-law's house, she would have spared Edward the "strain" she worries about putting him under and not risked the lives of the three of them on an antique gun, a ten-year-old boy, and luck. The novel applauds and punishes her for her independence, leaving her pride intact, but damaging her body.

What Marilyn F. Apseloff says about Edmonds' work applies to *The Matchlock Gun*:

All of Edmonds's books contain strong characterizations that have much in common: many of the protagonists have an indomitable, unquenchable spirit that keeps them going even in the face of adversity, and that determination, combined with a strong moral

fiber, creates a sure knowledge in the reader that the character will succeed. (341)

However, Apseloff proceeds to oversimplify *The Matchlock Gun*: "Edward . . . kills the Indians and saves his mother and sister" (341). As I hope to have demonstrated, Edward is not the only hero of the novel, and the case may be made that Gertrude is the primary protagonist, for she, at least as much as Edward evinces "an indomitable, unquenchable spirit" and "determination, combined with a strong moral fiber," and although he may be said to save his mother and sister, it is just as true that his mother has saved him, his sister, and herself. By ending the novel from the point of view of Teunis and Mynderse as the former picks up his presumably unconscious wife and the latter applauds Edward's big achievement, Edmonds may seem to be erasing Gertrude in favor of Edward, but she is such a dominant and compelling character for the six middle chapters of the novel that we do not forget her. Even as the novel presents two protagonists, Edward and Gertrude, so it unites male and female perspectives, conflicts, and roles. The climax of the novel fuses both views, for Edmonds twice narrates the moment when Gertrude is running to the house until Edward fires the gun, once from Gertrude's point of view and once from Edward's, the only time in the novel that he narrates the same scene more than once.

In addition to male and female protagonists and triangular relationships, Edmonds interweaves male and female artifacts into his novel's complex vision of gender. Although the title of *The Matchlock Gun* foregrounds the central male item, female things play important roles in the novel. Gertrude, for example, stabilizes the gun on her kitchen table

with her flatirons. After Teunis has left the house and Gertrude is putting her children to sleep, she sings a traditional Dutch lullaby: "Trip a trop a troenje;/ De varken en de boenjen," translated by Edmonds as, "Up and down on a little throne;/ The pigs are in the beans" (14). Although she sings it "mechanically" and does not bounce Trudy up and down on her knee ("throne") as she sings, presumably because she is anxious about Teunis and raiding Indians, to Edward "Her voice under the low roof [is] soft and sweet" (14). Later, while she is outside watching for Indians, she again sings the lullaby, this time so that Edward (waiting inside the house for her to shout his name to fire the gun) "might not feel too deserted" (46). Furthermore, Edmonds begins the Foreword to his novel by saying, "Perhaps you would like to know the rest of the lullaby that Gertrude Van Alstyne sings in this story" (vii). He then quotes the complete lyrics in Dutch with English translation and uses the lullaby as an entry point into the historical background of his story, including the real people it features. He uses the lullaby, then, to increase the historical authenticity of his novel and to highlight Gertrude's role as a caring mother.

The lullaby immediately puts Trudy to sleep "like a yellowhaired woodchuck, round and fat, burrowing down in the feather tick" (15), demonstrating her charming childish femininity. Fittingly, Trudy's character and vital role in the novel are developed through female things. While the increasingly dire Indian threat makes Gertrude worried and defiant and Edward excited and frightened, Trudy remains playful, as when she wants to go see the fire whose ominous smoke the family has seen from a distance (29). Through much of the novel Trudy is a figure of cute comedy relief, as when Gertrude puts an old shawl on her "so that she

look[s] like a comical dwarf woman with fat legs" (28). Just before the climax, to keep her daughter safely out of the way, Gertrude puts her in the bedroom, tells her to be quiet, and makes "a doll out of a handkerchief and [gets] a large lump of maple sugar and some of the silver spoons and put[s] them and Trudy together on the bed" (38). The domestic items help Trudy curb her obstreperous nature, and soon she is holding her doll up and softly whispering to it the funny and dynamic sounding name, "Bergom op Zoom" (38), which has earlier inspired Gertrude to set the trap with the huge gun. By the resolution Trudy actually gains a child-like gravitas. She wakes up the stunned Edward by screaming and trying to remove the "axe fast in their mother's shoulder" (56) and competently follows Edward's orders to remove her shirt so he can stuff it in their mother's wound and to go into the burning house to get blankets with which to keep their mother warm, and then sits down with Edward between their mother and the dead Indians to wait for dawn. Despite the nightmarish scene, Trudy retains her childish imagination and empathy, rescuing her doll when she brings the blankets because, she says, "I didn't want it to get burned to death" (59). Whereas at the end of the first chapter Edward "scornfully" tells Trudy, "You talk too much" (10), a typical male criticism of female behavior, by the end of the novel he has come to accept her girliness and is delegating important jobs to her and being influenced by her: when she explains why she has rescued her doll, he agrees with her, thinks "Trudy had done well," and is inspired by her to enter the burning house to rescue the matchlock gun (59). And whereas earlier Edward has hushed her when she has shouted "Bergom op Zoom," at the end he agrees with her, "Yes . . . Great-Grandfather Dygert brought it from Bergom op Zoom to the wild America" (60).

Although Trudy is not one of the protagonists of the novel, she is a vital character, providing cute humor and fresh vision to the otherwise severe situation and serving as a mini-catalyst for the solutions to Gertrude and Edward's conflicts and adding another female strand to the boys' book. Edmonds' Foreword further enhances Trudy's significance to the story, which has

been preserved down to the present day because of plump Trudy, and not through anything that Edward ever did. Trudy became known as the greatest and best spinner in the Helderbergs. Even after she married and became Trudy Hogle she was still known as the best spinster. A spinster is someone who spins. Because her mother's shoulder was crippled by the Indian's tomahawk, Trudy was taught to spin at the age of six, and was soon good enough to do all the spinning for her family. She became so unusually good, and her spinning was so unusually fine, that her descendants told their children about Trudy Hogle from generation to generation, and that was how her great-great-great-grandson . . . came to know about Trudy and Edward and the Indians and the Spanish Gun. (ix-x)

As the attack on the family causes Edward to begin maturing at ten years of age (and to begin to step into a role equivalent to his father's), it causes Trudy to begin maturing even earlier at six as she assumes her mother's role as family spinster. Tellingly, Trudy is a short form of Gertrude, an Old German name meaning "strength of a spear" (Wallace 89), another fusion of male and female and valuation of female power in the book. More surprisingly, Edmonds undercuts Edward's "achievement" in killing the

Indians and saving his mother and sister by revealing that it is through Trudy's spinning, not Edward's shooting, that the story is being told at all. This casting of the female role in big achievements as being at least as important as the male one reminds us that Trudy inspires the trap, Gertrude conceives it, and Gertrude and Edward spring it. Devoted to the lullaby and the spinning, not to the gun (which Edmonds only mentions once), the Foreword establishes a context in which traditional female roles are more valuable than male ones. Lantz' drawings for the Foreword reflect that emphasis, the first one being of Gertrude singing a lullaby to a baby in a cradle, the last one being of Trudy's spinning wheel, and no illustration depicting the gun. Without female spinning and storytelling, then, "heroic" violent male adventures would be forgotten and meaningless.

As Edmonds' Foreword provocatively modifies our reading of gender in his novel by focusing on the lullaby and the spinning wheel, it subtly does so by its closing patriotic paean:

the Dutch are never good at staying beaten. . . . As a matter of fact, the Palatine Germans [like Gertrude] had a bit of the same peculiarity, and so did the Pilgrims, and the Scotch-Irish, and the English, whether they caught it from the Dutch, who have always suffered from the complaint, or whether it is born in every man and woman who wants to be free, to think as he chooses, and to live as he likes, and who means to do so, too. (xi)

The virtue of fighting for freedom is an unsurprising sentiment for an American book published during World War II, although because the Van Alstynes and their neighbors are fighting for their own community and homes rather than for their British colony (let alone the USA, which did

not exist yet), the story itself avoids such overt patriotism. Clearly, Gertrude has risked herself and her children to "be free, to think as he chooses, and to live as he likes." Although Edmonds uses the male pronoun, he uses it in its universal sense, introducing it with "born in every man *and* woman who wants to be free" (italics added).

3. Rereading *The Matchlock Gun*

Needless to say, Edmonds denies his exclusively male Indians anything remotely resembling the triangular gendered relationships and fusion of male and female elements of his white family. It is not as if only men are violent and only women tender. Gertrude hates it when Teunis goes on militia duty (2), but ruthlessly packs the matchlock gun full of deadly projectiles and has Edward fire it to devastating effect. And Teunis, although shouting "like a bull" and being "lustful and thick-set" (2), is tender and understanding, as is shown by his care for Gertrude and Edward in the beginning of the novel and by his solicitude for his wounded wife in its resolution. By denying Indians any female elements, Edmonds dehumanizes them just as effectively as by denying them any thoughts, feelings, or names, and by describing them as "dogs" (48). Trudy's comical chant, "The Indians don't wear breeches. Oh, the Indians don't wear breeches" (27) further distances Indian men from white men. Moreover, the Indians are unaffected by Gertrude's feminine beauty or role, seeing her only as a tomahawk target. By casting the Indians as all-male savages, Edmonds is increasing reader excitement and identification with his two protagonists more than commenting on male aggression. But does the fact that the Indians are sub-humans who do not wear pants and exist to murder white

women and children bar them from a discussion of gender? Despite their status as savage animal others, Edmonds' male Indians are also foils with which to contrast sensitive and brave Edward, motherly and steely Gertrude, and tender and manly Teunis. By virtue of casting Indians as bestial males while mixing female and male protagonists and qualities and valuing female and male roles, Edmonds encourages his ideal reader to embrace role models that unite and respect male and female roles.

Rey Chow asserts that "Whereas, for Freud, the social is the horizon to which human beings must learn to submit despite the demands of their own sexuality, for feminist theory the social, including its capacity to reproduce itself through practices and institutions, is something to be seized, so that its (potential) oppressiveness may be subverted" (105). In that sense Gertrude subverts the oppressiveness of her patriarchal society by refusing to submit to Teunis' authority. In Gertrude's rejection of the advice of her husband (who in the eighteenth century and into the twentieth would traditionally be the head of the house) and the suggestions of her son (who is trying to fill his father's role), as well as in her refusal to be beholden to her mother-in-law, Edmonds has created an independent, resourceful, and strong female protagonist unusual in American children's literature until the feminist era of the 1960s and 70s. To take one example from a novel roughly contemporary with *The Matchlock Gun* (and a girls' book written by a woman to boot), in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) by Laura Ingalls Wilder, without argument Ma lets Pa move their family west to Kansas Indian Territory even though she would rather stay in Wisconsin near her relatives and civilization, and after trying hard for one year to make a viable home and farm in Kansas, again without argument she lets Pa

uproot the family against her desires. At various points in Wilder's novel Ma follows Pa's lead even when she disagrees with him: "Whatever you say, Charles" (19).

In its fusion of male and female protagonists, conflicts, roles, and artifacts, *The Matchlock Gun* is a highly unusual Newbery Medal winner. Of the Medal-winning historical adventure books written by men and targeted at boys, most, like Charles Hawes' *The Dark Frigate* (1923), Eric P. Kelly's *The Trumpeter of Krakow* (1928), James Daugherty's *Daniel Boone* (1939), Armstrong Sperry's *Call It Courage* (1940), Harold Keith's *Rifles for Watie* (1957), Sid Fleischman's *The Whipping Boy* (1986), and Avi's *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* (2002), feature no central, developed, and compelling female characters like Gertrude. The same is true of most non-historical Newbery Medal boys' adventure books written by men, like Will James' *Smoky the Cowhorse* (1926), Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* (1990), and Louis Sachar's *Holes* (1998). And the same is true of most Medal-winning books written by women and targeted at boys, like Elizabeth Janet Gray's *Adam of the Road* (1942), Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremain* (1943), Marguerite De Angeli's *The Door in the Wall* (1949), Elizabeth George Speare's *The Bronze Bow* (1961), Emily Neville's *It's Like this, Cat* (1963), and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993).

One reason why *The Matchlock Gun* feels anomalous concerning gender for a Newbery Medal book is that it blurs the boundaries between children's and adult literature. Despite the book being marketed for boys, Edmonds did not write it for children. According to Kathleen Long Bostrom, Edmonds "wrote all of his books for adults," and in the case of his Medal winner, he received a "transcript of a true family story sent to him

by a man named Thomas Shepherd," got his permission to adapt the transcript into a short story, published it in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and only then was encouraged by an editor to use the story to make a children's book (66-67). Edmonds said in his acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, "The criterion of any child's book should be whether it has enough stuff, humor, reality, wisdom, excitement to be interesting to an adult mind" (Bostrom 66). That must partly explain the complex female and male perspectives, roles, actions, and relationships of *The Matchlock Gun*. Nevertheless, it is also a boy's book, for it has simple syntax, savory diction, and engaging rhythm, as well as exciting action featuring a big gun and evil enemies to be killed by a boy who matures through the course of his experiences.

Historical fiction for children entertains them with past eras, life styles, and families as it communicates themes applicable to their lives. *The Matchlock Gun* shows that children should obey their parents, family members should love and rely on one another, women can fight to protect their families as bravely and effectively as men, maturing boys should incorporate female influences into their male pursuits, and violence may sometimes be necessary to protect one's family. Some of those themes are good for boys (and girls) to learn, but some, like the necessity of violence, are problematic. There is something troubling about Gertrude refusing to take her children to the safety of her mother-in-law's house and having Edward fire the gun to "scare" the Indians away and about Edward experiencing incipient patriarchal pride rather than any hint of the post-traumatic stress that afflicts soldiers after combat. Nonetheless, by reading a book in which a female protagonist is more prominent than a

male one, boys identify with and empathize with a female character, ideally learning that girls and women can be strong and maturing into more open-minded men.

Surveying current trends in feminist criticism as they are being applied to children's literature, Lissa Paul makes the following points: "the destabilization of hierarchical orders is one of the mobilizing features of feminist theory" (101); critics and scholars have been "rereading" children's literature, "search[ing] for a feminine tradition of 'other' stories: mother, daughter, sister stories . . . for a 'both/and' feminine plot rather than an 'either/or' Oedipal plot . . . for multiplicity, plurality, jouissance and a valuing of pro-creations, recreations and new beginnings" (103), so as to turn classics of children's literature "from . . . stor[ies] about women learning how to serve men into . . . stor[ies] of women supporting each other" (104). Paul's exemplary texts, like *Little Women* (1868-69) by Louisa May Alcott, *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *Teahanu* (1990) by Ursula K. Le Guin, are by women. Although there are limits to how favorably a book like *The Matchlock Gun* written by a man ostensibly for boys in the first half of the twentieth century may be reread from a feminist perspective, I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that there are interesting and useful insights that may be gained by doing so. For instance, we may reread *The Matchlock Gun* to find: Gertrude destabilizing the hierarchical patriarchal order, an "other" story featuring Gertrude (the primary protagonist) and Trudy (the original teller of the story and inspiration for crucial actions in it), "multiplicity" in the use of female and male protagonists, a "both/and feminine plot [uniting Edward and Gertrude], and "new beginnings" as of Trudy becoming an expert

spinner and storyteller. Surely rereading the novel with a feminist perspective also reveals unappealing things like the conflict between Gertrude and her mother-in-law, no example of women supporting each other. Furthermore, Trudy is destined to fill a traditional female role, replacing Gertrude as the family spinster. Nevertheless, in the spunky, cheerful, and inspiring Trudy and in the proud, brave, and resourceful Gertrude, Edmonds writes female characters who are at least as strong as his male characters, and rereading the novel from a feminist perspective rather than only from that of its boys' historical adventure genre reveals an appealing complexity vis-à-vis gender that must partly explain why, despite its egregious depiction of Native Americans, it won the Newbery Medal and remains popular to this day.

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