

Ann Fessler

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The books in Ann Fessler's *True Stories Series* juxtapose generic images with "loaded" story lines and, as a result, are open to broad interpretation. The images and works are capable of varied responses drawn from our own preconceptions and psychological state. The layers of narrative elements and the interrelation among the illustrations, captions, and narrative parallel the intricacies of human relationships. The unfolding of Fessler's books emphasizes the learning process in any relationship.

The illustrations in *First Aid for the Wounded* (1987) are simple line drawings appropriated from a First Aid manual. The book begins, "When Dick was young he was told it was a Mortal Sin to touch himself or little girls" and "so he started touching other little boys." The accompanying illustrations depict an anonymous hand – God, morality, self-censorship? – compressing the brachial and femoral arteries and thereby cutting off all major circulation to the limbs: committing a "Mortal Sin" is a truly mortal offense.

When Dick and Jane get married, the corresponding illustration depicts Jane, an adult, administering artificial respiration to Dick, a little boy – she is breathing false life into a psychologically and emotionally undeveloped person. The illustration may, on the other hand, depict Jane resuscitating the little boys whom Dick has touched. Jane's hand covers his abdomen in a position similar to an earlier gesture of repression in which Dick's hand, depicted as the injured and socially acceptable par of him, conceals Dick's desires.

Water Safety (1989), Fessler's fourth book, tells the more complex story of Debbie and Frank's relationship and its demise. The images are again generic photographs, this time taken from a water safety manual. The sentences are longer, and the illustrations are printed using an experimental four-color separation that creates an unearthly effect. The captions correspond closely to both the images and the text, creating a link among the book's various narratives.

The one-page introduction, "Personal Safety in Swimming," discusses knowledge of swimming and care for oneself as keys to water safety. Throughout, the book implies that the same is true for relationships – a successful relationship is a learning process in which one must watch out for oneself – and that entering the water is a metaphor for entering into a relationship.

Fessler describes how the relationship between Debbie and Frank came about—“He wanted a beautiful girl on his arm,” and “She didn’t want to be by herself.” The images depict a person diving into water, yet seemingly suspended mid-air surveying the water below. Although both appear to be diving in the same position, Frank, is more distinct from the water than Debbie, who is silhouetted, as if actually underwater. This suggests that Debbie may remain in the water emotionally (i.e., involved in an earlier relationship), although she thinks she is between relationships.

As the relationship disintegrates and Debbie’s dislike for Frank intensifies, the swimmer in these illustrations begins to get cramps, first in his calf, then in his abdomen. The cramp victim appears to be descending into darkness while emitting a silent scream of bubbles.

When Debbie eventually decides to rescue herself from this relationship, we see a swimmer rescue the cramp victim and drag him onto a dock. As he drags the devastated cramp victim from the water, the text reads “Debbie is not seeing anyone now and once in a while she says”...(we turn to the final page)...“Frank was not so bad.” Here we see just the legs of a swimmer diving into the water. This image reflects the initial images of Debbie and Frank’s relationship. Sometimes Debbie returns to Frank in her thoughts. This illustration reflects how quickly people forget pain and how easily and unthinkingly they dive into relationships.

Fessler attempts to dispel common myths by examining aspects of life that typically remain overlooked in our society’s self-image. Her books’ resemblance to simple children’s books and manuals draws attention to the disservice we do by not preparing ourselves for life as it truly is. Children’s stories are never *True Stories*.