

STEPHANIE SALTER

A celebration of, and for, brave little girls

DO YOU know a brave girl? Someone 18 or younger who has made the world around her a better place through courage, creativity, kindness, generosity, leadership or by overcoming hardship?

Tell the San Francisco Public Library about her — in 250 or fewer words — and be part of a super exhibit of girls' books and illustrations that will open next month at the new Main Library.

Created for the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the "Brave Little Girls" exhibit features 58 books and 43 drawings and paintings.

The subjects are girls, fictional and real, who do something new with themselves than cry, "Oh, help me!"

Take the heroine of Emily Arnold McCully's story, "Mirette on the High Wire." A hard-working, plucky, 19th century Parisian girl, Mirette teaches herself to walk a tightrope — and is instrumental in the comeback of her high-wire mentor, the Great Bellini, who has become phobic about heights.

"Bellini paced his room for

hours. It was terrible to disappoint Mirette! By dawn he knew that if he didn't face his fear at last, he could not face Mirette. He knew what he must do. The question was, could he succeed?"

The answer: Not without Mirette's help.

Curated by Krystyna Wasserman of the women in arts museum, "Brave Little Girls" was designed primarily for girls, ages 8 to 12. As numerous studies have indicated, that period of development is crucial for girls. Their self-esteem and confidence, which tend then to be at their most fragile, often are undermined by the mixed and sexist messages our culture sends.

As the museum's library and research director, Wasserman is of the preventive medicine school. She writes in the exhibition notes, "Much of our knowledge and behavior can be traced to our childhood reading habits."

Thus, a collection of stories to read about can-do girls. Girls who love wild horses and caterpillars. Girls like "Nadia, the Willful" or "The Paper Bag Princess," who not only saves a boy from danger but says "no thanks" to his grateful

marriage proposal.

The exhibit offers real-life courageous girls to read about: Helen Keller. Anne Frank. Emancipated slave and poet Phillis Wheatley. Several classic literary brave girls are on hand, too: "Heidi," "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm," "Pippi Longstocking," "Anne of Green Gables" and, of course, Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women."

San Franciscans have Catherine Muther, of the Three Guineas Fund, to thank for the "Brave Little Girls" show coming here. An early retiree from the Silicon Valley marketing milieu, Muther founded Three Guineas in 1975 to provide financial support for programs that foster equity and opportunity for women and girls.

"Brave Little Girls" fit her mission to a T.

"Girls who are at the threshold of adulthood are particularly vulnerable. They listen to and internalize the messages that are sent to them by society," said Muther.

"These books and illustrations offer an endless array of strong role models for girls. Together they show that girls can do anything."



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Cover illustration for "Mirette on the High Wire" by Emily Arnold McCully.

ceive \$250 each and will be honored at the Sept. 8 exhibit opening. For an entry form or more information, call the library's community relations department at 415/557-4277.

And don't forget, qualifications range far beyond the traditional heroic rescue stuff. A profound act of kindness is considered just as courageous and deserving of the title, "Brave Girl."