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## Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes in Four Newbery Award-Winning Books

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Gender Roles and Gender Stereotypes in Four Newbery Award-Winning Books

by

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A Thesis

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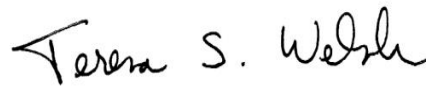


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## **Abstract**

This research project examined the presentation of traditional gender roles and representation in four books that were awarded the Newbery Medal. The four books that were examined are the award recipients from 1922, 1923, 2014 and 2015. It was predicted that as gender equality has become a more prominent issue, and men and women have become more equal, one would expect this change to be reflected in children's literature. A close reading was performed of these works, and special attention was paid to how the authors present the genders of the main characters in terms of personal interests, the roles of the parents, and other criteria. There was a predominance of male characters and male interests in both older and newer books and some stereotypical elements of gender roles in both, but there were also indications of changes in the portrayal of gender roles in the two newer books – there was one female main character who exhibited both male and female interest and the parents in the two newest books exhibited some non-traditional activities and roles. While this study found evidence of some change in portrayal of gender roles, some stereotypical elements persist so the thesis is only partly supported.

Key words: gender stereotypes, gender roles, children's literature

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents, Tracy and Melissa, and to my sister Carrie.

They have always supported me and are constantly an inspiration for me to be my best self.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the faculty of the School of Library and Information Science—especially Dr. Stacy Creel for providing valuable insight and ongoing encouragement during the completion of this project.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Materials and Methods

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 6: Conclusion

References



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction:**

The way that society thinks about gender is changing. The rules that dictate what is proper for girls and what is proper for boys are becoming more fluid and less straight-forward. One would assume that this change would be reflected in the literature that is available for these children to read, whether at the library, at school, or in their home. Award-winning books are more likely to be present in the school or public library, particularly in the case of books that have won a state award (Hilburn & Claes, 2007). Children use clues from the world around them to build an understanding of what will be expected of them, and books are a source of these clues (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993).

### **Thesis Statement**

As gender equality has become a more prominent issue, and men and women have become more equal, one would expect this change to be reflected in children's literature. This study examines four Newbery-Award winning books in order to determine if this change was apparent.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Literature Review:**

Chapter books may not be the first thought that comes to mind when one pictures children's literature although they are an essential part of this body of literature. There is a long tradition of children's literature being used to study the social attitudes of a particular time as depicted through books (Norton, 2011). Most of the research done on the subject of traditional gender role presentation has been focused on picture books. Hamilton et al. (2006) found that female characters in picture books were still significantly underrepresented despite the passage of several decades and significant strides in gender equality. Clark et al. (2003) found that while female characters were still underrepresented in picture books there was slightly less gender stereotyping as years passed. Even though these studies focused on picture books, they can provide valuable information about children's literature evolving over time and the way that other award-winning books have presented gender. There has also been some research about Newbery chapter books and gender roles specifically. Agee (1993) examines the role of mothers and female gender roles in two Newbery books. This study provides information on how four Newbery-winning authors have portrayed gender and how female characters specifically have been stereotyped in these chapter books.

This study detailed in this paper is important because the readers of these books are impressionable and reading books where female and male characters are not equal can lead to the continuation of damaging gender stereotypes. While this project may not have the scope to make definitive statements about the differences in the books it is a first step to determining whether there have been significant improvements in gender representation in the Newbery Award winners.

### *Overview of the Newbery Award:*

Initially created by Frederic G. Melcher in 1921, the Newbery Medal was formed to draw attention to Children's Book Week. Named after John Newbery, an eighteenth-century bookseller, the Newbery Award and honorary status is "awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children... to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American Literature for children" (Association for Library Service to Children, 2015). One of the most important distinguishing factors about the Newbery Award is that the award is given to the most distinguished children's book, not the most popular. The definition of distinguished is entirely dependent on "whatever "distinguished" means to the group of children's librarians making the selection each year" (Horning, 2012). This distinction between distinguished and popular literature sets the Newbery Award apart from other awards.

### *Overview of Gender:*

Gender is often used as one of the defining aspects of a person after their name. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), "gender is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (127). One aspect of gender of particular importance is that of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Gender stereotypes are expectations, both positive and negative, about how a certain gender should behave and think. Coyne et al. (2014) define gender stereotypes as "collections of gender-specific attributes or traditional norms that differentiate typical feminine behavior patterns from typical masculine behavior patterns in society" (p. 417). Traditional gender roles are a sort of gender stereotype that set forth the behavioral expectations of both males and females. According to Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), "the gender identity of most children is shaped by the universally shared beliefs about gender roles that are held by their

society. These shared beliefs often take the form of oversimplified gender stereotypes” (p. 220). For example, in children’s books the character’s gender would determine the character’s activities: with male characters being more adventurous and physically active while the female character is inside, playing house or dressing up.

From the time that they are born children are influenced to act or think a certain way based on gender stereotypes. According to Crisp and Hiller (2011), children are instructed by those around them and the information that they absorb from their environment how to “act like a lady” or “be a man,” something that would be unnecessary if gender were indeed “natural” (p. 197). This implies that gender may not be an implicit part of a person, but identification as one gender or another would be influenced by the spoken and unspoken rules and expectations handed down through generations.

According to Martin and Ruble (2004), “Children are gender detectives who search for cues about gender - who should or should not engage in a particular activity, who can play with whom, and why girls and boys are different” (p. 67). If this rings true, why should the books that children read present the genders unequally, or limit the ambitions of both genders by presenting abilities in the terms of stereotypical behaviors? The prevalence of books and reading in children’s lives means that children will take in the information presented in these books and use it to shape how they perceive their own gender. If the children are presented with the idea that girls cannot do math or boys cannot like the color pink, then that skewed image of gender is now part of how that child sees himself or herself. This acceptance of these stereotypes may limit what the child thinks himself or herself capable of throughout his or her lifetime and can lead to the perpetuation of the stereotypes to future generations. Books play a role in the development of gender.

### *Gender in Books:*

Much of the research done on the topic of gender roles and stereotypes in children's literature has centered on picture books (Hamilton, et al., 2006; Frawley, 2008; Crist & Hiller, 2011). Frawley (2008) uses two Caldecott picture books to investigate children's perception of gender and reports that their gender perceptions are influenced by picture books and their cognitive recall is influenced by gender bias. Using picture books only allows the researchers to examine both the gender stereotypes presented in the drawings or illustrations and in the text of the book itself. Hamilton, Anderson, Broadus, and Young (2006) found little improvement when investigating gender representation and sexism in 200 award-winning and popular picture books from 2001 when compared to books from the 1980s and 1990s.

The amount of research done on gender stereotypes in chapter books aimed at older children is more limited. One study that looks at Newbery Award-winning books is Agee's (1993) examination of the gender-role socialization influence of mothers on their daughters in *Caddie Woodlawn* by Brink (1962) and *Jacob Have I loved* by Paterson (1980). In this study, Agee (1993) looked closely at the influence that the mothers have on the daughters, which both start out as wily, tomboy types who are the source of constant exasperation for their stereotypically calm and ladylike matriarchs. The two aims of the study were to "make explicit the roles of fictional mothers as gender models for their daughters and the historical continuity of the messages of acculturation that emerge in these two female authors' portrayals of mother-daughter relationships" and "to show that gender roles depicted in fiction for young readers grow out of unexamined, long-accepted cultural assumptions about who women are and what they are supposed to do with their lives" (Agee, 1993, p. 165-166).

One important aspect is that while the books were written almost forty-five years apart there are similarities between the mother figures and the transformation of the daughters that show little to no improvement. In both books, Caddie and Louise admire their mothers' ability to conform to the expectations placed on them by traditional gender roles, and yet seek to shirk these expectations and become their own person. However, the mothers in both of these books pressure and guide their daughters to grow away from the individualistic spirit and non-traditional aspirations that set them apart. After going through puberty both daughters conform to the ways of their mother and, on an even bigger scale, the ways of society.

Other studies have examined the changes in children's books over time. One such study by Clark et al. (2003) focuses on the books that were awarded a Caldecott Medal over a span of forty years from the 1930s through the 1960s. The Caldecott Medal is an award given to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children (Association for Library Service to Children, 2015). This study included the winners and the runners-up and examined aspects of the books such as "the book's central character, and the most important character of the same sex, and the most important characters of the other sex," and "where supporting characters were deemed sufficiently visible for analysis" (Clark et al., 2003, p. 441). The study found that while there did not seem to be a linear improvement of the presentation of gender roles and stereotypes the books tended to reflect the attitude of society at the time that the book was written. One implication of the study is that while there was a "trend" towards visibility and decreased stereotyping...antifeminist backlash in other media...suggests that such a trend is reversible" (Clark et al., 2003, 446). Crisp and Hiller (2011) investigated 74 Caldecott Medal-winners and found that only 23 percent had female main, or leading characters. Additionally, "text-identified female characters in Caldecott Medal-winning picture books are generally

passive, inactive, emotional, dependent, submissive, imitative, nurturing, and emotional (Crisp & Hiller, 2011, p. 203).

Caldecott Award-winning books were also examined by Crisp and Hiller (2011) in a study that looked exclusively at the text to determine the presence of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. The assertion is made that studying only the pictures or illustrations in children's books can be compromised by the gender expectations and biases of the researchers and that studies that rely on this information exclusively may not be as complete as if, instead, the researcher had used the illustrations and the text. Exclusively referencing images can also become problematic because what one researcher gleans from an image may be different than what another researcher or a child might infer. The study found that while there have been almost equal numbers of authors that define themselves as male or female, starting after the 1970s the gap between the number of male and female authors began to grow. This study focused on certain Caldecott Award-winning books that have been described as progressive in their depictions of female characters as well as certain books that uphold the traditional gender expectations for male characters. While the study finds that there may be some variation in individual books that are more progressive, the majority of medal-winning books still uphold "problematic constructions" of gender that can be damaging for children who may not line up with the gender stereotypes and expectations presented (Crisp & Hiller, p. 27).

Crabb and Marciano (2011) looked at material culture and tool use in award-winning children's books to determine whether or not the ratio of which tools male and female characters used matched the gender-specific division of labor in the span of time in which they were published. The study focused on the illustrations in these books since younger children may be able to understand their meaning more easily than using the text alone, which may include words

not yet in their vocabulary. A variety of hypotheses were tested, all centering on female characters using artifacts that were geared towards more domestic tasks, while male characters would use artifacts that are geared more toward production. Female characters were found to use household artifacts more often than male characters, and there was no significant improvement found between books from the two decades studied, the 1990s and the 2000s. Male characters were found to be using production artifacts more often than female characters, and the number of female characters that used production artifacts did not increase during the two decades, despite more women working outside the home. Given the division of labor during the decades studied, male and female characters were depicted performing activities that went along with the ratio of females that worked inside the home and men working outside the home. However, books did not reflect the growing number of women working outside the home or the growing number of men that did not work outside the home. This can be attributed to a variety of things, but is most likely due to authors lagging behind or not being aware of the changes in society.

Hamilton et al. (2006) also examined gender bias not just in award-winning picture books but in the highest selling books as well. Some of the characteristics used to determine gender bias were “how often male and female main characters were portrayed as active or passive, found indoors or outdoors, rescued or were rescued by another character, and nurtured or were nurtured” (Hamilton et al., 2006, p. 760). In this study, male characters were found to outnumber female characters, there was a greater number of male authors writing about male characters than female authors writing about female characters, and the female characters were apt to be more nurturing. The genders were also more likely to be portrayed with traditional occupations.



*Selected Books for Study:*

The books examined for this project are the first two and the 2014 and 2015 recipients of the Newbery Medal. These books include *The Story of Mankind* by Hendrik Willem van Loon, 1922 winner; *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* by Hugh Lofting, 1923 winner; *Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* by Kate DiCamillo, 2014 winner; and *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander, 2015 winner.

In *The Story of Mankind* (1921), van Loon explores through literary nonfiction the journey that mankind has taken beginning with the very first cell that floated about in the sea. From there, the civilizations that arose are discussed and the relationships between those civilizations are recounted. The story has many main characters, depending on which portion of the world and which civilization is being discussed. Most famous historical, political, and religious figures are given a nod by the author regarding their accomplishments or their failures. The fate of the people that these famous figures lived around and among is also examined.

*The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Lofting, 1923) is a fictional tale that follows the much-beloved Doctor Dolittle, his young assistant Tommy Stubbins, and many animals around the world on a mission to gain knowledge of the natural world. The main characters begin and end their journey in Puddleby, England, and their journey takes them to Spidermonkey Island near Brazil. Faced with trials and tribulations from the beginning to the end of the journey, the group must confront Matadors, native peoples, and even Mother Nature herself. The brave Doctor Dolittle becomes king of the indigenous people of Spidermonkey Island, finds his long lost inspiration to study natural science, and discovers the oldest crustacean while his adventures are viewed through the eyes of his awestruck assistant.

*Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* follows Flora, a “natural born cynic,” (DiCamillo, 2013) and a squirrel that has recently acquired super powers due to being sucked up by a vacuum. The duo must overcome villains and the odd neighbor’s even odder great-nephew while following the example of Flora’s favorite comic book superhero Incandesto. The discovery of the different powers that Ulysses now possesses leads the two on a journey across the town in which they live, and causes run-ins with several interesting characters. The super powers that Ulysses has obtained include the ability to fly, the ability to think and understand Flora, and the ability to type on Flora’s mother’s typewriter, much to her chagrin.

The most recent winner, *The Crossover*, by Kwame Alexander (2014) is the story of twin boys told from the perspective of Josh Bell, one of the brothers. This fictional story is told in poems and rap-like lyrics. Josh and his brother Jordan are the sons of a basketball star and a vice principal. They both aspire one day to play professional basketball. Middle school problems like girls, angst, and balancing basketball and schoolwork are prevalent throughout the book. Family problems are also addressed in the story when Josh is faced with jealousy of his brother and his father’s continually declining health and eventual passing.

## Chapter 3

### Materials and Methods:

#### *Book Choice:*

The books that were chosen for this project are the first two and the 2014 and 2015 Newbery Award winners. This sample offers better insight into the changes in gender representation that have occurred over time from the beginnings of the award until today. The attitudes of society towards the respective genders would be reflected in these works. The decision to examine award-winning books was made because “nominations for state awards serve as a selection tool for both school and public librarians. Most librarians purchase all of the books nominated for their state’s book award” (Hilburn & Claes, 2007, p. 18). The greater likelihood of these books to be purchased by libraries means that children are likely to have greater exposure to these books and the material inside these books. The Newbery Award winners were selected because there is limited information about gender stereotypes in chapter books compared to the amount of information on gender stereotypes in picture books.

The books examined were *The Story of Mankind*, which won the award in 1922, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*, which won the award in 1923, *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures*, which won in 2014, and *The Crossover*, which won in 2015. The years in which these books won the award give an overview of the changes, or lack of changes, in gender representation in the books of the award over time.

These books were closely read at least three times and examined using the following described criteria related to the presentation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The first criteria include the examining the gender of the main characters and the genders of supporting characters to determine if female characters are still chronically underrepresented. The limit of

twelve supporting characters, three per book, was examined in this study in an effort to examine each book equally. Supporting characters were chosen based on their prevalence throughout the work. Second, the personal interests of the main character or characters were examined to determine if they aligned with gender stereotypes. Third, both the occupations and the household roles of the parents were examined; a related fourth criteria examined occupational goals of the main characters. These criteria were applied to each book separately, and then that information was utilized to determine the differences or similarities between the selected early winners and the recent winners.

The criteria were tracked using extensive note-taking during the close reading process. Passages and ideas within the books that related to the criteria were marked for further study in the following close readings, and these ideas and passages were then revisited after the close readings were completed. These criteria were selected because gender roles and gender expectations are often expressed through a character's interests and occupational goals, and the stereotype of the traditional family with a working father and stay-at-home mother is very well-known and easily identified in chapter books.

## Chapter 4

### Results:

As one can infer from the title, *A Story of Mankind* by Van Loon (1921) gives a descriptive overview of the history of mankind from its first appearance as a cell to the first time the world was at war with itself. The main character in this book is mankind. There are a variety of different pronouns used by the narrator to refer to this character: “they,” “he,” “him,” “himself,” and sometimes “we.” These pronouns tend to be more masculine or ambiguous and rarely, if at all, are feminine. Although mankind does include all humans, both male and female, the use of such pronouns leads the reader to believe that the overarching main character of “mankind” is male. For example, the author writes that some members of mankind liked “to have their hair and beards neatly cut” and “loved to see their wives wear ornaments” (Van Loon, 1921, p. 69).

The three minor characters include Moses, Napoleon, and Alexander the Great. The minor characters discussed in this work are overwhelmingly male. There are a few exceptions, but the female minor characters are written about in extremely briefly passages as opposed to the more substantial paragraphs or chapters about male minor characters. Women are also usually referred to as wives or as potential conquests. The personal interests of mankind include the pursuits of survival, knowledge, and expansion. Throughout the time periods discussed in this work mankind had to work and create new ways to survive and thought of new ways to ensure this survival. Whether this is through the discovery of fire or the creation of new ways of governing, mankind constantly seeks to survive and to ease survival. This ties in to the interest in pursuing knowledge. In the book, throughout history, civilizations have shared knowledge whether through open forums like the Greeks or through the creation of universities and the

desire to explain natural phenomena. The pursuits of both survival and knowledge also tie in to the pursuit of expansion. This is a common theme in the book. Mankind sought to expand the territory controlled by a person or group, the number of adherents to a certain religion, or the expansion of the amount of wealth that a person possessed. The criteria regarding the occupations and household roles of parents were not applicable to this book because there are no defined parental figures. The criterion regarding the occupational goals also does not apply because of the broad definition of the main character.

The main character in *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* by Lofting (1923) is Doctor John Dolittle, who is male and his assistant, as well as the story's narrator, Tommy Stubbins. The three minor characters examined are Bumpo, the African prince; Polynesia, the parrot, and Jip, the dog. Bumpo and Jip are both male, while Polynesia is female. Tommy Stubbins has many traditional male characteristics that include "wandering among the hills," and "rambling through the countryside" (Lofting, 1923, p. 7). However, Tommy does possess the more feminine interest of caring for animals, and he even takes care of a squirrel he finds until Doctor Dolittle returns. Mr. Stubbins, Tommy's father, is the town's cobbler, and his mother stays primarily at home and takes care of the house. The household roles of Tommy's parents appear quite traditional with the father being the main breadwinner and the mother being the housekeeper and primary caregiver. The first time Doctor Dolittle comes over, Mrs. Stubbins apologizes because "the place is a little untidy because I haven't finished the spring cleaning yet," and she makes a fuss and prepares a special dinner the next time the Doctor calls (Lofting, 1923, p. 40). The occupational goals that Tommy has starts out broadly defined as a longing to "sail away with those brave ships... I longed to go with them out into the world to seek my fortune in foreign lands- Africa, India, China, and Peru" (Lofting, 1923, p. 4). This is later narrowed down to a

desire to become a naturalist like his mentor and accompanying main character, Doctor Dolittle. Doctor Dolittle and Tommy have similar interests, with the desire to care for, learn about, and heal animals, Dolittle's main interest and career. He also has a desire to travel, and constantly goes on adventures. Doctor Dolittle also has an interest in learning about animals and their languages. One of the major projects he undertakes in the book is to learn the language of the shellfish, and this comes in handy when the group of adventurers is return home after travelling across the world. The occupations and household roles of Dolittle's parents are unknown so the criterion could not be applied to this specific character. Dolittle's occupation is that of a naturalist, and this is what inspires the other main character, Tommy, to become one as well. As a naturalist, Dolittle learns about animals and cares for them, almost like a veterinarian.

*Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* by Kate DiCamillo is the first of the two more recent books examined for this project. In this novel, the main characters are Flora Belle Buckman, a female, and Ulysses, her male squirrel companion. The minor characters include Flora's mother as the only female, and Flora's father and the neighbor's great-nephew, William Spiver, who are both male. Flora's occupational goals are not discussed in the book, but Ulysses aims to be as great a superhero as The Amazing Incandesto, a superhero featured in Flora's favorite comic books. Flora's mother writes romance novels, and she and Flora's father are divorced. The occupation of Flora's father is not mentioned. The household roles of the parents in this book are somewhat non-traditional since Flora's parents are divorced, but her mother is the primary caretaker. George Buckman, Flora's father, shares her interest in comic books. Because of the divorce, Flora's father is less present in her life than her mother. However, Flora's father seems to be more in tune with Flora's emotions and Flora expresses a desire to live with him as opposed to with her mother. Flora's main interests include comic books, practicing

the skills of observation she has gained by reading comic books, and caring for Ulysses. Ulysses' interests include saving Flora, honing his super powers, and poetry (Dicamillo, 2013). Ulysses' parents are not mentioned, and thus the criteria related to this could not be analyzed.

The last book to be studied for this project is *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander (2014). The main character is Joshua "Filthy McNasty" Bell, who aspires to be a basketball star like his father. The minor characters include his twin brother Jordan, his mother, and his father. Josh's main interests include basketball, girls, and listening to music. His career aspirations include going to college, preferably Duke, and then going on to play professional basketball. His mother is an assistant principal at the twins' middle school, and his father is a retired professional basketball player who does not have a job but plans to go back and coach. Not taking into account the occupations of the parents, the household roles are traditional. The mother cooks and cleans when not at work, and the father coaches Josh and Jordan in basketball and takes them to the recreation center to play against one another. The mother is more nurturing throughout the trying times that Josh faces throughout the novel, while his father is portrayed as more of a friend that takes Josh and his brother to restaurants expressly forbidden by their mother after they finish basketball practice.



## Chapter 5

### Discussion:

The main characters are male in all of the books examined except in *Flora and Ulysses*: *The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013), where only one of the main characters is a female. This follows the pattern of female characters being constantly underrepresented in children's literature (DeWitt et al., 2013). The gender of the minor characters was also overwhelmingly male. In this study, the male minor characters numbered nine out of twelve. The earliest books had five male characters and one female character, and the 2014 and 2015 books had two female characters and four male characters.

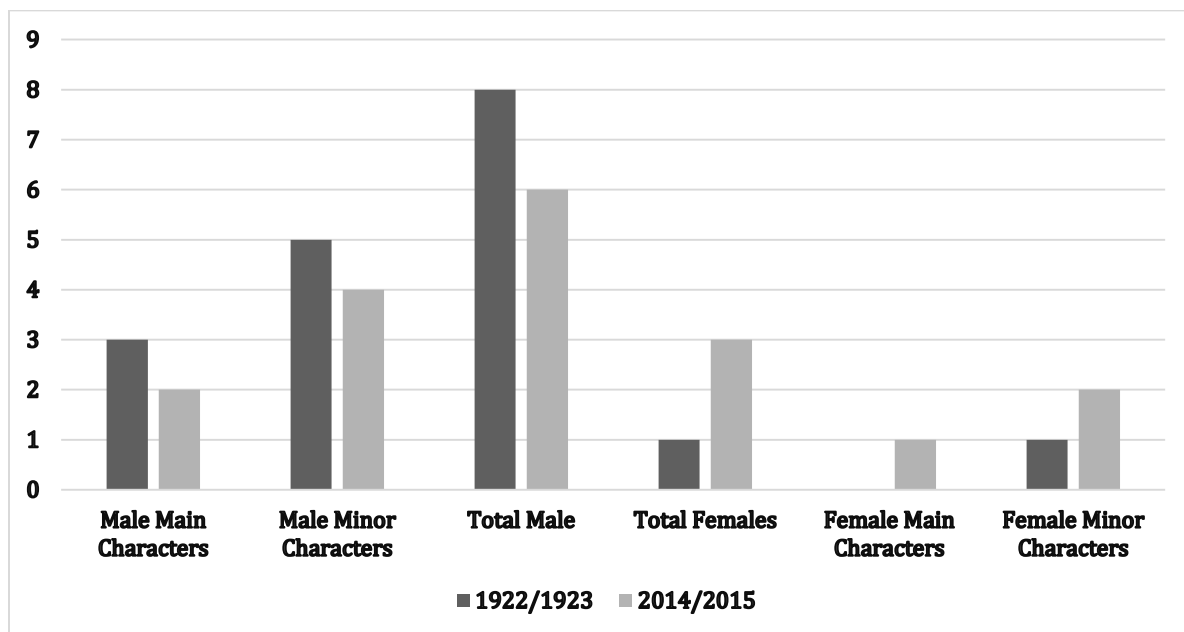


Figure 1: Comparison of male and female characters—main and minor—by years

Female characters, major and minor, were still underrepresented with there being more males overall in earlier books and latter books (*Figure 1*). The major characters were overwhelmingly male with only one female main character. In the earliest books, none of the main characters were female. The sole female character appeared in the 2014 and 2015 books.

The greater number of minor characters allowed for the presence of both genders, and while there were more females that made an appearance, they were still overshadowed by the number of male characters. These results are consistent with previous studies that focused on gender in children's picture books (Clark, et al., 2003; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Hamilton, et al., 2006). The lack of female characters and role models in children's books does not reflect well on the progress of gender equality. Because children take clues from the world around them about how to act and how to think about themselves and others, what is presented in the books they read can have lasting effects on how children view what is appropriate for their gender (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). It is possible that girls may view themselves as less important or less able if they are unable to find a positive role model, or any model at all, in the books that they read.

The interests of the main characters tended to line up with gender stereotypes when the main character was male. For example, Tommy Stubbins, Doctor Dolittle, Josh Bell, and Ulysses all share interests that include some sort of physical activity, whether it be exploring, sports, or flying. Mankind itself also tended to have interests that were geared more towards the masculine, which matched the pronouns that were used overwhelmingly throughout the book. The activities in *The Story of Mankind* (van Loon, 1921), which included expansion and survival, involve the main character taking part in wars or other activities that are thought to be more traditionally masculine. None of these characters are taking part in more traditionally female activities like playing inside or learning to take care of a house.

However, not all of the male characters had strictly stereotypically male interests (*Figure 2*). Tommy Stubbins and Doctor Dolittle both displayed a more nontraditional male interest when it came to their devotion to saving, caring for, and learning about animals. With this behavior both of the characters displayed the more feminine traits of "affection... or tenderness"

(Kok & Findlay, 2006). Ulysses' love of poetry was also a nontraditional male interest, and this was one of the major points of the book. Poetry was often quoted as one of the superpowers that Ulysses possessed.

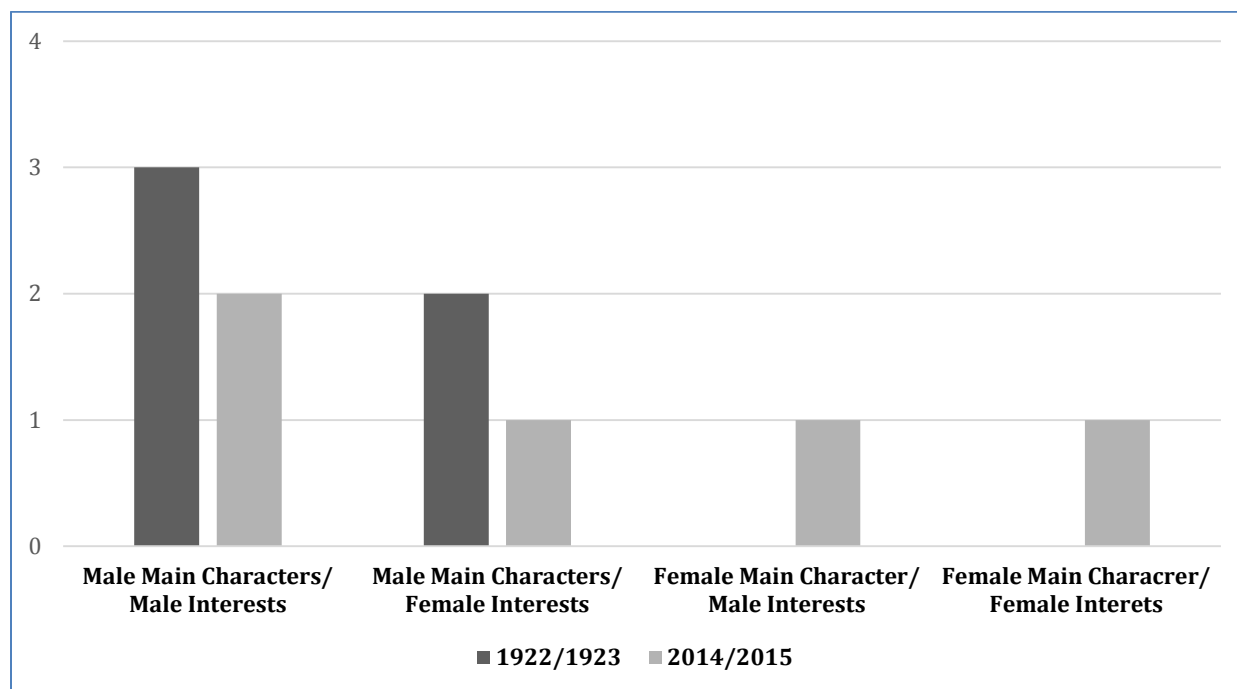


Figure 2: Main characters interested in stereotypical gender specific activities

In the case of the male characters, there was the inclusion of a nontraditional interest in both Tommy Stubbins' and Ulysses' case. Out of the 6 interests studied for the 1922 and 1922 winners, five of the interests studied lined up with traditional male activities, and one did not. There was a similar result for the 2014 and 2015 winners, with five of the six being traditional and one being nontraditional. This does not show any increase or decrease in the presence of nontraditional male interests over time.

Flora, the sole female main character, also had some nontraditional interests. The one that came up most often in the book was her love of comic books. She gained this love of comics through her relationship with her father. Comic books are seen as a traditionally male interest, and most comic book heroes are male as well. The hero in the comic featured in *Flora and*

*Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013) and the hero of the story itself, Ulysses, were both male. The love of comic books also led to some other nontraditional interests that included practicing survival skills that she learned from these comic books and observing the world around her should the opportunity present itself to use these skills. Flora was an active participant in most of the adventures that Ulysses took part in, and while she was not the superhero herself, she often came to his aid. This portrays her partly in both the more stereotypical role of the assistant or the supporter, and the less stereotypical role of the actively involved female.

The occupational goals of the main characters were only expressly discussed in three books. In *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Lofting, 1922), Tommy Stubbins aspires to be a naturalist like the other main character of the book, Doctor John Dolittle. In *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013), Ulysses aspires to be a superhero, and in *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) Josh aspires to be a professional basketball player. Once again, the desire to be a naturalist that nurtures and heals animals is not in alignment with the stereotypically male profession, like a professional basketball player or a superhero.

Each book in the study except *The Story of Mankind* (van Loon, 1921) had parents that were present. As shown in *Table 1*, the household roles of the parents, when parents were discussed in the book, tended to be more traditional, with “the acts of providing, disciplining, and participating in physical play (considered *traditional* behaviors for fathers and *non-traditional* for mothers)” were displayed by the fathers in the books, “and combining acts of nurturing, care-giving, and participating in non-physical play (considered *traditional* behaviors for mothers and *non-traditional* for fathers)” were displayed by the mothers. (DeWitt et al, 2013, p. 90). The fathers tended to have more traditional household roles as opposed to the mothers

despite the difference in time in publication of the books. In *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014), the main character's father is the one who constantly plays sports with them and inspired the main character's goal to become a professional basketball player, although he is not employed. Additionally, the father figure is not discussed as performing household duties like cooking or cleaning. Tommy Stubbins' father (Lofting, 1922) displays the "traditional" act of "providing" (DeWitt et al, 2013), as he is the sole breadwinner in the family, and the father in *The Crossover* also displays the "providing" behavior because of his making and saving a great deal of money from his days of playing professional basketball.

<b>Titles</b>	<b>Traditional Activity for Mothers</b>	<b>Traditional Activity for Fathers</b>	<b>Nontraditional Activity for Mothers</b>	<b>Nontraditional Activity for Fathers</b>
<i>The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle</i>	Cleaning house, preparing meals, worrying for child's welfare	Main breadwinner		
<i>Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures</i>	Mother is the primary caregiver	Father is employed, but is less present in life	Mother is divorced from father, Mother is employed, Mother is less emotionally in-tune with the child	Father is more responsive to child's emotional needs
<i>The Crossover</i>	Cleaning house, more emotionally involved with children	Playing sports with children, contributes to financial health of the household	Mother is employed outside the home	Father is currently unemployed

*Table 1. Traditional vs Nontraditional Activities for Mothers and Fathers*

The mothers in two books, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Lofting, 1922) and *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) tended to uphold the stereotype of the nurturing mother that was more responsive to the emotional needs of their children as well as performing most of the household duties like cooking, cleaning, and ensuring that the child or children are in good health. However, in *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013) the mother is more emotionally distant from the main character Flora. She cares for her daughter, but does not show it by constantly nurturing and simpering over her. She shows her affection by trying to force Flora down a particular path so that she is socially accepted. Flora's father takes on the more feminine role of the more emotionally supportive parent. Flora is more comfortable around her father, and feels that she can truly be herself. The pair have bonded over comic books, and the activities that Flora's mother discourages are encouraged by her father. Flora even wishes to move in with her father because she and her mother have such differing ideas. This is not how fathers are usually portrayed in children's books, with Mr. Buckman displaying both "nurturing" and "care-giving" (DeWitt et al, 2013).

While the mothers in these books tended to display more of the traditional nurturing behaviors, the more recent books turn the stereotype of the unemployed housewife on its head. In both *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (DiCamillo, 2013) and *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) the mothers are employed, as a vice-principal and a romance writer respectively. Both are perceived as successful at their jobs, and both contribute to the financial health of the family. This is not the case with the mother in *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Lofting, 1922), who stays at home and takes care of both the house and the child. The presence

of nontraditional characteristics in the 2014 and 2015 books shows that there has been some improvement over time.

Most of the criteria examined tended to line up with traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes, but some exceptions were present. Some aspects of the books that were studied showed improvement, like the interests of Flora and the mothers working outside the home in both the 2014 and 2015 winners, and some remained the same, like the household roles of the parents in the books. The presence of some forward movement in equalizing the presentation of characters of different genders shows that children's literature has not been standing still and resisting change. The exceptions, while not overwhelming or groundbreaking, show that some progress is taking place.

The presence of some characters shown in traditional gender roles and exhibiting gender stereotypical behavior is troubling, although not unexpected. In regards to both male and female characters, the perpetuation of these stereotypes can be damaging for children who are still establishing who they are as an individual. Take, for example, the mothers in the books. All that were present exhibited the traditional role of the parent who worries more about the emotional and physical well-being of the child as well as their success and acceptance by others. The portrayal of mothers in these children's books gives us an insight into how society views women because "even as *mothers* garner a certain kind of reverence (at least in certain cultural contexts and provided they conform to societal norms), *mothering* gets little recognition, and systemic injustices that hinder good mothering go unaddressed" (Moran, 2016). Even though the mothers may be employed and have lives outside the home they are all still ascribed to being seen as less than the father figures because they display these stereotypical behaviors, and can be seen as the weaker of the two parents because of their traditional focus on emotions instead of actions.

Father figures gain admiration and respect much more easily when participating in the home and working, while mothers can still be portrayed as neglecting the family if they have a job. This is not the state of the world that children are currently growing up in, and women are successfully balancing home and work lives while some men are choosing to stay at home and take on responsibilities traditionally ascribed to women.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion:

As gender equality has become a more prominent issue, and men and women have become more equal in many ways, one would expect this change to be reflected in children's literature, and in this study of four Newbery-Award winning, some aspects of gender representation and the presence of gender stereotypes are present in the earliest Newbery Award winning books *and* the more recent winners. Female characters are still underrepresented, and both genders are still subject to portrayals defined by societal expectations. However, there are some changes that have occurred, and this shows that children's books and their authors are not oblivious to the gradual equalization of society and the fact that the genders are not being so strictly limited by societal expectations. The changes between the two sets of years are as follows:

- First, there is the inclusion of a female main character in the later pair (2014/2015) and an overall increase in female characters—from one to three; however, there are still twice as many male characters in the 2014/2015 award recipients, and overall male characters dominate in numbers in both sets of years.
- Second in regards to gender stereotypes in interests, the main characters overall are like actual people, multifaceted with both male and female stereotypical interests, but the male main characters while exhibiting one female interest have many more traditional male interests. The one female main character exhibits several traditionally male interests like reading comic books, being into survival, and having adventures along with her female ones.

- The final change is that in the 2014/015 recipients the roles of the parents are no longer reflective of the historical or traditional stay-at-home mother and working father.

Given the small sample size in this study, it is difficult to make definitive statements about the changes in children's literature. It is also difficult to state that the thesis was definitively supported or not supported. There are improvements in some areas, and a lack of improvements in others. Overall, the criteria studied seem to uphold the thesis at least in part, although the sample size was small.

Although there have been improvements in the presence of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles in children's literature, there is still much to be done. Looking at the data in this study, one can see that efforts can be made on the part of children's book authors to equalize the presentation of the genders. It is not about excluding characters who may line up with gender stereotypes, it is about including those that do not. There has to be a balance of characters who have a variety of interests, and do not all line up with societal expectations. The children of today are growing up a world that has fought for gender equality, and while it may not be perfect, it is a different world than many children's book authors may have grown up in. It will take some effort to step away from biases and expectations engrained in all people by the world they experienced in their life, but it is important to show children that they are capable of more than they know, and that they are not limited by their gender.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research:*

This project can be improved upon by future researchers in different ways. First, it would be beneficial to include more than four Newbery Award winning books from a wider array of time periods. This might allow trends in the books, for example: the visibility and number of female characters or the employment of the mother characters. Another improvement that could

be made would be to examine not just award-winning chapter books, but popular chapter books as well. This would give insight into how characters are portrayed in books that might appear in a wider variety of locations or environments.

Another improvement that could be made to the project would be the examination of factors that can be used to define someone or used as a bias against someone besides gender. This could include race, ethnicity, income, and a variety of other factors. This could give the researcher a broader view of how characters in these different groups are represented, and how these representations could affect the children in these groups.

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