

It's a jungle out there: New study uncovers gender bias in children's books with male characters

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This is a book from 1916 featuring a female central character. Credit: Public Domain

The most comprehensive study of 20th century children's books ever undertaken in the United States has found a bias towards tales that feature men and boys as lead characters. Surprisingly, researchers found that even when the characters are animals, they tend to be male.

The findings, published in the April issue of *Gender & Society*, are based on a study of nearly 6,000 books published from 1900 to 2000. While

previous studies have looked at the representation of male and female characters in children's books, they were often limited in scope. "We looked at a full century of books," says lead author Prof. Janice McCabe, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Florida State University. "One thing that surprised us is that females' representations did not consistently improve from 1900 to 2000; in the mid part of the century it was actually more unequal. Books became more male-dominated."

The study also found that:

- Males are central characters in 57 percent of children's books published per year, while only 31 percent have female central characters.
- No more than 33 percent of children's books published in any given year contain central characters that are adult women or female animals, but adult men and male animals appear in up to 100 percent of books.
- Male animals are central characters in more than 23 percent of books per year, while female animals are in only 7.5 percent.
- On average, 36.5 percent of books in each year studied include a male in the title, compared to 17.5 percent that include a female.
- Although books published in the 1990s came close to parity for human characters (with a ratio of 0.9:1 for child characters; 1.2:1 for adult characters), a significant disparity of nearly 2 to 1 remains for male animal characters versus female.

Since children's books are a "dominant blueprint of shared cultural values, meanings, and expectations," the authors say the disparity

between male and female characters is sending children a message that "women and girls occupy a less important role in society than men or boys." Books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men, and shape the way children will think about their own place in the world.

The authors collected information from the full series of three sources: Caldecott award-winning books, (1938-2000); Little Golden Books, (1942-1993) and the Children's Catalog, (1900-2000). They found that Golden Books tended to have the most unbalanced representations.

A closer look at the types of characters with the greatest disparity reveals that only one Caldecott winner has a female animal as a central character without any male central characters. The 1985 book *Have You Seen My Duckling?* follows Mother Duck asking other pond animals this question as she searches for a missing duckling.

In seeking to answer why there is such persistent inequality among animal characters in books for kids, the authors say some publishers—under pressure to release [books](#) that are more gender balanced—use "animal characters in an attempt to avoid the problem of gender representation." However, their findings show that most animal characters are gendered and that inequality among animals is greater—not less—than that among humans.

The tendency of readers to interpret even gender-neutral animal characters as male exaggerates the pattern of female underrepresentation. The authors note that mothers frequently label gender-neutral animal characters as male when reading with their children, and that children assign gender to gender-neutral animal characters. "Together with research on reader interpretations, our findings regarding imbalanced representations among animal characters suggest that these characters could be particularly powerful, and

potentially overlooked, conduits for gendered messages...The persistent pattern of disparity among animal characters may reveal a subtle kind of symbolic annihilation of women disguised through animal imagery."

Provided by Sociologists for Women in Society

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