60 years of children's books reveal persistent overrepresentation of male protagonists

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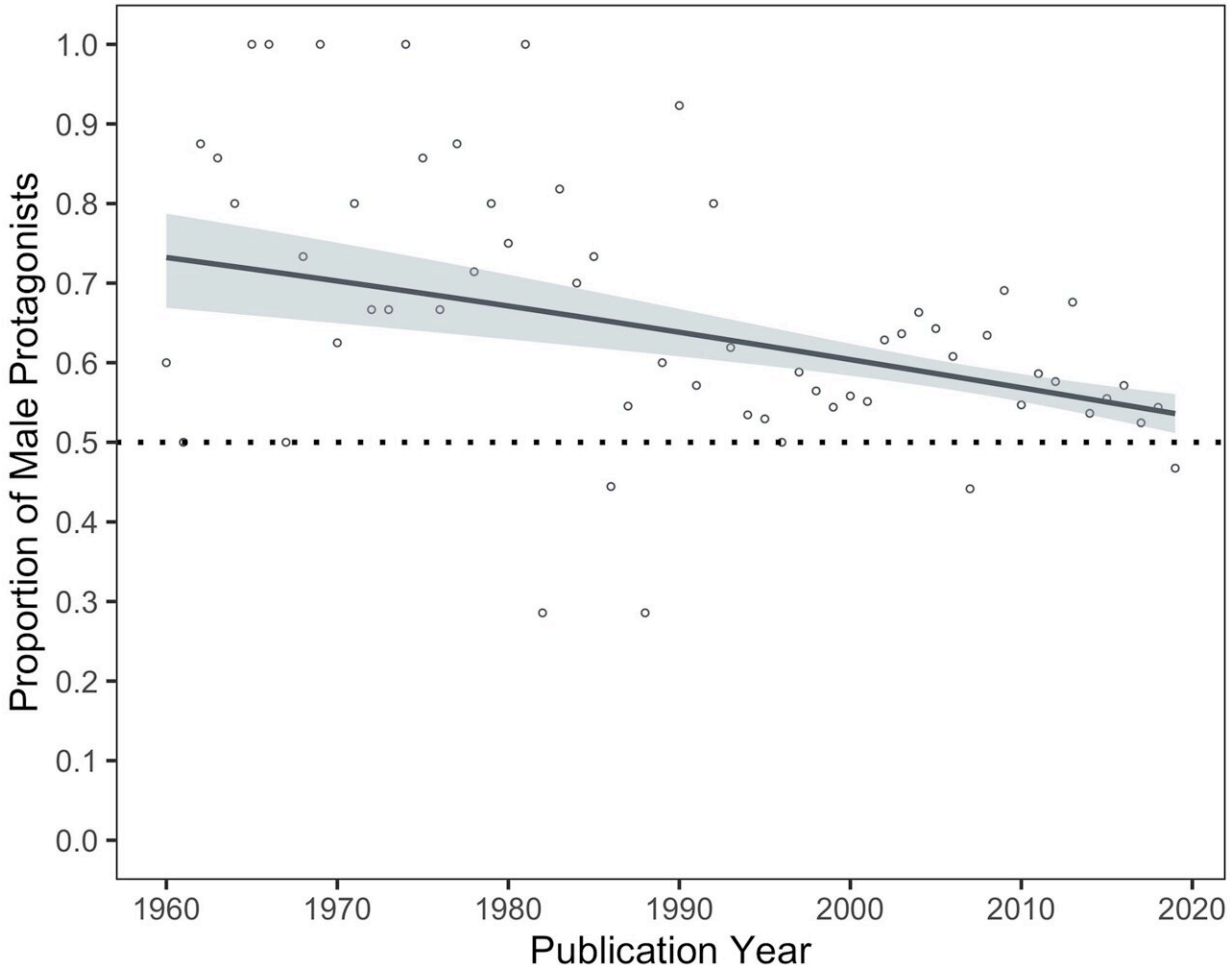

Individual points reflect proportion estimates for each year. The dotted line at 0.5 denotes parity. The shaded region shows the standard error of the binomial logistic regression model fit. Credit: Casey et al., 2021, *PLOS ONE*, CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

An analysis of thousands of children's books published in the last 60 years suggests that, while a higher proportion of books now feature female protagonists, male protagonists remain overrepresented. Stella Lourenco of Emory University, U.S., and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on December 15, 2021 and explore the factors associated with representation.

A large body of evidence points to a bias in male versus female representation among protagonists in children's books published prior to 2000. However, evidence is lacking as to whether that bias has persisted. In addition, it has been unclear which factors, such as author gender, may be associated with male versus female protagonists.

To help clarify whether gender bias still exists in American children's literature, the authors conducted a statistical analysis of the frequency of male versus female protagonists in 3,280 books, aimed for audiences aged 0 to 16 years and published between 1960 and 2020. They selected books that can be purchased online in the United States, either as hard copies or as digital books, and primarily written in English (