

Introduction

At the TED Women conference 2010, Tony Porter, a renowned activist working to end domestic violence, recounted the following story:

I can remember speaking to a 12 year-old boy, a football player, and I asked him, "How would you feel if, in front of all the players, your coach told you you were playing like a girl?" Now, I expected him to say something like, 'I'd be sad, I'd be mad, I'd be angry', or something like that. No, the boy said to me - the boy said to me, "It would destroy me." And I said to myself, "God, if it would destroy him to be called a girl, what are we then teaching him about girls?"

This thesis sets out to examine the cues about gender that are being transmitted by children's picture books, and to try to explain those cues by looking at societal norms and commercial pressures within publishing.

In 1972, a groundbreaking study found that picture book titles included male characters over female characters in a ratio of 8:3, and more worryingly, that in almost one third of the sample (Caldecott Medal winners 1966–71), there were no females featured at all. The following passage served as a catalyst to a number of social science researchers who realised there was a misrepresentation of gender in picture books, and who subsequently undertook research themselves:

Because women comprise 51 percent of our population, if there were no bias in these books they should be presented in roughly half of the pictures. However, in our sample we found... a ratio of 11 pictures of males for every one picture of a female. If we include animals with obvious [gender] identities, the bias is even greater. The ratio of male to female animals is 95:1.

This research, and those that followed it, have been almost exclusively conducted on books published in the US, with a dearth of data from the UK market. By analysing Kate Greenaway Medal winners, this thesis aims to contribute to our growing understanding of gender norms within UK publishing.

A brief introduction to gender

This study aims to examine the messages that picture books might transmit to children about gender. As such, it is sensible to spend some time outlining what is meant by the term gender. Intons-Peterson neatly sums it up as follows:

What is gender? We use the term to refer to a complex web of social beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, occupations, activities, and the like that are typically associated with females or males in a given society. We use 'gender' to designate the cultural, social, and psychological variations attributed to the two sexes and 'sex' to refer to biological differences.

The nature of gender is such that it is socially constructed; our ideas about what a man or a woman is like, beyond sexual characteristics, differ between societies. This is perhaps most easily illustrated by the changes that have occurred in Western beliefs about gendered appearance in the last two centuries. If told to picture a young girl, most people today would imagine a girl in a dress with long hair. A boy would have his hair cut short, and would wear trousers. However, in the 1830s, "knee-length dresses and long white trousers, with hair cut short, were recommended for both boys and girls". Indeed, a portrait of Franklin D. Roosevelt as a toddler shows him with "white skirt spread smoothly over his lap, his hands clasping a hat trimmed with a marabou feather. Shoulder-length hair and patent leather party shoes complete the ensemble." In the nineteenth century, it was believed that young boys and girls should be dressed the same way.

If boys in dresses don't adequately demonstrate how society's views have changed, then the following might. By the twentieth century it was no longer the fashion to dress boys and girls in the same style; a young child's sex was most easily distinguished by the colour of their clothing. But whereas now pink dresses are a staple of every girlsweat department, at the turn of the last century they would have been blue. A June 1918 article from *Earnshaw's Infants' Department* advises that, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl."

These facts are so surprising because our current ideas about gender seem fairly rigid. These gender demarcations are in large part due to the social norms of Victorian Britain. This began when the enfranchisement of the male working classes catalysed reforms in state education. The following generations saw a burgeoning of the middle class, where the now-educated husband could go out to work whilst the wife was left at home.

The home thus came to be seen as a feminine space, and before too long, "for boys over seven the home was thought all too likely to result in effeminacy". Thus, public schools [meaning private schools] for boys, which heavily emphasised learning to become men, exploded in Victorian Britain. One male writer of the time noted that, "as men have to rough it in the outer world, and fight their way to the post of honour that they may select for their goal, so the sports of boys must of necessity be rough, to prepare them for their future turbulent career." That male sport be rough was central; as Cunningham writes, "the manly boy was the boy who was physically tough, having learnt it on the games field. The effect of this... was to place an emphasis on the repression of emotion, on reserve."

The result of social pressure to educate middle class boys at expensive public schools was that very little money was left to spend on girls. Blanche Dundas, a girl writing to her friend, wrote that, "brothers howsoever charming they may be are expensive creatures and take *all* the money, and the sisters have to grow up ignorant and make their own dresses."

Any education that girls did receive was based around forming gentle graces and pleasant characteristics to help them find a husband. Alice Ottley, headmistress of Worcester High School, announced that, "the 'note' of the Worcester High School should be delicate, womanly refinement, a high-toned courtesy, a gentle manner, a dignified bearing." A commissioner of an 1860 education inquiry noted that "boys were educated for the world, girls for the drawing room".

This brief overview of recent influences of gender has already demonstrated a number of the key differences society highlights between the two sexes: men are athletic, aggressive, worldly and career-driven, whilst women are creative, gentle, homely and romance-driven. The feminist movements of the twentieth century made bold strides in breaking down many of the stereotypes typically associated with womanhood, and working mothers and female soldiers are totally accepted and approved of in our society. Indeed, for the first time in history, American women in their twenties are earning more money than their male counterparts.

The new sexism

Much improvement has been made in breaking down societal barriers for women and as a result, most young girls in this country know that they can be a girly-girl or a tomboy, or anywhere in between. It is broadly acceptable to be a young girl who detests pink, likes to watch rugby and burps after her afternoon milk. However, what is much less certain is how acceptable it is for a young boy to love pink, hate watching sport and dislike getting muddy. It can easily and logically be argued that this is sexism against women in a different guise – it is acceptable for a female to behave like a male, but shameful for a male to behave like a female – but regardless of that, its end result is that a whole group of young boys is being excluded by society.

Tony Porter argues that just as girls have to fight against an ingrained perception of gender, so do boys. He suggests that boys are presented with a 'man box', and that this man box discourages boys from expressing themselves freely. For example, he recounts his horror when he realised his intolerance of his son's tears, whilst he happily comforted his daughter when she got upset. As such, a boy is placed inside the 'man box' at a very young age. This rigid definition of manhood not only limits male expression, Porter argues, but actively encourages sexism and violence against women. The core boundaries of the 'man box' are:

- Don't cry or openly express emotions – with the exception of anger
- Do not show weakness or fear
- Demonstrate power/control – especially over women
- Base relationships around aggression-dominance
- Be a protector
- Do not be 'like a woman'
- Be heterosexual
- Do not be 'like a gay man'
- Be tough and athletic
- Have strength and courage
- Make decisions – do not need help
- View women as property/objects

Whilst there is still much to be done to improve women's standing in the world, there does also seem to be a largely unacknowledged sexism that targets males. One interviewee told me, "I think people are going to look back at what we're doing now, and see it as hugely sexist – sexist towards small boys."

Why picture books?

As discussed earlier, our ideas about gender do not come from biology, but from society. Each individual's conception of gender is *constructed* from a developing web of beliefs about how a man and woman look, talk, think, work and behave. These constructions happen at a very young age, and a child of five has an essentially fully-formed notion of the difference between a man and a woman in the social sphere.

The gender construction process starts at birth, and by the time they are two and a half, children can assign objects and activities to their 'appropriate' genders. For example, a hammer is more likely to be associated with a man and a cake is more likely to be associated with a woman. Six months later, they can classify interests and occupations into gender appropriateness. Firefighters and mechanics are identified as men, and teachers and nurses are identified as women. As such, "By the time the child enters kindergarten, he or she is able to make sex-role distinctions and express sex-role preferences."

Finally, between the ages of five and seven, children will attribute certain personality traits to either men or women. For example, numerous studies have found that “children as young as five years assign traits such as aggressiveness, independence, and self-confidence to men and gentleness, emotionality and dreaminess to women.” Children do not just learn to categorise personality attributes and behavioural cues – as Weitzman notes, “boys and girls are socialized to accept society’s definition of the relative worth of each of the sexes and to assume the personality characteristics that are ‘typical’ of members of each sex.”

Weitzman notes that, “Picture books play an important role in early sex-role socialization because they are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child.” This demonstrates that, as well as being age-appropriate in terms of gender development, picture books are also especially useful indicators of gender norms in our society because they so often “explicitly articulate prevailing cultural values.”

Do picture books especially influence children’s perception of gender?

However, picture books do not exist in a vacuum. There are many different influencers operating around a child, the most important of which are the child’s parents and social network, and the media they are exposed to. How parents, grandparents and siblings interact with a young child is, of course, very influential in that child’s developing construction of gender norms.

However, the external media that a child is exposed to also has a huge impact. This is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by studies that have found American children of non-white ethnicity to be just as likely as white children to describe a ‘girl’ as a ‘white blue-eyed person with long, blond, curly hair.’ In other words, books, television and other forms of media are so influential as to have overridden the gender cues provided by the appearance of those in the families and communities constantly surrounding them.

For children of seven and under, the mediums that they are most frequently exposed to are books, toys and television, being too young to interact much with gaming and the internet. Television undoubtedly has a large impact on a child’s developing gender norms, as research by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media has demonstrated.

The first stage of research was designed to pinpoint the messages that American children’s television programming was sending out. Researchers found that the aspirations of female characters were limited almost exclusively to finding romance, whilst male characters almost never had ‘finding romance’ as their ultimate goal. The number one occupation of girls and women was royalty (which, the researchers point out, is not a useful aspiration for most girls). Finally, they calculated that if female characters continued to be added to children’s programming at the current rate, gender balance would not occur for 700 years.

The second stage of research aimed to discover whether all this had any impact on the children viewing the material. Sadly, they found that “the more hours of TV a girl watches, the fewer options she thinks she has in life; the more hours a boy watches the more sexist his views become.” As such, TV has a significant impact on a child’s developing gender construction.

There is also research revealing the impact of toys on a child’s developing gender norms. For example, numerous studies performed since the 1970s have found that “young children do

not initially understand toys as gendered, but they that they rapidly learn that certain toys are 'for boys' and others 'for girls'." This has been increasing in recent decades as toy companies, aware of gendered consumer preferences, develop and market increasingly gender-stereotyped products.

A 2010 study completed by Becky Francis looked at toy preferences for British children aged between three and five years of age. The three favourite toys for girls were cuddly toys, Bratz dolls and toy dolls, whilst boys preferred toy cars, Power Rangers models and Thomas the Tank Engine characters. Francis noted that she could "identify little potential learning/skills development" in the toys for girls, whilst didactic opportunity was commonplace in the boys' toys, frequently "providing knowledge and skills development around construction and technology." Furthermore, toys for girls such as the Bratz dolls demonstrated hypersexuality – such as significant amounts of make up and revealing clothing - for the purpose of passively attracting a male romantic interest. Toys for boys, on the other hand, emphasised active heroism and machismo, both by action figurines themselves and the flames and explosions on the packaging.

Picture books are also significant influencers. Weitzman notes that, "these books are often read over and over again at a time when children are in the process of developing their own sexual identities. Picture books are read to children when they are most impressionable, before other socialization influences (such as school, teachers, and peers) become more important at later stages in the child's development." Indeed, the fact that picture books are often read at bedtime – just before the brain processes the day's information – in the presence of an influential companion (ie. parent) means that the 'staying power' of a picture book is sometimes disproportionate to the time spent absorbing it.

This is strengthened because picture books are "often our first encounter with written words. The stories told and morals which unfold help to shape our views as we learn to read and take meaning from what we read." It is precisely this new process – learning how to take meaning from what we read – that makes the books we are exposed to at an early age so important. Nodelman notes that, "the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced – in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture."

Flerx et al. found in 1976 that children exposed to picture books depicting non-stereotyped gender developed more flexible attitudes towards sex roles. The study was conducted on over seventy 4–5 year olds, and found that males had greater stereotyped beliefs, whilst females were more likely to be influenced by exposure to reverse-gender norms.

We frequently think of picture books as being a form of simple entertainment that tells stories in under 800 words. However, "looking carefully at images... entails, among other things, thinking about how they offer very particular visions of social categories such as class, gender, race, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so on." Indeed, adults take for granted how many schemas a child must already hold in order to be able to understand a picture book. To demonstrate this, Perry Nodelman used 6,000 words to analyse just the first page of the winner of the 1970 Kate Greenaway Medal, *Mr Gumpy's Outing*. He notes that the process of understanding the picture in relation to the short sentence beneath it – which takes approximately two seconds – actually demonstrates the social complexity that children are able to grasp. He points out the species-centricity, sexism and authoritarianism in that one picture alone, demonstrating that "readers of *Mr Gumpy's Outing* and many other apparently

'simple' picture books gain complex knowledge, not just of the world they live in but also of the place they occupy as individuals within it – their sense of who they are."

As children absorb the images and stories of picture books, they are learning about the world around them and about what kind of person that world expects them to be. To understand the importance of this, it is useful to note the findings of Intons-Peterson, who discovered that "after children have read stereotyped books, they are more likely to want to play with stereotyped than nonstereotyped toys."

The fact that picture books do have a very real bearing on how children think about gender mean that caregivers should think carefully about the messages that books send. As Nodelman says, "Picture books can and do often encourage children to take for granted views of reality that many adults find objectionable. It is for this reason above all that we need to make ourselves aware of the complex significations of the apparently simple and obvious words and pictures of a book."

Which messages have picture books been sending children?

Kolbe and LaVoie noted the potential in picture books to send positive messages to children, saying that they "have the power to change as well as instill cultural values". However, they also conceded that "in the area of sex roles, young children's books continue to show sexism".

Kolbe and LoVoie are not alone. Over sixty years of research has repeatedly shown that picture books have been sexist since the nineteenth century, and that they continue to be sexist today. Neuendorf states that:

Generally, the findings confirm a message environment of androcentrism (ie. with males heavily overrepresented in sheer numbers and routinely given more important roles) and sex stereotyping (ie. with significant and often predictable differences between male and female characterizations).

It is worth highlighting at this point that all the research performed in this area has analysed the American children's publishing market, and that as such there is no real record of British publishing's gender depiction over time. However, the two markets have far more uniting than dividing them, and it is useful to review the findings of these American studies.

The main focus of research has been to examine the presence of female characters in picture books, with every study finding a consistent imbalance between the ratio of male to female characters featured. The study that goes back the earliest is the Forlic study of children's literature, which was conducted in 1989 and which analysed 'easy' books in the children's catalogues produced by the American Library Association between 1900 and 1984. It found:

- A ratio of 2.3:1 of human males to human females included in the title of books
- A ratio of 6:1 of male animals to female animals in the title of books
- A 3:1 ratio of male to female central characters in books.

The authors Graverholz and Pescosolido found that "when all books were considered, males outnumbered females in all categories."

That study examined over eighty years of children's literature, but the seminal research on gender depiction in children's books was performed by Lenore Weitzman et al in 1972. In addition to the results mentioned earlier, the abstract of the study noted that, "it would be impossible to discuss the image of females in children's books without first noting that, in fact, women are simply invisible. We found that females were underrepresented in the titles, central roles, pictures, and stories of every sample of books we examined."

The situation is improving over time. One of the studies inspired by Weitzman, performed by Kolbe and LaVoie in 1981, found that “the ratio of female pictures and characters has improved considerably since 1972”. Furthermore, research completed in 2011 found that in a sample comprising the Children’s Catalog, Caldecott Medal winners and the Little Golden Books series, gender disparity in the 1990s almost disappeared for human characters. However, twice as many male animal characters were found than female animal characters. The researchers stated that, “the disproportionate numbers of males in central roles may encourage children to accept the invisibility of women and girls and to believe they are less important than men and boys, thereby reinforcing the gender system.”

Every study conducted since Weitzman’s groundbreaking research in 1972 has concluded that female characters are routinely excluded from picture books. The 2011 study concluded that, “this absence reflects a ‘symbolic annihilation’ because it denies existence to women and girls by ignoring or underrepresenting them in cultural products. As such, children’s books reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system.”

Moving beyond simple presence in picture books, research has also examined how male and female characters are portrayed. Weitzman found that, “when there are female characters, they are usually insignificant or inconspicuous”, and concluded that, “in the world of picture books boys are active and girls are passive.” In 1981, Kolbe and LaVoie were disappointed to note that despite improvements in the visibility of female characters, “role portrayal and characterisation had not changed”. Meanwhile, Lizbeth Goodman despaired that, “female role models offered to children in fairy tales and nursery rhymes are anything but liberating.”

Depressingly, whilst Weitzman commented in her 1972 study that, “the simplified and stereotyped images in these books present such a narrow view of reality that they must violate the child’s own knowledge of a rich and complex world”, McCabe et al were forced to conclude in 2011 that “research on gender representation in children’s literature has revealed persistent patterns of gender inequality.”

Commercial relevance

How, if at all, does gender depiction influence those making decisions about picture books, from authors and illustrators to publishing professionals, to booksellers, to consumers? This section aims to demonstrate the commercial relevance of gender-based research, and to emphasise that as an individual poised to begin her children's publishing career, gender is something that ought to be on my radar.

This section will take into account previous research, and will also draw upon the experience of four publishing professionals interviewed for this dissertation: two agents, an editor at a medium-size publishing house and an editor at one of the major publishers in the UK.

How do children feel about gender representation?

It seems sensible to begin the discussion of commercial relevance with those who will actually end up consuming the product: children. Whilst they do not buy books themselves, they do influence buying decisions, and parents will tend to buy books that are similar in approach to existing favourites at home.

There has been research performed to examine child responses to stereotyping in books. Unfortunately, the findings are far from conclusive. Clark, Kulkin and Clancy note that "depending on which researcher one reads, one could come away from the experimental literature believing that children remember best the stories in which characters do reverse-stereotyped things or the stories whose characters do stereotypical things."

Kropp and Halverston found that "preschool children actually dislike hearing stories in which characters of the opposite gender do gender-stereotyped things more than they dislike hearing stories in which characters of either gender do reverse-stereotyped things." In other words, children are more positive about characters that do not conform with traditional gender tropes.

However, the main variable between studies with conflicting conclusions is the age of the children being studied. As a rule, younger children find reverse-stereotyped characters more memorable, whilst older children find stereotypical characters more memorable. Therefore, for this study, where the sample of picture books selected implies an audience of children of six years old or younger, the fact that children of that age both *prefer* and *remember* reverse-stereotyped characters better indicates that our publishing schedules should take this into account.

In addition, heavily stereotyped books do not seem to be serving girls well: as far back as 1956, Brown found that "girls at every age are less likely to identify with the feminine role" because the hyper-feminine portrayal of the character was removed from how young girls actually thought and acted.

When I asked my interviewees whether children liked stereotyped characters, one agent I interviewed argued that "most [children] would prefer a simpler way of looking at the world. The whole of art is based on slight stereotypes or people wouldn't understand it." As such, stereotypes are valuable for young children with a limited grasp on the world – the tropes help them to follow the storyline. However, an editor disagreed, commenting that, "People underestimate how complicated a book a five year old can get into."

She suggested the following:

I would never say 'all children are interested in this.' But there are common experiences... and you want as much information about that experience as possible. People forget what it's like to be a child, and to have never done certain things, and all you want are as many examples of that thing as possible so you can work out how you're going to do it.

Another interviewee made a very similar point, commenting that, "the picture book audience is extremely conservative. They have a very narrow life – what would turn them on before four is a story about whatever issues they have at the time, like potty training."

Similarly, all interviewees agreed that children are not going to be noticing gender representation in a conscious, cognitive way. As one agent bluntly put it, "I just don't think any child is going to think 'the Gruffalo's a man, the mouse is a man, all the predators are men, and this is a book not about women'... *Charlie and Lola* doesn't sell because of balance between the male and female characters." For children, story is key – *Charlie and Lola* does set a wonderful example of balanced gender representation, but it is a bestselling series because the characters are funny and true to life.

Industry experts highlighted the importance of animals within picture book publishing. One editor explained, saying:

You can have animals going off on adventures and you don't have to worry that their parents aren't there. And a child can project themselves onto any animal more easily than they can with an image of a child that doesn't look like them.

This second point appears to be crucial – children must be able to identify with the characters they are reading about, and in the UK, "the picture book market is too small for there to be a book about going to nursery if you're a girl versus going to nursery if you're a boy".

Perhaps most interestingly, interviewees highlighted the difference between a child's public and private persona, particularly when it comes to young boys.

I've known little boys who would never, ever read certain picture books – they just wouldn't want to be caught reading them. But at bedtime, it's their favourite book, and they read it every night. There's a difference between what they enjoy and what they want to be seen doing.

This suggests that even very young children are sensitive to social pressures being exerted upon them when it comes to gender, and suggests that boys may have difficulty finding 'boysy' picture books that depict the full extent of a boy's life.

However, it appears that social pressures may be eased by the rise of the internet. One interviewee related the story of Disney's social networking site for 4–7 year olds called *Fairies: Pixie Hollow*. Initially, Disney did not create any male fairy characters at all, presuming that boys would not want to interact in a fairy world. But:

That anonymity you get with social networking meant that loads of boys wanted to be fairies, and they just picked the most boyish looking fairies with short hair. They just introduced their avatars as boys, and cracked on. It shifted what Disney were doing because they realised there was this whole section of boys who weren't being catered for at all. It changed not just the digital online stuff they were doing, but books as well.

Authors and illustrators

Of course, picture books could not exist unless authors and illustrators worked to create them. The ideas and personalities of characters are created in the artist's eye: "the author makes the book". This is shown clearly in some books such as the *FARTHER*, which won the 2011 Kate Greenaway. The editor of that title told me that "Grahame Baker-Smith, the author, is a really sensitive man." It comes across in his writing and illustration because both the male

characters in *FaRther* are depicted as creative, emotionally expressive and nurturing individuals. As such, if we want to widen depictions of gender in children's books, as one agent suggested, "Maybe it's the authors that need to change their way of thinking."

Similarly, I was told the story of Yoko Coko, a Japanese illustrator. Her upcoming picture book, *Hans and Matilda*, features Matilda who is well-behaved and neat, and Hans who is very naughty and messy. At the end of the book it becomes clear that Hans is actually Matilda in disguise. Yoko Coko's family see her as a quiet and respectful daughter – but at art college, she was known as 'crazy Yoko Coko'. As such, it was these opposing sides of her personality that inspired the book – and naturally, the clean and tidy characteristics were assigned to a female whilst a boy became messy. As the editor wryly noted, "I can't imagine someone coming along to me and proposing the opposite book – about a boy who's really naughty, who in his spare time does cleaning." Both *Hans and Matilda* and *FArTHER* demonstrate to what a great extent authors shape gender depiction in picture books.

Of course, this works in both directions – authors can also choose to represent characters in very traditional ways. One editor explained, "you can't impose your own opinions on stuff – you have to work with what the author is willing to do. Quite a lot of the time, people have fixed ideas... some aren't willing to change anything." However, at other times, authors are more happy to be advised. The second editor remarked to me that, "When you're working with good picture book authors and illustrators, you don't tell them what to do. They come to you with ideas and you shape them."

In one instance, an agent told me about a client who had been particularly conscious of gender depiction. Wanting to be representative, the client had 'shoehorned' a male character into a story about the tooth fairy. Whilst the agent appreciated what the client was trying to promote, she requested the male character's removal to ensure fluidity within the story – because, ultimately, "the gender of the character has to make sense".

There is a constant tension between editors, authors and illustrators, and one of the most significant ways in which illustrators are influenced is in the way they receive their briefings. Artwork preparatory notes from the author and the publisher can be stringent, and are often very specific, detailing what the character should be wearing and how they should look. Editors wield even more power when they ask for sample artwork submissions before selecting the illustrator for the project – they can determine how a character will look by choosing the illustrator whose vision most closely matches their own.

Illustration is another reason why there are so many animals in picture books. One interviewee told me, "Very few artists can do children at all. That's why you get animals." It also helps to avoid controversy – the same individual told me that "nobody can agree how a child should be drawn. I think everyone's terrified of stereotypes and therefore sunk into animals."

Publishing professionals

After the authors and illustrators, the people who influence gender depiction in children's books the most are publishing professionals: agents, editors, salespeople and marketers, among others. Publishers do far more than simply select titles; they also suggest characterisation and, as discussed earlier, have crucial input into how a character is visualised.

It is worth noting that editors are frequently feeding authors and illustrators advice from others in the publishing house – the whole team is involved. One editor told me about a friend who illustrates for one of the Big 4 publishers, but who can only do her creative work in the summer because of family commitments. The illustrator has so far been asked to redraw her illustrations for the same book three times, because each year a new sales team and marketing team is in place, each with a new interesting idea about what she should be doing.

These suggestions can relate to anything, but in many cases do relate to gender depiction issues. At one publisher, the first comment from the sales team upon seeing preliminary artwork was to ask that the female character – who was wearing yellow dungarees – be changed to “dress like a girl”. On that occasion, the response was, “no – she is a girl”. Sales teams also influence which books are acquired in the first place. Acquisitions meetings at publishers frequently discuss the need for a ‘boysy’ or ‘girly’ book in a particular month, and those conversations are driven by “sales people... who are most in touch with bookshops and what’s actually selling”.

Other interviewees pointed to the influence of marketing departments, saying that, “if the marketing teams think they can make it happen, there’s a big push behind it”.

This seems to be especially true in large publishing houses, where decisions by consensus are more common. An editor working at a medium-size publisher commented that, “I wouldn’t have the autonomy that I have if it was a bigger publishing house – if they take on a picture book, there is a lot more money behind it”. However, having more money to spend also means being able to create more varied lists. One editor at a large publishing house said:

When it comes to big publishers, it will always come down to what sells. But every picture book list has a balance of Kate Greenway-type books and big commercial sellers. So somewhere on each list there should be a place to think about gender.

However, is it true that commercial picture books have no room for balanced gender portrayal? As one editor points out, “there is room to be super-commercial and to have the builder be a woman, the nurse be a guy.”

Furthermore, the very fact that such significant amounts of money are involved should ensure that publishers try to get important issues like gender right, said the same editor:

It takes a huge amount to get a picture book made and to push it forward. You have to really believe in it. You’re talking about taking something that someone’s spent 6 months creating, you’re about to put £50,000 behind it. You have to believe in every single little thing. You want to shape a picture book list that is *your* picture book list, and that is an ambassador for you.

One way in which a larger publishing house might be able to create more flexibility in this area is to give greater independence to individual imprints. One interviewee highlighted Alison Green at Scholastic as a great example of this, suggesting that the reputation and personal involvement of Alison Green and her art director is such that autonomy is high. The editor argues that, “if you have a constant homogenising of picture books, you’re less likely to have a runaway success.”

A smaller publishing house might also be able to take a deliberate interest in social issues. For example, Frances Lincoln used to be predominantly interested in socially conscious picture books, with issues of race and gender at the forefront. A former employee of the company remarked, “It was very interesting... their primary motivation wasn’t to make a profit, but to make books they thought children should read. I think the hardest thing is to try and do both those things at the same time.”

However, most of my interviewees are adamant that, “it’s not the publishers’ job to create a genderless picture book section.” Publishers are not willfully blind to social issues, but as commercial ventures they do have to ensure a healthy bottom line. An agent commented that people tend to think publishers are “a little bit lame” when they defend male overrepresentation by arguing that whilst boys won’t read a picture book featuring a girl, girls will read a book about boys. She said, ‘I actually think that’s true. There’s a reason for them doing it.’”

The agent defended publishers further by saying:

I don’t think there is any editor in London who would suggest to one of their authors, ‘Ooh, rather than having mum being the managing director, can she be a stay-at-home mum?’ But I do think the vagaries of the market right now are such that publishers are extremely wary of taking a risk on anything. Even though they might say ‘we want something fresh and new’, what they actually want is something that looks like an already existing piece of publishing, which is quite frustrating.

It seems that most publishing professionals do not relate gender depiction to commercial success at all, despite research suggesting that children actually prefer reverse-stereotyped characters. As such, the main way in which thoughts about gender might be incorporated into commercial discussions is through explicit consideration of social issues. An editor remarked that, “I think publishers are broadly getting it right. The books that do represent stereotypes are balanced by those that try to subvert them.” But to what extent did my interviewees feel that they would try to influence gender? As expected, this was very much a personal choice. One agent said that:

I’m always quite outspoken to my clients. I get so bored when mum is always a nag. I try to squeeze that out of manuscripts when I can. But if I found a script that had really fantastic voice then I would perhaps overlook it.

Whilst another said that:

Unless it absolutely screamed at me that it was terribly gender-stereotypical, with endless fathers going off to work and mothers waving them goodbye - or the opposite, with the mother striding off to the garage whilst the father washed up in a pinny - I don’t think I’d notice it at all. I just want a good story, beginning middle and end.

One editor put her case forward thus:

I think there’s no way to *not* bring your own moral sense to the books you edit. If you don’t think about your moral sensibilities, you don’t know how you’re prejudicing things. It’s almost impossible to find a picture book editor who doesn’t have an opinion, even if that opinion is just to be as politically correct as possible.

The final interviewee, an editor, stated that:

I don’t think gender would necessarily be in my mind when I was considering a picture book. I don’t consciously think ‘we have X many books about girls and X many books about boys’. It depends on whether you are trying to deliberately promote a point of view, or whether you just want good stories. I just want good stories and illustrations.

External pressures on publishing houses

UK publishers no longer exist in a vacuum. Particularly with regard to picture books, global co-edition partners are vital in order to ensure a healthy profit – and sub-licensing of rights to TV companies and merchandisers is an ever-more-lucrative revenue stream.

Co-editions

All of my interviewees agreed that pressure from co-edition partners had an impact on gender depiction in the UK – because, “a publisher is not only trying to look out for gender stereotypes in this country, but all across the world”. However, there was disagreement about how that impact presented itself. One agent believed co-editioning led to more traditional representations of gender – that “it makes [publishers] verge more to the middle of the road than they might do if our domestic market was big enough to sustain whatever they wanted to publish”.

However, editors claim that other countries – most notably European nations – are more forward-thinking than the UK. This may be because in recent decades, British publishers were in front of foreign publishers in terms of representing girls in non-traditional ways.

French publishers are very conscious of how girls are portrayed, and are really selling to girls that they can be whatever they want to be. I think that happened in the UK in the 80s. Now, French publishers are a lot more sensitive about stereotyping women. I don't think any country is particularly brilliant at not stereotyping young boys.

One editor told me about a picture book in which the female character was a ‘girly girl’ and the male character was a ‘boysy boy’. The French publisher specifically requested if they could swap the gender roles around because they thought it was too stereotypical. The editor said, “I do think you have to be quite careful... the co-edition publishers come back and say ‘this is too stereotypical and quite dull.’”

Interestingly, the second editor remarked that, “the books that sell best in the UK aren't the ones that sell best in co-edition markets. The really mass-market picture books that sell well here don't do well in co-editions because the artwork style doesn't work in Europe - it's too flat.” Commercial picture books also tend to be the books with the most traditional gender portrayals.

Both agents and editors agreed that the USA was more sensitive to gender stereotyping than the UK. This is both because they have a significantly larger market (and thus are able to produce a broader range of books), and because, “they're careful not to offend. When you're trying to make books that appeal to the widest possible audience you... want to eliminate stereotypes.”

Licensing

In recent years, publishers have been much more eager to sign licensing deals with merchandisers and television companies. As one interviewee put it, they have “become more obsessed with extension of the publishing canvas”. This is because the children's publishing market is so difficult at the moment – and because publishers really only make money with a massive bestseller.

If a book makes it into a TV series, with the huge exposure that that leads to, the book has a far greater chance of making a big splash. However, media professionals can be very restrictive – as in Hollywood, they believe in producing with a core demographic in mind. One agent told me that, “if you talk to a television executive, they will be more gender stringent than you could possibly believe. There's a lot of pressure coming from that side of things.”

Even television programmes that appear to be breaking down gender barriers seem to actually be enforcing them. For example, *The Koala Brothers*, which broadcasts on CBeebies, is often championed as being a reverse-stereotype programme in which a female possum takes charge of two caring male koalas. However, the reality of the characterisation is to enforce

negative female images whilst promoting positive male images. For example, the female possum Mitzi's character is described thus:

Mitzi has a nervous, excitable personality and can be controlling and bossy... She often needs the Koala Brothers' help in overcoming her dominant, perfectionist, controlling personality.

As such, whilst the sex-roles may have switched from more common typecasting in which the males are dominant and the females are caring, the female's dominance is portrayed negatively, and in fact the male characters do exert dominance over her as they help her to "overcome her personality".

Furthermore, merchandising deals with toy companies further encourage publishers to conform to gender norms. As Francis demonstrated above, the children's toy market is very conventional with female toys almost exclusively pink and related to either nurture or fashion, whilst male toys deal almost exclusively with either mechanics or aggression. The book characters that toy companies are most likely to want to license are those which maintain the traditional gender narrative.

Librarians and booksellers

Further down the chain to the end user are those that make books available to consumers: booksellers and librarians. Whilst operating under vastly different models, both these groups wield twofold influence: on the one hand, they have a direct line of communication with publishers, and on the other, they are the 'gatekeepers' for consumers – those titles that they choose to make available to consumers are the ones that will sell.

Librarians

Librarians exert considerable influence over both the public and publishers. In the public domain, their purchasing decisions, display choices and support of certain authors (for example, by hosting a reading) all affect how visible a certain book may be. Indeed, it is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals who determine which books will win the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medals each year.

Whilst limited research has been performed on the role of librarians in shaping gender norms, in 2007 Stauffer found a consistent pattern, stretching from the 1880s to the present day, of librarians encouraging boys to read 'good books' in order to "indoctrinate young boys with proper gender role and class identification".

Publishers are also influenced by librarians, since many houses install panels of children's librarians to advise them. For example, Franklin Watts, the information imprint of Hachette Children's Books, regularly interacts with both librarians and teachers in order to ensure its books support the National Curriculum.

Booksellers

Bricks-and-mortar booksellers are especially powerful gatekeepers when it comes to picture books because consumers generally prefer to purchase illustration-heavy titles after physically browsing. However, because high street shops have limited shelf space (in comparison to online retailers like Amazon), consumers are exposed to a much smaller selection of books. With picture books tending to provide such low returns, space provided for them in shops particularly tight.

As a result, frequently there is only room to display one book on each topic, restricting the purchasing choices of consumers. This has an effect on gender stereotyping because, as one

agent said, “if there is only one book in the store about going to stay at granny’s, consumers will just buy it. Doesn’t matter who it’s aimed at or what the gender stereotyping is.”

All this means that, “retailers have had a huge grip on publishers for a very long time.”

In addition, interviewees cited problems caused by inexperienced booksellers in chains such as Waterstone’s, where poor knowledge of the market leads consumers feeling frustrated about a lack of choice. On the high street, depictions of gender may look traditional (because space is frequently given to character books tying into conservative television programmes), when the reality may be that online, much more diverse representations of gender exist.

The power in the hands of retailers leads to confusion about what drives sales patterns – that consumers only buy the books that are in stock, or that stores only stock what consumers will buy. As one editor groaned, “I don’t know whether what sells is just what’s on offer, or if it’s what people actually want to buy.”

Consumers

As alluded to earlier, the end users of picture books are not the ones with the purchasing power. The most frequent purchasers of picture books are parents and grandparents, who naturally influence the kind of gender depictions the children in their care are exposed to.

We have already seen how the choice of books has already been limited by the time consumers are involved: authors must choose to write a certain way, illustrators must draw a certain way, editors must acquire certain books and advise in certain ways, and booksellers must stock certain titles. So in many ways, as one editor put it, “the choice is made for them by publishers”.

However, all the above-mentioned links in the chain make their decisions based on what they think adults will buy. For example, editors make decisions based on advice from the sales team, and “usually the sales team represents a knee-jerk reaction from the bookseller”. Since picture books are exposed to children when they are at such a young age, there is a “real paranoia” about what parents and grandparents will consider appropriate.

Confusion is king in this area too, with no interviewees clear about what consumers actually want. One editor remarked that, “I think people think girls want lots of pink princessy stuff, so that’s what we produce for them. I don’t necessarily think that that’s what girls want, or even that that’s what parents want for their little girls either.”

As a result, publishing professionals seem to have avoided too much detailed thinking about publishing to market. One editor confided that, “when I’m making a picture book, I’m not thinking about whether an element is going to put a parent off buying it. I try and think about whether the book has the best possible story, regardless of what the underlying influence of the characters is. If the story’s good, then parents will buy it and children will read it. But that’s probably naïve.”

The changing picture book landscape

Now that the publishing chain has been examined in detail, I will consider the changes, if any, that have occurred in the industry's attitudes towards gender depiction. My interviewees represented a good range of experience, with some respondents having spent almost thirty years in children's publishing and others having first entered the scene seven years ago.

The consensus seems to be that around twenty years ago, the publishing industry was much more occupied with gender stereotyping – specifically, in trying to eradicate female stereotyping – than it is now. Those who entered the industry less than ten years ago reported little or no change in attitudes towards gender (either as an important issue or in terms of the kinds of depiction that are preferred), whilst those with a long-standing presence felt they had seen a shift.

The most experienced interviewee related the following:

Fifteen or twenty years ago publishers would be absolutely saying that they didn't want gender stereotypical books. There was a genuine desire among editors to find books that didn't reflect the traditional sort of family, and they would talk to authors about not doing stereotypical gender backgrounds. But... I suppose it's become much more normal to have a family where both the mother and father work – and we have a writing community that tends to be rather liberal and anti-gender-stereotype anyway. I think they just moved on.

Similarly, an editor working in the industry for nine years lamented that:

These days there is less attention on gender as an issue. I feel like, mistakenly, gender is seen as less of a concern – and it should be more of a concern. Girls from my generation onwards were well-targeted to realise how many options they have and how okay it is to be who you are. I think boys don't have anything like that, and haven't had anything like that.

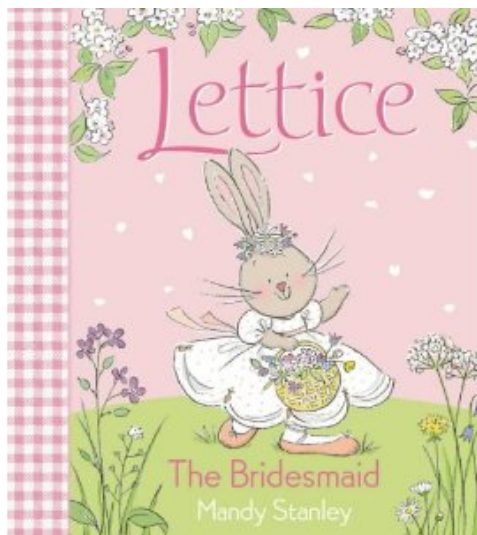
However, despite an apparent disinterest in gender representation, one agent did note a significant decline in human characters in picture books, and a corresponding increase in animal characters, and attributed the shift to concern about gender stereotyping in human children.

The most recent major change in children's books appears to have happened ten years ago, when, as one agent put it, "the world slightly divided into Pink Publishing and Other Publishing."

Pink Publishing

The phenomenon is most clearly described by one agent. When I asked her to describe the characteristics and stereotypes associated with girls, she replied with one word: "pink".

Recent developments in publishing have led to a huge increase in the amount of picture books that are overwhelmingly 'pink and fluffy'. A prime example is the *Lettice Rabbit* series by Mandy Stanley, published by HarperCollins.



Whilst Lettice does occasionally have adventures of a 'boysy' nature, most obviously when she flies an aeroplane, the vast majority of titles sees the cute rabbit engaging in fairy balls, planning parties and picking flowers. The colour scheme of almost every book is pastel pink. She fits almost precisely into the traditional stereotype of a girl, which was described by one editor as "pink and fluffy, sparkly. Princesses. Tea parties." The Lettice series is just one of many series portraying conventional images of girls.

Two interviewees referenced a recent trend to 'reclaim' pink as a symbol of womanhood, highlighting its use in campaigns for breast cancer awareness. Indeed, some argue that the huge influence of Pink Publishing really represents a sign of dominant female values both in the marketplace and in society.

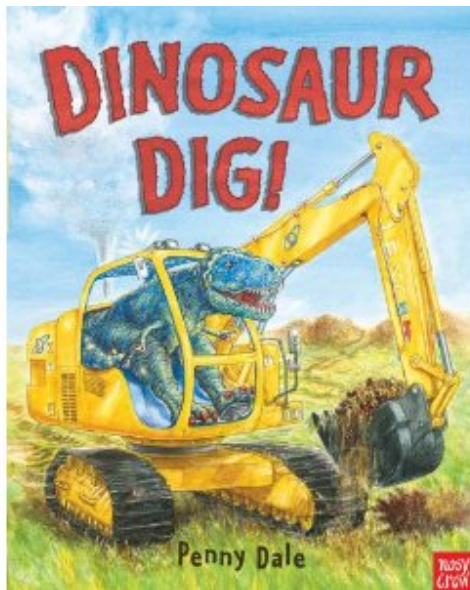
One agent suggested that female characters may stick closely to stereotype because within picture books, there is limited space to explain why they might be breaking out of it. She exclaimed, "I can understand why the Gruffalo is a man, and works as a man, because if it was a woman, you'd have to explain an awful lot – what was Mrs Gruffalo doing in the wood?"

The other difficulty with the idea of a 'Mrs Gruffalo' is that the Gruffalo needs to be a scary monster. As one editor commented, "one thing that little girls are not supposed to be is ugly." She told me about vibrant debates with one of her illustrators: "I want [him] to make his book about a classroom of aliens to have the aliens be girls." The illustrator is having a difficult time adjusting to the idea, but the editor thinks the story has a powerful twist: "so that the characters think of themselves of beautiful, regardless of what readers see and think about them".

The new sexism

Whilst my data did not appear to support theories that sensitive young boys were being overlooked, all the interviewees independently raised this as a main concern regarding gender in children's books. It was frequently noted that females seemed to be given more choice in how to define themselves whilst remaining unambiguous in their gender selection – that a girl could be a tomboy and still be seen as a girl, but that a sensitive boy was seen as 'gay' or 'a girl'. One editor commented that, "it's quite rare that you get stick for girls being too tomboyish, but if boys are feminine you can run into trouble."

Just as there are many books, like *Lettyce*, aimed squarely at perpetuating female stereotypes, many books seek to do the same for boys. One such title is Penny Dale's *Dinosaur Dig*, in which dinosaurs operate building machinery:



Within publishing, the notion of a boy's 'big machinery phase' between the ages of three and four is a well-known phenomenon, and countless books exist to exploit it. However, focus on the more traditionally masculine interests of a boy risks alienating others. For example, one editor noted that, "if you're a six year old boy, you've got a lot to live up to." This becomes a problem when, "for a lot of kids, picture books are a bedtime thing which is really comforting. A lot of the comforting bedtime picture books are for girls. Not *ostensibly* for girls, but..."

The implication is that our society's phobia of sensitive young boys limits their ability to experience and enjoy books that all young children have an emotional connection to.

This section has considered the interplay between societal and commercial factors surrounding gender in children's picture books. It seems that whilst most interviewees believed that sex stereotyping as an issue warrants a presence in publishing professionals' psyches, the degree to which it actually influences commercial decision-making is varied depending on individual taste.

Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to clarify the attitude towards gender depiction in the UK both by analysing sex stereotyping in award-winning picture books, and by placing that stereotyping in the context of the domestic market. It has found that significant overrepresentation of males to the detriment of females has continued to persist.

However, it has also found that whilst some character stereotyping transmits unhelpful messages to children, there are signs that both sensitive young boys and adventurous young girls are being considered and catered for. I believe it is crucial to continue this positive trend since, "reading egalitarian books to children over a sustained period of time shapes children's gender attitudes and beliefs."

One of the most startling findings to have come from my content analysis was the extent to which characters from ethnic minorities are still excluded from picture books, with just two characters (in the same book) being non-white in the entire sample. Not a single Asian or African-American character has ever featured in a Kate Greenaway-winning picture book.

Worryingly, anecdotal evidence points to systematic exclusion of black characters. One editor commented about a black main character in one of their picture books, “the number of times we were asked to make her white...I was really shocked and surprised”. This seems to be a pattern beyond the UK as well, as the following indicates:

We had one picture book where the girl on the front cover was black. I had comments back from international sales that that was a reason why some international publishers were not taking the book. In a commercial publishing house, they don't find that disgusting. They want what sells lots.

Industry experts gave two main reasons for the lack of black characters in picture books. On the one hand, few authors and illustrators (the vast majority of whom are white) create black characters, with one agent noting that, “artists have quite a problem doing non-white children. Not many people can.” This problem is then compounded by the perception that just as boys will not read a book about girls but girls will read a book about boys, white children will not read a book about black children but black children will read a book about white children. In both cases, the implication is that the experiences of minority groups are not worth sharing. More research is needed to properly examine this issue.

To improve gender representation in children's books, many different actors in the publishing chain need to be in support. Picture books must of course be placed in a cultural context. Children do not exist in a vacuum, and there are other influencers of gender norms like television and toys which may be subject to greater stereotyping than books. As such:

“Books are one piece of a socialisation and identity formation process that is coloured by children's prior understandings of gender. Because schemas are broad cognitive structures that organize and guide perception, they are often reinforced and difficult to change. It takes consistent effort to combat dominant cultural messages, including those sent by the majority of books.”

The whole body of research into gender in children's books began in 1972 following Weitzman's seminal study. The recommendations made by the researchers forty years ago were that picture books have:

- More flexible sex roles – fathers in housework and childcare, mums beyond the home
- A more positive image of a woman's potential
- Boys that express their emotions as well as their intellect
- More attention to single parents/divorced families.

Progress does seem to have been made, with my research finding many instances of male emotional expression. However, occupations seen in picture books continue to fall in line with traditional gender norms, and the nuclear family still dominates. Indeed, 2009's *Harry and Hopper* provided the only definitive instance of a single parent family, although a number of other books featured only one parental figure.

Furthermore, we are starting to see books in which – just as at one point it was groundbreaking to show girls enjoying male clothing – we see male characters enjoy female clothing. In fiction, David Walliams' *The Boy in the Dress* enjoyed real commercial success, and depicted a straight, athletic boy who simply enjoyed the greater choice and glamour associated with dresses. Meanwhile, Cheryl Kilodavis' picture book *My Princess Boy* strides to challenge social pressures by emphasising the normality of boys with traditionally feminine

outlooks, who love to wear pink dresses and enjoy dancing: “My Princess Boy has playdates with boys and girls. He likes to climb trees in his Princess Boy tiara crown.” These books and their colleagues (such as Harvey Fierstein’s *The Sissy Duckling*) are really pushing boundaries and encouraging publishers to cater to a previously unacknowledged group of children.

As part of a Masters programme that is predominantly vocational, publishing dissertations tend to focus on the hot topics of the moment, such as digital rights or the emerging world of digital marketing. As such, this thesis represents a departure from the norm. However, the digital side of publishing is changing and developing so rapidly that research now will be outdated within twelve months. This dissertation aims to address an issue that publishing professionals, especially editors, will face throughout their careers: characterisation. It proposes that, as postgraduates poised to enter the publishing industry, we should be aware of the influence that our editorial decisions can wield, and of the responsibilities that result from that influence.

I believe we have a responsibility to ensure that the picture books we offer to children and parents represent a world where men and women are equal – and where there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to be a boy or girl. One of my interviewees summed up my position perfectly, so I will leave the conclusion of this research to her:

Even if what you’re doing is only going to affect a small number of people, doing it to the best that you can is important. At the same time as we’ve had social networking sites and computer games, you’ve had a huge readership of children who have championed fiction, who have absolutely driven children’s publishing to the forefront of all publishing in terms of profitability. Yes, there are always lots of other things for children to do, but there always have been. There’s something that a book gives you – it’s quiet, and you’re on your own. It makes you calmer. There’s something there – and it’s worth fighting for.