

# David's Paradox: The Limitations of Textual Analysis of Gender Representation in Picture Books

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**ABSTRACT:** Various authors have counted gender representation in picture books using textual analysis, notably Crisp and Hiller in 2011. However, text-only analyses such as theirs are problematic because they do not adequately address inequalities in visual representation of gender, nor consider the focalization that informs a book's text. Ultimately, these text-only studies serve to reinforce rather than challenge lopsided gender representation in picture books.

**Keywords:** children's literature, gender, gender equality, picture books, sex role attitudes



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Children's literature is rife with sexism and unbalanced gender representation. Commentors like Segel (1982) have noted progress in eliminating the worst offenses, but gender representation still tilts heavily in favour of implied-male characters, including in books that feature anthropomorphic animals (Brugeilles et al., 2002; McCabe et al., 2011; Casey et al., 2021). Even an innocuous book like *Boo Hoo Bird*, a story about a bird's friends trying to help with a small injury, falls prey to the Smurfette principle by featuring a single female character compared to five males (Pollitt, 1995; Tankard, 2009).

Unequal gender representation in picture books is a problem, in part because harmful gender norms can be formed at a young age (Pollitt, 1995; Hamilton et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2007; Crisp & Hiller, 2011). McCabe et al. (2011) specifically warned that the gender ratio in picture books may lead to all children accepting that males are more important than females. Sciurba (2017) felt that "we, as a literary community, still have a long way to go before gender variance is represented positively and equitably" (p. 291). Goddard (2013) went one step further and argued that "sexism in picture books must be identified and critiqued in both its overt and subtle manifestations in order to properly combat against it" (p. 24). Goddard's belief is broadly reflected by the number of attempts to count gender representation in picture books, including a 2011 study conducted by Crisp and Hiller.

In their study, Crisp and Hiller (2011) focused on textual elements such as pronouns and words that implied gender and did not identify character genders based on illustrations. They justified their decision by noting that "relying upon visual cues in illustrations to determine the gender of a character or figure necessarily entails relying upon normative constructions or personal understandings of what it means and looks like to be either male or female" (Crisp & Hiller, 2011, p. 199). Their study classified characters not gendered by text, regardless of their physical appearance, as ungendered (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). While their approach limited the likelihood of misgendering characters, ultimately Crisp and Hiller's methodology represented a deliberate downplaying of various elements of picture books, including the role of illustrators and focalization, and served to reinforce rather than challenge the male-dominant character slate presented in so many picture books.

## Picture Books as a Format

While they target a young audience, picture books are not a standardized, homogenized format. The Association for Library Service to Children (2008) defined a picture book as a text that "essentially provides the child with a visual experience" (Caldecott Terms and Criteria section, para. 4). The ALSC's broad definition lends itself to a wide range of possibilities, from the textless *Where's Walrus* by Steven Savage to *The Book With No Pictures* by B. J. Novak. Similarly, the ALSC's definition allows for a variety of points of view; picture books are not limited to a single method of focalizing their stories. Yannicopoulou (2010) noted that "different focalization strategies in picture books provide the reader-viewer with different information ranging from a more restrictive to a more encompassing presentation and interpretation of the fictional universe" (pp. 66-67). In short, picture books can feature a variety of narrators with varying levels of knowledge about the characters and their motivations. However, Crisp and Hiller chose not to consider illustrations

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and focalization when determining character genders, to the detriment of their study.

## Illustrations

With a scant few exceptions, illustrations are a fundamental component of picture books. Schatz (1967), Doonan (1993), Eubanks (1999), Goldstone (2004), and Matulka (2008) all praised the role of illustrators and noted that picture books require the melding of visual and textual offerings to create a cohesive, or in some cases deliberately incohesive, whole. Lambert (2006) referred to this interplay as “a dance between pictures and words, wherein each is an equal partner” (p. 33). Yannicopoulou (2010) felt that “picture books require the cooperation of two modalities, verbal and visual, to establish an inherently dialogic relationship” (p. 66). In essence, readers experience a picture book as a combination of its text, illustrations, and the reader’s interpretation of the two.

In contrast, Crisp and Hiller (2011) focused solely on textual elements and noted that they did not “concern [them]selves with trying to imagine how ‘most’ children will view these images” (p. 200). However, *Bear, Do You Wear Underwear* by Todd H. Doodler demonstrates some of the problems inherent to Crisp and Hiller’s approach. While Doodler (2012) did not include any pronouns or other words that would explicitly gender the characters, he named three kinds of underwear worn by the animals that are stereotypically worn by boys and men: boxers, briefs, and “tighty-whites.” Notably, Doodler (2012) did not name panties, nor any other kinds of underwear stereotypically worn by girls and women. In total, six of the nine animals portrayed in the book wore underwear either labeled as or visually depicted as the kinds listed above (Doodler, 2012). But according to Crisp and Hiller’s (2011) methodology, all nine animals in the book should be classified as ungendered.

## Narration and Focalization

In addition to downplaying the importance of illustrations in conveying character gender, Crisp and Hiller largely bypassed the fundamental role of the narrator and the book’s focalization. While not named as such, their methodology assumed the picture books in the study employed zero focalization, which Yannicopoulou (2010) described as “a godlike narrator report[ing] the facts without the apparent subjective interpretation of an internal focalizer” (p. 74). However, picture books employ a wide variety of focalization, including stories told from a particular character’s point of view. Yannicopoulou (2010) described this kind of focalization as fixed internal focalization and noted that “because the narrator, and consequently the reader-viewer, has no direct access to events that the focalizer does not witness in person, this type of focalization is liable to certain limitations” (p. 68).

*David’s Father* by Robert Munsch demonstrates the possible contradictions caused by applying Crisp and Hiller’s methodology to a story with fixed internal focalization. As the story begins, Julie meets David for the first time and the book’s text states, “He seemed to be a regular sort of boy, so she stayed to play” (Munsch, 1983, para. 4). By referring to David as “he,” the text would meet Crisp and Hiller’s (2021) criteria for counting David as a boy. However, that same sentence and the lack of illustrations showing events happening apart from Julie indicate that the entirety of the book is written from Julie’s point of view. The narrator did not share David’s thought

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processes, nor did they indicate that David's introduction included pronouns. David did not say "I'm David, and my pronouns are he/him." In short, it was Julie herself making the determination to use the words "he" and "boy" to describe David, based solely on her interpretation of David's appearance, something that Crisp and Hiller (2011) argued was problematic for people studying gender in picture books.

## Reinforcing the Status Quo

Finally, despite their good intentions, Crisp and Hiller's approach offered authors and publishers an easy out—a way to maintain the status quo rather than move towards better representation in picture books. By removing gendered pronouns and other gender-identifying labels from manuscripts, authors and publishers could conceivably point to Crisp and Hiller's methodology, claim all their characters are ungendered, and continue with an uneven split in visual gender representation. Alternatively, authors and publishers could embrace characters who take the form of animals or normally inanimate objects. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) commented that using non-human entities as characters would allow authors to ignore character aspects such as age and gender. In theory, an author or publisher using a combination of these approaches could produce a picture book with no explicitly gendered characters.

The problem with presenting a slate of technically ungendered characters is with the readers and listeners themselves. Children tend to label characters according to a gender binary, regardless of a character's status as gendered or ungendered, animal or human, animate or inanimate, and when they do, they overwhelmingly consider the characters to be male (Segel, 1982; White et al., 1996; McCabe et al., 2011; Hill & Jacobs, 2020). Lambdin et al. (2003) specifically noted that "it appears that an animal must be 'super-feminine' before even close to half of participants will refer to it as *she* rather than *he* and before the majority of participants will resist seeing it as a male" (p. 479). However, according to Crisp and Hiller's methodology, a bare-chested character named Liam who wears boxer shorts and daydreams about playing professional American football could be counted as ungendered regardless of how children would gender the character based on that illustration. Admittedly, none of the above descriptors preclude the possibility of Liam being a girl, nonbinary, or any other gender. However, failing to label Liam and similar characters as boys in surveys of picture books may imply a false gender balance and ensure a continued real deficit in visual representation of implied girls and women in picture books, with serious consequences for children.

## Conclusion

Gender representation in picture books remains biased in favour of implied-male characters, which may perpetuate gender stereotypes and limit the possibilities explored by children of all genders. Studies that examine gender representation in picture books may serve as important tools to hold authors and publishers accountable. However, text-focused methodologies like Crisp and Hiller's ignore fundamental aspects of picture books such as illustration and focalization, and provide an easy method for authors and publishers to superficially balance gender representation by making a few textual changes while maintaining the visual status quo.

To encourage more equal gender representation in picture books, future studies should include additional elements beyond mere textual analysis. First, any analysis of gender representation in picture books should include focalization. While the distinction may not matter to an average child reading a book, accounting for focalization may help studies handle books featuring unreliable narrators and avoid the contradictions demonstrated by *David's Father*. Second, future studies should make some attempt to evaluate the genders depicted in illustrations. Granted, the interpretation of images is subjective, may not reflect an individual's response to the images, and may prioritize normative gender appearances. However, picture books are a visual medium, and the balance of visual gender representation should be considered in addition to textual gender representation. If focalization and illustrations are considered along with textual elements, perhaps the resulting studies will provide a fairer and more actionable tally of gender representation in picture books.

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