

# COOL not CUTE!

How picture books can help to close the literacy gender gap

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This essay asserts that the output of the picture book industry reflects girls' tastes more than it does boys' and that this bias is exacerbating the gender gap between boys' and girls' reading abilities.**

### **Part 1: *The Uneven Playing Field***

As the first books that most children encounter, picture books have a critical role in establishing reading habits and creating a positive attitude towards literature. Research shows that children that read for pleasure do better in maths, vocabulary and spelling and gain advantages that last their whole lives.

The gatekeepers in the world of picture books are overwhelming female. In the professions where picture books are produced and accessed, women outnumber men by a ratio of around 10:1. A similar demographic applies to picture book consumers — 84% of picture books, including those bought for boys to read, are purchased by adult women. As a consequence, the picture book industry's output reflects female-typical content preferences more than it does male-typical content preferences. Even picture books about pirates, dinosaurs, aliens or vehicles that might be characterised as having boy-typical appeal, partially reflect the tastes of the mother or grandmother that will usually be purchasing them.

While picture book content that reflects female-typical preferences is generally accepted as *suitable* and *appealing* by publishers, teachers, librarians and consumers, picture book content that reflects male-typical preferences is often regarded as being less suitable and less appealing and is rejected or diluted as a consequence.

### **Part 2: *The Missing Ingredients***

One reason given by many gatekeepers for rejecting picture book content with boy-typical is that it is not age appropriate. However the same content is deemed age appropriate by other media including television, films, video games and comics. This may be why many boys favour these media over picture books.

The essay lists five boy-friendly ingredients commonly found in 'U' certificate, age appropriate films, TV shows and comic books that are relatively rare in picture books: *Combat, Technology, Peril, Irredeemable Villainy and Rude Humour*.

It also mentions a sixth ingredient, *Cuteness*, which, though regarded by many picture book publishers as increasing a book's appeal, has the opposite effect on many boys.

The essay finishes by suggesting ways that publishers, schools, libraries and parents can help to address this bias and close the gender gap at picture book age.

The complete essay, along with two related essays, *NATURE and NURTURE* and *FIGHTERS and FASHIONISTAS*, can be found at [coolnotcute.com](http://coolnotcute.com)