

# COOL not CUTE!

## How picture books can help to close the literacy gender gap

This is a revised and updated version of the essay that was originally published in 2013.

You can find an outline of the revisions at [coolnotcute.blogspot.co.uk/2015/02/revisions.html#blogpost](http://coolnotcute.blogspot.co.uk/2015/02/revisions.html#blogpost)

### Part 1: The Uneven Playing Field

#### Introduction

There is a problem with boys and books. They don't seem to want to read them as much as girls do and this has resulted in a *gender gap* in reading ability.

The problem is outlined in the *Boys' Reading Commission* report<sup>1</sup> published in 2012 by the National Literacy Trust. The report is in response to increasing concerns about boys' underachievement in reading and notes that the *gender gap* is already present at age five and grows wider as children grow older. The 2012 OECD Council report<sup>2</sup> on gender equality in education, states that in reading skills "boys lag behind girls at the end of compulsory education to the equivalent of a year's schooling, on average, and are far less likely to spend time reading for pleasure."

I found the Reading Commission report depressing reading, not just because of the scale of the problem, but because, in my view, the solutions outlined in the report are unlikely to be effective on their own.

The report seems to regard the gender gap as principally a sociological issue and the opening summary highlights three factors that they feel need addressing: home environment, school environment and "male gender identities that do not value learning". All these factors have a significant influence; but there is a critical factor that the report barely acknowledges.

Tucked away on page 21 of the 28 page report is the following statement:

***There was also significant evidence to suggest that many boys do not choose to read simply because they cannot find reading materials that interest them.***

In my opinion, this is THE most important factor that needs addressing if the gender gap is to be closed.

I believe that the problem starts with picture books and the fact that the gender gap has already taken root by the time children enter school at age five<sup>3</sup> would seem to support this. First impressions are important, particularly for children, and if we can provide boys with picture books that appeal to them at this early age, we may be able to nip the problem in the bud.

However I don't believe this is remotely possible without some radical changes to the picture book industry's output and the culture that surrounds it.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/4056/Boys\\_Commission\\_Report.pdf](https://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/4056/Boys_Commission_Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/social/family/50423364.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The report notes there is already a gap of 11 percentage points between boys' and girls' achievement in reading at age 5.

I've split this essay into two parts:

- In this first part I'm going to explain how publishers, schools, libraries and parents all play a role in making the content of picture books less appealing to boys than girls.
- In the second, I'm going to list some of the ingredients that are particularly appealing to boys that are missing from most picture books and suggest how publishers, schools, libraries and parents can help address the gender bias in picture books.

I've also written two related essays which can be read as appendices to this essay. *NATURE and NURTURE* looks at some of the scientific evidence that suggests there are innate sex differences in boys and girls preferences. And *FIGHTERS and FASHIONISTAS* is intended to address concerns about gender-stereotyping that may arise from the assertion that some preferences should be acknowledged as being boy or girl-typical.

Most of this essay is based on my 17 years' experience as a picture book author, but I'm going to start with my experience as a parent.

## A Parent's Tale

Around the same time I began my career as a children's author, my wife and I decided to start a family. It would be several years before I was earning a proper living from my books and we needed to pay the bills, so my wife worked full-time while I combined writing with being a stay-at-home dad to our son, Max.

One of the advantages of this arrangement was that I was able to use Max as an excuse to raid the picture book section of our local library. We were allowed to borrow six books at a time; usually we'd take three books that Max had chosen and three books that I'd chosen because I wanted to read them myself as well as try them out on Max.

We started reading to Max when he was only a few months old, moving on quickly from board to picture books. At this early age, Max had an obvious enthusiasm for books. His first steps, at thirteen months old, were across the living room to pick up a picture book, which he brought back, still tottering upright, to his mum and I, so that one of us could read it to him. It seemed obvious that this was a boy who was going to love books.

Despite a varied reading diet, Max developed his own tastes and as he approached the age of three, he was particularly keen on picture books featuring machines and vehicles. *The Amazing Machines* series by Tony Mitton and Ant Parker were big favourites as were *No Problem* and *Tick-Tock* by Eileen Browne and David Parkins. I don't think it's a coincidence that Max developed these tastes at an age when psychologists tell us that a child's gender identity stabilises.

By the time Max was three, he was going to nursery for half of the week. And it was around this age that he started showing an increasing interest in other media such as TV, films, comics and video games. It's often said that boys find these media more attractive, but it seemed clear that it wasn't the media themselves that Max was drawn to so much as the content they contained — content that was largely absent from the picture books we were still trying to share with him.

Max's nursery friends were big fans of the *Power Rangers* TV series that was airing at the time. My wife and I were not big fans of the *Power Rangers*; the series had low production values, dreadful plots and trite dialogue. So it was with some reluctance that, after persistent hints from Max, we let

him watch it. It soon became apparent that Max's interest in the programme could not simply be dismissed as peer pressure. The colossal assault machines the heroes piloted, the deadly villains and the inevitable perilous confrontations between the two obviously excited him. Nevertheless, we were pleased when Max switched his devotion to *Thunderbirds*, which had all these elements, but with a lot less swaggering and shouting.

As well as the TV series, Max was an avid consumer of the monthly *Thunderbirds* comic. Indeed Max's interest in comics helped lessen our concerns about his lack of enthusiasm for regular books. He was particularly keen on the *Asterix* comics by Goscinny and Uderzo. These are brilliantly illustrated and incredibly witty, both verbally and visually. Although much of the humour and language in the text was too sophisticated for him, Max was able to follow the story in the pictures and he loved these stories so much that we ended up reading all 28 in my collection to him.

Max's *Thunderbirds* phase lasted until he was four. By this time, although he was still happy to have books read to him, he rarely chose to pick up a book to read on his own.

Then one day he asked me if I knew anything about *Star Wars*, which one of his nursery friends had told him about. I loved *Star Wars* and had a box set of the original trilogy. All three films are U certificates. I'd suggested to Max that he might like to watch them a few months earlier, but he'd been too obsessed by *Thunderbirds* to consider spending his limited TV time on anything else.

Max adored *Star Wars* from his first viewing. As countless parents will testify, most four-year-old boys will adore *Star Wars*. But while it was gratifying to see him sharing my enthusiasm for the films, I realised that this might make engaging his interest in reading all the more difficult. I'd been working as a professional author for five years at that point and was familiar enough with the industry to realise that it was going to be a struggle to find anything as thrilling as Hans Solo's shootout with the stormtroopers or Luke Skywalker's destruction of the Death Star in the comparatively safe and cosy world of picture books.

Around this time I had a phone call from Alison Sage. Alison has been working as a children's editor since the early seventies and has written many children's books of her own. I first got to know Alison as freelance fiction editor for a well known levelled reading scheme. She's an exceptionally astute editor and always leaves my stories in far better shape than she found them. She is also the only editor I know who routinely takes stories into schools to try them out on children before accepting them for publication.

I've done five chapter fiction books with Alison. They are stories about robots, dinosaurs and space rangers. On this occasion Alison was phoning to ask if I would write something for a new series she was editing. Alison told me that she kept coming back to me because she knew I could write stories with "that Saturday morning television factor" that was particularly appealing to boys. I laughed out loud when she said this. I told her that, while she'd clearly intended it as a compliment, many of the other editors I worked with would regard "Saturday morning television" as a pejorative phrase. This was back in the days when there were only five TV channels and "Saturday morning television" meant programmes like *Dick and Dom in Da Bungalow* and *SMTV*, padded out with *Pokemon*, *Looney Tunes* and superhero cartoons as well as Max's former favourite, *the Power Rangers*. I think most picture book editors would have regarded "Saturday morning television" as the equivalent of junk food in comparison to the healthy, wholesome alternative they were offering in picture books.

Alison and I often talked about what boys wanted from books and many of these conversations have stuck in my mind. In one conversation I described my frustration at the lack of picture books

that engaged with boys' enthusiasms in way that TV, films, comics and other media did. I described literacy as being like a ladder, with the first rung being board books, the next picture books, then chapter fiction, children's fiction, teen fiction and finally adult fiction at the top. I told Alison I felt that many boys found that the picture book rung was missing for them. Alison told me that many boys found that the chapter fiction rung was missing as well.

As well as picture books, Max's reading diet now included a wide selection of chapter fiction. But while Max was happy to have these books read to him at bedtimes and use them for his reading practice, he still showed no enthusiasm for reading on his own — he'd much rather watch *Star Wars* or play with his Lego. You can imagine how frustrating this was for a children's author. Fortunately, although picture books and chapter fiction had fallen short of the challenge, children's novels were able to save the day.

The turn of the Millennium was a golden age for children's novels. The *Harry Potter* books were in mid sequence, the final instalment of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy had just been published, as had the first of Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider* books. Between them, these books picked up a slew of awards, mostly in the categories for *nine to eleven-year-olds*. Although these books were meant for children twice his age, I recognised that their content was very similar to the content my five-year-old son found so attractive in TV and films. So we started reading them at bedtime in place of the more "age-appropriate" books we had been using. Eureka! We had finally found some books that my son loved. Some of the language was too sophisticated for him to follow, but that didn't matter when the content was so appealing.

We discovered an abundance of novels for older children that appealed to Max, but one that deserves special mention is *Mortal Engines* by Phillip Reeve. This novel, with its mechanised predatory cities, killer zombie-robots, ruthless saboteurs and daring secret agents was a watershed read for my son as it was even more exciting and appealing than many of his favourite TV shows and films. It's a book I recommend to parents of reluctant boy readers. It's a book I recommend to everyone. So thank you, Philip Reeve, for showing my six-year-old son that reading could be a thrilling and rewarding experience.

Although his mum and I continued reading to Max at bedtimes up until the end of primary school, by the time he was seven Max had decided that books were too good for bedtimes alone and was reading them on his own at an ever-increasing rate.

It's worth noting that, up until this point, TV, films and comics were the only other media competing for Max's attention. Despite his mum and I being keen gamers, we didn't have a games console in the house until after Max had been reading on his own for several months. Max took to his first PlayStation game, *Bionicle*<sup>4</sup>, as instantly as he took to *Thunderbirds* and *Star Wars*. However his enthusiasm for this new medium had no impact on his appetite for reading. By that point, he'd discovered that books could offer the same appealing content as these other media — indeed the first book he chose to read on his own was a *Bionicle* novel.

Max is now sixteen and still an avid reader. Like many teenage boys, he's particularly keen on science fiction and fantasy. He's read *Slaughterhouse Five*, *1984*, *American Gods* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, among many other books in the last year. Now that he's discovered the treasures that books contain, I doubt Max will ever stop reading. However he had to reach up past the missing rungs at the bottom of the literacy ladder to get to those treasures. It took a concerted effort over several years by two supportive parents to get him past those missing rungs. Many parents and

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<sup>4</sup> *Bionicles* were warrior-like Lego action figures and the books and games were spun-off from these toys.

guardians simply don't have the time or the resources to do this. Those rungs need to be there for every child, girl or boy, and they need to be conspicuously appealing so that, even without parental encouragement, a child will want to reach out and grab hold of them.

## An Author's Tale

Our struggle to find books that appealed to Max had an influence on the picture books I was writing and I spent more and more time trying to write books that included the content Max had found so appealing in TV and films.

Writing these stories came easily as I was drawing on my own childhood enthusiasms as much as my son's. Getting them published in a form I was happy with proved to be more difficult. Some of these stories were rejected by publishers as not sufficiently appealing or not age-appropriate for picture books. When I did succeed in finding a publisher, it was sometimes after years of persistent touting rather than the months it took for my other books. And in these early years, when I was still establishing myself as an author, I often found myself agreeing to changes in the text or the way that the way the book was illustrated that compromised the book's boy-typical appeal. I was particularly keen to create picture books centred on technology, but the technological content that inspired some of the stories was often played down or omitted from the illustrations.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, I succeeded in getting a technology-centred picture book published that had not been compromised. *Pigs Might Fly* is a sequel to the *Three Little Pigs* and centres on an air race between the three pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. My agent found three publishers who wanted to take the story, which gave me a degree of bargaining power I hadn't had previously. For me, the key to the illustrations' appeal would be the aeroplanes that the characters were racing in, so one of the things I asked of the publisher was that the illustrator's first "character sketches" should be of the aeroplanes rather than the pigs and the wolf, since I felt that getting the "character" of the technology right was a higher priority.

The book's publisher understood what I was aiming for and we quickly agreed on the choice of Steve Cox to illustrate the book. Steve has a flair for illustrating technology that's relatively rare among picture book illustrators. I'd say that his comical, action-packed, technically-literate illustrations for *Pigs Might Fly* have the "Saturday morning television factor" that Alison Sage had identified as being particularly appealing to boys.

Of all the books I've written that have strong boy-typical appeal, *Pigs Might Fly* has sold the most copies. However its sales are modest compared with some of the books I've written that are more girl-typical in their appeal.

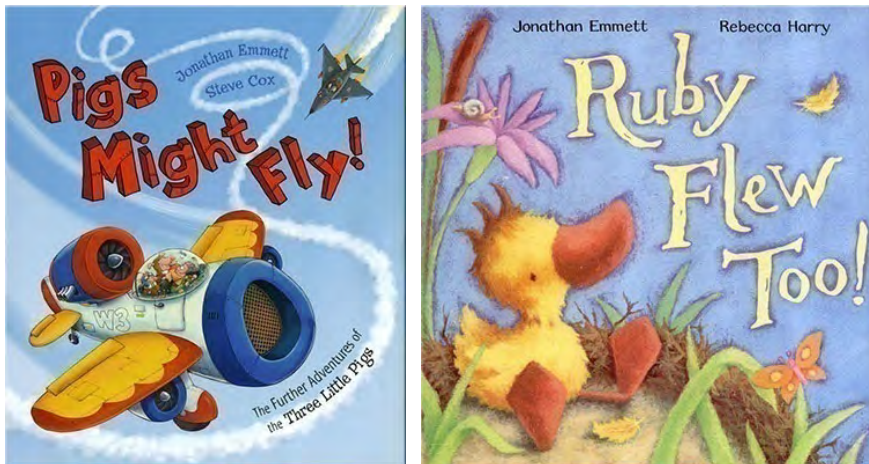
One of my best-selling books that typically appeals to girls more than boys is *Ruby Flew Too!* This book was published in 2004, only a year before *Pigs Might Fly*. For every **ONE** copy of *Pigs Might Fly* that's been sold in the UK, **NINE** copies of *Ruby Flew Too!* have been sold.<sup>6</sup> One conclusion I might draw from this is that, despite my best efforts, I'm a lot better at writing picture books that appeal to girls than I am at writing picture books that appeal to boys; a quick glance at my accounts suggests that it would certainly make more business sense for me to focus on writing

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<sup>5</sup> I'll explain how and why this happens in Part 2 of this essay.

<sup>6</sup> According to my royalty statements *Ruby Flew Too!* (originally published as *Once Upon a Time Upon a Nest*) sold 170,015 copies in the UK between publication in 2004 and October 2012. *Pigs Might Fly* sold 18,120 copies in the UK between publication in 2005 and October 2012. Although published a year earlier *Ruby Flew Too!* went out of print in 2011, so these two figures represent similar periods in print.

books about cute and cuddly animals. However I don't believe this to be the case; there are other factors at work here.



For one thing, even with *Ruby's* earlier publication date, the total number of UK library loans for these two books to date is almost identical<sup>7</sup>, with *Pigs* slightly ahead. The relative availability of these two books in bookshops and libraries is obviously a factor in these figures, but it seems clear that there's a huge difference between the picture books that get bought and the picture books that get borrowed. I believe that the main reason for this is that children have more influence over the choice of books in a library than they do in a book shop. The vast majority of picture books are bought by adults rather than children; if the book is a gift, the child it is intended for may not be accompanying the adult that's purchasing it. And even when the child is there, the choice of book is often moderated by an adult. Most paperback picture books cost around six pounds and many adults will want to ensure that this money is "wisely" spent on something "suitable". School-age children often visit libraries with their class and are allowed to choose books for themselves with little or no adult moderation. And children that are accompanied to libraries by adults are generally allowed more influence in the choice of books, because library loans are free — so there is no cost implication to making an "unsuitable" choice.

The other reason I know that books such as *Pigs Might Fly* are genuinely appealing to boys is from first-hand experience. Like many authors I regularly visit schools and libraries to read my books to children. Most school and libraries leave the choice of books to me. I obviously try to choose books that I think will be popular and for the first couple of years I was visiting schools my selection was biased towards my bestsellers, as I'd assumed that their sales figures reflected their appeal. I no longer regard sales figures as a reliable indicator of my picture books' appeal to children; I now know better.

I haven't read *Ruby Flew Too!* in a school or library session for the last seven years and I've only read *Bringing Down the Moon*, which is my biggest selling picture book, once, at a teacher's request. I stopped reading them because I noticed that while some of the audience clearly enjoyed these stories, around half the children simply weren't engaged by them. The overwhelming majority of these unengaged children were boys.

<sup>7</sup> According to PLR figures, *Ruby Flew Too!* (originally published as *Once Upon a Time Upon a Nest*) was borrowed 91,125 times between July 2003 and June 2011. *Pigs Might Fly* was borrowed 92,348 times between July 2004 and June 2011

*Bringing Down the Moon* does have cross-gender appeal for pre-school children and I still use this book for pre-school sessions. I suspect this is because gender identities are not so defined in children of pre-school age. However, by the time children reach school age and their gender identities have been established, this book seems to lose its appeal for most boys.

These days, when I visit schools, I stick to books I've found to have a broader cross-gender appeal. Some I regarded as having cross-gender appeal when I wrote them. The remainder are books like *Pigs Might Fly* that I wrote specifically to appeal to boys' tastes. Once I started reading these books in schools, it was apparent that many girls also found them appealing. Despite their low sales in comparison to my other books, the books I've written that have boy-typical appeal have become staples of my school visits.

Although I've learnt that my books with boy-typical appeal won't sell nearly as well as the ones that might appeal more to girls, I continue to write both, as well as books that I think will appeal equally to both sexes. I try to bring the same care and attention to everything I write, but I'm more particular about the content of books with boy-typical appeal and am generally far more choosy about the choice of illustrator. It often takes longer to find a publisher for these books and, once published, they often go out of print far quicker than my other books. But when I read them to children, it's usually these books that get the most enthusiastic reception, which is one of the reasons I continue to write them.

When I'm asked for advice on how to write a "good" picture book, I give the same answer that many authors give — *write something that appeals to yourself or the child you once were or that would appeal to your own children if you have them.*

When I'm asked for advice on how to write a "successful" picture book, I give the same answer. However if the person asking me is a man, I sometimes offer some additional advice: *it also helps if you can write something that will appeal to women.* While it's possible to be successful in the picture book industry without doing this, the path of least resistance is to write something that will appeal to female sensibilities.

Why is this?

## The Uneven Playing Field

There are a great many picture books published each year that have genuine cross-gender appeal. The collaborations of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler seem to appeal equally to both boys and girls and I suspect that this, along with the excellent quality of the writing and illustration, is one of the reasons for their huge commercial success.

The gender gap in reading ability reflects the relative numbers and content of picture books that appeal, intentionally or unintentionally, principally to boys or girls. It's my experience that a great many books that the industry perceives as having cross-gender appeal (including many I've written) are actually far more appealing to girls. And, while books targeted at girls are usually uncompromising in the way that they maximise their girl-appeal, books targeted at boys usually have their boy-appeal compromised to some degree.

**In short, the picture book industry is biased towards producing books that appeal more to girls than boys.**

Page 22 of the Reading Commission report addresses "why some boys are not getting access to materials which interest them" and notes that "some teachers and librarians asserted that it is a supply issue and linked it to the female bias of the publishing industry".

In the 17 years I've been working in the industry, I've had books published by 11 different publishers and dealt directly with editors from another 8. Over this period I estimate that I have worked with between 30-50 different editorial staff. For the first 15 years, every single editor I worked with was female. In the last 2 years I've worked with 2 male editors, one of whom has now left the industry. While there are many men, such as myself, writing and illustrating picture books, the overwhelming majority of commissioning decisions are made by women.

This predominance of women in the industry is *partly* responsible for its bias towards female preferences. However, as I intend to illustrate, the roots of this problem spread well beyond the industry itself.

I should stress that I don't think that the scarcity of men working in picture book publishing is a result of anti-male employment discrimination within the industry. Men simply don't seem as interested as women in publishing books for the very young, in the same way that men seem less interested in teaching the very young in our schools.

## Arts versus Sciences

Before I go any further, it's worth addressing an apparent inconsistency in my argument that some readers may have spotted.

I've said that, in my experience, many girls also have boy-typical tastes. If that's the case, why aren't these tastes also shared by many women working in the picture book industry? This inconsistency is due to the influence of another, less conspicuous demographic.

I suspect that most people working within children's publishing, male or female, are from what the Americans would call a *liberal arts* background. That's to say that, if they went to college, they studied subjects such as literature and history, as distinct from science and technology. I think that girls that have boy-typical tastes, girls that like *Thunderbirds* and *Star Wars*, are currently far less likely to pursue a career in the liberal arts; they are far less likely to become picture book publishers.

For example, I've already referred to *technology* as an element with boy-typical appeal. A child of either sex with an enthusiasm for technology is more likely to choose to become a product designer, engineer or mechanic than a picture book publisher. Even if a child's enthusiasm for technology is combined with a strong interest in storytelling, they are likely to want to work in another storytelling medium such as TV, films, comics or video games, which currently reflect an enthusiasm for technology far more than the picture book industry does. This situation will be self-perpetuating for as long as enthusiasm for technology is not adequately reflected in picture books. Needless to say, it's just as important for a child that is enthusiastic about science and technology to develop literacy skills as it is for a child who is enthusiastic about the liberal arts.

Although there is a considerable overlap in the effects of the 'arts over science and technology' bias and 'female over male' bias they are not one and the same. Just as there are girls who are interested in technology but not the arts, there are boys who are interested in the arts but not technology and some of these boys grow up to become writers and illustrators in the picture book industry. One of the things I discovered when I started writing technology-centred picture books was that, while there are many male picture book illustrators, relatively few picture book illustrators of either sex have the technical literacy needed to make an illustration appeal to readers with an enthusiasm for technology.



Before I move on, it's worth noting that there are other demographic factors influencing the output of the picture book industry, including race and class.

## The Other Gatekeepers

Publishers are only the first of many gatekeepers that a picture book must get past before it gets into a child's hands. All routes are monitored by a chain of gatekeepers. If just one gatekeeper in a chain decides that a book is unappealing, then the whole route is blocked.

Alison Sage is not the only editor I've worked with who has a good understanding of what boys find appealing. On many occasions I've had editors enthusiastically receive a story, on the basis of its obvious boy-typical appeal, only to have them come back later to tell me that they will not be accepting it for publication as their sales or marketing team have told them it will not sell. And — much as it pains me to admit this — the sales and marketing team is probably right. But it's not because the book will not appeal to children; it's because the book will not appeal to the other gatekeepers further down the chain, nearly all of whom are adult women.

There are three main environments where children get access to picture books: home, school and library. Let's examine how books reach each of them.

### Home

By "home" books I mean books that are owned by a child or the household in which they live, as opposed to books that might be brought home temporarily from a school or library. Out of the three environments I'm going to look at, this is the one that makes up most of the sales in the picture book market, which means it's the environment that most publishers are focused on.

To get into the home the book will usually come via a retailer. Either a bricks and mortar retailer, such as a bookshop or a supermarket, or an online retailer, such as Amazon. In the case of the bricks and mortar retailers, these books will first have to be accepted by a buyer. Buyers can represent a single shop (e.g. an independent bookshop) or a whole string of shops (e.g. a book or supermarket chain). I'm told that children's buyers are predominately female. If this is the case, it's possible that there is some degree of gender bias at this point and that some books with strong boy-typical appeal may have been filtered out before potential customers are even aware of them. However book sales are subject to the same 'supply and demand' principle as other retail products and the effect of any filtering at this point may not be as significant as the filtering carried out by the final customer.

A 2013 Bowker report on the UK, US and Canadian children's book market<sup>8</sup> revealed that 84% of picture books are bought by female customers. Picture book publishers have told me that their in-house market research shows that most of these female customers are mothers or grandmothers.

As I mentioned earlier, even if an adult is accompanied by the child they're buying the book for, most adult buyers will moderate the child's choice in some way. Research shows that it's more likely to be a mother rather than a father who will be reading the book at bedtimes<sup>9</sup>. A mother buying a picture book will be aware that she may have to read it time after time, so it's

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<sup>8</sup> Bowker's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age* 2013 Report <http://www.slideshare.net/BKGKrisen/understanding-the-childrens-book-consumer-in-the-digital-age-toc-bologna-2013>

<sup>9</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7340720.stm>

understandable that she might want a book that appeals to her as well as the child she'll be reading it to. Like many editors, many adult picture book buyers will be looking for a book that appeals to the child they once were and the overwhelming majority of those children will be little girls rather than little boys.

This is why the sales and marketing people are right. Whether or not a picture book appeals to boys is of secondary importance, when the actual customer is most likely to be an adult woman. It's also worth noting that most picture books are bought by middle class households, which means that the tastes of this demographic group is also disproportionately reflected in picture book content.

## School

Although most picture book publishers are focussed on the home consumer market, a recent survey for the National Literacy Trust<sup>10</sup> indicates that 3 in 10 children own no books whatsoever. This suggests that for many children the main place they will have access to picture books is at school.

According to a 2011 report,<sup>11</sup> only 12% of primary school teachers are male. In my experience, very few of these male teachers are working with reception or infant classes. For many children, schooling starts at nursery and the same report notes that there are only 48 male teachers working in state nurseries in the whole of England. In short, there are very few men working with picture book age children in schools, which means that, once again, the books that children encounter will have been selected according to predominately female sensibilities.

The Boys' Reading Commission report does consider the possibility that the predominance of women teachers could result in "a bias towards materials which suited girls' interests". Page 13 of the report states:

*It could well be that the teacher's gender could influence the extent to which they effectively promote books and reading materials that are attractive to boys and girls. Interestingly, one survey respondent who understood the need to promote reading materials that reflect the interests of boys at the same time made clear her discomfort with these interests:*

*"We try to work from their interests no matter how banal, disgusting or undesirable..."*

There is evidence that this distaste for boys' enthusiasms extends beyond the selection of reading material and into other aspects of literacy. In an article on his website<sup>12</sup> (originally published on *The Times* website) children's author Joe Craig talks about his experience of running creative writing workshops for over 40,000 children between the ages of 8 and 13. Most of these children will no longer be reading picture books, but the gender bias Joe describes begins at picture book age. I recommend reading the whole article, but I'm going to pick out a couple of paragraphs that are particularly relevant:

*In every age group, the boys tend to go for the explosive, the spectacular and often the violent ideas. Girls often contribute ideas that seem more considered, and which often*

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/news/4161\\_3\\_8\\_million\\_children\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_do\\_not\\_own\\_a\\_book](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/news/4161_3_8_million_children_in_the_uk_do_not_own_a_book)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14748273>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.freewebs.com/turkeyonthehill/thoughts.htm>

*appear, to their teachers at least, more 'sensible'. To generalise, boys want things in their stories to blow up; they want chases, demons and zombies. Girls usually suggest issues concerning the character's family, the domestic world and real-life situations. Both types of idea are great, but it's the boys' suggestions that elicit concern and often embarrassment from their teachers. Teachers sometimes even apologise to me for some of their students' contributions!*

*I often get the impression that teachers are drawn to the ideas from their girl pupils, whereas the imaginative world of the boys seems mysterious – sometimes even dangerous. I can sympathise with teachers who are afraid to be seen to be encouraging violent thoughts. But most boys' imaginations run most quickly to two extremes: the violent and the absurd. I happen to think that's exciting, but teachers seem to want to foster creativity within certain 'safe' parameters. Creativity is not safe.*

This article rang a lot of bells for me when I first read it. I mentioned that when my son started school, he was a big fan of the *Power Rangers*, as were many other boys of the same age. When I began visiting schools in the early 2000s I learnt that most schools regarded *Power Rangers* storybooks as unsuitable reading material to be brought into school – let alone to have in the school library.

There seemed to be three main justifications for this:

- Depictions of combat in the *Power Rangers* books were seen as encouraging aggressive behaviour.
- Allowing children to read *Power Rangers* books might be seen as encouraging them to watch the TV series — and TV was a competitor to reading.
- The school did not want to be seen to be encouraging children to buy merchandising spin-offs from the series.

All of these are reasonable concerns, but I think that the schools that excluded the *Power Rangers* books needed to take a step back and ask themselves if these concerns were more important than engaging a child's enthusiasm in reading. Much as I personally disliked the *Power Rangers*, many four-year-old boys adored them. Rather than ignoring or attempting to suppress this enthusiasm, a more constructive response would have been to channel it into something beneficial, like an interest in reading.

Possibly the most important concern outlined above is the encouragement of aggressive behaviour. However there is research to suggest that aggressive behaviour is related to literacy; the more developed a child's language skills, the less likely that child is to be aggressive<sup>13</sup>. So reading about the *Power Rangers* might actually reduce rather than increase the tendency to be aggressive. This is something I've explored in more detail in my other essay, *NATURE and NURTURE*.

Page 8 of the Boys' Reading Commission report notes that the gender gap is an international problem.

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the research relating to this is listed in "Early Learning Prevents Youth Violence" [http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/documents/Tremblay\\_AggressionReport\\_ANG.pdf](http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/documents/Tremblay_AggressionReport_ANG.pdf)

*Girls outperforming boys is not just an issue for the UK; far from it. International comparisons of 10-year-olds (PIRLS16) and 15-year-olds (PISA17) show that girls do better in reading than boys across all of the OECD countries.*

In 2009 the Canadian Council of Learning<sup>14</sup>, an independent organisation funded by the Canadian government, published their own report into the gender gap, entitled *Why boys don't like to read: Gender differences in reading achievement*<sup>15</sup>. It's a lot shorter than the UK Boys' Reading Commission's report and, in my opinion, more focused and pertinent. A section of the report is headed "Why don't boys like to read?" Top of the list is "Choice of Reading Materials". Here's an excerpt from this section relating to schools.

A recent study in the United States found that the genres preferred by boys were available in only one-third of classrooms, in part because teachers and librarians disapprove of them as appropriate forms of school-based reading.<sup>16</sup> Others have claimed that these genres do not usually find their way into classrooms or library shelves because teachers are predominantly female and teachers' own reading preferences are reflected in the books they select for their students.<sup>17</sup>

## Library

The third environment where many children can access picture books is the local library. As I've already remarked, children generally have more say over their choice of books in a library than they do in a bookshop, but the overall selection of books to be found there is still moderated by library staff.

In addition to selecting stock, a good children's librarian will be able to offer advice and recommendations to parents, many of whom will be unfamiliar with the range of books available, having not looked at a children's book since they were themselves children. Based on my experience of having met a great many, nearly all children's librarians are women. I'd be very surprised if the number of men working as children's librarians amounted to much more than 5%.<sup>18</sup>

As well as giving young children the message that reading is not for men, the absence of male librarians from the children's section means that staff are less able to make recommendations based on male-typical preferences. It also means that the books on prominent display may reflect female preferences. While libraries sometimes feature targeted displays of "Books for Boys", such displays are more likely to reflect female preferences in boy-targeted content if the books featured are selected by women rather than men.

In addition to running the libraries, children's librarians play a crucial role in the promotion of children's books to the general public. Many UK children's book awards are organised by children's librarians. Some of these awards are decided by the votes of children of both sexes, but the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ccl-cca.ca>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/02\\_18\\_09-E.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/02_18_09-E.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> 19 J. Worthy et al. "What Johnny likes to read is hard to find at school".

<sup>17</sup> T. Gambell and D. Hunter, "Surveying gender differences in Canadian school literacy".

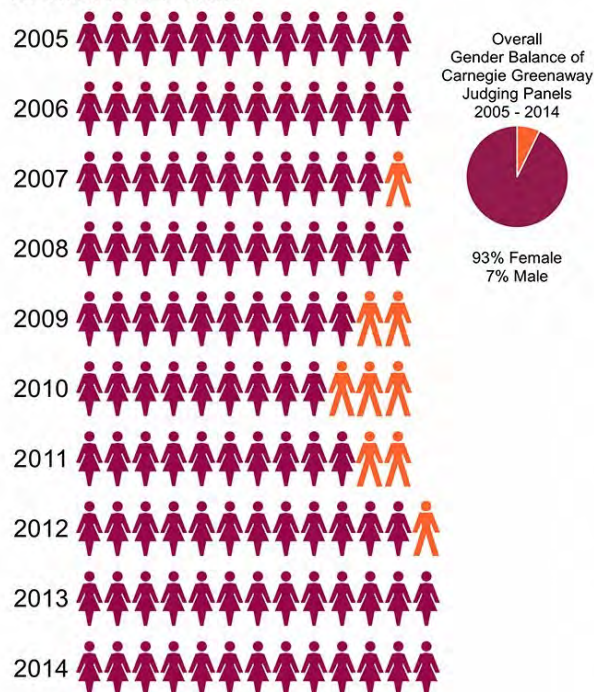
<sup>18</sup> I asked CILIP if they could provide me with an accurate figure for this but was told that "there haven't been any national surveys commissioned into gender differences of library staff."

shortlists are usually drawn up by a panel of children's librarians who, more often than not, are predominantly, if not exclusively, female.

It's generally accepted that the most prestigious award for children's book illustration in the UK is the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal, which is awarded annually for distinguished illustration in a book for children. This award usually goes to a picture book illustrator. CILIP is the professional body for UK librarians and the winner of the award is chosen each year by a panel of youth librarians who also select the winner of the Carnegie Medal for children's fiction. Neither award is gender-specific; they are supposed to recognise excellence in books for children of both sexes. In contrast to grown-up book awards, such as the Man Booker, the judging panel for Greenaway and Carnegie has always been either predominantly or entirely made up of female judges.

## Gender Balance of Judging Panels for UK Literary Awards

### Carnegie & Greenaway Medals for Children's Literature



### Man Booker Prize for Adult Literature



coolnotcute.com

The awards are run by CILIP's Youth Libraries Group. In 2013-2014 I campaigned for the adoption of a gender-balanced judging panel for future awards. However I was unable to convince the group that gender-balance judging was either practical or worthwhile.<sup>19</sup>

## Reviewers

One other group that has an influence on all the gatekeepers described above is reviewers. Parents are influenced by reviews in the national and local newspapers, booksellers are influenced by reviews in trade publications such as *The Bookseller* and teachers and librarians are influenced by reviews in their own trade magazines. In addition to this there are magazines such as *Books for*

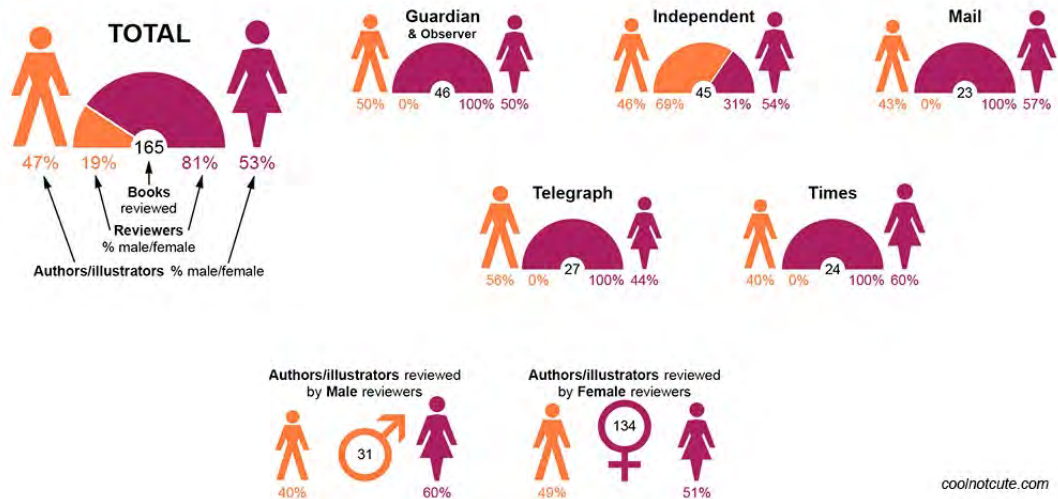
<sup>19</sup> You can read a summary of my campaign here; <http://coolnotcute.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/CKG%20gender%20balance#blogpost>



*Keeps* and *Carousel* which specialise in reviewing children's literature along with an ever increasing number of websites and blogs.

One of the pleasant things about being a picture book author is that you rarely read bad reviews of your work. If a reviewer doesn't like your book, instead of slating it, they will probably choose to write a favourable review of a book that they do like.

### Gender Balance of Picture Book reviewing in UK National Newspapers 2013



Of the thirteen picture book reviewers writing for five UK national newspapers and their Sunday editions in 2013, only one (*The Independent's* Nicolas Tucker) was male.<sup>20</sup> A similar lack of gender balance can be found in periodicals and trade publications. I think it's reasonable to suggest that this might mean that books that appeal to the boyhood enthusiasms more than girlhood enthusiasms are less likely to receive an enthusiastic review. Indeed, I believe that they are less likely to be reviewed at all.

As I hope I've demonstrated, one of the chief reasons that boys as young as five years old find reading far less enjoyable than girls of the same age is that the picture books they are offered are commissioned, reviewed, selected and purchased according to overwhelmingly female sensibilities.

It's important to emphasise that this is a *generalised* argument. I'm not claiming that every individual female gatekeeper is biased against books that would appeal principally to boys. Just as there are female editors who understand what boys find appealing, there are female librarians, teachers, reviewers and mothers who have a similar understanding. Some of these women will have boy-typical tastes themselves. Others, while not sharing these tastes, make a conscious effort to be impartial.

<sup>20</sup> Taken from this analysis: <http://coolnotcute.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/gender-balancing-books.html#blogpost>

A spreadsheet containing all the data can be found here: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/j.emmett/COOLnotCUTE/ReviewData/ReviewData.pdf>

Nevertheless, the overwhelming number of women in gatekeeper roles creates a bias towards female preferences across the system as a whole. Not every gatekeeper is impartial and even small differences in individual preferences will have a significant accumulative effect.

I'd like to stress that I don't believe that men are any more suited than women to these gatekeeper roles. If anything I think men are *generally* less suited, for reasons I've outlined in my separate essay, *NATURE and NURTURE*. Individuals of both sexes inevitably bring some degree of subjectivity to their selection of reading material; it's simply that male gatekeepers would generally bring a more boy-centred subjectivity.

Literacy is an essential life skill, fundamental to an individual's ability to access and understand information and communicate effectively. So reflecting the reading preferences of one sex more than another is arguably an equal opportunities issue.

In the next part of this essay I'm going to highlight some of the content typically appealing to boys, which is underrepresented in picture books and suggest ways to address this inequality.

## Part 2: The Missing Ingredients

This second part of this essay highlights several ingredients that *typically* appeal to boys, which in my experience are commonly diluted or excluded from picture books.

The word “typically” is important. As I mentioned at the end of Part 1 of this essay, I’m making a generalised argument. I recognise there will be girls who find all the ingredients I’ve listed very appealing and there will be boys who find none of them appealing.

### Age-Appropriate Content

All the ingredients I’m going to list can be found in books aimed at older children. Indeed, one reason publishers often give for rejecting stories including these ingredients is that their inclusion makes the story “too old for picture books”. This is a Catch-22 rationale; the main reason these ingredients are not found in picture books is that they are routinely excluded by picture book publishers.

All of these ingredients are deemed age-appropriate and commonplace in other media available to a child of picture book age. Recognising the differing standards of age-appropriateness between picture books and other media is essential to my argument, so before going any further, I want to clarify the basis of this comparison.

Picture books are read by a wide age range; they are read to children who are only a few months old and read by children up to the age of seven or eight. Age-appropriateness obviously varies enormously across this age range; content that is appropriate for a eight-year-old may be inappropriate for a one-year-old. I’m going to split the difference and focus on content that is appropriate for a four-year-old.

Another good reason for focusing on four-year-olds is that this is the age that most children start school in the UK. As I noted earlier, research indicates three in ten children do not have any books of their own at home. Many of these children will not encounter picture books on a regular basis until they start school and their first visit to a library may be through school. I suspect that boys in this group have a disproportionately large impact on the gender gap in reading ability.

It’s easy to ascertain what content is deemed appropriate for four-year-olds by the film and TV industries as their outputs are monitored and certificated by the British Board of Film Classification<sup>21</sup>. The BBFC monitors the film industries’ output directly by certifying each film as it is released. The BBFC also monitors the TV industry’s output indirectly by certifying TV programmes that are released on DVD, Blu-Ray or download.

Many people have misconceptions about the BBFC’s certification system, so it’s worth clarifying how it relates to children.

**U certificate:** although the ‘U’ stands for universal, the BBFC qualifies this with the statement that U certificate media “should be suitable for audiences aged four years and over”.

**PG certificate:** an unaccompanied child of any age may watch a ‘PG’ certificate film in a cinema, but the certificate indicates that the media contains content that some parents may consider unsuitable for children younger than eight-years-old.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bbfc.co.uk>



**12A certificate:** although a child of any age may see a 12A film in a cinema if accompanied by an adult, 12A media contains content that is not recommended for children younger than twelve-years-old.

While I'm only going to compare picture book content with U certificate content in this essay, it's worth noting that many parents are happy for four-year-olds to view PG content and, as many cinemagoers will have witnessed, a few parents even regard 12A content as acceptable for a four-year-old.

## The Missing Ingredients

Here are six ingredients that *typically* appeal to boys, are commonplace in U certificate media, but which are filtered out of picture books to a greater or lesser degree.

### 1: Combat

In most picture books the worst harm that one character inflicts upon another is to hurt their feelings. Picture book characters rarely come to blows and on the few occasions they are shown holding weaponry it's seldom in a combat situation. Characters rarely die in picture books, and if they do, it's often to impart a life lesson about loss and grieving. A picture book character dying as a result of combat is almost unthinkable.

Compare this with some of the other media four-year-old boys have access to. Compare this with a U certificate film like *Star Wars*. Countless lives are lost in the original *Star Wars* film, *A New Hope*, although the majority of these deaths are off-screen. At one point, an entire planet is destroyed along with its inhabitants. The film also features several shootouts, light sabre duels and dogfights between spacecraft in which it's clear that characters are losing their lives.

The BBFC's guidelines for a U certificate film include the following statement.

*'U' films should be set within a positive moral framework and should offer reassuring counterbalances to any violence, threat or horror.*<sup>22</sup>

Note that the BBFC regards elements of "violence, threat or horror" as being acceptable for four-year-olds, providing these elements are handled responsibly.

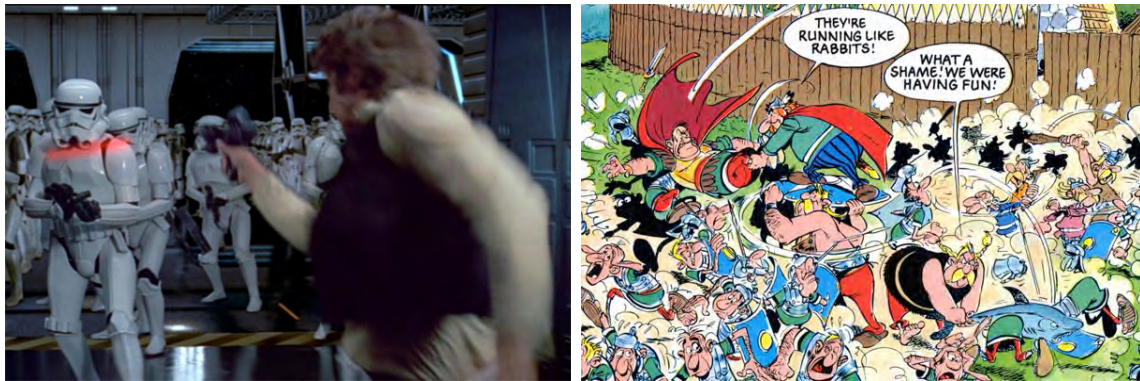
There's a fine line between *thrilling* and *upsetting* in depictions of combat that are appropriate for a four-year-old. Part of the skill of making a U certificate film like *Star Wars* is understanding exactly where that line lies, so that the film can thrill a child by skirting close to it without actually crossing over it. In my experience, many picture book publishers prefer to keep as far away from this line as possible.

Another type of combat that many four-year-olds are familiar with is the absurd version found in comics such as the *Beano* or the *Asterix* books that my four-year-old son was so fond of. Although no one ever seems to die in an *Asterix* book, characters are regularly shown being punched in the face and knocked unconscious. It's impossible to get through an *Asterix* book without several punch-ups and they sometimes include large scale military battles. Although comic books themselves are not certificated, many of the *Asterix* stories have been adapted into animated

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<sup>22</sup> Since writing this essay, the BBFC have revised their definition of U certificate content, replacing it with a more detailed wording that can be found here <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification/u>

cartoons, all of which are U certificate<sup>23</sup>. Again, similar depictions of comic combat are conspicuously absent from picture books.



*Depictions of combat like those commonly found in U certificate films such as Star Wars and comic strips like Asterix are rarely found in picture books.*

For many people, an aversion to depictions of combat in children's media is underpinned by the belief that exposing a child to such depictions will teach children to be aggressive. While I accept that exposure to depictions of combat outside of a positive moral framework may encourage children to be more aggressive, I'm not convinced that depictions set within such a framework will have the same effect. I've examined this issue and some of the research relating to it in a separate essay, *NATURE and NURTURE*.

## **2: Technology**

As a technophile, the contrast between the way technology is represented in picture books compared with other children's media was one of the first things I picked up on when I started working in the industry. Most of the TV shows and films I was drawn to as a child featured technology prominently as did the shows and films that my four-year-old son was drawn to. When the *Thunderbirds* left from Tracy Island, that week's plot was put on hold while we watched their fantastic machines being launched from their hangars. It was the same sequence every week, but that didn't matter when the technology was this exciting and cool.

Many of my own picture book stories are inspired by technology to some degree. I often start with a particular piece of technology in mind and then try to write an engaging story around that object. I'm very proud of some of the books that have come from these stories, but I've been disappointed with others.

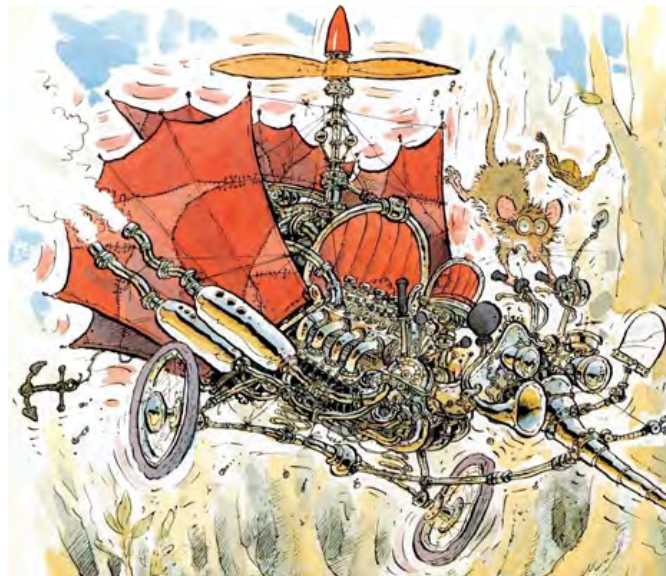
Sometimes this was because the technology they were written around was pushed into the background of the book's illustrations, or omitted altogether on some spreads. Publishers usually did this to give more prominence to the story's human or animal characters, who they saw as being more important to the book's appeal. I think they had this the wrong way around as far as many boys are concerned. One of the differences that psychologists have noted in male and female perception is that males are generally more interested in objects and females are more interested

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<sup>23</sup> In addition to the U certificate animated Asterix films, there have been 3 PG certificate live action films. According to the extended classification information, the PG certificates reflect the inclusion of mild bad language, sex references and innuendo, which are not present in the books.

in people.<sup>24</sup> To put it another way, many boys will find a train more interesting to look at than the character that's driving it.

This prioritising of human or animal characters over technology can undermine what might otherwise be a technologically appealing picture book in another way. I've mentioned that there are relatively few picture book illustrators with a flair for illustrating technology. This is understandable in a profession that is generally better suited to people of an artistic rather than a technical bent. For many picture book publishers the key criterion for selecting an illustrator is how well he or she can draw the story's human or animal characters, and illustrators are often selected on the basis of character sketches of these alone. But no matter how appealing their characters are, an illustrator who's not technically literate is unlikely to be able to illustrate a technology-centred book in a way will appeal to a technically-literate child. Part of the problem is that publishers often see technically-literate illustration as an element of style rather than content. Sometimes an individual illustrator will work in several contrasting illustration styles, but if their illustrations feature technology, the illustrator's technical literacy — or lack of it — is usually apparent across every style.



*David Parkins' wonderful illustrations for  
No Problem show intense technical detail*

Another issue affecting the depiction of technology in picture books is the level of technical detail. One of the reasons my son found the picture book *No Problem* so appealing was the extraordinary draughtsmanship in David Parkins' illustrations. The vehicles in this book are shown in intense technical detail, with every nut, bolt and rivet drawn in place. I think some publishers believe that the younger the book, the simpler the illustrations ought to be; that an illustration in which characters and objects are represented simply will be more appealing to a young child than one

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<sup>24</sup> This has been demonstrated by a number of studies including a 2002 study by Cambridge psychologists Svetlana Lutchmaya and Simon Baron-Cohen. A group of one-year-old children were presented with a choice of two films to watch, one of a human face, the other of cars. On average the boys looked for longer at the cars, while the girls looked for longer at the face.

Lutchmaya, S., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2002). Human sex differences in social and non-social looking preferences at twelve months of age. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 25, 319–325.

featuring objects that are intensely detailed. However this belief is at odds with the results of eye tracking experiments carried out on babies and toddlers which show that, when presented with images of contrasting detail, infants devote more attention to the detailed areas than the simple areas of the same image. Striking the right balance is still important; a whole spread crammed with detail is difficult for anyone to process, child or adult. However I suspect that a balance similar to the one Parkins employs in *No Problem*, where intense detail is restricted to significant objects, would make illustrations more appealing to many children than ones featuring simplified representations of the same objects.

As well as an aversion to technical detail in the illustration, many picture book publishers have an aversion to technical detail in the text. The brain processes language and images in different ways and I accept that language in picture books needs to be kept relatively simple if it's to be comprehensible to a four-year-old. However there is considerable gender bias as to what constitutes an "appropriate" level of language in a picture book. Publishers have told me that words such as "piston" are too old for four-year-olds. I suspect this judgement has more to do with the publisher's familiarity with technology than the age-appropriateness of the word itself. A four-year-old boy who is interested in trains might well know what a *piston* is and if he doesn't, it's probably a word that he'd be interested to learn. I don't consider "piston" to be any more difficult or age-inappropriate than "plié", "arabesque" or "pirouette", all of which can be found in one of my daughter's preschool ballet books. I have read this book aloud dozens of times and yet I still had to fetch it just now to remind myself of these words and what they mean. The reason these words remain unfamiliar to me is that I have little interest in ballet. I suspect the reason many editors think that the word "piston" is inappropriate for a picture book is that they have little interest in technology. While picture book language generally does need to be kept simple, children of both sexes are more accepting of complex words if they relate to something that they are particularly interested in. For instance, there are plenty of four-year-olds who can identify dinosaurs using complex names such as *tyrannosaur*, *velociraptor* or *pterodactyl*.

One of the recognised differences between boys' and girls' preferences is that boys generally have a greater preference for non-fiction. This is usually attributed to boys being more interested in facts. I'm sure there is some truth in this, but I suspect that another reason many four-year-old boys interested in technology prefer non-fiction to fiction is that the detailed imagery and technical language that fascinates them is more likely to be found in a non-fiction book than in a picture book story. If not, then why doesn't the same marked preference apply to other media? Given a similar choice between watching a TV documentary about spacecraft or a TV adventure featuring spacecraft, I don't think so many boys would opt for the non-fiction alternative.

### 3: Peril

Picture book characters seldom find themselves in the sort of life-threatening situations often faced by characters in other media. For many adult picture book devotees, the reassuring safeness of the picture book world is one of the factors that makes picture books appealing. However for many four-year-old boys, it's one of the factors that makes picture books boring.

The BBFC guidelines state that U certificate media should offer "reassuring counterbalances" to any depiction of threat. One counterbalance that is commonly used in TV and films is comedy. The climax to the *Wallace and Gromit* short film, *A Close Shave*, takes place in a factory which turns whole sheep into knitted jumpers and tins of dog food. At one point the characters find themselves on a fast-moving conveyor belt that feeds the vicious-looking *Mutton-o-Matic* mincing machine. It's clear that if the characters fall into the jaws of this device they will die very painfully. However this



high level of threat is mitigated by the comical nature of the setup. Indeed, the high level of threat makes the scene a lot funnier.



*Aardman's Wallace and Gromit attempting to escape  
being minced in the Mutton-O-Matic*

Again the success of this scene comes down to judging the fine line between thrilling and upsetting. The closer the characters get to the *Mutton-o-Matic*, the closer we are to this line, the more thrilling the scene becomes and the greater the sense of relief when the characters eventually escape. It's all about maximising emotional responses within age-appropriate limits. This is something that films, TV, games and comics have become adept at, but which picture books rarely attempt.



*Buzz and Jessie face incineration*

The most intense scene of peril I've seen in a U certificate in recent years is in *Toy Story 3*. After narrowly escaping a series of increasingly perilous situations, the toys find themselves sliding down a slope towards a hellish incinerator. Although the film has plenty of humour, this scene is incredibly tense and grows tenser by the second. The necessary counterbalance is there, but it's

held back until the last possible moment when the characters escape in a manner that is both totally unexpected and incredibly funny. I'm sure that many parents watching this scene with a four-year-old will be aware of its potential to upset a child and some might seek to address this. However relatively few parents would go to the extreme of taking the child out of the cinema or turning off the television, as withdrawing the child at such a critical moment in the story might upset them more than the scene they are watching. So the child continues to watch the scene and eventually has their fears allayed when the characters are rescued.

One possible justification for not including a scene like this in a picture book relates to the fact that picture books are often read to a child by an adult, usually a parent. When a parent reads a picture book to a child they become an active participant in the storytelling. It's something that makes sharing a picture book a more personal experience than sharing most other media. So, as an active participant, a parent reading a scene like this may feel some personal responsibility for any potential upset. It goes against parental instinct to upset a child intentionally. A parent reading a scene as emotionally fraught as the *Toy Story 3* incinerator scene in a picture book might feel too uncomfortable to continue reading.

This response has questionable benefits, especially if the child is going to encounter similar scenes in other media. I'd argue that the shared nature of the picture book experience makes it the ideal medium for a child to encounter such a scene. As an active participant in the storytelling, a parent is ideally placed to address a child's fears by discussing the scene and how it plays out, either before or after the story has finished. Acknowledging that a scene is scary, will make children realise that they are not alone in their concern and questions such as, "Do you think they will be rescued?" will help the child to anticipate a positive outcome.

#### **4: Irredeemable Villainy**

As a child, one of my favourite TV series was Oliver Postgate's *The Saga of Noggin the Nog*. My favourite character in the series was not the noble hero, Noggin, but his villainous uncle, *Nogbad the Bad*. Although Nogbad would claim to be a reformed character in some episodes, his penitence was always revealed to be a sham, put on to disguise some new act of villainy. That was one of the things that made the character so appealing to me. Although the series had what the BBFC would call a "positive moral framework" it was clear that Nogbad was irredeemably bad.

This trait of irredeemable villainy is shared with many modern villains of TV and film. It's a useful trait in a TV series as an unreformed villain can always be brought back and redeployed in future episodes.

One of my favourite U certificate films of recent years is *The Incredibles*. Like most of Pixar's work, it's a brilliantly visualised, wittily scripted film with masterful storytelling — it's also full of combat,, peril, technology and irredeemable villainy. The film's villain, Syndrome, is a would-be superhero who relies on technological genius to give him the sort of superpowers innate to genuine superheroes like the Incredibles. Syndrome has no regard for human or superhuman life, has already killed countless superheroes to advance his evil plot and shows no qualms about killing the Incredible family, including the children. After being caught attempting to abduct the Incredibles' baby son, an unrepentant Syndrome eventually dies in the blades of a jet engine.



*The villainous Syndrome from Pixar's The Incredibles*

Ruthless villains rarely appear in picture books, and deadly villains such as Syndrome are practically unheard of. When a character that is even mildly villainous is featured in a picture book, the story often ends with them recognising the error of their ways and making good on any wrongdoing. A redemptive twist like this is seen as giving the story a positive message and a reassuring ending. *Reassuring* is often equated with *satisfying* as far as picture book endings are concerned. However, an ending does not need to be reassuring in order to be satisfying. The final image, familiar to TV and film, of the seemingly vanquished villain's fist or claw punching out of the rubble or the appearance of a fresh new villain (as is the case in *The Incredibles*) may not be *reassuring* in the straightforward sense of putting fears to rest, but it is thrilling, which is a far more satisfying way to end a story for many children. And unlike a redemptive ending, which tends to close off a story in a child's imagination, a threatening ending like this encourages a child to wonder what might happen next.

### **5: Rude Humour**

Boys like humour in picture books and rude humour is particularly appealing. This is one ingredient that has become a lot more acceptable in recent years and there are many more picture books reflecting this appeal than there used to be. I wrote a pop-up book called *A Turtle in the Toilet* about a decade ago and, although there was nothing remotely rude in the book's content, the editor and I spent some time deciding whether we could get away with having the word "Toilet" in the title or whether to go with safer, but less amusing *A Dolphin in the Dishwasher*, instead. I don't think we'd need to have this conversation now.

Nevertheless, I still hear teachers and read reviewers expressing discomfort or even disgust at references to bottoms, underwear and bodily functions in picture books. Its detractors often describe rude humour as *crude* humour, implying that it lacks subtlety or finesse. However there's no reason that a picture book with a rude theme cannot be skilfully written and illustrated as *Bottoms Up!* by Jeanne Willis and Adam Stower ably demonstrates.

To those who remain unconvinced, I'd point out that funniness is entirely subjective and that there is a good reason why this particular sort of funniness is often referred to as "schoolboy humour".

### **6: Cut out the Cute!**

This is not so much an ingredient as the absence of an ingredient.

Shortly after finishing my second picture book about Ruby the duckling I remarked to one of my editors that, much as I was proud of the Ruby books, experience had taught me that they appealed chiefly to girls and I was looking forward to moving onto our next project that had more boy-typical

appeal. The editor was surprised to hear me say this. She told me that she thought of the Ruby books as appealing equally to both boys and girls. I think many of the editors I've worked with would have agreed with her. However, I think most men would recognise that these books would be far more appealing to girls. Ruby is a small fluffy yellow duckling. The books are illustrated in soft pastel colours. The paperbacks have soft 'strokeable' flock covers. In short, they are incredibly CUTE!

The Ruby books are intentionally cute. When I wrote the first story, I was aiming for cute! I was picky about the choice of illustrator and one of the reasons I wanted to work with Rebecca Harry was that, as well as being beautifully painted, her illustrations are very cute. I've no doubt that cute was the right direction for this particular story, but by pursuing it, we'd created a picture book that appealed principally to girls.

The fact that some publishers regard books such as *Ruby Flew Too!* as gender neutral is an indication of how badly calibrated the industry's understanding of gender appeal is. Making the characters and illustrations in a picture book cuter is seen by many publishers as making them more appealing. For many four-year-old boys it has the exact opposite effect. Cute picture books may appeal to children of both sexes when they're very small, but once gender identity becomes established, making a picture book cute is the equivalent of spraying it with boy-repellent.

Many picture books that are targeted at boys have their boy-appeal reduced by an injudicious application of cute. And many books that are intended to appeal equally to both sexes end up appealing more to girls for the same reason. A small amount of cute goes a long way as a boy-repellent.

I have a maxim which I try to keep in mind whenever I'm working on a picture book that I want to appeal to boys. It characterises most of the ingredients on this list and reminds me of the one ingredient I should try to avoid. Here it is:

## **COOL NOT CUTE!**

That's what many four-year-old boys want from a picture book.

### **Solutions**

I think that the absence of boy-friendly ingredients such as these from picture books and their relative abundance in other media has played a big part in creating the gender gap in children's reading.

The other factors highlighted in the Boys' Reading Commission report all play a significant role and the list of recommendations the report makes are worth adopting, but little progress will be made unless the critical issue of content is addressed. While there may also be gender bias in the content of books for older children, the most effective place to start tackling the problem is with the first books most children will encounter, which are picture books.

Although it's become easier in recent years, it's my experience that getting a book published which incorporates two or three of the ingredients listed above is usually an arduous task, compared with books with less boy-typical appeal. Getting a book which incorporates five or six of these ingredients published is practically impossible. And yet U certificate films such as *The Incredibles* do exactly that and are both critically acclaimed and immensely popular.

There's a lot of ground to cover if picture books are to match the boy-appeal of other media. But they can match it and even surpass it providing they are made a lot less *cute* and a lot more *cool*.



Here are some suggestions as to how this might be achieved:

### **Picture Book Publishers**

Examine the content of TV shows, films, video games and comics that picture book age boys are enthusiastic about. Don't look at the boys who have plenty of picture books at home, look at the boys who have few. I've only made comparisons with U certificate content in this essay, but many picture book age boys are watching PG rated TV shows such as *Ben 10* and playing videos such as *Plants vs Zombies*, so look at those too and identify the ingredients that give them their boy-typical appeal. You may think the standard of storytelling and illustration in these other media are second-rate compared with those found in picture books and you'd be right in many instances. Many animated TV shows can get away with second-rate storytelling and illustration because they're not competing directly with picture books. By forgoing boy-friendly ingredients, picture books have effectively ruled themselves out of the competition for the attention of many boys. If picture book publishers are prepared to engage directly with these boys' enthusiasms, the higher standards of storytelling and illustration customary to the industry will give picture books an edge that other media will struggle to match.

Consider routinely trialling picture books stories with children before accepting them. One publisher has already told me they're planning to do this by taking stories into a "test school". It's sometimes said that picture books are written by middle class adults for middle class children; I think there's some truth in this, so make sure that the children you trial stories with are representative of the whole population. Every child needs to read, so every child needs a book that appeals to them. And don't just present children with a selection of stories that you as publishers consider to be appealing, take in well written-stories that you consider unappealing as well; you may be surprised by how popular they are.

Encourage more men to take up commissioning positions within the industry. Let men know that they are needed by the industry by targeting them directly at careers fairs and in the media.

One objection that might be made to my argument is that publishers are businesses and therefore subject to the principle of *supply and demand*; if the UK market is overwhelmingly female, it makes business sense that the majority of products should reflect female preferences. There are implications for sales to overseas markets too. While films featuring combat, such as *The Incredibles* and *Star Wars*, are produced by US film studios, I'm told US publishers are even more likely to reject picture books featuring combat than UK publishers are. If women are as predominant in the culture surrounding picture books in other countries as they are in the UK, then the bias toward female preferences will be just as evident in foreign publishers. What I'm advocating will make no sense to anyone who thinks children's publishing is principally about short-term *supply and demand*.

In my experience, most picture book publishers are not that cynical. I think that most of you would accept that closing the gender gap is more important than maximising your company's profit margins. And, while such an approach might be at odds with the current market, anything that makes boys want to read books instead of watching TV or playing video games is likely to benefit the industry in the long term.

### **Booksellers**

Focus the marketing and promotion of children's books on dads rather than mums; you're preaching to the choir as far as many mums are concerned. If dads can find picture books that appeal to their tastes, they are far more likely to want to read them to their children, which means

that their children are far more likely to accept reading as a male activity. Wouldn't it be great to have dads and mums arguing over the choice of a picture book? They might even end up buying two!

Here's an idea to get you started: "Dads' Happy Hour" promotions, when ALL picture books (whatever their gender-typical appeal) are half price if they are bought by a man. Some men may get dragged into the picture book section by female partners, but at least they will be involved in the purchasing decision.

### Parents

By "parents" I mean principally dads. So, dads, if you accept that reading is an essential life skill and want both your sons and daughters to have the best opportunities in life, get involved with your children's reading. Reading to them *regularly* at bedtimes is the obvious place for you to start.

Try to find books that appeal to you as much as your children, because the chances are you will have to read them again and again. If you have trouble finding conventional picture books that appeal to you (as I fear many of you may), try comic books. *Asterix* and *Tintin* are popular choices, but graphic novels and comic books inspired by films and TV shows are also worth a try. The main thing is to find something that YOU also like and will enjoy sharing with your children. This is not as selfish as it may sound. If you find reading a chore and are not engaged with your reading material, your children will pick up on this and may consequently see reading as a chore themselves. Enthusiasm is infectious, so take the time to find reading material you are enthusiastic about if you want your kids to catch the reading bug.

### Teachers

Teachers have to work with the reading materials available to them. Even if publishers start producing picture books that engage effectively with boys' enthusiasms today, it will be some time before these books are available. And teachers will have to carry on trying to get boys reading in the meantime.

One thing that might help with this task is if schools were more accepting of books that are spin-offs from more boy-friendly media such as TV, films and even toys.

I mentioned earlier that I thought the exclusion of *Power Rangers* books from schools was a missed opportunity for encouraging some boys to read. When my own son started reading the first books he read on his own were *Bionicle* novels, spin-offs from the Lego action figures that he was fanatically collecting at the time. I feel indebted to these books, but many schools would not be comfortable offering children books that are directly tied to a toy in this way. Some parents might also object on the grounds that reading the book might result in the child pestering them for the toy. The same objection would not be applied to *Angelina Ballerina*, but there are currently 77 *Angelina Ballerina* products listed in Amazon's toys and games section, including play sets, dolls and costumes and 90 *Angelina Ballerina* DVDs. The distinction many adults would make is that the *Angelina Ballerina* books came before the toys and DVDs. However, few children will be aware of this distinction. A child who has read and enjoyed an *Angelina Ballerina* book is just as likely to want an *Angelina Ballerina* toy or DVD as a child that reads a *Bionicle* book is likely to want other *Bionicle* merchandise.

The point is, if a book engages a child's enthusiasm, they are more likely to want to read it and at the moment TV shows, films and toys engage many boys' enthusiasms more effectively than picture books do. Some of these spin-off books are poorly written and illustrated in comparison to conventional picture books, but a child's reading skill is more likely to develop reading a poorly

written book from cover to cover than no book at all. And if the picture book industry *is* prepared to engage with these enthusiasms, this will only have to be a short term fix.

## Librarians

I've noticed that even in large libraries that employ several male librarians, if the children's library is a separate section, it's nearly always staffed by women. In the eight years I was regularly visiting our local library with my two children, I only saw a man behind the desk of the children's section on two occasions. I realise that this is probably because many female librarians express a preference to work in the children's section, while many male librarians are either indifferent or express a preference not to work there. However, if the library service wants to help close the gender gap, male staff need to take a turn in the children's section. I realise that men are a minority within the profession, so children's sections will still be staffed predominately by women, but it will be a start.

I've mentioned the crucial role librarians have in running many of the UK's children's book awards and the importance of these awards in promoting children's books to the general public. One thing that librarians can do to ensure that the books promoted by such awards will appeal equally to both sexes is to gender balance panels that selects the shortlist and, if the winning books are to be judged by librarians rather than a children's vote, gender balance the judging panel as well. I realise that this would mean over-representing the number of men working as children's librarians, but what is more important — reflecting the preferences of the profession or of the readership it is meant to serve?

## A Personal Note

This has not been an easy essay for me to write. I make a comfortable living out of writing picture books and consider myself extremely fortunate to do so. The two phrases that have been running through my head since I began writing this essay are “biting the hand that feeds me” and “career suicide”.

Over the 17 years I've been working in the industry, I've met hundreds of wonderful people in schools, libraries and publishing houses who are doing their utmost to engage children of both sexes in reading picture books; many of them do so on a voluntary basis. The overwhelming majority of these “wonderful people” have been women. As I said earlier, outside of writing and illustrating, few men seem to want to be involved with picture books. So let me make this clear — if one demographic group is chiefly to blame for the state of affairs I've outlined, it is adult men, for failing to take sufficient interest in what young children are reading.

However, despite the best intentions of all involved, there is a culture of emasculation surrounding the picture book industry which has created a disconnect between what boys are interested in reading and what they are offered to read. While this disconnect remains, many boys will continue to find picture books unappealing and the gender gap in reading ability will not be closed.

A second essay, *NATURE and NURTURE*, looks at some of the scientific evidence that suggests that BOTH nature and nurture are responsible for sex differences in children's preferences. And a third article, *FIGHTERS and FASHIONISTAS*, addresses gender-stereotyping. All three articles can be found at coolnotcute.com