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# **“Cult of the Apron”**

*Gender Representation in Children’s Literature*

**B.A. Essay**

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## **Abstract**

This essay will explore gender roles in relations to children and children's literature. It will aim to show how sexism, in the form of stereotypical gender roles, has been remarkably observable in children's books. An example of its manifestation is the underrepresentation of females, both when it comes to occupations as well as the prevalence of female characters. Since around the dawn of the feminist movement, people have been asking questions about why this has come to be. The effects of being constantly exposed to stereotypical gender roles can influence the social development of children in a negative way. This essay attempts to trace back how the genders have been described in children's books through the years. Alternative research that has been made on gender and gender roles in children's literature will be reviewed and compared. Then it will look at four examples of children books characters that evidently behave in a way that contrasts the usual stereotypical gender roles. They are: *Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole, published in 1986, *The Only Boy in Ballet Class* by Denise Gruska and Amy Wummer, published in 2007, *I'm a Girl!* by Yasmeen Ismail, published in 2015 and *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty and David Robert, published in 2013. This essay will demonstrate how children would benefit much more from being exposed to diverse, positive and capable characters of both genders in the books they are exposed to. Last is the conclusion which is that even though sexism, in the form of stereotypical gender roles, has not resolved completely from children's literature, it seems to be a process in the right direction. Both female and male characters are getting more equal when it comes to capability, occupations and representation. By comparing research from around 1970 with research made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this becomes evident.

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## **1. Introduction**

“Children are made readers on the lap of their parents.” This quote by author Emilie Buchwald contains an important message. Books play a big role in the development of language skills, as well as being a great source of knowledge. They present social values and ideals, which can influence the way children develop their identity. Parents can help strengthen their children’s social development by regularly reading with them and showing them a variety of different children’s books. These books are viewed at a time when individuals are figuring out what their role is in society (Tsao 108); therefore, the importance of them containing meaningful and positive values and morals seems considerable. Different studies on children’s books have demonstrated that some of them have questionable messages about society and societal rules. Some have additionally been found to contain different examples of sexism, often in the form of stereotypical gender roles. This is alarming if the books can be influential for children when they are developing their own sense of identity and self worth. Fortunately, there seems to have been an increase in books that are visibly setting positive examples and, in a way, are subverting gender role stereotypes. Extensive research on the subject, along with the beginning of the feminist movement in the 1960s, might have initiated a social awakening and awareness on what children should and should not be exposed to through mediums such as books. Yet children are exposed to sexism from other venues, for example the television, which makes it almost impossible for them not to be affected by it. But what exactly is the significance of gender stereotyping in children’s literature?

Children look for cues in their environment about gender and gender roles. They are concerned with matters such as how to behave and how to act in the company of others. Additionally, children are constantly exploring their personality and physical appearance. As they realize that people around them situate themselves in different groups, they begin to actively search for their place. Their sense of gender identity begins to develop when they can

see that they belong to a gender group (Martin and Ruble 67). When gender roles become too established they sometimes start turning into gender role stereotypes. That happens when gender roles are directly connected to different behaviors or attitudes that are usually referred to as feminine or masculine. In terms of definition, gender role stereotypes could mean that either males or females are better qualified or capable of doing a certain task or performing a certain role (Turner-Bowker 461).

However, it is quite difficult to find a thorough definition of both gender and gender roles. Gender is a socially determined system of attributes which are associated with either males or females. This distinction between males and females is used to create a social structure, which usually varies between societies. These social structures are concerned with what is suitable for males and females, for example in terms of roles (Leinbach, Hort and Fagot 107-108). This is almost in contrast to the definition of sex, which is a biological term and based on what kind of reproductive system an individual has. What makes gender somewhat more complex is that it is something that is both learned subjectively and socially, as well as being very extensible. Both children and adults develop their gender identity through time and under influence from the environment. Books are an example of environmental factors which seem to have some influence on our understanding of gender and gender roles. Likewise, it has been said that children's books are influenced by social views about gender and gender roles. As early as in the 1960s, it became apparent that gender role stereotypes were very prevalent, and this seemed to be consistent in many different reading materials for children (Paterson & Lach 185). With the emergence of the feminist movement, ideas about gender and gender roles were being questioned. After years of examples of stereotypical characters and unequal opportunities for genders in children's books, the representation of males and females has recently been moving towards a more equal and non-stereotypical direction. At this time in our society it is relatively easy to find children's books that do not portray gender stereotypes in

any way. The question is, have recent children's books improved enough when it comes to equal gender roles and representation? At least, many of the recently published children's books seem to reverse stereotypical gender roles in a very effective manner. Available today are many examples of children's books characters who behave in a visibly non-traditional way, and subvert ideas of stereotypical gender roles. Therefore, steps are seemingly being taken in the process of eliminating stereotypical gender representation, or sexism, in children's books.

This essay will look into how children's books have been affected by stereotypical gender roles as well as other examples of unequal gender representation, both in the past and in recent times. The second chapter looks into how stereotypical gender roles in children's books can influence children's development. The third one explores historical views about genders and gender roles in children's books, as well as reviewing research that has been made on this matter. The fourth chapter presents four examples of recent children's books with characters that, in a way, subvert ideas about gender role stereotypes. They are: *Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole (1986), *The Only Boy in Ballet Class* by Denise Gruska and Amy Wummer (2007), *I'm a Girl!* by Yasmeen Ismail (2015) and *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty and David Roberts (2013). These four books include characters that behave in a very non-stereotypical way. They present positivity and actively stand up for their own sense of identity and self worth. Their roles and occupations are motivating and provide important messages about how children should not be afraid to be who they really are. Lastly is the conclusion, where the importance of an egalitarian gender representation is discussed. A brief comparison of different research that has been made on children's books is examined along with a short overview.

## **2. Children, books and stereotypical gender roles**

Children's books are an important source of entertainment for children, as well as being instructive about values, friendship, family and life itself. Through reading and browsing through books, children are introduced to the written word. Children's literature is very present and available which makes it an important venue in the socialization process for children. Some books are meant for children only a few months old. Many children are even exposed to books straight from birth. It has been said that books guide children on their journey through life and the discovery of the world (Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer 239). Books are available for children that include a social environment which can be very different from the readers' own experience. They teach children about the reality of other children, what boys and girls do, what they say and how they feel in different scenarios. Children can learn through books what society expects of them. They learn about social norms and cultural values, as well as what is acceptable for them based on their gender (McCabe et al. 199).

In general, children's books usually have characters or environments which children can identify with. They might even identify with different actions, events or scenarios in books. What they read, or what is being read to them, plays a part in the formation of a child's own identity. As children are taking on different social behavioral practices and behaviors, they use what they are exposed to through different forums, like books, and connect it to their everyday life (Tsao 108). In other words, books can present role models to children. Considering that, it seems fairly obvious that children might benefit a lot more from being exposed to characters of both genders that have positive characteristics, like strength, willfulness and capability. Books could even be positively helpful for social development by portraying role models that children can look up to as well as environments where they can situate themselves in and learn from (Diekman and Murnen 373). Yet, unfortunately, stereotypical gender roles are seemingly visible in a world where complete gender equality still does not exist. The idea that one gender

is more competent or talented than the other is noticeable in society and children are negatively affected by that.

By the time children are in preschool, they are usually able to recognize gender categories. Most can even situate themselves, as well as others, in one gender group or the other. At the same time, their parents, friends and teachers begin to talk to them and act in a certain way based on which gender group they represent (McCabe et al. 199). Gender plays an important role in children's upbringing and they are affected in many different ways by the fact that they are born male or female. With gender being socially constructed, that means that it is society which creates both the standards and ideas of what it means to be a part of the male or female gender group. Correspondingly it could be said that stereotypical gender roles exist because outdated and wrong societal ideas about what males and females are capable of, or not capable of, have gained too much foundation over the years. To be able to understand how children acquire these social gender attributes and why, it is convenient to look at society as a whole. Gender roles are socially constructed ideas which are learned and shared between individuals. They vary between different societies and individuals are socially expected to follow them to be fully accepted member of their society. What follows then is that the concept of gender roles is reestablished by different social rules and guidelines about how one should behave and perform their gender. Still, the definition of gender role is delicate because it deals with how people look at themselves as well as others around them. As a result, when gender roles turn into stereotypical gender roles, they become restricting and even harmful for individuals both socially and personally as they oversimplify and exaggerate characteristics between the two gender groups. Stereotypical gender roles create wrongful distinctions between females and males, sometimes in terms of value and attributes (Turner-Bowker 461).

The importance of the recognition and awareness of stereotypical gender roles is evident when the consequences of wrongful distinctions between the genders are looked into. Books

are very relevant in this matter because they provide information about societal values and socially acceptable directions. Children gain new knowledge from books which they use to construct new ideas. As a result, when children are constantly being exposed to literature that reinforce stereotypical gender roles, they might start to get the wrong idea about their place in the social structure (McCabe et al. 200). Children are steadily creating their own identity and forming ideas about themselves and others. They are vulnerable and get affected by many different factors in their environment. When they are subjected to stereotypical gender roles it can become limiting for them and negatively affect the choices that they have and their interests. It can likewise change their perception of other people as well as of themselves and their own self-esteem (Gooden and Gooden 90). If children are constantly being shown examples of unequal opportunities for individuals based on their gender alone, it can prevent them from moving towards their interests and passions. They might start to believe that there are some occupations and roles that are better suited for them, based only on whether they are male or female. It doesn't matter what is best for them based on their abilities and interests (Gooden and Gooden 97).

The effects of sexism on children's literature can, however, be looked at from another point of view. It is very clear that society itself has undergone extensive changes since the beginning of children's books publication. Furthermore, it is still constantly changing, and gender inequality and sexism seems to be getting less and less noticeable in everyday life. It might be said that books are almost like the mirrors of society, so in that sense, one cannot simply argue that books with dated ideas about ethics and societal rules are wrong. It is almost inappropriate to look back at the incredible history of children's books and simply decide that they are not good enough for young readers of the 21st century. They are simply portraying how things were in the past, when females were sometimes regarded as the inferior gender.

Avoiding them will not change history. Yet, it seems indisputable that even though sexism was more widespread in the past, it should not be reflected in recent literature (Pyle 116).

### **3. Historical view of children's literature and research on gender roles**

The history of children's literature is quite extensive which can make it difficult to trace it back. To be able to look at exactly when children's literature first surfaced it is essential to understand that not everyone agrees on the right definition of children's books. It might be said that the first books that were written especially for children, and not to be shared with adults, are the first children's books. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a shift in the literature world when these kinds of books surfaced in Britain and most other countries in the world. In some countries it took place a bit later, for example in Spain where books especially written for children did not emerge until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hunt 4-5).

Even though the arrival of children's books varied a bit between countries, it is apparent that children's literature went through similar stages everywhere in the world. At one point there was seemingly some tension between two categories within the field, one which includes books that were written with educational, religious or political purposes, and the other with fantasy books, that were more concerned with the pure and simple imagination of children. They were about freedom and innocence, as it was believed to be directly connected to childhood. It is not clear where children stand between these two categories and it can be hard to recognize what kind of books are really appropriate for children at all. Still, what all children's books have in common is that they are usually reviewed by adults. Even though not everyone agrees on what kind of books are appropriate for children, most agree on the potential influence that they have on children's development. Their values and opinions are shaped by what they are exposed to in their environment, which includes books (Hunt 5). That is why it has always been important to review and monitor the publications of children's literature as well as to look at what children's books are about with a critical view. What is interesting in this case is that this confirms that society has for a long time acknowledged the effects that books can have on the social development of children. This perspective has, according to this,

been visible from the beginning of children's literature, even though the focus has not always been the same.

Still, the issue of sexism and stereotypical gender roles in children's literature has gone through a few stages. For example, books written especially for boys or for girls have not been available for a long time. Only around the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century did books written especially for boys emerge, with books containing domestic stories for girls following as well. Adventure stories were written for boys even though both boys and girls read them simultaneously. This seems to be the point where children's literature started to portray and interpret genders in a very distinct manner. A clear distinction was being made between what was thought to be suitable for girls and suitable for boys. The books written for boys were about leaders and they were full of action. The books written for girls were supposed to teach them about the value of obedience. The literature provided was designed to encourage gender appropriate behavior (Narahara 6). This might be one of the first recognized examples of sexism in children's literature.

According to Ya-Lun Tsao (2008), stereotypical views about both gender and gender roles can be found in the content of children's books as well as in the illustrations. She states that there are a few underlying themes which can be common in this regards. One of those is the underrepresentation of females. Many different examinations on children's books have shown that male characters usually dominate the character roles (Tsao 110). Other studies have shown that for many years have children's books authors been portraying females as less valued and secondary characters. They usually are dependent and passive, with an expertise on how to do chores at the home. In many cases they need to be rescued by a male character. Male characters are likewise presented in a stereotypical way, but the difference is that their role is usually positive and important (Tsao 110). First of all, the central characters of children's books are usually male. They are usually portrayed as active leaders and heroes. They are likewise

the decision makers, as well as the wage earners of the households (Turner-Bowker 463). It is convenient to look at studies which have been made on this matter through the years to gain a better understanding of the issue of stereotypical gender representation in children's books.

As early as in the year 1971, research has been made on gender representation in children's literature. Around that time, feminists began to explore the disparity in the representation of the gender, as well as looking into how male and female characters were illustrated. A study was conducted that same year on 49 Newbery award-winning children's books which brought to life a ratio of three male characters in those children's books for every female character. The gender roles were likewise highly stereotypical. When the illustrations of women in 25 books were examined, 21 of those showed a female character wearing an apron. This issue has been known as the "cult of the apron" (Narahara 6).

Research made by Weitzman et al. 1972 on prize-winning picture books concluded that not only were female characters marginalized in children's books, they were likewise underrepresented in both titles and in the illustrations. Following were other examples stereotypical gender representation, for example how male characters were most often active and outgoing, meanwhile female characters had more passive roles. Male characters were more front and center, while female characters were behind, following and serving others (Weitzman et al. 1139). This examination additionally revealed that female characters were most often complimented on for being attractive, but male characters for their accomplishments and cleverness. Furthermore, female characters seemed to have much fewer opportunities presented for them, and they were ignored in several fields, such as politics and sports. In most of the studied books, their portrayed worth mainly came from their relationship with male characters (Weitzman et al. 1146).

The before mentioned 1972 research by Weitzman et al. was replicated in 1987 by Williams et al. and it showed an interesting conclusion. Even though there is still some

difference between the genders when it comes to character roles in children's books, there seem to have been some changes in a more gender equal direction (William et al. 154). More egalitarian thoughts are steadily replacing the ideas about stereotypical gender roles. However, these issues will not completely disappear when they continue to manifest in a society where men and women have very different roles. Yet, women are more and more involved in the former male-dominated ones. For example, many women are responsible for supporting their family economically. The female-dominated roles have not changed as much with women still managing most of the housework and care-taking in the household. Unfortunately, the origin of gender role stereotypes seems to be in the cultural mindset of people which is not so easily changed (Diekman & Murnen 374).

A different focus was made on the examination of children's books in 1993 when Patt and McBide researched books that were used by teachers in the classroom (qtd. in Narahara 11). The research included 4 preschool classrooms with 80 children. When the library corners in the classrooms were reviewed, it became clear that only 24 % of the 129 books had female central role characters, meanwhile the male central role characters reached to 70% of the books in the library corners. A special focus in their research was set on seeing whether the teachers would change the pronouns used in the books when they were reading out loud. In an earlier research made by Pratt the year before, in 1992, he noticed that children tend to use masculine pronouns much more than feminine or neutral pronouns when they were referring to characters where the gender is unknown. Patt and McBide noticed that teachers had the tendency to add masculine pronouns to texts that did not include any pronouns (qtd. in Narahara 11). Nilsen (1971) suggested that the reason for this tendency of using masculine pronouns instead of feminine pronouns might be the structure of the English language. Linguists have pointed out that it might be troublesome that the English language does not have any singular pronouns that are equivalent to the plural pronouns *they*, *their* and *them*. Because of that, every gender

neutral character needs to be introduced as either he or she. Numerous animals in children's books are referred to as males because the author simply needs to pick a pronoun, and choosing male is easy and it is more likely to be able to stand for both male and female characters, meanwhile, the pronoun *she* is usually thought to be only acceptable for females and not for males (Nilsen 921-922).

Turner-Bowker conducted an interesting research in 1996 where he put his focus on the adjectives used in children's books to describe the characters. He examined 30 Caldecott Medal and the so called "honors" books, from the years 1984-1994. His conclusions were really interesting. He found out that the most commonly used word to describe female characters were beautiful, frightened and worth. In context with other research made on this matter, this confirms the stereotypical outlook which was widespread. The words that were most commonly used to describe male characters were, in contrast, big, horrible and fierce (qtd. in Narahara). Likewise, his research showed that male characters were portrayed as being more active than female characters, which were usually more passive. Furthermore, as other examinations on this subject had likewise confirmed, female characters were usually much less visible in pictures and titles. Still, Turner-Bowker did find that the representation of females as central characters had increased. She noted how it had improved significantly since the research was made by Weitzman et al. in 1972. However, she believed that authors needed to deal with this problem of sexism in children's literature (Narahara 9).

More recent studies on this matter have shown similar results. In 2001, an extensive research was conducted by Angela M. Gooden and Mark A. Gooden on the representation of gender in children's picture books. Eighty-three children's books from between the years 1995-1999 were analyzed to see how females and males were represented. This research showed how stereotypical gender roles have prevailed, although there had been an increase in the appearance of non-traditional characteristics and gender roles. Adult males were visible in 25

different roles, but adult females were visible in only 14 roles. Most of these were traditional and stereotypical gender roles. Still there were a few adult females who had roles who have not been very visible in children's literature before, which were, for example, chefs and doctors (Gooden and Gooden 95). Males were rarely visible staying at home and caring for the children, or even going to the supermarket. Not one example showed a male character doing chores at home (Gooden and Gooden 96). Males were still visibly dominating in the world of children's literature in 2001 (Ibid., 97).

In 2006, another interesting research project was conducted by Mykol C. Hamilton et al. on sexism and gender roles in children's literature. A collection of two hundred books was gathered, which consisted of top selling books from 2001 as well as a 7-year sample of the very prestigious Caldecott award-winning books. The results showed that gender role stereotypes are consistently very noticeable in children's literature published at that time. In addition, when samples from 1980s and 1990s books were compared, they did not even show decreased examples of sexism. In the books covered, female main characters were more often portrayed as nurturing than male main characters were. Activities and employments were gender stereotyped, with more female characters having no paid occupation than male characters (Hamilton et al. 757). Furthermore, of the small percentage of male and female characters which visibly had jobs outside the home, male characters were much more likely to be in that group, with over two-thirds of those being men (Hamilton et al. 764). These results confirm that the prevalence of gender role stereotypes is highly concerning, especially in regards to children's literature. Contemporary children's books are seemingly often still portraying traditional gender role stereotypes, as well as bracing the idea that all things associated with the male gender are much more impressive and interesting than things associated with the female gender (Hamilton et al. 764).

However, sexism, in the form of stereotypical gender roles, is visible in children's literature as another approach than the underrepresentation of females. An example of that is in the portrayal of parents in children's literature. In 2005, a research was conducted by Anderson and Hamilton on 200 children's books with a focus on the representation of parents. The results showed that even though male characters have been proven to be much more dominating than female characters, they seem to have been largely under-represented as father figures in children's books. They have additionally been portrayed as unemotional and withdrawn as parental figures (Anderson and Hamilton 145). The fathers are often unaffectionate in regards to their children, and they usually do not participate in actions such as feeding the children or carrying them, or even talking to them. These activities were mostly composed by the mothers, who seem to take care of most things at the home (Ibid., 149). These findings show how mothers and fathers are portrayed in a significantly different way. This unbalanced representation can have major influence on the social development of children as well as parents. Yet, the problem is further visible in society. Even though mothers are working more and more away from the home, they take care of thirty percent more work in the household, like cooking and taking care of the children, than fathers do (Ibid., 145). As books tend to portray social conditions, it might be said that the reason for this unequal representation of parents is due to the fact that it is simply portraying common circumstances. This is could be related to the idea that the underrepresentation of females is due to the unequal opportunities in society. Still, the representation of parents provides examples of stereotypical gender roles.

Many books have been published that are being praised for being anti-sexist and supporting of equal gender opportunities. Still, there are usually only examples available that show female characters acting in ways that are usually linked with male characters. The portrayal of male characters in stereotypical female gender roles is rare (Anderson and Hamilton 145). Female characters are more often seen working outside the home, yet male

characters are seldom seen doing chores or watching the children. This is another example of sexism, where in this case male characters are presented as less significant than female characters. The fact is, there are so many different family structures, which includes for example both single mothers and fathers, as well as same-sex parents, it clearly shows how maternal and paternal roles are extensible in many different ways (Ibid., 149). That is why it would be beneficial if children's books would portray more diverse family patterns than has previously been done.

The exploration of recent research that has been made on gender roles has shown that there still seems to be a long road ahead to complete egalitarian gender role representation in children's literature. At least it is not challenging at this time to access children's books that feature both equality and fairness. It seems like more emphasis is now being put on publishing books that celebrate diversity and equal opportunities for people, no matter what gender, age or ethnicity, even though the progress of complete gender equality is still ongoing.

#### **4. Characters that subvert stereotypical gender roles**

Authors of children's books are evidently writing more about inspiring characters that are engaged in all kinds of different activities and diverse situations. Often these characters are visibly reversing traditional and stereotypical gender roles. The book *Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole was published in 1986. Its main character truly fits into that category. Princess Smartypants is a young, beautiful princess who does not want to get married. As she is a princess, her parents expect her to find a husband before she gets too old. Yet she enjoys not being married and she likes to be in the company of her pets in her castle, doing only what she wants to do. Potential suitors are constantly knocking on her door but she wants nothing to do with them. To get rid of them she sets up many different and impossible tasks that she knows no one is able to accomplish. Not one of the suitors is able to complete them, so Princess Smartypants thinks that she is free from any more interruptions. Then one day, Prince Swashbuckle shows at her doorstep. Unbelievably, he is able to finish all the tasks that Princess Smartypants has set up, much to her dissatisfaction. Afterwards he tells her that he really did not think she was that smart, a comment which makes her very frustrated with him. Therefore, she decides to give him a "magic kiss" which instantly turns Prince Swashbuckle into a big toad. He leaves her castle, and as the news about his unfortunate destiny spread out, Princess Smartypants is left undisturbed, which makes her really happy.

Interestingly enough, this book features a character who is a princess and she is not looking for a husband. Not only that, but she does not even want to get married ever, as "she enjoyed being a Ms." (Cole n. pag.). As an unconventional version of a princess story it really is very exceptional and this character shows examples of very non-stereotypical behavior. Some of the most famous princess characters known are linked with Walt Disney, with the first princess movie released as early as in 1937. A research on Disney princesses, made by England, Decartes and Collier-Meek in 2011, revealed that Disney princesses usually have similar

characteristics and behavioral traits which are traditionally assigned to the feminine. These princesses are usually very emotional, they are portrayed as followers as well as in the need of a rescue (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 560). However, Princess Smartyants does not need, nor does she want to be rescued. She is a producer in her own life and she is the commander. She wants to do “exactly what she pleased” (Cole n. pag.), which could indicate that she does not want to be controlled by anyone, and that includes by a husband. She has set up extremely hard tasks for the potential suitors, which contrasts the more usual stories about princesses who are restrained from meeting suitors by some external factors. Examples of that are the stories about Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel. Another interesting and contrasting point is where Princess Smartyants turns Prince Swashbuckle into a warty toad on purpose. This, for example, is in opposition to the old Brothers Grimm’s story about the Frog Prince, where a princess turns a frog back into a prince. All in all, *Princess Smartyants* is about a princess who is happy by herself and does not need to be saved or taken care of by a prince. Her non-stereotypical activities and behaviors are very successful examples of reversed stereotypical gender roles.

Another book which includes a non-stereotypically behaving character is *The Only Boy in Ballet Class*, by Denise Gruska and Amy Wummer. It was published in 2005. This story is about a young boy named Tucker Dohr who lives with his mother, his twin sisters Blanche and Edie, and their cat. Tucker really loves to dance ballet. At school he cannot sit still and his feet continue to dance even though he is sitting in the classroom. For him dancing is like breathing, and he does not want to stop, even though some think he is really strange. A group of boys from his school practice football and they make fun of Tucker, saying: “Yo, Tippy-Toe Boy! Where’s your tutu? Dancing is for girls!” (Gruska and Wummer n. pag.). Tucker’s uncle Frank is disappointed in him and says that he should be playing football instead of dancing ballet even though Tucker consistently tries to tell him that he is wrong. Even though it is considered

more socially acceptable for girls to practice ballet and for boys to play football, not all children have the same interests and capability.

Additionally, Tucker is free from stereotypical and discriminatory remarks from other children when in ballet class. Then, for example when his uncle Frank comes to dinner, Tucker is reminded once more about the dissatisfaction that comes with prejudice and unfairness. Stereotypical gender roles can prevent children from doing what they truly want to do. Children learn from societal views about genders what activities and behaviors are traditionally “suitable” for them, but that does not mean that it includes what they truly want to do. If both genders are presented with equal opportunities, children can be successful doing what they want without being limited by ideas of stereotypical gender roles. This story celebrates the uniqueness of every individual and demonstrates that without the constant exposure to stereotypical gender roles, children can much more easily explore every opportunity there is.

There are always those kinds of people around in society that are very opinionated and judgmental when it comes to the appearances and behaviors of others. The book *I'm a Girl!* by Yasmeen Ismail was published in 2015. It is about stereotypical remarks and comments that children sometimes receive which are based on their appearance or behavior. This story is about a young girl who likes to do her own things in her own way. She believes that because she is a girl, she is supposed to be good and behave properly. Yet she is messy, she is fast, she likes to read and learn, she likes to make noise, she likes to be good at things and she likes winning. All these traits that fit her very well are usually associated with boys. When she is messy, people think she is a boy and they tell her “Ugh! Boys are so messy!” (Ismail n. pag.). When she is riding really fast on her scooter, she hears “Look how fast that boy is going!” (Ismail n. pag.). She is also very brave, “and I am as brave as anyone else I know” (Ismail n. pag.) and she likes to be spontaneous. When she jumps into the pool and makes a big splash, they think she is a boy. Because of the things she likes to do, people keep thinking that she is

a little boy. Fortunately, she is not affected by what the people are saying, and she continues to do things that she loves to do and being who she is, a little girl. She gets frustrated that people constantly think she is a boy because of how she behaves, and she keeps shouting back to them that she is in fact a girl. She always stays true to herself and she never doubts her abilities or thinks that she is anything less than perfect just the way she is. This story really breaks down both traditional and stereotypical views about how girls and boys should behave. This little girl is described in a manner that most commonly is used to describe boys. In a way it mocks societal views about gender and people thinking she is a boy only because she likes to be messy and she likes to be the the best.

Finally, the book *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty and David Roberts is about perfectionism and failure. This story, published in 2013, is about a young, shy girl named Rosie Revere. She is an ambitious, positive female role model and her interest is in engineering which is often associated with the male gender. In school she does not say much and keeps mostly to herself, but when she is alone she likes to create gadgets and gizmos. She makes a couple of special devices, some of which her family members find to be comical and amusing. It makes Rosie sad as she wants to be taken seriously and she feels like she has failed at being a great engineer.

The book *Rosie Revere, Engineer* positively subverts stereotypical gender roles in many ways. First of all, Rosie Revere is a central, female character and her main interest and abilities are in the field of engineering. The key message in this story deals with the importance of knowing how to deal with failure and disappointment. Females can be great engineers and they can learn from failure. Rosie is afraid that her gadgets will not work perfectly and so she hides them away where people can not see them. Yet it was not always like this for her. Her enthusiasm for engineering and creating is broken down when her uncle Fred starts to laugh when she shows him the gadget she made especially for him. He acts very judgmental, however

it is not clear whether he is laughing so hard because he thinks her invention is ridiculous or because he is making fun of her for who she is. Perhaps he is not used to placing a little girl in the male dominated world of engineering. Rosie is embarrassed because of him and she starts keeping her dream about becoming an engineer all to herself. The societal demands to be perfect is seemingly criticized in this story. Rosie does not think she has what it takes to be an engineer because of other people. Yet with a little encouragement, she continues on her journey to becoming a great engineer. Rosie Revere is another female main character who is not dreaming about marriage or being rescued by Prince charming. This book provides a great example of a female character who is successful in the world of science, which is a world usually associated with the male gender.

What these books have in common is that all of them portray different choices and opportunities for children that sometimes are associated with only one gender. All these characters are very successful in maintaining their self-worth and dignity, regardless of how other people react to their behavior. All of them are criticized by someone who thinks they are not behaving as they think is correct based on their gender alone. However, they stay true to themselves and continue with their activities and behaviors that are often classified as only suitable for either males or females. Each of these books is, in its own way, about personal strength, social expectations and abilities; and with their behaviors and activities, these characters do succeed in reversing ideas about stereotypical gender roles.

Even though sexism in the form of stereotypical gender roles is still frequent in children's literature, it is evident that some effort is being made to subvert these traditional ideas about the capability of men and women. Stereotypes are weakened by showing both boys and girls in situations and roles that have previously been occupied by the other gender. These characters subvert the stereotypical ideas about males and females which have been dominant throughout the last fifty years. Their roles, abilities and occupations contrast the view that one gender is

more capable, or even more superior than the other. Characters like these are important tools on the road to complete gender equality in children's books.

## **5. Conclusion**

As society is in the process of completely accepting the fact that males and females are equally capable, it is important that literature does so as well. Women are constantly taking on more diverse roles in the workforce. The traditional idea of women wearing aprons in the house is gradually fading away. Stereotypical gender roles in children's literature are highly concerning and their prevalence does not seem to be in line with what is happening outside the world of literature. Recent studies have shown that there still are remarkable differences in the representation of males and females in children's books. As the importance of reading is for the social development for children, it is imperative that they are exposed to versatility and equality when it comes to the opportunities and occupations of both males and females. Stereotypical gender roles in children's literature are not only evident in regards to the underrepresentation of females, but additionally in the occupation of characters and the portrayal of parental figures. To be able to clarify the reason for this inclination of uneven gender roles in children's literature, it could be helpful to look at how they first came to be. The problem might be that people think of gender as a biological phenomenon and not as socially developed. The fact is, gender is something one can do, and one person can do gender in many different ways. It is learned from social factors in the environment. Children learn it from diverse sources, like their parents, from school, the television and from books they are exposed to. Constant exposure to stereotypical gender roles could make children start to believe that they are correct because they are used to being unprotected from it. What needs to happen is that children should be taught that gender is socially performed and thus they should be able to decide what they want their role to be. With books being especially familiar to children, it is a perfect venue to teach correct social values and not introduce them to sexism in the form of gender role stereotypes. However, research has showed that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is

still very widespread in children's literature. That is why the significance of stereotypical gender roles in children's literature lies both in the prevalence of it, as well as in its endurance.

A gender related distinction in children's books was not visible at the beginning of the publication of children's literature. The reason for the sudden shift is hard to find. It could be said that it was societal changes that sparked the sudden interest in books written especially for boys or girls. The inclination of putting males and females in separate groups might have been stronger at this time than it is now. Historical review has shown that the tendency of inserting sexism in children's books has declined. A comparison of the before mentioned research made shortly after the beginning of the feminist movement, and the research made after the 21<sup>st</sup> century, shows that even though the unequal representation of males and females persists, it is beginning to visibly decrease. In children's books since before the 1970s, female characters were ignored in roles that were completely reserved for male characters, like sports and politics. A majority of the female characters were wearing aprons, which indicates their supposed role as being housewives. Research on books published around the millennium showed similar results although there were some factors that were different. For example, female characters were occupied in more roles than the ones they had before, for example as chefs and doctors. Even though male characters are still dominating the world of children's literature, it is apparent that female characters are gaining more capability and courage than before. In addition to that, the advent of the twenty-first century has likewise brought some non-traditionally behaving characters that actually are subverting stereotypical gender roles. These characters might be the beginning in the elimination of stereotypical gender roles in children's books. They teach children that they are free to explore and to find out where their interests and personality leads them. If it is society's goal to make sure children can make use of their talents, they need to be taught that every opportunity is a viable choice.

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