



# Heroines and Mothers: Female Representation in the Carnegie Medal Winners 1936–2020

Mette Lindahl-Wise<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

This article presents quantitative research into the representations of females in Carnegie Medal-winning books 1936–2020. The relative presence or absence of female protagonists (heroines) and their mothers are used as proxies for gauging whether the representation of females is equitable. The research shows male protagonists outnumber female ones by a ratio of 1.58. Further, adult females are underrepresented in the narratives, as only 42% feature mothers who are alive and present in the story. Mothers are even underrepresented in fictional lone-parent families. While there is a strong correlation between female authors and female characters, the bias against fictional females is pronounced and so pervasive that it may signal a ‘symbolic annihilation’ of females in this particular cultural product. Societal changes and realities appear to have been slow to manifest in the Carnegies and a bias against females has not been attenuated even in recent years. Reflecting the diversity of lived experience in books is essential, and it is imperative that readers, including girls, are offered opportunities for identification—not only with protagonists but also adult females who might serve as role models to help them navigate towards adulthood.

**Keywords** Gender diversity · Carnegie Medal · Mothers · Family in children’s fiction · United Kingdom

This article presents research into the representations of females, both child and adult, in Carnegie Medal-Winning books from 1936 to 2020. The Carnegie Medal is the ‘UK’s longest running and best-loved children’s book award’ (Yotocarnegies, 2022), aimed at finding ‘an outstanding book written in English for children’ (ibid).

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**Mette Lindahl-Wise** is a PhD student in the Department of Education, Goldsmiths University, particularly interested in the portrayal of girlhood and adult women in children’s literature generally and the Carnegie Winners particularly.

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✉ Mette Lindahl-Wise  
mlind004@gold.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Goldsmiths University, London, UK

A long-list is made up of books nominated by librarians who are CILIP members, and the winner is selected by a panel of judges from CILIP's Youth Libraries group. Since February 2022, it has been known as the Yoto Carnegie Prize. While historically, Carnegie scholarship has focussed on an overview of the winning books (Barker, 1998) and authors (Crouch, 1967) or the mechanics and history of the award (Barker, 1986; Allen, 2005), this article turns attention to a detailed quantitative study of gender disparity and female representation in the Carnegie winners. As a woman, a feminist, and a mother of a teenage girl, my particular focus and interest in terms of identity is on gender, particularly the representation of females in children's literature. This interest shaped two separate questions with which I approach the Carnegies. Firstly, I am interested in understanding whether the body of Carnegie winners exhibits a gender bias in the portrayal of female children (expressed as an under-representation of female versus male protagonists) and, if so, whether such bias has been attenuated in recent years with increasing emphasis on gender equality. Secondly, in extension of my questions above, I am interested in the representation of adult females, and in this article, I explore the trends and developments in the prominence of the protagonist's mother.

## The Importance of the Carnegies as a Site of Research

Carnegie Winners are set up as a 'Gold standard' by virtue of its selection criteria and historical gravitas as outlined above. Barker points out that 'the effect of a children's book award on sales is an important element in the publicity that award generates' (1986, p. 37) and awards are 'tools used by educators and school and public librarians when selecting books for young readers' (Christian-Smith, 1990, p. 145). Consequently, each year's winner is highly likely to be recommended by what Aidan Chambers (1994) calls the 'enabling adults': teachers, librarians, bookshop staff and parents, and is thus likely to be read by a high number of children in any given year. Prizes are a form of curation (Pearson et al., 2019). While Carnegie Medal winners cannot be said to constitute a traditional canon, they conform to Taxel's (1995) notion of a 'selective tradition', which imposes ideological values on readers. As such, they might influence how people come to construct themselves. As the Carnegies provide a microcosm of children's literature, mainly in the UK, over the last 85 years they can, tentatively, be extrapolated to manifest trends in contemporary children's literature in general, at least in the UK.

As storying may be one of the most fundamental means of meaning-making (Pinsent, 1997), literature that reflects the diversity of lived experience is important (Mabbot, 2017). While I recognise that gender as a social category intersects with other categories of social identity, including sexuality, ethnicity, social class etc., in this article I focus on one aspect of this diversity: gender representation. Though the Carnegie criteria carefully avoid stipulating that all the selection criteria must be met in any winning novel, they acknowledge that representation is important by directing the reader to ask:

Which characters' voices does the reader hear from? Whose story or stories are being told? Whose stories are not being told? Why might this be? Is it a problem if some characters do not get heard? Could this be construed as an act of silencing? What might be inferred by the silence? Does this contribute to or reinforce existing societal inequality or discrimination? (Yotocarnegies, 2022)

While these questions help the reader tease out inequities in the portrayals of backgrounds, experiences and identities, they are not explicitly aimed at exploring gendered representations. In fact, 'the judging committee will not be looking at whether the author has chosen to write about a girl or a boy and how that will reflect on the shortlist' (Schmidt, 2013). However, unless criteria explicitly consider socio-political dimensions, prize-winning literature may tend to privilege some voices over others (Pearson et al., 2019). By not specifying gender representation as a specific dimension for consideration, the Carnegie Award risks privileging male voices over female voices, both in the short and the longer term.

## Gender and Children's Literature

Despite roughly equal numbers of males and females across the world's population, women are underrepresented in a variety of domains, and male overrepresentation is especially pervasive in media and cultural products. This is often referred to as 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman, 2000). Disproportionate gender representation negatively impacts women (and men) by sustaining explicit and implicit biases against the female gender and diminishing women's sense of self-worth and belonging (Tuchman, 2000). Symbolic annihilation is also readily apparent in literature targeted towards children (Casey et al., 2021), where the resultant negative consequences on self-worth may be particularly detrimental (Peterson and Lach, 1990). The way gender is portrayed in children's literature is an important social issue because 'gender representations reproduce and legitimate gender systems' (McCabe et al., 2011). Moreover, gender depictions matter to the actual readers. As the media influences how we see ourselves and our bodies (Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2012), children's literature might open children's eyes to gender bias or, alternately, perpetuate limiting stereotypes. Recent work suggests that exposure to counter-stereotypical protagonists in books can reduce children's endorsement of gender stereotypes (Casey et al., 2021). While children can and do read resistantly (Pinsent, 1997; Lehr, 2001), resistance requires effort, and I question why children (in this case, girls) should have to do so to any significant extent. It is, perhaps, a blunt instrument to explore gender parity in children's literature through the figure of the child protagonist. However, I suggest it is also important to understand whether adult females are equitably represented in these narratives, as a relative absence of adult female characters might further indicate issues of symbolic annihilation in children's literature.

There has generally been a high degree of academic focus on gender portrayals in US children's literature, both in its prestigious medal winners, the Caldecott and the Newbery Medals and in children's fiction generally (see, for instance, Kortenhuis and Demarest, 1993; Diekman and Murnen, 2004; McCabe et al., 2011; Casey et al.,

2021). The findings are not unequivocal. When Powell et al. (1998) analysed characters of Newbery Medal-winning books by decade from the 1920s to the 1990s, they found that overall proportional representation was achieved in the 1990s. An extension of this work was provided by Mcleary and Widdersheim (2014), who analysed how 12 books that won the Newbery Medal between 2000 and 2011 represented gender and found equitable female representation (though with a bias toward traditional male stereotypes). On the other hand, Albers' (1996) analysis of Caldecott winners found that the representation of females continues to reify cultural stereotypes. Widening the site of research, McCabe et al. (2011) reviewed the representation of males and females in the titles and central characters of 5618 books published in the twentieth century in the US and found that male protagonists outnumber female protagonists by a factor of 1.58. They also found that change toward gender equality is uneven, non-linear, and tied to patterns of feminist activism and backlash throughout the century (McCabe et al., 2011). Ullah and Naz (2014) attribute the persistent presence of gender bias, which they found in the reading material offered to young children, to the lack of serious attention to gender inequity in recent years. The lack of progress is also reflected in the up-to-date estimates of the relative proportion of males and females featured as single protagonists in 3280 books published between 1960 and 2020, carried out by Casey et al. (2021). They found that although the proportion of female protagonists has increased over this 60-year period, male protagonists remain overrepresented even in the twenty-first century. Despite ample evidence of gender bias in children's books prior to 2000, there is a dearth of evidence on female gender representations in the twenty-first Century (Casey et al., 2021), particularly for books published in the UK. My research thus seeks to contribute to a more complete picture of gendered representation in UK children's literature, particularly prize-winning literature.

### The Role of Adult Females in Children's Lives and Literature

According to the ONS, there were more than 8 million families with dependent children living at home in Britain in 2021. Of these, 204,000 were lone-father families. Consequently, mothers are present in 97% of families living in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in a supportive and loving home environment is important for children's outcomes across a range of parameters and is predictive of children's positive behavioural and cognitive outcomes in childhood (Fomby and Musick, 2018). Specifically, Fomby and Musick found that the presence of the mother is important:

(T)otal shared time, including time when mothers and children are directly engaged with each other and when mothers are present but not engaged, is a

<sup>1</sup> The ONS defines 'a family' as "a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children or a lone parent with at least one child". The data does not describe how many families are headed by grandparents or live in extended or blended family situations. There were 6000 same-sex couples with dependent children. These are included in the overall number of families because even if these were all all-male families (which they are not), statistically, this does not change the overall number of mothers living in families.

more sensitive predictor of child outcomes than is either of these more narrowly defined measures on its own (p. 178).

Adult women (whether they are mothers or not) are important role models to children, particularly girls (Porter and Serra, 2020). In children's literature, mothers figure very prominently in picture books, while fathers are often absent (Anderson and Hamilton, 2005). Further, images of mothers in picture books often establish 'scripts and schemas for mothering that children come to expect, and mothers strive to enact' (Fraustino and Coats, 2016, p. 12). In other words, mothers are often portrayed as engaging in gender-stereotypical and nurturing behaviour (Anderson and Hamilton, 2005). Middle-grade and young adult novels, on the other hand, 'more often seek to disrupt or extend those roles by challenging gender stereotypes as well as nurturing mother schemas' (Fraustino and Coats, *ibid*, p. 12). However, if the mother is absent or dead in the narrative, opportunities for challenging gender stereotypes or for providing positive or negative role-and-gender portrayals can be lost, even as some of the narratives explore the impact this loss.

There is a position that the absence of families in some children's literature is a device to give children freer rein or to allow adventure into the narrative (Grenby, 2014). Gillian Avery (1975,) states that mothers, in particular, 'have a constricting effect on the plot and on the children's activities; their love is so embarrassingly obvious that it cannot be overlooked, it stands in the way of that independence that children like to imagine' (p. 224). However, the idea that families in general and mothers in particular are narrative constraints should be questioned. The importance of books acting as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors (Simms Bishop, 1990) is accepted, though usually applied to questions of race or class. However, it is equally applicable to the question of gender, not only of the protagonist, but also to adult females. Given the centrality of mothers in families and in relation to their children, especially, children should be able to see realistic (and positive) portrayals of mothers in books. Providing space for both adult and child female voices in children's literature is essential, particularly for girl readers. Assuming that a bias against mothers as expressed in Gillian Avery's (1975) statement above might have been attenuated in recent years with increasing emphasis on the female experience, I expected that female voices would feature more prominently in later Carnegie winners than in earlier winners.

### **Methodological Approach to Reading the Carnegies**

I undertook a quantitative analysis of all the Carnegie Winners from 1936 to 2020. The Carnegie Medal was first awarded in 1936 and has been given every year since except for four years: the prize was withheld in 1943, 1945 and 1966 as 'no book considered suitable', and in 2006 the date changed from the year of publication to the year of award. Thus the medal has been awarded to 81 books between 1936 and 2020 as set out in the table below in Table 1.

As I read the Carnegies, I recorded information about them in a spreadsheet to be able to chart trends and changes over the 'life' of the medal and to test the assumptions and expectations of my research questions. In this article, the variables

**Table 1** Number of Carnegie winners per decade

1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
5	8	10	9	10	10	10	9	10

examined are as follows: gender of the author, the number of female vs male protagonists, genre, the status of the protagonist's mother, family setting, and whether the protagonist's mother or father was a 'single parent' in the narrative.

### **Protagonist Variables**

The gender of the protagonist is reported as 'male' or 'female'. This reflects the fact that there are only two Carnegie-winning novels that queer gender in any way (*Here Lies Arthur* (Reeve, 2007), where a girl dresses as a boy until unable to hide her maturing body, she 'transitions' into a girl, and *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler* (Kemp, 1988), which plays on the reader's assumption that the protagonist is a boy when she is actually a girl) and though gender as a construct is queried, both protagonists are resolutely 'females'. This suggests that future research would do well to examine trends in the representation of non-binary protagonists to better understand gender diversity in children's books.

**Male/female:** In the first-person narrative, the determination of the protagonist category was determined by the voice of the 'story-teller'. In third-person narratives, I looked at which characters the narrative focuses on (e.g. a girl in *Handles* (Mark, 1983)).

**Multiple:** The category 'multiple' is used when the book contains both male and female protagonists. A typical example is *Salt to the Sea* (Sepetys, 2016) which has four protagonists, two male and two female, with these different voices marked by the chapter headings. The category 'multiple' also covers collections of stories (e.g. Walter de la Mare's *Collected Stories for Children* (1947)). Though I categorised them separately, for reporting purposes, multiple protagonists of the same sex are counted in the appropriate gender category, e.g. *The Grange at High Force* (Turner, 1965), which has several boys as main characters, is counted as 'male'.

**N/A:** A number of the older Carnegie Winners do not feature a protagonist because they are non-fiction books. The Carnegie committee phased out non-fiction winners as they dated too soon, and the last non-fiction winner was *The Making of Man* (Cornwall) in 1960.

### **'Mother' Variables**

In this dataset, I was only interested in the mother of the protagonist(s) and whether she was present in the narrative. I did not capture how the narrative represented mothers in general nor if and when caregiving was provided by other characters in the individual narratives.

**Present:** I defined a 'present' mother as somebody who is mentioned in the story and has at least a line or two of actual speech. Sometimes the 'presence' is tenuous, as in *The Wind on the Moon* (Linklater, 1944), where the mother only makes an appearance in the first couple of chapters. Usually, though, a 'present' mother is involved in her child's everyday world, like the mothers in *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* (Lively, 1973) or *One* (Crossan, 2016).

**Absent:** I have deemed a mother 'absent' in one of three cases: the first is if this is made clear by the narrative. For instance, the mother in *We Couldn't Leave Dinah* (Treadgold, 1941) is unable to return home from Africa when war breaks out and is thus not part of the storyline. The second is if she is only mentioned in passing and/or does not speak any lines. In *Lark* (McGowan, 2019), the mother returns at the end, but the reader never 'meets' her, nor does she speak any lines. The third is where it is not clear from the narrative where the mother is, but she is not present, and she is not declared dead in the course of the narrative, as is the case in *Maggot Moon* (Gardner, 2013).

**Dead:** I have used the category 'dead' only where the narrative declares explicitly that this is so, e.g. in *A Gathering Light* (Donnelly, 2003). I maintain the consistency of this even when a mother is dead, and the father has remarried (in Mahy, 1982). There are cases where it is difficult to determine whether the mother of the protagonist is dead or merely 'absent'. For instance, in *The Stronghold* (Hunter, 1974), Col's mother has been abducted by Roman raiders—she is undoubtedly absent and probably dead, but the narrative is not specific. In this case, I have chosen the category 'absent'.

**Multiple:** I have used the category 'multiple' in cases where the Carnegie winner is either a collection of stories with different protagonists (e.g. *The Little Bookroom*, Farjeon, 1955) or it features multiple protagonists who are not siblings (e.g. *Pigeon Post*, Ransome, 1936). There are two exceptions to this; the first is if the multiple protagonists are siblings, in which case they obviously only have one mother. The other is if the mothers of multiple protagonists all have the same status, i.e. as both Viola's and Todd's mums are dead in *Monsters of Men* (Ness, 2010), that is what I have recorded in my data.

**N/A:** This category has been applied where the Carnegie Winner is a work of non-fiction.

### **Gender of Author**

For the avoidance of doubt, I captured the declared gender of the author at the time of winning the Carnegie Medal. At the time of writing, only two genders were declared by the authors: female or male.

### **Family Structure Variables**

I captured a small set of variables describing the family structure portrayed in the novels.

Family Setting: Captured as a 'yes' when the narrative clearly describes a family setting either headed by a parent or by an extended family member (i.e. the grandmother in *Wolf* (Cross, 1990)). Conversely, there is no family setting in *Salt to the Sea* (Sepetys, 2016), where three of the four protagonists are refugees fleeing in front of the armies of Russia and Germany and is thus captured as a 'no'.

Single Mother/Single Father: captured as a 'yes' where the single parent is not remarried or in a similarly committed partnership.

### **Genre Variables**

I allocated each winner to one of the following categories:

Historical: if the book was set outside the living memory (approximately 70 years) of the author (e.g. *Where the World Ends*, 2017).

Fantasy: including high (e.g. *The Borrowers*, 1952) and low fantasy (e.g. *The Little White Horse*, 1946).

Realistic: set in the present day (of the author)—a typical example might be *The Other Side of Truth*, 2000).

N/A: Non-fiction winners or collections of stories.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

The data under consideration provided the perfect opportunity to examine general trends in the representation of female protagonists and the position of mothers in children's literature over the last 85 years.

### **Gender Bias Against Female Protagonists**

In my research, I was interested in exploring gender disparity in children's literature in its most blatant form—the male-to-female ratio of the protagonists. I wanted to understand whether the Carnegies contained a gender bias against female protagonists and, if so, if there was a 'tipping point' at which gender parity is generally achieved in the Carnegies. In order to explore this, I used a gendered protagonist method which reflects a proportional representation of female protagonists (the heroines of the title) vs male protagonists. While crude, this is an obvious marker of equality and at least gives an indication of changes and trends in this area. While I had expected a predominance of male protagonists in early (pre-1970) winners, I had assumed that the relative number of female protagonists might increase post-1970 as second-wave feminists started to address the underrepresentation of females in society. In other words, I had expected the male/female ratio to settle around a 'tipping point' of 1.0 in the decades after the 1970s.

As shown in Fig. 1 above, the ratio of male to female protagonists is 1.58 over the 85 years of the Carnegie Winners 1936–2020. It remains largely constant throughout—if anything, the ratio of male protagonists increases slightly from 1.57 before 1970 to 1.59 after 1970. This increase is partly driven by the fact that the 1970s



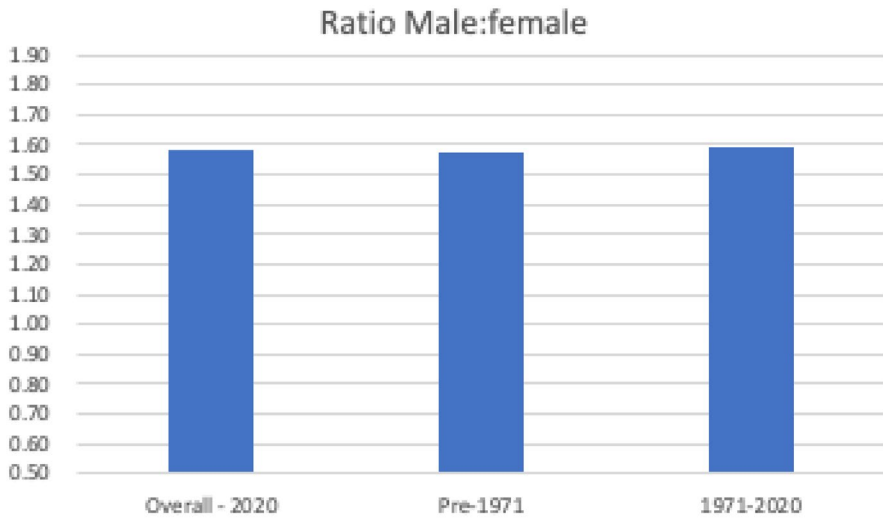


Fig. 1 Male:Female protagonist ratios

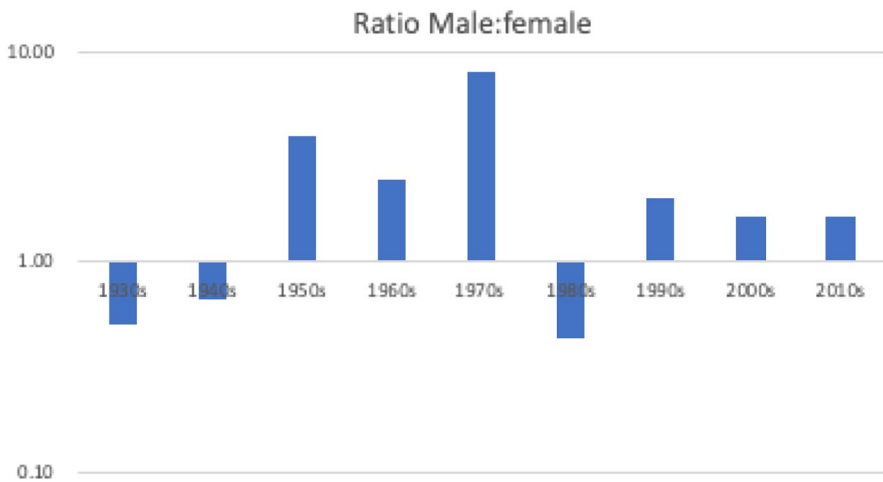


Fig. 2 Protagonist ratios by decade

feature the most male protagonists of any decade: 8 males (see Fig. 2—Protagonist ratio by decade).

Further, as seen in Fig. 2, there is no question of a linear progression over the course of the Carnegies and thus no ‘tipping point’. The dominance of male protagonists in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, where an astonishing eight protagonists were male, might reflect the concern at the time that boys were not keen on reading books which featured a female heroine. Research carried out by Bleakley

et al. (1988) found that boys prefer stories about boys and men, and Peggy Albers (1996) refers to how, as a teacher, she would 'read books to my students that featured males because I did not want the boys to get bored' (p. 267). Indeed, textbooks in the 1980s advised: 'the ratio of 'boy books' should be about two to one in the classroom library collection' (Segel, 1986, p 180). To a large extent, such concerns with books which might appeal particularly to boys are still present, for instance, in the ways books are marketed specifically for boys. It is also a sentiment that I personally have heard from both children's library professionals and teachers in the very recent past. It might account for books featuring male protagonists being consistently in the majority, even in recent decades.

Female protagonists outnumber males in three decades; the 1930s and the 1940s (two decades where the numbers are skewed by the fact that there were fewer overall winners and most winners featured multiple protagonists of both genders) and the 1980s. The predominance of female protagonists in the 1980s might have been caused by greater awareness of previous decades' gender inequalities on the part of the CILIP library committee members. However, as the 1980s' winners are a roll-call of renowned female authors, Margaret Mahy, Anne Fine and Jan Mark, who each won two medals in a little over a decade, maybe it was simply a fortuitous coincidence, as it is not repeated in subsequent decades. Powell et al. (1998) and Mcleary et al. (2014) found that patterns of parity were persistently present in the Newbery Medal winners from the 1990s onwards. This is not reflected in the Carnegies, where the average male:female protagonist ratio over the last 30 years is 1.78. However, the findings of female gender bias in the Carnegies were mirrored in the extensive studies of 20th-century American children's books by McCabe et al. (2011) and by Casey et al. (2021). Somewhat depressingly, this points to the fact that the gender parity seen in the Newbery winners is the exception rather than the rule.

Like Casey et al (2021) I found that non-human characters are overrepresented as male, though the sample size in the Carnegies is relatively small. Of the five novels featuring non-human characters, four feature a male protagonist. Of course, the centring of non-human characters could indicate that writers are exploring postgender, posthuman narrative positions. However, as these particular winners are all narratively straightforward stories featuring animals (e.g. *Watership Down* (1972) or 'miniature humans' (e.g. *The Borrowers* (1952)). The small number of non-fiction winners too were overtly male focussed, either as indicated by the title *The Making of Man* (1960) about the evolution of mankind or by the conspicuous absence of women in the illustrations of *A Valley Grows Up* (1953), an illustrated book about the development of a village from pre-history to the present day. The exception is *The Radium Woman* (1939) which, as a biography of Marie Curie, centres on a female character.

At the outset I had assumed that female protagonists would predominate in fantasy or historical novels with these genres' accompanying scope for giving females relatively more agency than they would necessarily have at the time of writing. Somewhat disappointingly, I found that heroes outstrip heroines in both fantasy novels and in historical novels. Only in realistic novels is there some semblance of parity, as can be seen in Table 2

**Table 2** Genre/protagonist correlation

	Fantasy	Historical	Realistic
Female	7	7	9
Male	15	12	11
Multiple	6	2	6

Multiple protagonists (of both genders) were common in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s before staying steady at 10% for the later decades. This is probably not a surprising development. Novels written in the 1940s and 1950s featured groups of self-reliant children who are managing during war or were given freedom of movement that modern children cannot imagine; for instance, in *Pigeon Post* (1936) where the children go camping in the Lake District for several weeks. Multiple protagonists of the same gender, on the other hand, are not that common. Multiple male protagonists occur in three books (*The Grange at High Force* (Turner, 1965), *The Little Grey Men* (BB, 1942) and *Lark* (McGowan, 2019) but multiple female-only protagonists are only present in one Carnegie winner, *The Wind on the Moon* (1944). While the total number of books with multiple protagonists of the same gender is tiny, this seeming reluctance to allow multiple girls to be the focal point of these novels potentially suggests a social reticence to validate groups of females—the point that Auchmuty also put forward in her critical exploration of the female school stories, *A world of girls* (1992). Based on this data, it is evident that there is considerable underrepresentation of female protagonists in the Carnegie winners and that male voices are, therefore, privileged over female voices.

### ***Mothers are also Absent when Books are set in a Family***

My second set of research questions relates to trends and developments in the prominence of adult females in the Carnegies. While there are cases where strong and positive female role models other than mothers appear in the narrative, these remain in the minority. Consequently, in this research, I used the mother of the protagonist (whether portrayed positively or negatively) as a proxy for adult females generally. I assumed that I would be able to observe a general trend towards a more equitable presence of adult females in more recent Carnegie winners, reflecting the greater prominence of women in contemporary society. However, using the ‘mother proxy’, I found that adult females are underrepresented in the narratives: of the 71 Carnegie Winners which are categorised as fiction, only 42% feature mothers who are alive and present in the story (even though this ‘presence’ is sometimes narratively tenuous and not always a positive force). Given the high incidence of self-reliant groups of protagonists in the earlier winners, it is perhaps not surprising that the mother is only present in 29% of the narratives prior to 1971. Superficially, there is much more parity between ‘present’ and ‘absent’ mothers in the Winners of the last 50 years (49% and 51% respectively). However, these numbers mask considerable variation decade by decade, including a significant absence of mothers in the most recent Carnegie winners. This is clear from Fig. 3 which shows the proportion of mothers

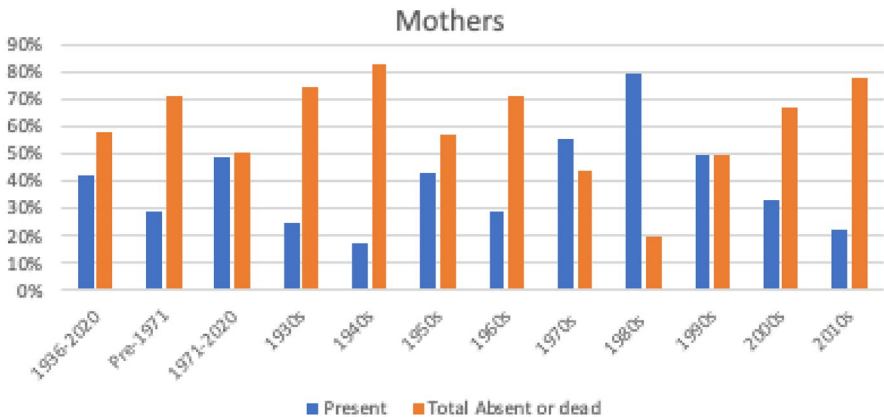


Fig. 3 Status of mothers by decade

who are present in their children's lives against mothers who are absent ('dead' or 'absent') from their children's lives.

Mothers are more 'present' than 'absent' in the 1970s and the 1980s, reaching an overall peak in the 1980s. However, contrary to my expectation, this adult female presence was not sustained in the more recent (2000–2020) winners which only feature an average of 28% 'present' mothers. There is also a slight correlation between the gender of the protagonist and the presence of the mother in the storyline. Of the 30 books that feature 'present' mothers, 15 have a female, and 12 have a male protagonist.

As mentioned earlier, mothers are present in 97% of British families whose children still live at home. Consequently, the underrepresentation of adult females in the Carnegie fiction winners does not reflect the social reality most children in Britain experience in their family lives. Neither does it reflect the important place the family occupies in children's fiction, where 'family is inherent in and central to most children's literature' (Alston, 2008, p. 2). Fiction set in a family presents a situation where females are almost invariably included through their role as mothers. In other words, without it, there tend to be fewer adult females present in the narrative. Narratively, 48% of Carnegie winners are rooted in a family setting. Thus, if we accept Grenby's assertion that 'probably the majority of children's fiction has been set within the family' (2014, p. 117), then the Carnegie winners feature fewer books set in a family than children's literature generally. This can be framed positively; Grenby points out that 'families have sometimes been represented as constrictive, especially for girls' (p. 140), and as such, it could be argued that the lack of family settings or a mother is potentially liberating, particularly for the female protagonist. In the Carnegies, which *are* set in a family, the mother is 'present' in 60% of the winners. In these cases—for instance *Bog Child* (Dowd, 2008)—she frequently plays a key role, commensurate with the role of mothers which many child readers would experience at home. However, in 40% of narratives rooted in family settings, she is absent. This is an underrepresentation of mothers/adult females, possibly in comparison with children's literature generally, and certainly

in the context of real-life, and it is problematic because it means that there are far fewer opportunities for the reader to engage with adult females in the narrative.

### ***Single-Parent Households are Amply Represented in the Carnegie Winners***

A high proportion of the Carnegie winners feature a single-parent household; of the 39 books set in a family, 15 (38%) is headed by a lone parent. However, even here mothers are in the minority: there are ten single dads and only five single mums in the winning books. Though not all single fathers are successful parents (e.g. the alcoholic father in *Whispers in the Graveyard* (Breslin, 1994), most are. Of course, it could be argued that this portrayal of fathers as nurturers serves as a way to redress gender inequality. However, given that it is much more common in UK society for fathers to be absent,

The vast majority of the 1.8 million lone-parent families in Britain – almost nine out of 10 – are headed by women. Together, they are raising 3.1 million children – more than a fifth of all children (Partington, R, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2022)

it does not reflect the experience of the majority of children in lone-parent families. Could it be a reflection of the fact that single mothers are ‘demonised’ in UK political parlance (McRobbie, 2009, p. 51) in a way that single fathers are not? In children’s literature, Jan Mark suggests that the absence of complete families is driven by the narrative expectation that ‘children with two harmonious parents were likely to have little to unsettle them’ (2001). However, this is not universally applicable. International children’s literature often depicts family life where the diversity of the family is taken for granted as part of the frame, not as an inherent catalyst for the narrative. For instance, Scandinavian children’s literature, popular and prize-winning alike, has a long history of realistic fiction set within family settings, from the works of Astrid Lindgren (e.g. *Alla Vi Barn I Bullerbyn*, 1947) to Gunilla Bergstrom’s Alfie Atkins series (from 1972) to Renee Toft Simonsen’s series about the girl Karla which began with *Karla’s Kabale* (2003). The families portrayed in these Scandinavian books do not necessarily have ‘two harmonious parents’, but regardless of how the family is composed, the setting is generally essential to the narrative and the action. Grenby (2014) argues that somewhat paradoxically, ‘these accounts of familial diversity and dysfunction do a great deal to reinforce the attractiveness of the kind of ‘normal’ nuclear family (p. 136). While that may be ideologically true, I feel it is generally positive that different family models are portrayed in the Carnegie winners, particularly where these are portrayed in a positive and realistic light. Nevertheless, the diversity of families found in Britain—in terms of gender, race and ability—is poorly represented in the Carnegies.

### ***Author Gender Correlation***

In their research of 200 children’s books published between 1995 and 2001, Hamilton et al. (2006) found that female authors were instrumental in promoting diversity and this finding is echoed in my research which shows a strong correlation between female authors and female characters.

**Table 3** Author/gender correlation

	Total winners (fiction)	Male protagonist	Female protagonist	Multiple protagonists	Present Mother
Male author	34	20	6	8	12
Female author	42	18	16	8	17

As can be seen from Table 3, the majority of Carnegie fiction winners have been authored by a female author. Winners by female authors feature a roughly equal distribution between male and female protagonists. In contrast, male authors seem to have been reluctant to write stories featuring a female protagonist. In fact, male authors are three times more likely to feature their own gender as lead protagonists than female authors.

In absolute terms, female authors also tend to write more 'present' mothers—mothers are present in 17 of the Carnegie winners authored by a female but in only 12 books authored by a male. It is probably no coincidence that the 1980s, which featured the highest ratio of female protagonists to male protagonists (7:3) and the highest proportion of 'present' mothers, also had the greatest number of female authors (eight out of ten were female, including Margaret Mahy, Anne Fine and Berlie Doherty). In recent decades (2000–2020), the correlation between female authors and the representation of females has not been as strong as in the 1980s. While ten Carnegie winners were authored by females, only four featured a female protagonist (*A Gathering Light*, Donnelly, 2003, *Buffalo Soldier*, Landman, 2014, *One*, Crossan, 2016, and *Poet X*, Acevedo, 2018) and only two a present mother (*One*, Crossan, 2016 and *Poet X*, Acevedo, 2018).

## Conclusion

I set out to understand how well females were represented in the Carnegie winners over the last 85 years and to explore whether the increasing focus on gender equality since the 1970s was evident in these prize-winning books. While the ratio of male-to-female protagonists fluctuated, it is notable that, overall, male protagonists are overrepresented in the Carnegies, with half as many male protagonists as female protagonists (a 1.58 ratio). The research also showed a pronounced absence of adult females in the Carnegies as most mothers were dead or absent, and a disproportionate number of fictional lone-parent families were headed by a single male. While winners featuring credible adult female characters flourished in the 1970s and 1980s this was not numerically sustained in the winners of the last 20 years. The delta between the social reality of 97% of children who live within a family with their mother and the fictional life portrayed in the Carnegies indicates that there may be issues with the representation of adult females that goes beyond any purported conventions of children's literature to liberate the protagonist from the constraint of the family and the mother. Further, it

was evident that male authors were somewhat disinclined to write female characters, possibly through a reluctance to write an experience they had not lived. If so, this reluctance was not shared by the female authors.

Since the inauguration of the Carnegie prize, women have made great social and economic strides and there have been multiple waves of feminist movements. Why, then, the lack of prominence of females in the Carnegie winners, if not in general, then at least in recent decades? Given that motherhood is no longer viewed as a monolithic identity there could be a reluctance on the part of the author to navigate the complexities of motherhood, including non-normative mothering practices. However, the lack of parity may be a sign that gender stereotypes persist in society at large and as such it is an expression of unconscious bias on the part of the authors or the judging panel. Or it may be an overt backlash against several waves of feminism, as set out by McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009). Another possibility, specific to children's literature, is that there might be residual concern about boy's reading preference if the chosen book features a heroine. Whatever the reasons, taken together the dearth of female representation in protagonists and mothers is so pronounced in the body of Carnegies as to signal a 'symbolic annihilation' of females.

Obviously, the Carnegie Winners should not be chosen solely based on the gender of the protagonist or for their inclusion of adult role models of either gender. However, it is essential to reflect on how females are represented in books with a canonical status and to question what this says about the kind of society which is presented to young readers in these narratives. In children's literature, female role models may manifest as heroines or (amongst other characters) as mothers. They provide opportunities for identification and can help readers navigate the path towards adulthood. The judging criteria point directly to the importance of this point "(w)hose story or stories are being told? Whose stories are not being told? (...) Could this be construed as an act of silencing? (...) Does this contribute to or reinforce existing societal inequality?" (Yotocarnegies, 2022) A lack of female representation (whether adult or child) is problematic as it means that male voices are privileged at the expense of female voices, and opportunities for portraying complex females are lost. Further, while girls can and do read resistantly, why should they continue to have to do so?

This research has focussed on quantitative data to drive an understanding of general trends and developments in the (inequitable) representation of females in the Carnegie winners in the last 85 years. However, further, qualitative, work could be undertaken to understand *how* females, adult and child, are portrayed in these books selected to represent the 'best' of children's literature in any particular year. Given that the Carnegies represent a curated microcosm of UK children's literature, these issues can probably be extrapolated to children's literature currently available in the UK. My research results are also echoed in the large-scale studies of American children's books by McCabe et al. (2011) and Casey et al. (2021). Certainly, these findings indicate trends worth exploring further in a broader range of children's books for sale in the UK and denote that equal representation is not to be taken for granted. With Ullah and Naz (2014), I call for serious and renewed attention to gender representation in children's literature.

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