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"Is This a Boy or a Girl?": Rethinking Sex-Role Representation in Caldecott Medal-Winning Picturebooks, 1938–2011

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Abstract A number of previous studies have addressed gender role-stereotyping in Caldecott Award-winning picturebooks. Building upon the extensive scholarship examining representations of females in Caldecott books, this current study offers a critical investigation of how gender is represented in Caldecott Medal-winning literature from 1938 to 2011 by exploring the ways in which "femininity" and "masculinity," biological sex, and gender are constructed in these texts. The investigators briefly address author and illustrator gender and the representations of males and females as characters or images in pictures and text before departing from previous scholarship to offer a rereading of books that feature "ungendered" leading characters, those that are not identified in the text as being either "male" or "female" and are therefore open to the interpretation of individual readers. By resisting cultural cues and normative constructions of gender and biological sex, these ungendered depictions extend the range of possible ways in which readers may see themselves or those in their lives represented in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks.

Keywords Caldecott Medal · Awards · Picturebooks · Gender

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> Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men. We who write children's books, and we who teach through literature, need to be sure we are opening doors to full human potential, not closing them.
> – Mem Fox (1993, p. 84)

Western conceptions of gender have undergone a marked shift across the past half century. Where gender and biological sex were previously taken for granted and considered "natural," today, theorists explore the various ways sex, gender, and biology are both ideologically and socially constructed. Influenced by radical feminism, the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, and the field of masculinity studies, contemporary scholars and critics work to make explicit the political nature of phallocentric systems that undergird, among other things, Western cultural constructions of what it looks like and means to be "male" or "female."

Particularly since the 1980s, popular thinking about gender has been problematized by scholars like Judith Butler (1990), who argue gender is not a thing (a noun), but a series of repeated actions (verbs) that, through their repetition, appear "natural." Through work by Butler and other theorists, gender can be conceptualized not as something that is "real," but that is instead a constructed set of acts privileged by language and made to feel like "reality." Whereas binary conceptions of gender have traditionally situated the categories of "male" and "female" as contradictory and complementary (where the "male" is viewed, in part, as active, aggressive, directive, and persistent while the "female" is constructed as passive, creative, emotional, and imitative), the work of these scholars has made clear that one is not born gendered, one *becomes* gendered. In working to destabilize notions of sex and gender, queer theorists attempt to make space for those who reject or cannot fit into these previously rigid categories.

Despite increasingly complex understandings of gender as a culturally constructed performance, gender-role socialization remains firmly entrenched in most children, even before they begin their formal education. Researchers have argued that it is between the ages of three and five that children begin to distinguish between sexes and start forming gender stereotypes, conceptions rooted in oversimplified, culturally shared beliefs about how a particular gender is perceived (Powlishta et al., 1993). By the time young children enter kindergarten, they readily differentiate between "masculine" and "feminine" roles and have a firm understanding of the types of behavior deemed "appropriate" for males and females. From the time they are very young, children are instructed (explicitly, through caregivers and teachers, as well as implicitly through media like literature, television, and film) how to "act like a lady" or "be a man," something that would be unnecessary if gender were indeed "natural."

Re-Examining Gender in Caldecott Medal Books, 1938–2011

A primary means of transmitting cultural values from one generation to the next is through the telling of stories and, in the United States, this commonly comes in the

form of children's literature. As objects that present models for not only understanding the world, but for understanding oneself, the messages in children's literature have the potential to profoundly influence the lives of young readers. The pervasive depictions of "females" and "males" or "femininity" and "masculinity" too often go unquestioned across these books and leave "no doubt that the characters portrayed in children's literature mold a child's conception of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how males and females are supposed to act" (Korenhaus and Demarest, 1993, p. 220). These types of implicit messages about biological sex and gender construct what is "normal" or "natural" and need to be critically interrogated (Walkerdine, 1990) as those values that are most taken for granted are often the ones to which readers must pay the closest attention (Rosenblatt, 1995/1938).

In examining gender distribution and constructions of gendered behavior in picturebooks,[1] a number of studies have focused on Caldecott Award-winning titles. Named for nineteenth century illustrator Randolph Caldecott, the Caldecott Medal has been awarded annually by the American Library Association "to the artist of the most distinguished American picturebook for children published by an American publisher in the United States in English during the preceding year" (Association for Library Service to Children [ALSC], 2009, p. 10). As the most prestigious award for children's picturebooks, the Caldecott Medal guarantees winning books phenomenal sales: Caldecott Medal and Honor books are ordered by nearly every school and public library across the country. Because librarians, teachers, and caregivers do not have the time to read every picturebook published for children in any given year, they often rely upon awards to help them select the most exemplary titles for inclusion in their collections (Brown, 2008/1958).[2] As Beverly Lyon Clark (1992) explains, "any self-respecting U.S. library that caters to children will be sure to get the medal winners that year, no matter how tight its budget is otherwise" (p. 6). Scholars and critics have often focused on Caldecott books for precisely this reason. Award-winning picturebooks, like those that receive the Caldecott Medal "need to be examined in light of whose knowledge is considered the best and whose lives are being represented in these books" (Albers, 1996, p. 269).

In this study, we build upon the work completed by previous scholars by examining each of the Caldecott Medal-winners from the inception of the award through 2011, the year in which this article is written. While some authors of previous Caldecott studies look at winning titles across multiple decades (Nilges and Spencer, 2002; Clark et al., 2003), the majority of the previous research examines Medal and/or Honor books across a short span of time (Nilsen, 1971, 1978; Engel, 1981; Kolbe and LaVoie 1981; Dougherty and Engel, 1987; Williams et al., 1987; Albers, 1996) and sometimes incorporates literature beyond Caldecott Award-winners, such as Newbery or Coretta Scott King Award-winners or *Little*

[1] We follow the lead of Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007) and scholars such as Barbara Kiefer, Maria Nikolajeva, and David Lewis by using the compound word "picturebook" as opposed to "picture book" because it "recognizes the union of text and art that results in something beyond what each form separately contributes" (p. 273).

[2] For an informative problematizing of prizing children's fiction, see Kidd (2007) in *Children's Literature* and (2009) in this journal.

Golden Books (Weitzman, et al., 1972; Clark et al., 1993; Hamilton et al., 2006). In this paper, we explore only Caldecott Medal-winning titles due both to the limitations of space and the fact that previous research has suggested that picturebooks awarded the Caldecott Medal are generally representative of the content of Honor books as well as the larger body of published children's literature (Korenhaus and Demarest, 1993).[3]

What becomes immediately clear in looking across the previous research on Caldecott books is that researchers often rely upon visual depictions within illustrations to determine whether or not a character is "male" or "female" (i.e., "Does this character look like a man or a woman?").[4] In some cases, the text is also consulted for gender clarification (Nilsen, 1971; Williams et al., 1987; Clark et al., 1993; Albers, 1996) and on at least one occasion, figures that were pictured, but not identified as either male or female "by name, physical characteristics, attire, or personal pronoun references" were labeled as "neuter" (Engel, 1981, p. 647). In this present study, these previous findings are problematized: relying upon visual cues in illustrations to determine the gender of a character or figure necessarily entails relying upon normative constructions or personal understandings of what it means and looks like to be either male or female (i.e., assuming that carrying a purse or wearing a dress identifies a character as female or that a figure wearing a suit is male). It privileges particular conceptions of the ways in which these genders may appear at the expense of others: in the "real" world, there are self-identified males who become pregnant and/or who wear dresses and there are self-identified females with beards and mustaches and/or who wear tuxedos. If a character is not explicitly gendered in the text of a book, it ultimately falls upon the reader to interpret the gender identity of the character depicted.[5]

In some cases, previous researchers made the decision to classify figures based on how a child might encounter, engage with, or interpret a particular image (i.e., Engel, 1981; Albers, 1996). For example, Hamilton et al. (2006) write, "If we believed that children were likely to interpret a character as male, we coded it as male" (p. 761). There is some difficulty with this position as well, as it relies upon an adult's beliefs about how all children think and view the world. Because children's responses to literature are as varied and broad as those of their adult counterparts, this general assumption (like other assumptions about "all children") does not stand up to scrutiny. To assume that adults can determine how children might respond to a text often limits the range of possible interpretations; it relies upon cultural assumptions about the nature of childhood and upon a constructed

[3] In fact, some researchers have argued that "the Caldecott winners are clearly less stereotyped than the average book, and do not include the most blatant examples of sexism" (Weitzman et al., 1972, p. 1127).

[4] As Segel (1982) argues, in several of these studies, there is "a disturbing tendency…to assume that any illustrated figure of unspecified gender is male" (p. 31).

[5] We acknowledge that this position presumes that only text (words) can specify gender (i.e., "he" or "she") and privileges textual language by assuming that words are more "fixed" than visual images, a notion questioned by critics and theorists like Jacques Derrida. Written text is ultimately as slippery as visual images: as one example, in queer cultures, words that may previously have been assumed to have "fixed" meanings (i.e., "girl" or "she") are often resignified and used across categories of biological sex and gender-identity.

view of an imaginary "Child." It assumes that a child's understanding of the world cannot include people (who may, in actuality, be caregivers, relatives, friends, etc.) who do not fit normative constructions of gender. Further, these classifications limit the available bodies presented for readers. They make no space for those who don't (or refuse to) "fit" the binary categories of "male" or "female," those who may, as two examples, self-identify as queer or transgender. In this project, we do not concern ourselves with trying to imagine how "most" children will view these images, nor do we attempt to guess how the illustrator intended for the images to be interpreted by readers. Instead, the purpose is to locate spaces in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks in which there are possibilities: where individual readers may be able to see mirrors of themselves or images of people who are present in their lives.

A popular misconception about the Caldecott Medal is that it is an award for illustration alone. In fact, the Medal recognizes the year's "most distinguished picturebook" as a whole, with the award going to the illustrator of that picturebook. The picturebook genre is unique in that it is defined as much by format as it is by content, and the illustrations play as much of a role (if not more) in the construction of meaning as the words by reflecting, extending, and/or contradicting the text. As Perry Nodelman (1988) notes, while the images invoked through language (or the "stories" that could be visualized after looking at a picture) are almost limitless, words and pictures in picturebooks are not "as open-ended as either would be on its own," resulting in an interaction and unique rhythm of communication—alternating between words and pictures—to which readers attend both individually (picture or text) and in conversation with one another (picture and text) (p. vii). Therefore, in determining gender representations in this set of books, we rely upon the words to explicitly gender particular characters as being either "male" or "female" through textual qualities such as pronouns (i.e., he or she), titles (i.e., sir or ma'am), or gender-specific language (i.e., brother or sister). If a text does not explicitly identify a character as being either "male" or "female," those figures have been classified as "ungendered."

In their study of Caldecott books, Clark et al. (2003) situate the published texts within the cultural milieu in which they were produced. This work is valuable, as it is important to explore literature within the context in which it was created and released (Crisp, 2009): books do not exist in a vacuum (Rosenblatt, 1995/1938) and, like all literature, the picturebook genre is impacted by shifts in perceived cultural norms (Lewis, 2001). Without dismissing the role context plays in the constructions presented for readers, in this study, we instead explore ways in which these books might speak to contemporary audiences, a type of rereading or "looking back" at older texts referred to as "revision" (Rich, 1972) and the "resisting" of dominant messages and interpretations (Fetterley, 1978). This study takes up the conversation about gender in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks, offering a rereading of characters previous studies may have classified in gendered ways by instead exploring these instances as "ungendered" representations.

In putting together the tools for this study, we relied in large part on the work completed by previous researchers and attempted to replicate their processes of data collection and analysis. We collected data on the gender of authors and illustrators,

the number of male and female characters (human and non-human) in single-gendered illustrations (those pictures in which exclusively females or only males are depicted), as well as the number of male/female/ungendered characters and figures pictured in each book. Beyond these counts, we used the behavioral definitions established by Albert J. Davis (1984) to look at the ways in which up to four leading characters were depicted in each book.

Prior to completing the full study, we used the research instruments independently to analyze the Caldecott Medal-winning literature from the last 20 years (1991–2010). We then compared our results to see how closely our labels and classifications were aligned. We found discrepancies between our individual counts of the total number of figures in images as well as the behavioral attributes assigned to leading characters. By engaging in discussions as to why we each felt a character fit a particular attribute (i.e., In what ways is this character cooperative?), we determined whether or not one particular way of reading was warranted by the text or if a certain characteristic was open to interpretation.

Upon the completion of the pilot, we concluded that the best way to proceed in the full study was to read and analyze the books independently before comparing results. In other words, while sitting together, we read each book and completed analyses independently before immediately comparing our findings. Where conflicting numbers or data were encountered, we moved page-by-page through the text, working together until we reached a consensus. Working closely with one another also enabled us to check our own assumptions and misconceptions by asking each other to clarify perspectives (for example, asking something as simple as, "Where in the text does it say this character is female?" or "How do you know that's a male?"). In working together like this, we made some discoveries that may have been missed had we been working in isolation. As one example, there were occasions in which one of us had a hardcover version of a book with a dust jacket and the other had a version without it (i.e., a paperback edition). In examining these various editions, we found that peritextual elements sometimes identified the gender of a character that remained ungendered throughout the text itself. As such, we made the decision to not consider information revealed in these types of peritextual features because these elements are not consistent across editions of the book.

Counting Depictions Because Depictions Count: General Findings In Terms of Authors, Illustrators, and Male and Female Representations

Before moving to consider specific representations of ungendered characters in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks, it is helpful to look more broadly at statistics about Caldecott Medal-winning authors, illustrators, and male and female characters/figures. For the 74 Medal-winning titles, there are a total of 79 authors (some working as teams). Using biographies and publisher information, we concluded that authors of Caldecott Medal-winning books were gendered (as identified by authors or by their editors) in the following way: 44 (56%) are

identified as males and 35 (44%) are identified as females. As Table 1 indicates, by decade, the number of male authors of Caldecott Medal books is generally greater than the number of female authors. There are an equal number of male- and female-identified authors during the decade of the 1930s (where a total of two Caldecott Medal-winners were selected—one written by a female author, the other written by a male author), as well as during the 1970s (which included five male authors and five female authors). Interestingly, it is only during the decade of the 1960s, famous for the Civil Rights and women's liberation movements, that female authors outnumber male authors (a ratio of 8:3). In the 1970s, that number again becomes equal (with five male and five female authors) and in subsequent decades, the gap between the number of winning books with male authors and those with female authors has continued to increase, with a startling eight male authors writing Caldecott Medal-winning titles in the 2000s versus two female authors. Although it is early into the 2010s, with Jerry Pinkney's retelling of *The Lion and the Mouse* (2009) and Philip C. Stead's *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (2010) being the first Caldecott Medal-winning titles of the decade, this trend may be continuing.

The collected data regarding gender representation among illustrators is equally revealing: as Table 1 indicates, clear disparities exist in terms of illustrator gender. Using biographies, publisher information, and Caldecott Medal acceptance speeches (ALSC, 2001; Kingman, 1965, 1976, 1986) as a guide, we were able to conclude that illustrators of Caldecott Medal-winning books were gendered by themselves or their editors in the following way: 53 (66%) were identified as male as compared to 27 (34%) who were identified as females. With the exception of the 1930s, in which there was one female and one male winner, each decade is marked by more males receiving the medal than females. These numbers reach their most equitable point during the 1960s (6 male winners versus 4 female winners) and 1970s (7 male winners to 5 female winners) before the numbers of female winners steadily decline in subsequent decades: in the decade of the 2000s, 9 males won the Caldecott Medal as compared to only 1 female. It may be surprising that across the history of the award, there has never been a full decade which saw an equitable number of both male and female illustrator-recipients (let alone more female recipients than male).

Table 1 Author and illustrator gender

Decade	Authors		Illustrators	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1930s	1	1	1	1
1940s	7	6	8	5
1950s	6	4	7	3
1960s	3	8	6	4
1970s	5	5	7	5
1980s	6	5	7	4
1990s	6	4	7	3
2000s	8	2	9	1
2010s	2	0	1	1

Of course, simply because the authors and illustrators were identified as "male" more often than they were identified as "female" is not an indication of the content of the picturebooks themselves—many writers and illustrators work across gender categories. Following the lead of previous researchers of Caldecott Award-winning texts, we counted each time a male, female, or ungendered figure was represented in the text as well as the number of illustrations that depicted characters of a "single" gender (i.e., all males or females). By decade, illustrations depicting only text-identified male characters consistently outnumber those illustrations depicting text-identified female characters, at an average ratio of 5.3:1, meaning for every illustration depicting only text-identified females, there are 5.3 illustrations depicting only text-identified males. While we found these statistics to be of interest, we also felt it was essential to move beyond the number of males, females, and ungendered figures represented in these texts to look more closely at the various ways in which the leading characters are depicted. Because a full discussion of "male" and "female" representations in Caldecott Medal-winning literature is forthcoming (see Crisp and Hiller, 2011), for the purposes of this analysis, these findings will only be summarized briefly before moving to a full discussion of the previously unexplored category of "ungendered" representations.

Of the 74 Caldecott Medal-winners from 1938 to 2011, only seventeen books (23%) were identified as having female leading characters. Similar to the findings of previous researchers, text-identified female characters in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks are generally passive, inactive, emotional, dependent, submissive, imitative, nurturing, and emotional. Even when we identified female protagonists who defied many of the characteristics traditionally and stereotypically ascribed to females, remnants of these modes of thought remained, with active females often ultimately relying on males to satisfy the conflict.

Of the 74 Caldecott Medal-winners from 1938 to 2011, thirty-nine texts (53%) have male leading characters. Contrasted with the seventeen books (23%) identified as having female leading characters, it is noteworthy that male leading characters comprise more than twice the number of books as female leading characters. This provides readers who self-identify as male at least double the opportunities allotted to other gender-identities to locate images that mirror their self-identity in Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks. In fact, in the 2011 Caldecott Medal-winner, *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (2010), the human protagonist and each of his five animal friends are all gendered male; the book contains no characters who are gendered female. As with female-identified characters, male-identified characters are ascribed behaviors that reify stereotypical constructions of "masculinity": they are generally independent, competitive, directive, persistent, and active.

Illustrating Possibility: Ungendered Representations in Caldecott Medal-Winning Picturebooks

Of the 74 Caldecott Medal-winners from 1938 to 2011, ten picturebooks (14%) depict ungendered leading characters. In calculating titles with ungendered

representations, we looked through the books for any indication within the text as to the gender of the protagonists and other leading characters. When none were provided within the text, we classified these depictions as fitting into the "ungendered" category. These are books in which the illustrator may have attempted to rely on cultural cues to signal for readers the biological sex of the character being depicted, but, as previously argued, because there is no singular way of being (or appearing) "male" or "female," the fact that these characters have not been assigned a particular biological sex opens possibilities for readers' interpretations.

One source of ungendered representations is the wordless (or nearly wordless) picturebook. These books depict human or non-human characters that may appear for some readers to be culturally coded as either male or female, but because there are minimal words in the text, these images often allow spaces in which any reader may look at and identify a character as being "like" themselves or someone they know—regardless of biological sex or gender. Two examples of this type of ungendered representation are David Wiesner's picturebooks *Tuesday* (1991) and *Flotsam* (2006). *Tuesday* presents supposedly verified events that occurred on a Tuesday evening somewhere within the United States and the story moves chronologically from that evening through the following morning. As the narrative opens, the illustrations show surrealistic, but generally "natural" looking (i.e., not anthrophomorphic) animals near a body of water while frogs, sitting on lily pads, fly through the air. By 11:21 p.m., the frogs have infiltrated a suburban neighborhood, sometimes drawing the attention of (but also often remaining unseen by) ungendered human characters. By the next morning, the frogs have returned to the pond, leaving a number of puzzled humans and animals behind in their wake. As the story comes to a close, the narrative skips to the following Tuesday evening, when pigs literally begin to fly. *Flotsam* opens with a close-up of a crab, behind which readers see a large human eye gazing at the animal. Across the following pages, the illustrations reveal that a young ungendered child (the protagonist) is sitting on the beach, surrounded by a net, shovels, buckets, microscope, and a pair of binoculars while ze looks at the crab through a magnifying glass.[6] The child investigates other sea life before a large wave deposits an old camera on the shore. Finding film in the camera, the child has it developed and looks on in surprise at the various images that challenge hir conceptions about sea creatures and life underwater. Eventually, the protagonist discovers a photograph of a child holding a photograph of a child (who is, in turn, holding a photograph of a child, and so on in this fashion). The protagonist uses hir magnifying glass to look more deeply into the photo as the images move back across history. While holding this photograph, the child takes hir own picture with the camera before throwing it back to the sea where it is taken by various creatures deep into the water before being deposited on the shore next to another child elsewhere in the world.

Although Wiesner seems to rely on cultural cues like style of dress, hair length, and physical attributes to depict particular characters as "male" or "female," there

[6] Throughout this discussion, the gender neutral pronoun "ze" is adopted as opposed to "he" or "she." Following this lead, "his" or "her" has been replaced with "hir."

are no genders defined within the books themselves. As such, any reader is free to self-identify with any character(s) who most closely reflects images of themselves. In flipping through the pages of these books, it may seem that based on physical appearance, some characters fit more easily into categories of "male" or "female" than others, but it's important to remember that this type of classification privileges particular performances of gender and situates these characters within a heteronormative frame. Despite any reliance on culturally constructed norms, these images are intended to be interpreted by the reader, who may or may not share the same conceptions about gender as the illustrator. It is entirely possible for a reader to look at these images and find themselves (or those in their lives) within these ungendered spaces.

A similar text is Jerry Pinkney's *The Lion and the Mouse* (2009), a nearly wordless picturebook based on Aesop's fable of the same name. The story opens with illustrations that position readers to view the world from the perspective of a mouse that, scurrying away from an owl, unknowingly finds refuge on the back of a lion. The lion grabs the mouse in hir paw and contemplates the mouse carefully before deciding to release hir back into the wild; readers see the mouse as ze returns home to a nest of babies. Subsequent illustrations depict the arrival of poachers, who set a trap utilizing a large net into which the lion inadvertently enters. The mouse hears the roars of the captured lion and rushes to hir side, gnawing through the rope and setting the lion free. At the end of the story, the mouse returns to hir nest, carrying a knot of rope from the trap with which the baby mice play.

The depiction of gender is particularly interesting in this book, as the lion is illustrated with a mane, something commonly attributed to males of the species. However, not all male lions have manes and female lions may grow manes as well. Because there is variation among gender categories within this animal species and its various subspecies, the presence of a mane is not indicative that the lion is male. In one illustration, a lion without a mane and what appear to be baby lion cubs are present in the background. These animals may be interpreted by some readers as the lion's "family," but there is no evidence within the book to indicate that this is the case. Further, as Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) demonstrates, there are "same sex" families in the animal kingdom and there are a range of ways in which animal families obtain their young.

The mouse from whose perspective the story is presented is depicted as nurturing, explorative, and persistent, but also remains ungendered throughout the story. While some readers may see the mouse returning to a nest of babies and assume the mouse is female, others will assume the mouse is male; still others may resist gendering the mouse at all. In the artist's note, Pinkney writes, "When the mouse remembers *her* debt, *she* frees the lion from a poacher's trap" (n.p., *emphasis added*). In Pinkney's interpretation, the mouse is female, but there is nothing within the narrative itself to suggest that the mouse is gendered in any way.

Eric Rohmann's *My Friend Rabbit* (2002) is a story told from the first person perspective of a mouse that remains ungendered throughout the story. Like the picturebooks explored above, with few words throughout the book, the illustrations are the predominant means of making meaning in Rohmann's text. The story recounts an incident in which Rabbit's toy plane gets caught in a tree and, in an

effort to get it out, he gathers up other animals, stacks them on top of one other and attempts to retrieve the plane. When the animals all come crashing down, they are angry with Rabbit, but Mouse, who is depicted in the illustrations as being thoughtful and cooperative, has been present throughout the story and has watched these events unfold with what may be a mixture of fascination, fear, concern, or merely interest. Mouse ultimately saves the day by hopping in the plane and flying away from the angry animals with Rabbit in tow. As the story ends, it also comes full circle, when Rabbit's zealous attempt to thank Mouse causes the plane to end up back in the branches of a tree.

The title character, Rabbit, is gendered male within the text (the book opens with the line, "My friend Rabbit means well. But whatever he does, wherever he goes, trouble follows" [n.p.]), but the mouse, from whose perspective the story is told, remains ungendered. Initially, Mouse depends on Rabbit to come up with an idea for retrieving the plane: the illustrations depict a puzzled-looking Mouse, as Rabbit declares, "Not to worry, Mouse. I've got an idea!" (n.p.). When Rabbit's plan fails, however, Mouse retrieves the plane hirself and ultimately rescues Rabbit. What is pleasing about the depiction of Mouse is that across various circumstances, ze is simultaneously dependent and independent, directive, cooperative, and submissive, as well as both active and passive. Mouse is constructed as a character with traits that complicate traditional depictions of gender and disrupt previous representations of "masculinity" and "femininity."

Like the previously discussed books, the text of author Susan Marie Swanson and illustrator Beth Krommes' *The House in the Night* (2008) is sparse; nowhere is the gender of the protagonist revealed. The book presents the story of a young child, who, upon opening a book, is whisked away on a journey across the sky on the back of a bird. The text of the book is very simple, naming objects like a key, a house, a light, or the moon in a rhythmic way as the journey begins and ends in the room of the child protagonist. This child's bedroom is filled with what are often considered to be the accoutrements of middle or upper class life: a violin, bookshelf, mobile, several stuffed animals, pets, as well as a doll and a toy car. Although cars and dolls have been traditionally gendered toys, there are plenty of children of all genders who enjoy either (or both) of these playthings and they ultimately indicate nothing as to the gender of this protagonist. The depiction of the child protagonist with a pageboy/bowl cut hairstyle could represent a child of any gender identity or biological sex. The only other human figure within the story appears but briefly, hair pulled back into a bun and wearing a knee-length dress. For some readers, it may be hard to conceptualize this character as anything other than a female, but again, to do so would limit the possibilities of who this individual could "be" for any particular reader.

Author Jane Yolen and illustrator John Schoenherr's *Owl Moon* (1987) is a book about which the gender of the child protagonist has been widely debated and discussed. The story is told from the first person perspective of a child who goes owling with hir father. One evening, well past hir bedtime, the child and Pa enter the woods, trudging quietly through the snow in search of owls. The illustrations follow the two, as the child struggles to keep up with Pa and then stands close to him as he covers his face and uses a bird call in an attempt to attract an owl. They listen and

wait quietly before moving on through the cold night and dark woods into a clearing. Pa again calls to the owls and this time, he and the protagonist hear an owl answer back. They wait, hearing the owl's call growing louder until it lands on a branch directly in front of them. They stare at the creature, mesmerized, and it gazes back at them before eventually flying away. Having been successful in their quest, Pa and the protagonist return home and the narrative comes to an end.

Despite the fact that the protagonist's gender is never identified within the text of the story, the book has been widely interpreted as being about a young girl and her father. Although the book contains direct quotes from the father (i.e., "'Time to go home,' Pa said to me" [n.p.]), there is no gendered reference made toward the child hirself. This is a case in which the peritextual elements included in certain editions of the book and intertextual statements made about the book may have influenced the way in which the text is generally read and interpreted. In the author biography for the hardcover edition, Yolen identifies the book as being particularly pleasurable to write because her husband went owling with their three children (Heidi, Adam, and Jason) when they were young. Illustrator Schoenherr's biography also states that he relates to the story, having taken nighttime walks with his own children (Jennifer and Ian). Although we are not concerned with author/illustrator intent, even if one were to assume that the child depicted in the book is meant to represent one of Schoenherr or Yolen's children, the names of their children are culturally coded as belonging to both "males" and "females," meaning that the child depicted in the book could be a representation of any, all, or none of these children and their respective gender identities. In his Caldecott Medal acceptance speech, Schoenherr actually genders the protagonist by stating, "Jane's heroine was hardy and eager for experience" (qtd. in ALSC, 2001, p. 65). Of more interest to us than possible illustrator intent, intertextual statements, or even the biographical information, is the content of the front flap of the dust jacket for certain editions of the book, which begins, "Late one winter night a little girl and her father go owling" (n.p.). Despite the fact that the author has not gendered the character anywhere in her text and that even those researchers who rely on cultural cues to determine gender often state that the gender of this character cannot be discerned (i.e., Clark et al., 1993), in the creation of some peritextual elements, the publishers have ultimately gendered the protagonist as female.

Other researchers have relied upon peritextual elements or Yolen and Schoenherr's comments outside of the story to identify the protagonist as female. Peggy Albers (1996) genders the protagonist "female" and actually goes a step further, stating that she finds the lack of assigned gender of the protagonist "a bit troublesome…[w]hen I see this character, I am unsure as to her gender" (p. 275). Suggesting that a father would not say to his son that "When you go owling you have to be brave," (n.p.), Albers (1996) suggests that the book reiterates stereotypes of female characters: a timid, imitative female in need of the protection of the adult male father that "may become internalized as normal, even in the female's adult life" (p. 275). It could be that Albers's own assumptions about what it means and looks like to self-identify as "male" or "female" have shaped her reading of this particular picturebook. Although some may find it troublesome, we suggest that because the character is ungendered, ze could be identified by a reader as male,

female, trans, or any other gendered identity: here is story about a child who is sometimes fearful, but who perseveres and is ultimately brave, when out in the night with hir father, owling for the first time.

Penultimately, author Beatrice Schenk de Regniers and illustrator Beni Montresor's *May I Bring a Friend?* (1964) depicts another ungendered human protagonist. This fantasy story is told from the first person perspective of a child who announces on the opening page that ze has been invited to the home of a King and Queen. The protagonist tells the Queen (who subsequently tells the King) that ze would like to bring a friend with hir. After the trio has tea with the friend (a giraffe), the protagonist is invited to return for dinner on another day and arrives with a different friend in tow. When the protagonist is invited to return yet again, ze is told, "the more friends you bring the better" (n.p.). The story continues in this fashion until eventually, the protagonist declares that hir friends would like the King and Queen to visit them at their home and as the story ends, the protagonist, King, and Queen have tea at the City Zoo with all the animals. Although the King and Queen are gendered in rather stereotypical ways (i.e., in one illustration, banners describe the King as "brave" and the queen is described as "lovely"), the protagonist remains ungendered throughout the story. The playful, directive, and nurturing protagonist has short, curly hair that is cut around the ears, is dressed in shorts and a long sleeve shirt, and wears what may be a bowtie or a bow around hir neck (of course, if a reader believes the object is either a bowtie or a bow, it still does not gender the character in any specific way, as people of many gender identities wear both bows and bowties).

Finally, David Macaulay's *Black and White* (1990), a postmodern picturebook that simultaneously presents several potentially interrelated stories, contains at least one instance of an ungendered leading character, as presented in the sub-story, "Problem Parents." This tale relates an unexpectedly eventful evening in the lives of two young people whose parents (later identified as "mom" and "dad,") arrive home dressed in newspaper outfits and proceed to march around the room and sing. The protagonist's brother joins in the celebration before the family eventually decides to eat dinner at a local fish and chips shop. The protagonist is relieved that the family removes their newspaper clothing (with the exception of hir brother, who retains his paper hat) before they enjoy a meal together. Upon returning home, the protagonist is reminded of the homework ze still needs to complete, reiterating hir conviction that parents are unpredictable and need to be carefully monitored.

For some readers, it may initially be difficult to discern which of the two child figures in this story is the protagonist and which is the brother, however, careful examination of the text and illustrations reveals that the character with dark, medium length hair and bangs is the protagonist (see, e.g., the sequence in which the protagonist describes hir brother joining in the celebration and the illustrations situate readers to view the event through the eyes of the dark-haired sibling). Despite the fact that there is no textual evidence that the protagonist is either male or female, some researchers have identified this protagonist in gendered ways. For example, Peggy Albers (1996), whose work has been discussed earlier, writes that this sub-story is "about a female's story of her parents" (p. 277). There is no textual evidence, however, to support the interpretation that one of these characters is "female" unless one relies upon the timid and generally passive nature of the

protagonist to (stereotypically) indicate gender identity. In fact, in teaching with this book, Thomas has seen students engage in vigorous debates as to the gender of this character before ultimately determining there is no interpretation that can be privileged over any other because this character is ungendered.

Beyond Gender Confusion: Implications for Classrooms and Young Readers

Several months after starting this project, we were reminded of its importance during Brittany's interaction with a young female in her kindergarten class. During independent reading time, this student approached Brittany with a book in her hands. She pointed to a character on the open page and asked, "Is this a boy or a girl?" This interaction reiterated for us the importance of examining gender representations and constructions with children from very early ages: this type of critical reading and questioning is a skill which can—and must—be taught to young readers (Crisp, 2009). In order to become critical consumers, children must be able to examine and analyze the signs, signals, and messages that are embedded in literature and all media.

As academics, teachers, librarians, caregivers, and interested adults, we must continue the difficult work of recognizing our own assumptions about gender while guiding young people in their own critical explorations of how literature and media work to establish what it means and looks like to self-identify in gendered ways. By attending to the presentation of gender roles when selecting and introducing children to books, one can work to decrease stereotypic gender attitudes in young people (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1999). An important step in this process is bringing readers back to the text itself, looking for gender assignments within the words on the page: does the book indicate the biological sex of a particular character? If so, how do the depictions reinscribe or disrupt traditional notions of what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine?"

While doing this work, however, it is important to allow space for individual readers to locate and describe moments in which they find nuance or contradiction in particular literary constructions, as long as those positions can be legitimized and defended with evidence from the text. It was previously mentioned that there was "at least" one ungendered character in David Macaulay's *Black and White* (1990). Beyond the ungendered protagonist in "Problem Parents," the depiction of one final character from this picturebook merits a brief exploration, through which we hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which teachers and students (and all children and adults) can "play" with (a.k.a. "interrogate," "subvert," or "resignify") the gender of characters—even when explicitly identified within a text. The character of the burglar appears across all four of the *Black and White* sub-stories; in three of the four, the character remains ungendered. However, in the sub-story, "Seeing Things," Macaulay genders the character as "female." The burglar appears on the train, concealed in a cloak, and an omniscient narrator reports that, "A few minutes later, an old woman enters the compartment and sits down opposite the boy. She says nothing" (n.p.). A few pages later, the narrator states that "The old lady has vanished" (n.p.) and the illustration reveals that the cloak that concealed the burglar

has been left behind. The text identifies this character as "female" and the character may indeed be (or appear to the young protagonist to be) an "old lady." If Macaulay is taken literally, the character actually "is" a female and the reading of the text may be relatively straightforward. However, a reader may locate clues in the illustrations (such as the use and subsequent discarding of the cloak) that suggest other interpretations: perhaps the burglar (a convict on the run) is not actually an "old woman," but is instead a biological male (or, for that matter, a character of any gender-identity that is not "female") who has obscured his identity by disguising himself as a female while riding on the train. This reading may make the disguise appear clever or humorous to the reader because the burglar is "pretending" to be a female in order to hide out on the train.[7]

This example makes explicit the ways in which an individual reader's interpretation of the character and the events of the story may lead to very different responses to the text itself: where some will have a straightforward reading of the picturebook, others may find humor if they have subverted the explicit gendering of the character or believe the author/illustrator is being playful or invoking humor by using the illustrations and text to complicate the narrative. This suggests that even if a text explicitly identifies a character as "male" or "female," there is no guarantee that a reader will view the character in the way that the author or illustrator intended. What is ultimately important, then, is that readers ground their interpretations in both the text and illustrations of the picturebook—if one is going to argue that the gender identity assigned to a particular character within the text is not "accurate," the interpretation must be warranted by the text (Rosenblatt, 1995/1938) and not grounded in gender stereotypes.

Books that do not assign gender identities to characters can be particularly powerful tools, allowing one to gauge how individual readers interpret these characters. If a reader assigns a specific gender identity to an ungendered character, a productive conversation could include interrogating what ultimately led the reader to that gender assignment. For example, as previously discussed, the young protagonist in Yolen's *Owl Moon* could easily belong to multiple genders and if a reader interprets the character to be female because of hir pink jacket or sometimes timid behavior, that becomes a teachable moment in which those assumptions and stereotypes can be questioned and disrupted.

Finally, this study ultimately makes clear that there is a need for wider representations of diverse gendered identities in all children's literature. Although the Caldecott Medal is not awarded for diverse gender representations, as the most prestigious award for illustrations in American children's picturebooks, winning titles reach a wide audience and may have a profound influence on readers. These books legitimize and validate experiences, providing spaces that allow readers to locate images of themselves and the people they love. The power of such narratives

[7] Some readers may interpret the burglar as a character temporarily cross-dressing to disguise hir identity and still not find humor in the sequence. Space does not allow for a full reading of this sequence in light of the literary traditions of male-to-female cross-dressing, a tradition explored in more depth in Flanagan's *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film* (2007). Particularly relevant here is Flanagan's discussion of the use of male-to-female cross-dressing to invoke humor in children's and young adult literature.

cannot be paralleled. Awarding the prestigious Caldecott Medal to books that provide wide-ranging depictions of what it means to self-identify or resist identification as "male" or "female" may work to position readers to acknowledge the existence of the range of people who represent gender in all its complexity.

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