

Is “Kiddie Lit” Growing Up?

Changes in the Representation of Females and Minorities in Caldecott Winners and Honor Books Over the Past Half Century¹

By

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Abstract

This study examined all 61 Caldecott medalists and honorees from the two distinct time periods: 1967-1973 and 2017-2023. Our goal was to discover whether change in their content over the last half century has addressed criticism directed at children’s books that they under- and mis-represented people of color (e.g., Larrick 1965) and females (e.g., Weitzman et al. 1972). The Caldecott Award is the preeminent award given for children’s picture books. By juxtaposing these two periods, we hoped to shed light on the trajectory of representation in award-winning children’s literature and understand the influences shaping these narratives. Our quantitative and qualitative analyses of these books suggest enormous change in books honored by the American Library Association’s Caldecott Committee. Specifically, females and minorities are much more present among recent than past medalists and honorees. The social consciousness implicit in the ways in which they are presented has changed as well. We describe and interpret our findings.

Introduction

Historically, children’s books in the U. S. underrepresented or misrepresented females and people of color. Pioneering researchers like Larrick (1965) and Weitzman et al. (1972) were among the first to draw attention to these glaring disparities, particularly noting how people of color and women were drastically underrepresented in the stories that shaped young minds.

The trajectory of representation in award-winning children’s books, as illuminated by previous studies, has been both intriguing and confounding. While research endeavors such as those by Clark, Lennon & Morris (1993) and Clark, Kessler & Coon (2013) have provided optimism by indicating progress in the presentation of females, at least, others have painted a more confusing

picture. Clark (2007) and McCabe et al. (2011), for instance, highlighted a fluctuating trend characterized by periods of growth in representation of both females and minorities, followed by times of stagnation or even regression. A common thread in existing research suggests that children’s books—especially those gaining prominence and awards—are directly influenced by the broader social and political climates of their respective eras.

While social movements such as the civil rights and women’s movements have sparked considerable progress in representation, backlash against these advances has been notable. This ebb and flow of progress, documented by researchers like Clark (2007) and McCabe et al. (2011), illustrate how the fight for representation in children’s literature has been intertwined with larger societal shifts. Moments of progress have often been countered by efforts to maintain the status quo, with children’s literature caught in the cross hairs of these cultural battles.

Given the historical context and patterns observed in previous research, our hypotheses are anchored in

¹This paper honors the memory of Beverly Lyon Clark, children’s literature scholar. Dr. Clark was Professor of English, emerita at Wheaton College and lifelong companion of Roger Clark. She published *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children’s Literature in America* in 2003.

the belief that contemporary Caldecott books from the 2017-2023 period will show a marked increase in representation, not just in character diversity but also in the themes they address. We postulate that increased visibility and representation of women/girls and people of color will be evident in these recent books. Several factors inform this expectation: the cumulative pressure from decades of scholarly criticism, the legacy of impactful social movements like the women's and civil rights movements, and the belief that children's literature often mirrors the zeitgeist of its time.

In the modern era, the sociopolitical landscape has been tumultuous and transformative. The 2016 U. S. presidential election serves as a prominent example. The world watched as Hillary Clinton, a highly qualified woman, lost to Donald Trump, whose campaign was often characterized by sexist and racially derogatory remarks. Following this, the appointment of three conservative justices to the Supreme Court culminated in the consequential overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. Furthermore, racial tensions have been palpable, fueled by prominent instances of police brutality and overtly racist rhetoric from prominent figures.

Against this backdrop, social movements have gained traction. The Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, has been a powerful voice against racial injustice. There has been intense public discourse around the teaching of American history, racial inequality, and concepts like Critical Race Theory in schools. We hypothesize that, in response to these sociopolitical currents, contemporary Caldecott books will not only have greater representation but also gravitate toward more socially conscious themes. Given the ongoing debate around the inclusion of contentious parts of American history in education, we anticipate that the largely progressive world of the American Library Association and more particularly its Caldecott Award Committee might respond by rewarding books that address these themes more directly.

Methods

The major reason for focusing research attention on Caldecott winners is the influence these books have on tastes for children's literature. The Caldecott is the most prestigious award for preschool literature. It also guarantees winners extraordinary sales, "since," as Beverly Clark (1992) observed, "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 its budget is otherwise. No national award for adults'

literature has anything like a similar impact."

We examined each of the 61 Caldecott medalists and honorees from the years 1967-1973 and 2017-2023. For each book, we recorded the number of human single-gender illustrations, as well as the number of those illustrations which depicted female and/or non-white characters. We define "single-gender illustrations" as those depicting only one gender, regardless of the number of individuals depicted in the illustration. We also recorded the number of non-human single-gender illustrations, as well as the number of those which were of females. We recorded whether or not each book contained any female or non-white characters at all, as well as their statuses as central characters. Additionally, we recorded the gender and race of the authors and illustrators of these books. We obtained these details by reading "about the author" sections, as well as through online research.

Our analysis also involved a careful noting of themes within the books in preparation for a qualitative analysis that complemented our quantitative analysis.

Results

Larrick (1965) and Weitzman et al. (1972) reported that Blacks and females, respectively, were seriously underrepresented in children's books during the 1960s. Although some studies have since suggested progress (e.g., Clark, Lennon & Morris 1993; Clark, Kessler & Coon 2013), some have suggested a more cyclical pattern, showing progress during some periods and backsliding during others (Clark 2007). By juxtaposing these two time periods, we hoped to shed light on the trajectory of representation in award-winning children's literature and understand the influences shaping these narratives. Our focus on Caldecott-award winners and runners-up around 1970 and winners and runners-up around 2020 enabled an assessment of the change over half a century.

Our analyses show that the overall change in percentages has been dramatic. **Table 1** reports that the percentage of single-gender illustrations that were of females between 1967 and 1973 was about 38%, while the percentage for books honored between 2017 and 2023 was 72%--nearly doubling over the half century. The percentage of such illustrations that were of non-whites also rose from 29% in the first period to 74% in the 2017-to-2023 period--increasing by about 250%. Even more amazing, the percentage of single-gender images that were of Black characters rose from 11% to 44%--quadrupling. The representation of females

in non-human single-gender illustrations grew by 30 times—from 0.7% in the first period to 21% 50 years later. (See **Table 1 in the Appendix.**)

The comparisons of single-gender illustrations are impressive enough. But such comparisons could be misleading because some books simply have more single-gender illustrations than others. And it’s true that one book in the more recent group, Jason Reynolds’s and Jason Griffin’s (2022) **Ain’t Burned All That Bright**, essentially a graphic novel, does have 35 single-gender illustrations of Black characters, more single-gender illustrations than any other book in our sample. As a result, it is important to examine the books themselves as units of analysis, in addition to pictures within books, to get a true feel of the visibility of certain kinds of characters. And when one does this, the increased visibility of females and minorities is again striking.

Table 1 allows examination of both the presence of *female and minority characters* and the presence of *central female and minority characters*. Both contrasts are telling, but let us just focus on changes in the central characters in the books. In the 1967-to-1973 period, females were the central character in only 30% of the books. While in the 2017-to-2023 period, they were central in 68% of the books, thus enjoying two times the likelihood of being central characters in the latter than the former books. The change for minority characters was equally impressive. Twenty-six percent of the earlier books had non-white main characters, while 62% of the later books did—more than doubling their representation as main characters. Similarly, only 11% of the books a half century ago had main characters that were Black, while 35% of the more current ones did—more than tripling their representation. (See **Table 1 in the Appendix.**)

The increased visibility of both females and minorities almost pales in comparison to the relative social significance of the themes dealt with in the two time frames. In general, the early books are the kinds of fantasies one might once have expected in children’s picture books. Arnold Lobel’s (1970) **Frog and Toad are Friends** tells a number of stories in which Frog and Toad try to outdo each other with kindness. The minor dramas they experience—such as when Toad bangs his head against a wall trying to come up with a story to entertain Frog, who is sick in bed—expose the reader to ways in which friends can encounter difficulties when trying to help one another. Some of the fantasies are darker—e.g., Ransome and Shulevitz’s (1968) **The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship**, in which, early on, a mother seems to ignore the least intelligent of her sons.

But, by making the right kinds of friends, the “Fool” eventually gets to marry the Czar’s daughter and lives happily ever after. “Happily every after” is the refrain of virtually all of the early books.

The one early book that is meant to tell a serious tale of social realism is Keats’ (1969) **Goggles!** In this story two Black boys, Peter and Archie, find a pair of motorcycle goggles that a gang, again apparently largely composed of Black teens, threatens to take from them by force. The two get an assist from Peter’s dog and the story ends with them enjoying the goggles after all. Keats, a white author, received some criticism for stereotyping of Black neighborhoods as violent (Shepard, 1971), but the story does end happily.

“Happy endings” are *not* so characteristic of many of the contemporary books. In fact, several deal with tragic historical events. Two, by Black authors and illustrators, have titles that hint at their potential usefulness for Black history courses as well as for the bedrooms of America’s children: Weatherford and Cooper’s (2021) **Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre** and Joy and Washington’s (2022) **Choosing Brave: How Mamie Till-Mobley and Emmett Till Sparked the Civil Rights Movement**. The former not only focuses on the violence of the massacre but also the achievements of the upwardly mobile Black residents before the attack. The latter examines not only on the mystery surrounding Emmett Till’s murder but also the courage of a mother who used her grief to call for action in response to his murder.

Unspeakable and **Choosing Brave** are much more typical examples of the relative social seriousness of the contemporary books than one might expect. Weatherford and Christie’s (2016) **Freedom in Congo Square** tells the story of 19th-century slaves who were permitted on Sundays to gather in one place in New Orleans: Congo Square. Reynolds and Griffin’s (2022) **Ain’t Burned All that Bright** is a long poem, with many haunting and moving illustrations, that tells of the ways in which various member of a Black family dealt, variously, with the Covid pandemic and, among other things, the repercussions of George Floyd’s killing.

Many of the most socially serious contemporary books have been written and illustrated by Blacks, but this is not a rule by any means. **The Cat Man of Aleppo**, the 2020 book by Latham, Shamsi-Basha (from Syria) and Shimizu, tells the true story of Mohammed Alaa Aljaleel, an ambulance driver who, during the Syrian civil war, organized people to care for Aleppo’s abandoned cat population. And Lindstrom and Goade’s (2020) **We Are Water Protectors** provides a fictional

account of an Ojibwe girl who fights against an oil pipeline to protect her own people's water supply. Goade became the first native American illustrator to win the Caldecott Medal in 2021.

Water Protectors does not have a happy ending, though it does have a hopeful one insofar as it suggests that fights against pipelines like the Dakota Access Pipeline will continue. And hopefulness, rather than happily-ever-afterness, is characteristic of several of the fantasies that have been recently recognized as well. As an example, Lies' (2018) **The Rough Patch** depicts the relationship between an anthropomorphized fox, named Evan, and his dog, with whom he does everything until . . . his dog dies. Evan buries his dog, and his grief (his bitterness and anger) then becomes palpable to readers. In the end, Evan seems to be connecting with another dog and the reader is left with hope for his future. But **The Rough Patch** is no **Frog and Toad are Friends**. It is a story that provides an opportunity to expose young people to the very "rough" world of bereavement.

Another difference between the earlier and later samples has to do with gender stereotyping. Weitzman et al. (1972) not only noted the relative invisibility of females in children's books, but also their passivity and dependence on males. Ness's (1966) **Sam, Bangs and Moonshine** in our early sample is a good example. In it, Samantha, a teller of tall tales, persuades a young neighbor, Thomas, to go to a sea cove where he and her cat, Bangs, get lost. Sam is distraught and weepily persuades her father to go save Thomas and Bangs—which he does. None of the main female characters in the more recent sample is so dependent on males and passive. We've already mentioned the Ojibwe who fights to protect her people's water. For another example, Archer's (2021) **Wonder Walkers**, depicts two adventurous children, one a girl and one a boy, as they explore the wonders of nature. Both seem like independent and explorative adventurers.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between the Caldecott Medal and honor books published from 1967 to 1973 and those from 2017 and 2023 is stark. And it is one that not only suggests progress in the presentation of female and minority characters in picture books honored by the American Library Association. It also suggests change in the social seriousness of the books. Reading our sample of the later picture books, an audience would be introduced to themes of racism, civil war, corporate greed, disregard for the environment and bereavement—topics not

usually associated with children's picture books.

The American Library Association itself may have been responding to Larrick's (1965) criticism that children literature was an "all-white world" when, at the urging of several African American librarians, it established the Coretta Scott King award in 1970 (Wikipedia, 2023a). But the Caldecott Medal is the longer-standing, doubtless more prestigious, award and the fact that the Caldecott made Black illustrators over a third of its recent honored recipients (as opposed to 4% in our earlier period) is remarkable.

Why the change? We theorize that it has *something* to do with the nature of the American Library Association (ALA) and, in particular, the make-up of its Caldecott Medal committee. The ALA was founded in 1876 and, throughout its history, has been a beacon of progressive thought and behavior. This progressiveness can be seen not only in its formal statements of policy, but also in its changing leadership and its formation of awards committees. For example, it only took until 1911 before the ALA got its first woman President; until 1976, to get its first black (woman) President; until 2007, to get its first Native American (woman) President; until 2009, to get its first Latina President; until 2021, to get its first Asian-American (woman) President (Wikipedia, 2023b). It has stood up against censorship of all kinds and established separate awards committees for Black, Latino/Latina, and LGBTQ authors or illustrators (Wikipedia, 2023b).

What we are suggesting is that the ALA, and most likely its awards committees, is (are) very likely to pick up on and promulgate progressive impulses in American society. And we think it may be no accident that the only books in our sample to emphasize anti-Black racist themes (**Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre**, **Ain't Burned All that Bright**, and **How Mamie Till-Mobley and Emmett Till Sparked the Civil Rights Movement**) were honored after the police killing of George Floyd in May of 2020 and the protests that murder sparked.

Unfortunately, what our data do not permit us to do is to determine whether the progressive attitudes of the ALA have been representative of more progressive standards in the publishing industry. But sadly, there is evidence that they are not. We can't speak to whether females are as well represented in all of today's picture books as they are in the ones in our recent sample of Caldecott winners and honor books. But we do have evidence suggesting that minority characters are not anywhere near as well represented in the larger population of children's picture books as they are in recent Caldecotts. In fact, what had provoked Larrick's

(1965) concern was that of the 5,206 picture books published from 1962 to 1964, only 6.4 percent had at least one illustration of a Black character. When Horning (2014) replicated this study with picture books published in 2013, she found that only 10.5 percent of the picture books with human characters depicted a person of color, much less a Black character. Nearly 90% (89.5%) depicted only white characters.

Still, there is good reason to focus on trends associated with Caldecott Medalists and honor books, because, as we noted earlier, the Caldecott guarantees its winners (and honor books) huge sales (e.g., Clark 1992). Consequently, they are the books most likely to be read by parents to their preschool children. In this respect, the findings of this paper are most encouraging.

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Appendix

Table 1. Comparisons of Gender and Non-White Visibility in Caldecott Award Winner and Runners-Up

	<u>1967-1973</u>	<u>2017-2023</u>
<u>Human Single-Gender Illustrations</u>		
Percentage Female	38% (102)	72% (290)
Percentage Non-White	29% (78)	74% (298)
Percentage Black	11% (29)	44% (175)
Total Number	(271)	(402)
<u>Number of Non-Human Single-Gender Illustrations</u>		
Percentage Female	0.7% (10)	21% (15)
Total Number	(147)	(72)
<u>Books</u>		
Percentage with Female character	56% (15)	82% (28)
Percentage with Central female character	30% (8)	68% (23)
Percentage with Non-White character	30% (8)	68% (23)
Percentage with Central Non-white character	26% (7)	2% (21)
Percentage with Black character	11% (3)	35% (12)
Percentage with Black central character	11% (3)	35% (12)
Percentage with Female author and/or Illustrator	52% (14)	62% (21)
Percentage with Non-White author and/or Illustrator	15% (4)	62% (21)
Percentage with Black author and/or Illustrator	7% (2)	35% (12)
Total Number	(27)	(34)