

# Gender in children's literature in Europe

## 19th-21st centuries

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### ABSTRACT

The notion that girls and boys should read different books was a key feature in the development of the specialised children's publishing industry in Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of a strict gender demarcation, thanks to publishers seeking to segment a growing market, but also a product of the rise of the bourgeois moral order, which stimulated a demand for gender differentiated education and reading matter. Still, we can find many examples of children resisting such restrictions. Writing for children became an important source of income for women as well as an outlet for female creativity, and women have featured amongst the best-known authors of the European tradition. In the twentieth century feminism had an important impact on children's book publishing and criticism. The Franco-Italian partnership 'dalla parte delle bambine' / 'du côté des petites filles' pioneered militant feminist books in Europe in the 1970s. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century internet activism has led to heightened awareness of the importance of diversity in children's books, but gender differentiation remains firmly entrenched.



As education systems across Northern and Western Europe began to expand over the course of the nineteenth century, so too did the children's publishing industry in these regions. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the strict gender demarcation that was to become a regular feature of children's literature. This was a result of publishers seeking to segment the growing market, but also a product of the rise of the bourgeois moral order, which stimulated a demand for gender differentiated education and reading matter. Publications such as *The Boy's Own Paper* (1855-1967) trained the next generation of imperial leaders, through inculcating Christian moral values as well as celebrating sporting prowess and manly courage. Books for girls concentrated on domestic education, Christian charity, and the simple pleasures of family life, to prepare them to be good wives and mothers. The Prussian author Clementine Helm's *Backfischchen's Leiden und Freuden* (1863) launched the Backfischroman, a new genre of edifying literature featuring adolescent, bourgeois heroines and usually on the themes of impending marriage and motherhood. The expansion of domestic novels encouraged a proliferation of female protagonists. The Comtesse de Ségur's (1799-1874) semi-autobiographical heroine Sophie, in her *Fleurville Trilogy* (1858-9), found her imaginative play and curiosity landed her in all kinds of trouble. Across the Channel, Lewis Carroll's (1832-1898) *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) created another female literary icon, whose fantastical adventures transcended the normal domestic limits of girls' books. Nevertheless, children did not necessarily obey these restrictions to their reading. Edward Salmon's study of English children's reading habits in 1886 noted that girls seemed to enjoy Jules Verne's books just as much as their brothers. Similarly, the Comtesse de Ségur had many ardent male readers, including the young Charles de Gaulle (b.1890). Moreover, because of its readership and lowly status in the hierarchy of literary genres, writing for the young was often designated as feminine. It became an important source of income for women as well as an outlet for female creativity in the nineteenth century, and produced some of the best-known authors of the modern European tradition (Stéphanie de Genlis (1746-1830), Johanna Spyri (1827-1901), Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940) - the first female author to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1909 - Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) and Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002), to name but a few).

By the early to mid-twentieth century, the rise of organised feminism, and the role of two world wars in overturning the rigid moral conventions of the nineteenth century, began to be reflected in children's literature. With her bicycle - the symbol of freedom for the new woman of the turn of the century - the cocksure Cousin Pony in Erich Kästner's (1899-1974) *Emil and the Detectives* (1929) was one such modern female character. In Soviet Russia, a few children's books began to reflect the dramatically changed role of women in the socialist era, such as Nina Sakonskaia's (1896-1951) *Mamin most [Mother's Bridge]* (1933) which depicted women at work. The greatest challenge to prevailing ideas on gender came in 1945, from Sweden, when Astrid Lindgren's heroine *Pippi Longstocking* burst on the scene. Endowed with superhuman strength, 'in all the world there was no policeman as strong as she', Pippi's great ambition in life was 'to become a ferocious pirate.' While some of her behaviour was modified in translation (playing with loaded pistols was removed from the West German edition), Pippi proved popular in many European countries, notably in West Germany and Austria, where she inspired a new school of anti-authoritarian novels, including Christina Nöstlinger's (1936-2018) *Fiery Federica* (1970).

Mass market books for children, part of the important structural growth of children's book publishing in the mid-twentieth century, often promoted more conventional ideas of gender roles. The American Little Golden Books series swept across Europe in translation in the 1950s, and the emphasis was firmly on the nuclear family. Similarly, comics and adventure stories in the early Cold War celebrated militarism and traditional masculinity. Nevertheless, Enid Blyton's (1897-1968) books enjoyed a broad readership across Europe, and her *Famous Five* series featured the memorable tomboy character, George, who wears her hair short, and fiercely objects to being treated differently to the boys.

The advent of Second Wave feminism in the 1970s transformed children's books and their literary criticism, with the argument that gender is socially constructed. Growing numbers of mothers were now educated to university-level and were interested in new ways of educating their children. The Italian author, translator and editor Adela

Turin's (1939-) series 'dalla parte delle bambine' (named after a famous treatise on sexism in child-rearing by Elena Gianini Belotti from 1974) worked in partnership with the French feminist press "Des femmes", to produce militantly feminist children's books. They insisted girls did not need to wait for their 'happy ever after' and celebrated female empowerment. The influence of feminism on mainstream publishing became apparent in the 1980s and '90s, with the trend for subverting fairy tales and traditional gender roles (Babette Cole's (1949-2017) *Princess Smartypants* (1986) is a classic in the genre).

The early 2000s witnessed a return to more conventional and clearly defined gender differences, best exemplified by the wildly popular Disney princess franchise (2000-present). Gendered marketing has taken a new turn with the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the internet has facilitated gender activism in children's books. Crowd-funding produced Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo's international best-seller *Goodnight stories for rebel girls* (2017). This is the most successful example of feminist-inspired books depicting girls as scientists, mathematicians and engineers. Others have attempted to challenge masculine and heteronormative stereotypes, by presenting male characters in caring roles, or non-traditional families (for example, José Carlos Andrés and Natalia Hernández's *Mi Papà es un Payaso*, 2015, about a boy who has two fathers). Campaigns on the importance of diversity in children's literature have nevertheless highlighted the continued sexism and exclusion of non-white, LGBTQ+ and disabled characters from best-selling children's books (critics note that the white, cisgender, able-bodied male remains the default for heroes - for example, the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) only has one female lead character). The notion of gender demarcation remains firmly entrenched in European children's literature.

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