The Cultural Accuracy of Gender Representation in Children's Literature:
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Abstract

Outdated and charmingly virtuous, it would seem surreal to give a child today a copy of a 1960s Peter and Jane, Ladybird reading book. Despite their undeniable success, Ladybird's interpretation of society in the mid twentieth-century would fail to resonate with today's youngsters. In particular, attitudes towards gender assumptions, sexism, patriarchy and gender representation, have widely shifted. These philosophical and political changes have helped to inform Ladybird's publishing practice. This article aims to explore the significance and accuracy of Ladybird's gender representation, specifically during the second wave of feminism. And whether the publisher sought to reinforce, or challenge gender stereotypes as cultural opinion shifted.

Key Words

Gender; stereotypes; Ladybird Books; feminism; children's publishing; 1960s

Introduction

Despite the fact that Wills and Hepworth's, as Ladybird Books was formerly known, foray into children's publishing commenced at the beginning of the First World War, faced with the impending vulnerability of paper supplies, Ladybird created an economically adhering, modestly sized, illustrated series of books. Post-war optimism combined with an increasing

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emphasis upon children's education and an emerging economy paved the way for success. But did Ladybird merely bolster an orthodox society, accentuating the safety of ordinary gender expectations? Or purposely conceal radicalisation, drip-feeding change at their own discretion, conditional to economic capital?

It was in the 1960s that Ladybird thrived, publishing an abundance of new series such as *How it Works, People at Work* and the *Key Words* reading scheme. Pre-war class divisions were dissipating, and women were eagerly expressing their demands for equality. These contemporary changes, however, were initially undetected in Ladybird titles, instead choosing to embrace neoteric objects, as observed by Zeegen: 'Ladybird was keen to grasp hold of this new modernism, albeit primarily in terms of design, fashion and architecture, as depicted in its illustrations during the 1960s.' (2015, 58) It is equivocal as to whether this was a deliberate marketing strategy, whereby the aesthetics appealed to newfound parental consumerism, or whether Ladybird was reluctant to comprehend political and social developments until they were culturally established. This strategy favours Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production' which hypothesises that symbolic capital is non-binary with economic capital. Had Ladybird depicted cutting-edge societal influences, such as increased women in the workplace, their symbolic literary authority may have been interpreted as too extremist or innovative to guarantee income. Therefore, the focus was to generate a lucrative profit whilst circumventing disturbances to the utopian status quo.

The Language of Gender

Conducting a thorough understanding as to the reception of Ladybird's gender portrayal in the 1960s requires clarification of gender connotations during that period. The ambiguous nature of gender and linguistics means gender theory is constantly evolving, with sexist terminology and neologisms infinitely entering the lingual landscape. Childhood development studies have often cited that children's gender expectations are learnt, thus influencing their behaviour and understanding of conventional gender principles. Certainly, this was suggested in 1963 when Comfort wrote that:

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> The 'gender role' which an individual adopts - 'manly' or 'womanly' - according to the standards of his culture, is oddly enough almost wholly learned, and little if at all built in; in fact, the gender role learned by the age of two years is for most individuals almost irreversible, even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject. (Comfort 1963, quoted in Glover and Kaplan 2000, 26)

Comfort's theory suggests that even without Ladybird enforcing gender norms, children would naturally segregate themselves. According to Glover and Kaplan (2000, 28) the 1960s were ambivalent in differentiating gender and biological composition. Reference is made to the work of Stoller, who had 'distinguished between "gender role" and "gender identity" in order to indicate that one's inner and outer life may be deeply conflicted or fail to coincide.' The subliminal act of belonging to one gender as opposed to the other, according to Stoller, '[…] gave rise to a stubborn core of gender identity [and] could sometimes clash with subsequent experiences, values or wishes.' (Glover and Kaplan 2000, 28)

Considering that numerous Ladybird titles would have been commissioned prior to many gender hypotheses, their significance is limited. Recognising Ladybird's slight changes, made a decade later, validates their conservatism. Observations such as Stoller's facilitated a gender revolution that consequently paved the way for fundamental gender theories in subsequent decades, most notably Bem in the 1980s.

The Women's Liberation Movement Impacting Publishing Culture

Referred to as the second wave of feminism, the Women's Liberation Movement was predominantly concerned with practical feminism throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Contrasting to the previous wave, that campaigned for political equality, such as the right to vote, the second wave focused upon debates surrounding female identity and social structures. Activists fought against discrimination and abortion laws and campaigned for financial independence and equal pay. Originating in America, second wave feminism is thought to have commenced in Britain following the circulation of feminist philosophy books, such as Beauvoir and Friedan. Women began to challenge their societal roles,

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particularly their disempowerment within the nuclear family and objectification as solely domesticated care-givers.

Arguably, the significance of second wave feminism is just a fragment of transformations that occurred in the 1960s impacting publishing: increased Americanisation and previous decolonisation had shaped Britain's political and economic outlook. It could be said that the Women's Liberation Movement was merely a by-product of the impetus of post-war regeneration and confidence; life was no longer threatened; quality and fulfilment became measurable. Contrastingly, Stevenson determines the catalyst of dynamic gender perceptions in connection with the publishing of the uncensored edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2010, 165). Published after the Obscene Publications Act of 1959, Stevenson writes that the previously expurgated title was symbolic and that 'publishing was both a fundamental vehicle and reflector of the changes that characterised 1960s Britain.' Despite a clear distinction between children's and adult literature, these overarching consequences would have provided a liberalist steering within the publishing profession.

Darnton's model of a communications circuit (Finkelstein 2006, 12), tracing and influencing a book's production through variations such as social conjuncture and intellectual influences, fails to explicate Ladybird books' positive reception, irrespective of their communication process combining their original printing activities with publishing. Feminist ideologies and greater numbers of women working within publishing during the 1960s changed not only business structures, but also the character of publishing output. Although, as Stevenson points out, the transition was not easy and 'women in executive roles were not everywhere welcomed' (2010, 199). Indeed, Johnson and Alderson noted that whilst Ladybird pioneered technological advances, it was resolutely conservative to social change, stating that 'The board of directors [in 1972] comprised a group of elderly gentlemen, while the author and illustrators of the Key Words Reading Scheme were equally advanced in age and were also all male.' (2014, 106)

Ladybird and the 1960s Publishing Scene

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The subtle infiltration of impropriety and a more relaxed acceptance subconsciously affected publishers and authors' psyche, albeit diluted in appropriateness for the children's genre. Children's publishers were at a crossroads as to whether to protect or expose children to the radicalism of society. There was none of the urgency for political correctness necessitated in later eras, thus Ladybird may have suspected that the longevity of their titles would be threatened if they were overtly contemporary. And, as Reynolds and Tucker emphasise, children's publishers were largely motivated by financial incentives following the government's exuberance for early education and libraries, hence, teachers and librarians became crucial gatekeepers (1998, 26).

In relation to Bourdieu's aforementioned cultural production theory, schools became mediators supporting the cultural field of the vastly literacy-centric education system. Grammar schools were prevalent in the 1960s, therefore Ladybird's titles, particularly the *Key Words* reading scheme, were appreciated with accurate illustrations of affluent, nuclear families, reflecting increasing numbers moving to the suburbs. Schools demonstrated gender identities through their educational material. It would have been disadvantageous and potentially controversial for Ladybird to have depicted non-conformist family roles, when the government's educational establishment, respected and authoritative, was their largest influence. Suarez and Woudhuysen underline the historic cultural relevance of children's literature: 'A book adopted for use in a system of national compulsory education is likely to promote the values of the established religion, ruling class, or dominant ethnic group […] more like instruments of colonisation or hegemony' (2013, 228).

Substantiating the claim of the homogenised relationship between American and British publishing cultures, Clark et al cite American social science research as the facilitator of change in children's books (quoted in Clark and Higonnet 1999, 71). A study published in 1972 by Lenore Weitzman into the depiction of gender in American picture books was described as 'a rallying point for feminist activism'. Clark et al articulate that 'Weitzman almost surely influenced publishing practices [and the] raising of consciousness'. The influx of such findings continued to enter Ladybird's publishing domain, when, according to Johnson and Alderson:

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> A prompt to action had come from the United States where, in 1974, the McGraw-Hill Book Company had issued an extensive set of guidelines for the benefit of their editorial staff and authors, 'designed to make them aware of the ways in which males and females have been stereotyped in publications'. (2014, 105)

Advice from McGraw-Hill had included omitting references to female marital status and reducing use of the prefix man, for example, mankind. However, the most notable consideration for Ladybird, again in 1974, came from a British teacher, Glenys Lobban who analysed their *Key Words* reading scheme and declared it sexist material. Lobban wrote of the series of books that 'The world they depicted was not only sexist, it was more sexist than present reality, and in many ways totally foreign to the majority of children', suggesting that Ladybird had completely failed to pick up on the social cues of the Women's Liberation Movement (qtd. in Johnson and Alderson 2014, 105). Lobban's claims were pretentious and misleading. Subsequent research concluded 'there is no evidence [Ladybird's reading scheme] has moved any faster ahead in relation to the society it serves' (Whiting, 1981). It was also noted that 'there can be no overall policy on stereotyping.'

Establishments such as the Children's Rights Workshop, Librarians for Social Change and Women in Publishing, criticised the lack of modern social representation in children's literature. This culmination eventually prompted changes by Ladybird in the later 1970s. Nonetheless, revisions to illustrations were preferred over that of changes to text, most likely as a consequence of Ladybird's close association with school gatekeepers. There is discrepancy as to whether the illustrators were forthcoming with these alterations: Johnson and Alderson describe prolific Ladybird illustrator, Harry Wingfield, as being 'offended' and giving a 'rather contorted range of excuses.' (2014, 108) Peter and Jane, characters from the *Key Words* reading scheme, were apparently researched and thereby drawn by Wingfield as well-behaved, inquisitive role-models. There was a tendency, that arguably still exists, for backward-looking in children's publishing, with both author's and illustrator's inspiration being drawn from their own childhood experiences. Pearson legitimises this, referencing the Carnegie award winners of the 1960s as featuring,

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predominately middle-class characters in traditional gender roles […] the most active and daring roles were typically afforded to boys; author Philippa Pearce recollected, 'In the first books I wrote, the central character was a boy or boys, because I somehow thought that was right'. (2016, 45)

This prevalence indicates that Wingfield, and therefore Ladybird, were coherent in their traditionalist approach to children's publishing and portrayal of gender.

Ladybird's Narrative and Image Gendering

According to social and cultural historian, Helen Day, there were three phases of Ladybird: 'the 40s and 50s was post-war harmonisation and social optimism, the late 50s to late 60s was the enthusiastic period, and late 60s through to 70s was anxious' (Conway Hall, 2016 29:30). Whether the anxiety was a result of the threat to Ladybird's independence – they were soon to be acquired by Pearson – or the threat to their successful nuclear family characterisation, is unclear. Day points out that 'Ladybird were slow off the mark to respond to a responsibility to portray society, not just as it happened to be under the noses of the artists, but as Britain was changing' (45:37).

The placing of mothers and fathers, with gendered careers, in Ladybird titles was typical of 1960s Britain. Manual labour was prospering, and the *People at Work* series showcased males' vast involvement. As Zeegen explains when referring to the job-based books:

> At a time when men and women still had very defined, stereotypical gender roles, women seldom feature in the series, and where they do we are reminded of their supporting role. In *The Nurse* we learn that 'the doctors tell nurses what to do', and in *The Customs Officer* if female customs officers 'are not busy, they help with the office work'. Only in *The Policeman* do we learn that 'policewomen are trained in the same way as the men and they can do the same jobs'. (2015, 152)

The Fireman, The Pottery Makers, and *The Car Makers* all show male only employees on their cover. By today's measure women were hugely underrepresented and a young girl of

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the 1960s would be forgiven for thinking that she was limited in occupations to pursue. Intellectuals were portrayed as predominantly male, and women's capabilities were confined to either domesticated roles or bringing up children, enhanced by the *Learning with Mother* series encouraged to be read by mothers at home with pre-school youngsters.

The Influence of the Didactic Decades

To criticise these design and illustrative decisions would fail to acknowledge that Ladybird simply applied a snapshot of 1960s realism to every subject matter. Regardless of how gender specific the adult characters were portrayed, childhood, crucially, was often depicted neutrally. The *Junior Science* series contained illustrations of boys and girls both experimenting with household objects. Stereotypical pink and blue references are absent from Jane and Peter's adventures in *Key Words*, and activities that conventionally would have been classed as feminine, such as picking flowers, skipping and housework, are carried out by Peter. These nuances, potentially avant-garde at the time*,* imply that it is the adult reader that has retrospectively typecast Ladybird as sexist and unrealistic, amplified by propaganda of subsequent Third Wave feminism. If Ladybird were perceived as discriminatory of women and therefore outdated, a contemporary competitor would surely have achieved greater success. Coincidently, an account from *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* details Macmillan doing just so, in releasing a series called Nippers in 1968 'in an attempt to counteract Ladybird with stories that were more true to the lives of working-class children. But Nippers generally proved too crude for school and parental tastes', evidencing that society required gentle changes concerning children, as opposed to mass literary reform (Carpenter and Pritchard 1984, 300).

Early 1960s children's literature emphasised fantasy and imagination (Pearson, 2016) therefore suggesting that a child's comprehension of realism, even in non-fictional titles such as Ladybird's, would have been more pragmatic. Books were not a child's solo informant; alternative forms of popular culture, in particular television, experiencing increased ownership in the 1960s, and pre-determined exposures, such as parental conditioning, would have had greater influence.

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Between the 1960s and 1970s subtle changes were made to some Ladybird titles, although for critics these were minor and failed to reflect the dynamic velocity of society. The *Key Words* protagonist, Jane, saw her fashion and physiognomy modified to incorporate jeans as opposed to dresses, and narratively she had greater involvement instead of a mere observational role next to her brother, Peter. The portrayal of the female household role was also altered so that mothers were seen relaxing watching television, instead of carrying a tray or pouring the tea (Conway Hall, 2016 44:45). Theoretically the subtle changing of illustrations could be an intervention that affects the meaning of the text, pertinent to Genette's theory of paratext, whereby accompanying paratextual components act as a 'vestibule' to the interpretation of a book. Paratextually Ladybird's author names were absent from covers, plausibly due to lack of space, but also to emphasise the naturalistic illustrations. Ladybird's gender stereotypes were not explicitly reinforced through paratext. The epitext was non-gender specific: red and black are deemed neutral and it would be exorbitant to suggest that the emblem, a Ladybird, was anything other than homage to the founder's love of nature, rather than sexist symbolism. Endpapers were gender-generic, depicting maps, artwork or diagrams that added informative perceived value to the short books.

Conclusion

Using modern values to discredit Ladybird books during the 1960s and 1970s as sexist is contradictory to appraising them within the context in which they were published. Indeed, the second wave of feminism had broadened the otherwise innocent childhood environment. Books, historically blamed for influencing the masses, began to look forward, permeating social inequalities. Yet in order for Ladybird to portray gender realism, they consciously chose not to be patronising. Subtle changes, albeit reactive, ensured that neither the sales figures or integrity of Ladybird were diluted. Physically the books appealed to children as a whole, unifying language and knowledge for the young, without labelling titles for a specific gender. Ladybird's clichéd quaint traditionalism, nowadays often ridiculed, would not have experienced esteemed longevity had they misrepresented the

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1960s generation. Although, arguably, many parents purchased titles aspiring to the lifestyle of Ladybird's illustrations, gender stereotypes were only viewed significantly controversial in later decades, once sexism boundaries were widely recognised. Publishing's dependency upon socio-economic and cultural factors to facilitate content and generate profit necessitate a precise balance between giving the reader profound value, alongside subjective relatability. Ladybird secured this with a nurturing legacy that acknowledged past gender representation to gradually inform the future.

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