

Gender Themes in Czech Books for Children of Younger School Age

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Abstract

Children's literature can become one of the means of shaping personal identity, including gender socialization. The main characters portrayed in a book can become a kind of gender role model. The study examines gender themes in Czech books for children of younger school age that have been awarded the Golden Ribbon and Magnesia Litera prizes. The selected books (n=15) were analysed through quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. The main findings include the fact that 596 different characters (as well as 29 main characters among them) are represented from a position of gender imbalance (boys and men are represented twice as often as girls and women). In other similarly focused research, the gender imbalance in the number of literary heroes did not have an effect on readers' popularity or the impact of reading on readers, regardless of their gender self-identification. From the results obtained, therefore, we do not conclude on social discrimination, since from a gender perspective we do not encounter any erosion of respect for any individual.

Keywords:

Gender Socialization, Children's Literature, Gender Imbalance

Introduction

Contemporary society is characterised by an extraordinary concern for minority rights and social justice, and is in a very turbulent time of changing understandings of gender and sex. In particular, the contemporary mainstream, including children's literature criticism, seems to be pushing for gender expansive and inclusive books dealing with gender creative and transgender characters, preferring literary protagonists from the LGBTQ+ community (Luecke, 2023).

The attempt to radically rethink the gender binary, however, clashes with mainstream opinion, which does not see the distinction of the human way of being into male and female forms as a discriminatory problem. This is evident in contemporary analyses of children's literature in different geographical areas. In many countries, both children's literature and its recipients equate stories with their own self-identification, with an understanding of the natural order, but also with questioning the cultural structure of gender roles. These contradictions are confirmed from research in recent years from Spain (Martínez-García, Rodríguez-



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Álvarez, & Virgós Sánchez, 2023), from Turkey and South Korea (Ramazan & Arslan Çiftçi, 2020), or from the USA (Berridge & Thomas, 2013) and Australia (Adam & Harper, 2023).

Intercultural differences in the approach to gender and gender sensitivity come to the fore especially in international communication. On the one hand, the socially different understandings of gender exemplified in children's literature are not only evident in the teaching of future teachers (Kumlu & Çomoglu, 2021) but also in the more sophisticated practices of translation. The strong focus on removing certain attitudes of traditional society into a language that prefers total gender sameness is evident, for example, in the rewriting of the original dimension of the Chinese text with the intention of softening the fragility and submissiveness of the girl protagonist, empowering her and weakening the original conceptual metaphor (Chen & Song, 2023).

Books for children reflect the theme of gender and gender roles mainly in a dualistic form, i.e., in the form of men and women placed in different gender spaces, using traditional social gender stereotypes of heteronormativity. This is evident both in picture books for preschool children and in stories intended for children readers, in which men are often described as active and dominant, while women are portrayed as gentle and submissive (Axell & Boström, 2021; Tsao, 2020). Yet, in recent years, children's books with themes of a non-binary approach of gender or trans and queer gender have been appearing (Bittner, Ingrey, & Stamper, 2016), stories in which the role of a boy is reversed for a girl and vice versa (Earles, 2017), or literary heroes adopt differently conceived gender roles (Marshall, 2004). This transformative activity has not escaped traditional and widely known fairy tales (Meland, 2020; Pawłowska, 2021). The apparent effort of such books is to overcome gender stereotypes, critique sex and gender essentialism and the whole binary opposition in children's literature, and conversely, there is a strong effort to promote themes of sexual and gender diversity in the gender socialization of school children (DePalma, 2016; Quast, 2019; Varga-Dobai, 2013).

Repeatedly, a select set of children's books have been analysed research-wise in different cultural contexts, particularly with regard to the portrayal of non-normative gender identities, usually with a value-based effort to challenge gender norms and with the perception that the lack of representation of gender variance (LGBTQ+) in children's literature promotes social injustice and problematic institutions (Capuzza, 2020; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016; Zanfabro, 2017). In our study, we intend to avoid this kind of activism and, with value distance, we want to draw the attention of the international scholarly community to the form

and shape in which gender themes appear in Czech books for younger school-age children (6-11 years old). We are deliberately selecting children's books that are not only widely available in the Czech Republic, but have been awarded by literary associations.

We are aware, of course, that we are entering an ideological space in which any essentialist grounding of gender tied to sex is rejected and social constructivism, often denying any ties to gendered corporeality, comes to the fore (Butler, 1990). However, the disregard for human corporeality as a necessary part of the human way of being and the perception of solely social pressures as determining the life of the individual seems to be too reductive, so that a more balanced conception of corporeality and gender is sought in the debate with the new materialism and biologism (Cameron, 2010; Davis, 2009). The element of dynamics and development also enters academic attention, for example in relation to the philosophical concept of 'becoming' in the wider discussion around the notion of 'becoming-woman' (Batra, 2012; Sotirin, 2011), or in relation to the phenomenology of possible 'becoming-man' processes (Jirásek, 2021b). This does not, however, reject the basic thesis of constructivism, i.e., that a child behaves as presented to oneself or in relation to what is reinforced by society - e.g., if masculine behaviour is demanded of boys, boys in turn demand masculinity from other peers. Social influence, however, cannot explain all existential differences between masculinity and femininity, and gender identity and sexual difference need not be limited to empirical facts (hormones, social roles, historical facts) but can be grasped as a unique personality's way of life (Urban, 2016). Sexual identity, i.e., awareness of the characteristics of the anatomical structure of the body or the influence of hormonal levels, may conflict with gender identity, i.e., the assumption of a gender role and self-identification by gravitating towards masculinity, femininity, or a combination of both (Fafejta, 2016). The influence of the social environment on the formation of gender identity, starting from earliest childhood, is particularly evident in the family, peer influence, educational institutions (Nurlu, 2017), and mass communication through electronic and print media, including books. Children perceive gender themes as natural if they are in line with the norms of their environment, while their own independent perspective is developed much later due to the influence of physical and mental maturation (Janošová, 2008). The traditionally respected binary concept of gender roles (male-female), i.e., the preference for masculine and feminine types in the human way of being, is now enriched with additional categories, making it possible to respect individuals as distinct, individual beings (Daly, 2017). The possibilities of gender identity, i.e., the perception of one's own corporeality and sex characteristics, in the context of social roles and

socially expected behaviour and thinking, are now multiplied in a non-binary understanding into various combinations of masculine and feminine elements, namely transgender, cisgender, queer, or the broad field of LGBTQ+ individuals.

In this categorically opaque situation, where on the one hand the majority society is comfortable with a binary model, but burdened with a multitude of stereotypes of social behaviour and expectations, and on the other hand the pressure of the public space for full recognition of the uniqueness and sovereignty of each individual without the need to fit into any categories, the role of literature for children (and especially for preschool and younger school-age children) is quite crucial not only in the process of developing gender identity and the acceptance of gender roles. The choice of appropriate children's literature is entirely dependent on the age of the reader, when children are able to work with and reshape their perspectives on others at all, depending on their knowledge of human diversity (DePalma, 2016; Tsao, 2020), especially when they are strongly influenced by social norms and gender stereotypes.

The solid foundation of every children's book is primarily a specific story based on detailed portrayals of the main characters, who indirectly take responsibility for the complex understanding of the fictional plot, including the themes of social and gender roles. The characters have their own gendered spaces in which they move and which are specific to them. When gender stereotypes appear in children's literature, for example when female literary heroines are attributed humility and care for others, while male ones are attributed dominance, activity and physical strength, such books are rightly criticized, with demands for the elimination of sexism (Earles, 2017; Shen, 2018; Tsao, 2020). While we fully agree that children should have a clear understanding of otherness, including gender specificity, we are not convinced that producing literary stories with protagonists from the LGBTQ+ community is the only possible path to social justice. The social environment of the pupils and their families may be in stark contrast to the tendency of the literary story, which, without adequate discussion and explanation, may in turn play a negative role when the non-stereotypical gender behaviour of the characters is evaluated negatively by the children and perceived as funny or nonsensical. Therefore, it is not acceptable for the topic of gender to become a mere tool to manipulatively inculcate views or actively promote any of the gender identity models (Bittner et al., 2016; DePalma, 2016; Earles, 2017). Therefore, the main purpose of the present research is to explore gender themes in Czech books for young school-age children that have been socially valued. Specifically, what is the representation of the main literary characters in terms of their biological sex and in which gender roles

they are portrayed in terms of binary and non-binary understandings of gender.

Materials and methods

Research sample

With regard to the social recognition of some titles from the overall book production intended for children of younger school age, we make a deliberate selection using the literary award "Golden Ribbon" (selection of the best books for children and youth carried out by expert juries of the Czech Section of IBBY and other institutions under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) and "Magnesia Litera" (promotion of quality literature and good books regardless of genres, juries in nine categories delegated by the respective professional organizations) for the last ten years (2011-2021). We assume that the chosen criterion will make it possible to select books that do not focus primarily on gender themes (let alone with a preference for non-binary concepts and LGBTQ+ literary heroes, although such books are rare in Czech literary production, e.g., *Two Dads and a Curious Girl* from 2019), but in its social reflection it will point out the gendered social preferences through which professional institutions can co-create the gender identity of younger school-age children.

Another determining criterion is the age from 6 to 11 years, which was applied on the basis of the cataloguing records of the National Library of the Czech Republic. Titles for which such information was not available were examined with respect to the subject matter and any age recommendations published by booksellers. Also excluded were picture books, comic books, educational books without literary characters, poetry, nursery rhymes, and dramatic plays without sufficient description of the featured characters, and books available only in audio version. The research set consists of 15 prose books intended exclusively for children of younger school age, which were awarded the "Golden Ribbon" literary and translation prize and the "Magnesia Litera" prize for children's and young people's books (see Appendix 1 for a list). It is worth noting that not only contemporary original works are awarded in this way, but also classic and translated titles by established authors (such as Mark Twain or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry), which, of course, given the time of the texts' origin, could significantly undermine the basic focus of the study. Therefore, we declare the main idea through direct quotations exclusively from contemporary works.

Data analysis

The selected books were analysed through quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis (Hendl & Remr, 2017; Nowell, Norris, White, &

Moules, 2017; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Content analysis allows us to record the frequencies of occurrence of certain types of literary characters in terms of their biological sex, gendered social role, and preference for binary or non-binary conceptions of gender. The content units of these categories are male-female, masculine-feminine and binary-nonbinary polarities. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to categorize and quantify the content units. Thematic analysis allows a larger data set to be organized into clear categories - themes - and these can then be described and interpreted in detail. The focus of the thematic analysis on gender led to detailed descriptions of the categories from the content analysis, i.e., specific characteristics dependent on the biological sex of the characters, their physical appearance, hobbies and activities performed in diverse environments, etc. Repeated readings of text sections with these units of meaning lead to the generation of initial codes, which are then organized by emerging subthemes into a structure identifying key themes. The corpus is further reviewed to achieve semantic integrity and meaningful integration of the themes into a coherent narrative. The whole procedure was carried out in Czech, only the final research report was translated into English.

Results

The analysed Czech books for children of younger school age (6-11 years) do not only describe stories with human characters, but also with animals or things that take on proxy characteristics of humans, including their possible sexual and gender identification. Characters from unspecified groups (giants, neighbours, cyclists, people on a bus or in a circus, audience or magical creatures, a shoal of fish, etc.) were not included in the quantification. Across all 15 books combined, 596 different characters were identified, the majority of which (77%) had human form, in the form of children, adults, fairy, magical and other beings with human appearance. Zoomorphic characters also represent a relatively large group (22%), with the most common animal depicted being a dog. The least numerous group (1%) was things acting as characters (talking food, plants, or types of weather).

In terms of binary gender identity, boys and men predominate (66%), followed by women (30%) and non-gender-identified beings (4%), referred to as "someone", "another of the class", "good person", "rare guest", etc. The more than twofold prevalence of male literary heroes is thus fully consistent with the representation of gender in children's literature also in other cultural frameworks (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011). An interesting detail turns out to be the fact that this gender imbalance and masculine dominance applies to both human and animal heroes (in roughly the same

proportion), while for the least numerous group of characters in the form of things, which, moreover, do not feature gender-ambiguous characters, female heroines (over 60%) predominate over male ones (less than 40%). However, what is lost in this overall number are the individual differences of each book, in which a higher or lower gender imbalance is evident. Because the number of characters in each book varies widely (from 7 to 119), we use percentage representation. There is only one publication that is completely gender balanced, i.e., the ratio of male and female characters is equal. The books in which the female gender is represented in the range of 0.75-0.5 (i.e., two or fewer masculine characters for one feminine character) are 5. The other books, i.e., 9, show an even lower ratio, ranging from 0.25 to 0.43 (i.e., up to four times more male roles than female roles).

Out of a total of 596 literary characters, 29 of them play the main role. We also analysed the gender social role of these characters. Here too, the same gender imbalance is evident, namely, male characters are more than twice as often presented as main characters than female characters (69% and 31%, respectively). All the main literary characters can be categorized according to a binary concept of gender; none of them show a preference for a non-binary concept. Yet, even in these books, themes emerge that transcend cultural representations of gender stereotypes and disrupt them in some way. Given that these are representatives of children's literature that are socially valued, we consider this finding significant.

One of the main themes that emerged from the codes of the semantic text fragments, which can be related to the theme of gender, is the appearance of the characters. Books for younger school-age children focus on the plot of the story rather than depicting the appearance of literary characters. Nevertheless, from the descriptions of the style of dress, footwear, body structure, hairstyle, face, etc., it is possible to infer the gender roles of the individual characters, and this is of two types. The first adheres to the usual stereotypes, e.g., "She had big blue eyes, brown hair that made coils up to her shoulders, and a skirt with ruffles from her mother, but now it hung in the dressing room under a picture of a hedgehog because she had been undressed in the morning so as not to get wrinkled." (Papoušková, 2019, p. 9). Other female characters slightly exceed them: "Hanka ran out of the house in her oldest jeans and dirtiest T-shirt..." (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 42). The female characters are very diverse and interesting, in some ways showing signs of stereotyping, for example, the body structure is always slender, whether she is tall or short: "Tapota is as slender as a match, but tall." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 44); "a golden-haired girl... She was small and should have stayed that way." (Trojak, 2020, p. 7). Neither of the main heroines is of stocky or sturdier stature. However,

the hair description no longer usually plays the role of gender specification in Czech children's books: "a dishevelled girl with leaves in her moss-green hair." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 6). The drastic transgression of the usual gender space is explicitly mentioned only in one publication, and it should be noted that this is a translation of an English book: "I am a girl with a beard!" (Stower, 2018, p. 40); "James watched as Vrku combed his hand through his beard, occasionally dropping a tiny leaf that got caught in it." (Stower, 2018, p. 122). The aforementioned otherness is also evident in the clothing: "Vrku has lent Jacob a very respectable pair of wombat-fur shorts to wear while his clothes dry." (Stower, 2018, p. 59).

Stereotyping, and even transcending it, can also be observed in male characters. Boys are often described as tall and skinny: "He was skinny and freckled. All arms, all legs." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 11), or, on the contrary, very small and petite: "He was so short and thin that even in a light breeze he had to walk in a forward bend to keep the wind from rolling him onto his back." (Stower, 2018, p. 7). Unlike the female characters, however, the male ones are described with a lesser degree of physical perfection: "A stocky fifth-grader with a good-natured round face, ruddy as a doughnut." (Trojak, 2020, p. 13). The character descriptions are more characteristically neutral: "He has an elongated face, blond hair combed into a ponytail covering half of his high forehead, a long straight nose, and a tightly pursed narrow mouth. The most striking thing about him, however, are his eyes: one is blue and the other brown." (Trojak, 2020, p. 12). In the appearance of the male characters, the social and material aspect often comes to the fore, rather than the gender aspect: "He was medium height, wearing a grubby white shirt with the buttons torn off, ten-euro jeans from Kiku, and clunky brown shoes. They looked like dead rats." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 40).

Another main theme is the characteristics of the characters, with rather positive characteristics predominating, probably with a view to the possible identification of child readers with the main characters. The female characters in the selected books are described as bright, courageous, resourceful and ambitious, i.e. rather in opposition to traditional gender stereotypes: "Then she took her sword and the biggest poker in the kitchen, got on her bicycle and rode off on her dragons." (Jirků, 2020, p. 25); "she crept quietly under the bench on which he stood, pulled a string from her pocket, and in a flash wrapped it around his ankle." (Trojak, 2020, p. 34). Of the traditional qualities attributed to girls, concern for other characters emerges: "Rozarka got worried about Choros! Where has he gone? Did someone hurt him?" (Jirků, 2020, p. 8). Furthermore, timidity and fear shown in dangerous or unknown situations: "she was red-faced and absolutely terrified." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 7); "Kvikalka

was pale. Just when she thought her knees, wobbly with fear, couldn't carry her." (Stará and Matlovičová, 2021, p. 30). In some cases, however, disrespect comes to the fore, which can also be perceived in a mode of insolence that is usually inconsistent with traditional descriptions of girls: "Your daddy is no nice daddy, but a gutted bowl! ... I know a blockhead, and your dad, what a piece of work!" (Fisher, 2021, p. 11).

Male characters are traditionally described in children's books as very bright, courageous, and willing to stand up for their loved ones at any time and fight regardless of their own physical building: "There were seven worshippers against two of them ... Hugo pulled his bamboo shinai out of his holster, which couldn't really hurt anyone, but was still better than nothing, and went after them." (Stančík, 2017, p. 8); "At that moment all fear left Chrochtík. In a rage he seized his stick, struck the Lone across the outstretched paw, and when the wolf roared in pain, he thrust into his open mouth the pack which he had previously taken off his back with lightning speed." (Stará, & Matlovičová, 2021, p. 48-49); "For a long time I wondered if Chik understood that they meant him and that they were laughing at him, but then one day he suddenly stopped and walked back to the boys in the parking lot. They were all a head taller and a couple of years older than him, and they were grinning terribly." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 45); "Loan Bach and Denis waited for nothing and started to defend Vojta." (Trojak, 2020, p. 32). Another typified character trait is the access to arcane information: "He quickly wrote the idea down on a piece of paper. Then he encrypted the message on a second piece of paper... Finally, he tore the first piece of paper into pieces and decided to eat them too, just in case, as he saw in the spy movie." (Stančík, 2017, p. 26, 27); "as if he was trying his best not to reveal something important. His jokes seemed to be a leaking secret." (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 28). The clear presentation of the man as a fearless hero is, however, enriched by a more developed and colourful characterization, which does not lack aspects usually attributed to the opposite gender, such as concern for others: "Although he assured others that nothing could happen to Justine, he trembled and prayed that everything would turn out well." (Trojak, 2020, p. 77).

The third main theme is the activity of the characters, i.e., the interests and hobbies, the activities they engage in within the stories. They are usually related to physical fitness, and female characters are not described in as much depth as male characters. Yet the main female characters, in terms of their activity, fall directly into male gender spaces, more than half of them are described as very independent and self-sufficient, others are physically fit: "Vrku was as nimble as a squirrel and climbed higher and higher among the branches without difficulty." (Stower, 2018, p. 45); "And with that, she turned, joggled, climbed the

nearest tree, and climbed up one of the branches to above the road." (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 19). Yet some activities remain gendered in the descriptions, such as sewing. It is the girl who creates superhero outfits for herself and her friends: "Then she took out a tape measure, measured both boys thoroughly and wrote down the measurements in centimetres in a notebook. She answered their protests firmly." (Stančík, 2017, p. 33), another made pillows from her pet's hair: "she collected a few hairs and put them in a bag" (Stower, 2018, p. 55). However, this does not prevent them from undertaking activities such as building a tree bunker and a whole complex of forest slides and traps: "I didn't discover it. I built it." (Stower, 2018, p. 56), or working with tools and gadgets, or other activities stereotypically considered masculine: "Vrku grabbed her tools, disappeared into the trees" (Stower, 2018, p. 117); "Then she took her sword ... and went off to beat the dragons" (Jirků, 2020, p. 25). Likewise, the desire for heroism and full self-realization: "I always wanted to do something great!" (Trojak, 2020, p. 68); "Hanka loved to live, but she was always haunted by the strange feeling that the life she was living was not the life she should be living." (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 61-62).

The main male characters are particularly distinguished by their physical prowess: "He ran, did a somersault, while still in the air drew a shinai from his holster, landed on his feet and firmly went into an overhead guard" (Stančík, 2017, p. 11); "He is unusually flexible and agile, in gym class he amazes with daring somersaults, flips and spectacular parachute rolls." (Trojak, 2020, p. 13); "In the high jump and long jump I am almost unbeatable." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 35); "Hugo just went from school to the martial arts club" (Stančík, 2017, p. 7). Characters who, on the other hand, do not excel in physical prowess, or even otherwise differ from the established stereotypes associated with the male gender, are usually the target of bullying by their classmates in the books: "A group of the infamous blue Baphomet Worshipers came around the corner and cunningly followed the boy." (Stančík, 2017, p. 7); "He knew that if he wanted to survive, he simply couldn't get in Max's way." (Stower, 2018, p. 7). In general, however, boys' interests are very varied, with mathematics, physical education and chemistry cited as popular school subjects. In line with the male gender space, there are also themes of invention and building various machines: "Hugo himself glued model airplanes, so he could appreciate such fine work." (Stančík, 2017, p. 9); "The work they were just finishing was quite revolutionary. It was a secret model of a real flying airship." (Papoušková, 2019, p. 6); "Then he tickled the cables for a while, started up and tried to drive out of line, slamming his bumper into the cars in front and behind us." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 92). Reading is relatively common among the boys' interests: "He read. He was so engrossed that he didn't hear it and didn't get up." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 5); "In truth, he

devoured mostly educational dictionaries and thick novels." (Trojak, 2020, p. 7.); "I had read it at least three times, but I figured it couldn't hurt to read it a fourth time." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 71). The boys in the books pay special attention to technology, computer games, PlayStation, and the Internet: "he was looking at the computer screen, where a single castle tower already loomed above the smoke, flames, and flashes" (Kratochvíl, 2015); "Only I am much more attracted to the Internet and programming instead of libraries" (Končinský, & Klárová, 2017, p. 16).

The last major category is the perception of characters, i.e., perceptions of and relationships with other literary characters, perceptions of one's own personality, ways of experiencing, and desires directed toward future goals. The descriptions of the girl protagonists, despite their appearance, are guided by the modern of strangeness and oddity, of a tough character: "I know you, you're the goofy - I mean stuffed - namely weird - redhead from the B-class." (Stančík, 2017, p. 29); "There was a strange dishevelled girl sitting by the wall ... she continued to be a badass, she found a chestnut in the pocket of her shabby dress and sucked on it like a cough drop." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 6, 11); "How dare you! ... I'm a girl with a kinky beard, yes, and a spear too!" (Stower, 2018, p. 87). Yet strong emotions are repeatedly displayed, often stereotypically interspersed with crying: "When she cried a little ..." (Stančík, 2017, p. 55); "She wondered if she should cry. She always did that when she didn't know what to do." (Jirků, 2020, p. 40); "But I am not such a sissy. I just cry easily. I don't know why." (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 74). Relationship themes and liking for the other sex do not deviate from the usual literary descriptions: "Yes, he is as beautiful as a prince." (Jirků, 2020, p. 37); "At first she blushed with joy because Sudieček said she was smart, and no one had ever told her that." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 29). Aspirations about the future and careers are varied, ranging from traditional fashion design: "she will be a fashion designer one day anyway and then everyone will wear panties on their head" (Papoušková, 2019, p. 18); "I am Ophelia. A spy and a fashion designer." (Stančík, 2017, p. 29), so transcending the accustomed stereotypes: "I'm going to drive a garbage truck!" (Jirků, 2020, p. 14).

The self-identification of the male literary characters is carried by the modus of acceptance of personal uniqueness: "Škraloup and I are pretty big screw-ups, but we would never leave each other in the trouble." (Končinský, & Klárová, 2017, p. 27), and in relation to the evaluation of others, it is a labelling: "Chik was clearly welfare trash and it showed." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 39-40); "Just try it, you accuser!" (Fisherová, 2021, p. 30); "The weirdo who either disappeared or went through the wall" (Stančík, 2017, p. 10); "That's the bespectacled intellectual, almost a philosopher." (Trojak, 2020, p. 36). The breaking out of male gender spaces, however,

is exceptional: "As if it wasn't enough that a boy was born instead of a girl! Weird Sister have always been female!" (Fisherová, 2021, p. 8). More often the theme of sex and gender identity is addressed, represented by thinking about girls and first relationship experiences: "Sudicek hugged her. The whole thing only lasted a second or two, but Sudicek fell head over heels and over ears over his head in love." (Fisher, 2021, p. 101). It only hints at transcending heterosexual normativity: "and I considered for a moment that I might be gay too. (...) I liked Chic terribly, but I kind of liked girls better." (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 190). Family relationships here tend to be complicated, often negative, especially in the dimension of the paternal role model: "Dad was eye-rolling at me for about four seconds. ... Blows rained down on me from all sides, and I fell out of my chair and slid across the floor" (Herrndorf, 2012, p. 202); "He started to laugh, but stopped again immediately, a look of horror appearing on his face" (Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 30); "When he said our dear Daddy, he turned pale green." (Fisherová, 2021, p. 11). Friendship and mutual devotion are reserved for relationships between boys as they experience adventures, yet, unlike children's literature of earlier times, boy literary heroes are not afraid to hide their feelings, including crying: "Tears could be heard in Dog's voice." (Pennac, 2011, p. 79); "With every pain, tears always helped him. They brought help." (Kratochvíl, 2015, p. 32); "I was crying for real already." (Končinský and Klárová, 2019, p. 107).

Discussion

The analysis of the titles of children's literature for younger school age awarded in the Czech Republic provides an idea of what aspects of gender themes are preferred by professional societies dealing with literature in this Central European country. It is not only the Czech Section of IBBY, but also representatives of other professional societies that nominate their representatives to the expert juries, including the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, the Writers' Association, the Czech PEN Club Centre, the Translators' Community, the Writers' Community and others. Thus, our focus is not on presenting a specific section of children's literature that focuses on transcending the binary understanding of gender, i.e., transgender, cisgender, queer, or the broad field of LGBTQ+, but rather on recognizing the influence of the overall cultural environment, appreciated values and norms, their presentation in children's literature, and its role in the gender self-identification of younger school-age children.

Children's literature reflects dominant cultural frameworks, including gender representation, and analyses of this literature confirm the fact that the representation of boys and men is more pronounced, with male protagonists twice as often present in children's literary narratives than women (Axell & Boström, 2021; McCabe et al., 2011). Our analysis is fully

consistent with this evidence, demonstrating that this is an international and transcultural phenomenon. Yet, we do not infer from this situation the necessity of social activism or the requirement to codify the demand for full gender balance of the main characters in children's literature. Analysis of United States' recommended children's literature also shows an unbalanced number of women authors and titles with female protagonists, but at the same time gender bias was minimal (Berridge & Thomas, 2013). This situation is certainly related to the characteristics of society, where most children perceive themselves primarily as members of their own gender, which has been empirically confirmed, for example, in Turkish and South Korean society (Ramazan & Arslan Çiftçi, 2020).

We do not see the relationship between children's literature, gender self-identification and the potential transformation of the gender binary as direct or mechanistic. We do not perceive the parallel existence of girls' and boys' literature as a social problem, the elimination of which would potentially lead to the gender identity of literary heroes. Therefore, we do not infer social discrimination or social injustice from the results either, since we do not encounter any erosion of respect for any individual in terms of gender in the children's literature analysed. We are also led to this by the specific context of boys' literature in Bohemia, represented by the work of the writer Jaroslav Foglar, who greatly influenced the comics scene, children's literature and educational efforts under the auspices of Scouting ideals (Alaniz, 2008; Jirásek, 2021a). This author was quite deliberately writing about and for boys; his construction of intersexual relations is heavily unbalanced. And yet, the readership of these stories is consistent for both genders, as is the research-confirmed effect of reading on readers regardless of their gender self-identification (Jirásek, Macků, & Němec, 2021).

In the set of children's books awarded in the Czech Republic, the appearance of the characters, their characteristics, relationships and activities do not lack some of the features of gender stereotyping, but at the same time, there is also a noticeable transgression of historical cultural traditions by casual dress or individual differences (most notably in the story of the girl with the beard). The characters easily stand out from their gendered space, for example by their physical descriptions, their relationship to emotions and their choice of activities. The stories offer examples of girls who are brave, bright and enterprising, as well as emotionally sensitive boys caring for others and succumbing to tears. Significantly, the activities (technical ingenuity and construction, music, reading sports, computers, etc.) are not presented in a feminine/masculine distinction, but are intertwined and complementary.

The limitations of the research may include the intentional choice of the research sample, as it is likely that an analysis of all children's books for the chosen age group would add additional themes to the results that are not reflected in our survey. One of these may be, for example, the theme of homoparenting as presented in the book *Two Dads and a Curious Girl*, or in stories responding to transgender, cisgender, queer, or the broader LGBTQ+ field. However, the aim of this study was not to provide a full picture of children's literature production in the Czech Republic, nor a selection of such stories, but to highlight a sample of culturally preferred, peer-reviewed awarded publications, thus highlighting a theme that stands rather in the background of the authors' intentions.

A potential limitation is the analysis of texts without verifying readers' opinions on them. Children's participation in reflecting on gender issues in stories and reading (DePalma, 2016; Earles, 2017) brings a deeper understanding of children's socialization processes through texts. On the other hand, it is clear that the in-depth interview method not only ascertains the views of the recipients, but necessarily also transforms the depth of awareness of the topics discussed, and thus the very process of gender identification that it simultaneously explores. Thus, in our research we have grasped children's literature as a kind of authorial statement in a certain social context, without ascertaining its real influence.

Declaration of interest statement

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: Research Set of Analysed Books

Table 1.

Research set of analysed books

| Title Czech / English | Author(s) | Year of publication | Description |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Chrochtík a Kvikalka na cestě za blýskavým prasátkem / Chrochtík and Kvikalka on the way to the shiny pig | Stará, E. & Matlovičová, M. | 2021 | The book is about two little pigs who embark on an adventurous journey. Together they want to find the silver pig that the birds have been chattering about. But along the way they meet several other animals, with whom they get into a conversation. |
| Cirkus Abrafrk / Circus Abrafrk | Charms, D. | 2013 | The book is a collection of several short stories about animals and people in the world humorously tackling the issues of everyday life to which the research primarily relates. A series of miscellaneous poems can also be found at the very beginning, and even a story from the circus itself at the end, which is incorporated into a relatively short play (these parts of the book were not considered in the research, however, as gender issues they are not sufficiently incorporated in their content). |
| Cirkus zlodějů a tombola zkázy / Circus of Thieves and Raffle of Doom | Sutcliffe, W. | 2015 | The book is about a very ordinary small-town girl who, by chance, befriends a boy from the circus enough to try to help him foil his circus father's evil plan, and thus help him free himself for good from his hard fate. Not only do the two begin to form a special bond of trust, but they also have an adventure together that the protagonist has long wanted. |
| Čik / Chick | Herrndorf, W. | 2012 | The book is about two boys, class outsiders, who, although they come from different family backgrounds and have completely different personalities and interests, become friends at the beginning of the holidays. With nothing to keep either of them at home, they set off together in a stolen car on an adventurous journey to Tramtaría, getting to know each other, strengthening new friendships and learning a lot from each other. |
| H2O a tajná vodní mise / H2O and the Secret Water Mission | Stančík, P. | 2017 | The book is about three fourth grade students who are brought together by the adventure of a planned submarine trip through a water pipe thanks to a never-before-seen invention by one of them. Meanwhile, however, as a new friendship begins to form between the heroes, they must save not only the ghost of a formerly cursed physicist who still haunts the school, but more importantly the town from a water shortage, one of the evil plans of an evil professor from the neighborhood, precisely by stealing the invention. |
| Kosprd a Telecí / Kosprd and Calf | Papoušková, E. | 2019 | The book is about a boy who comes to kindergarten for the first time against his will. Although he doesn't want to go to kindergarten, he finds his first friend there, with whom he subsequently has an adventure in the form of an escape, accompanied by a series of humorous incidents, while learning that their newfound friendship is ultimately the most important thing of all. |
| Král Vrkú / King Vrkú | Stower, A. | 2018 | The book is about an ordinary boy who, while running away from bullies at school, accidentally ends up in the forest, where he also meets the resourceful and courageous King Vrkú. But to his great surprise, he soon learns that King Vrkú is not an ordinary creature with a long beard, but an extraordinary girl living in the forest, with whom he becomes such friends that together they outwit not only the bullies, but save the whole town. |
| Malý princ / The Little Prince | de Saint-Exupéry, A. | 2019 | The book is about the Little Prince, a little man from another planet, whom a pilot meets in the desert after his plane crashes. While they become friends, the pilot also hears the whole story of the little man and his adventurous travels from planet to planet, only to eventually be able to say goodbye so they can each go their separate ways again. |
| Pes paličák / Stubborn Dog | Pennac, D. | 2011 | The book is about the fate of a rather ordinary, not very nice dog, who had a hard life. But after the death of the surrogate bitch who took him in, he goes to the city at her request to find a mistress who will take him in, which he does after a series of unfortunate events. But his new owner is a spoiled little girl - and she's not easy to train! He has many adventures on his way to win her love and makes new friends among other dogs and cats. |
| Pohoršovna / The Worsening Room | Fischerová, D. | 2021 | The book is about a group of pests, would-be evil fairy creatures who have been put into the premises of a worsening room to learn to harm people and not to do good. But thanks to the outrage, all the pests find not only themselves and their true selves in an unexpected adventure, but also their first real friendships and childhood loves. |
| Překlep a Škraloup / Typo and Scratch | Končinský, T. & Klárová, B. | 2017 | The book is about an entropic leprechaun, a third-grade student at a strange school, who, along with his best friend Skraloup, learns how to let things get old and worn out. But because he learns on one of his excursions into the human world that people don't like old things, he sets off, all disillusioned, on an adventurous journey to find the Tooth of Time, which he could use to stop aging forever. |
| Safíroví ledňáčci a Glutaman / Sapphire Kingfishers and Glutamate | Trojak, B. | 2020 | The book is about a group of school children called the Sapphire Kingfishers who one evening, by an unfortunate coincidence, get involved in a crime, from which they take the diary of the captain of the ship, the brother of the headmaster himself. What follows is a series of events that not only sees the whole gang grow by two more members, but after which they attempt to solve the town's problem and defeat the villainous Glutaman, despite the rivalry of an entirely different gang full of villains who complicate their lives at every opportunity. |
| Táta a princezna Rozárka / Daddy and Princess Rozarka | Jirků, J. | 2020 | The book is about a little girl and her father who tell each other unusual fairy tales on various occasions. In each tale, there are real-life characters who follow the life of the little Rozarka, who is portrayed as a brave princess by her father in many of the stories. |
| Zajatci stříbrného slunce / Captives of the Silver Sun | Kratochvíl, M. | 2015 | The book is about a first grade boy who, thanks to a computer game his dad bought him as a reward, has a glimpse into the world of gaming; the world of a defeated City. It is in this that he tries to find something mysterious or evil; among other things, he gets to know both the City itself and the people who live there, mostly other children, and to whom he tries to pass on all the experiences his grandfather once passed on to him. |
| Ztracený princ Margarín / The Lost Prince Margarine | Twain, M. & Stead, P. | 2017 | The book is about a poor boy brought up by an evil grandfather who, despite his difficult fate, found understanding and friendship with various animals with whom he could easily communicate thanks to eating a magic bean and who subsequently became his surrogate family. It is also with the animals that he embarks on an adventurous journey to find the cruel king and, in the end, to rescue the lost Prince Margarine. |