

Bias, She Wrote

The Gender Balance of The New York Times Best Seller list

By Rosie Cima

Shirley Jackson was a literary superstar of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Her work won the O'Henry award and was shortlisted for the National Book award. She's best known for "The Lottery," which is one of the most famous stories in American literature.

In her memoir, *Life Among the Savages*, Jackson wrote about going to the hospital to deliver her third child, and having the following exchange with the receptionist:

"Occupation?"

"Writer," I said.

"Housewife," she said.

"Writer," I said.

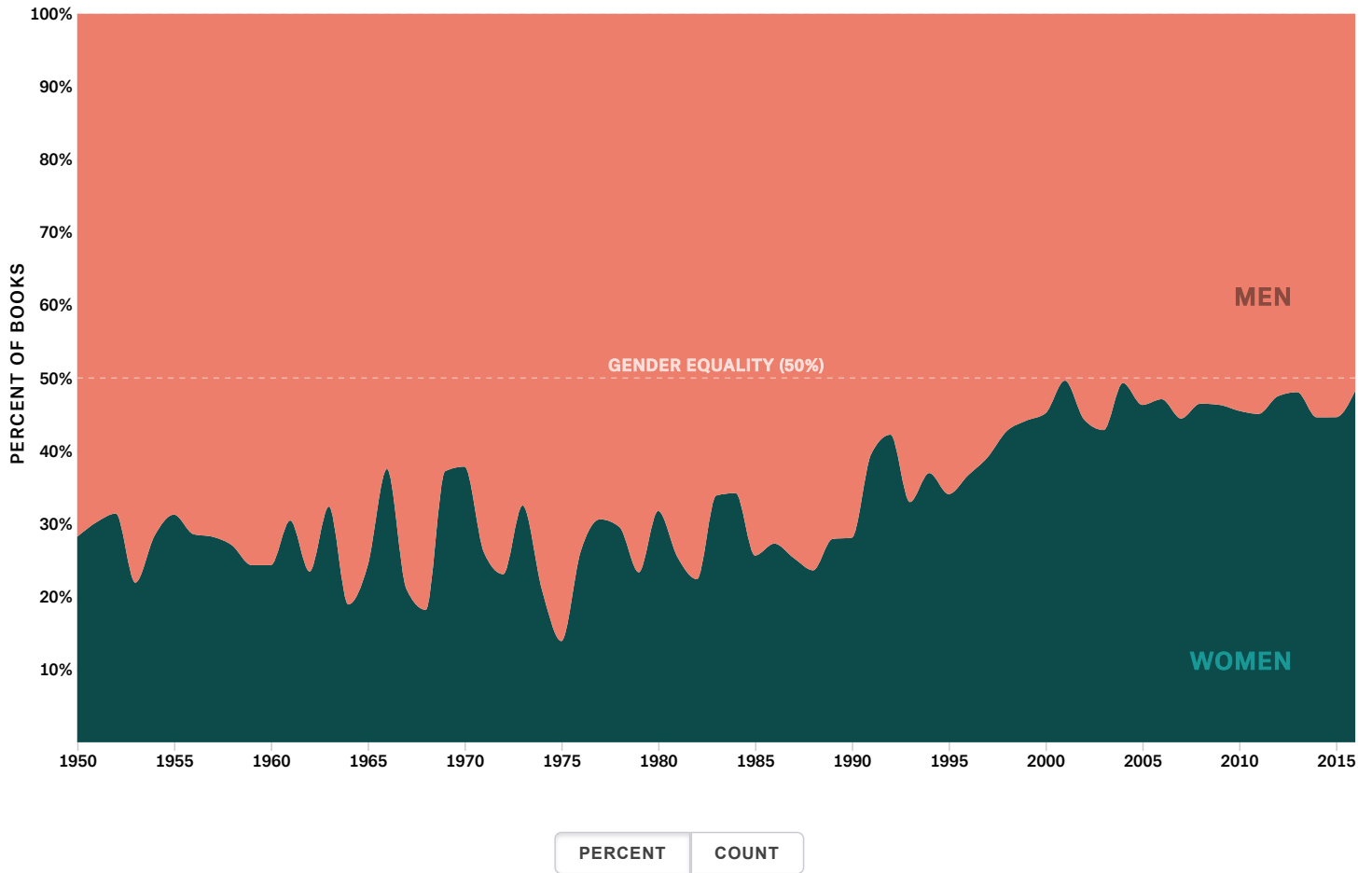
"I'll just put down housewife," she said.

I want to think things have changed. I want to think that if a woman says she's a writer, today, people accept that she's a goddamned writer.

The gender ratio of the authors on the New York Times Best Seller list is one way to gauge how being a female writer today might be different from 70 years ago, in Shirley Jackson's time. The Best Seller list is the equivalent of the Billboard Hot 100 for literature, tracking the weekly 10-15 best-selling books since the 1940s.

By taking the set of books that made it onto the list each year and looking at the gender of the authors, we can track the changing relationship between author gender and commercial success.

Best-Selling Novels by Author Gender



Our analysis of *New York Times* best sellers is based on the aggregated list of unique books that charted each year. For example, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* appears on the Best Seller list for all 52 weeks of 1999, but it only counts once towards the 1999 data. Note: this process yielded a directionally similar result as an approach that weighted books by weeks-charted (see the results [here](#)).

Books by women consistently made up about a quarter of the list in the 1950s. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, female representation on the list fluctuated dramatically. The rate of books by women got as high as 38% in 1970, and as low as 14% in 1975. (Some of this was simple math: from 1963 to 1977, the *New York Times* capped the list to 10 books per week. This made the annual list of best sellers shorter and the gender ratio more sensitive to changes in the counts from year to year.)

This volatility didn't result in permanent change: in both 1990 and 1950, 28% of the books on the list were written by women. In the 1990s, women finally made steady gains on the list over ten years. 2001 saw the highest ratio of all time: 50% women, 50% men, later dipping to 48% in 2016.

This is a piece of our answer, and it's good news. Among commercially successful authors in Shirley Jackson's time, men outnumbered women 3 to 1. Now, that number is close to 1 to 1.

What Happened in the 1990s?

Since most of the change in the gender ratio occurred in the 1990s, let's better understand the composition of the Best Seller list and how books are categorized.

Here, binned by decade, are the top-performing authors ranked by number of books on the *New York Times* Best Seller list.

Top Authors by Decade

1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
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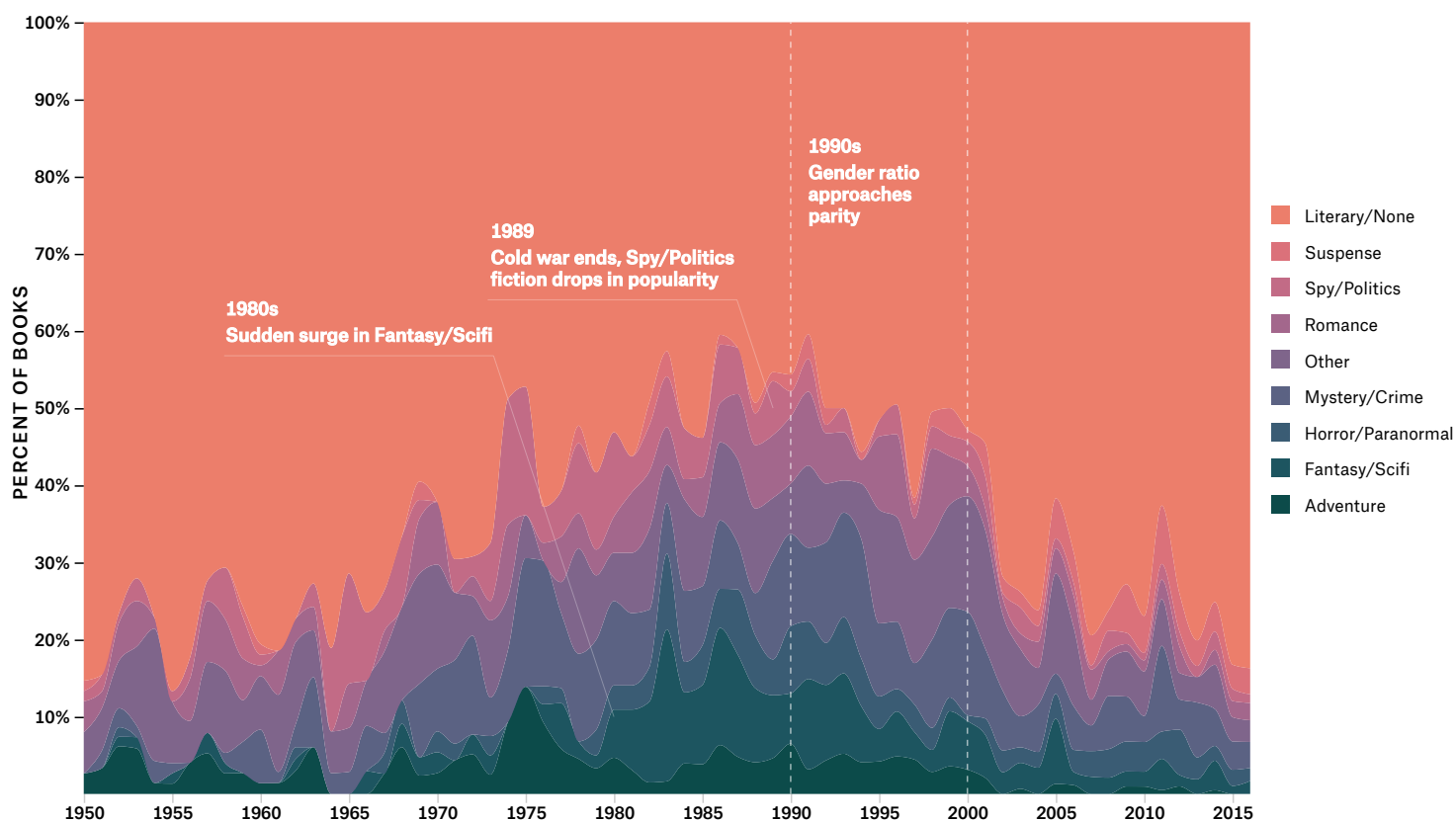
NAME	GENDER	GENRE	RANK	COUNT
Danielle Steel	Female	Romance	1	15
Stephen King	Male	Horror	2	13
Robert B. Parker	Male	Mystery	3	12
Dean Koontz	Male	Horror	3	12
W. E. B. Griffin	Male	Other (War)	3	12
Mary Higgins Clark	Female	Mystery	6	11
Dick Francis	Male	Mystery	6	11
Lillian Jackson Braun	Female	Mystery	8	10
Barbara Taylor Bradford	Female	Romance	8	10
Robin Cook	Male	Horror	8	10

Note each author's genre: the Best Seller list includes all types of fiction. The list tracks pure commercial performance, including everything from mystery and horror fiction (e.g. Agatha Christie, Stephen King) to literary fiction (e.g. Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen).

Critics call books that are written to fit into a specific genre – such as mystery, romance, sci-fi, and horror – “genre fiction.” Genre fiction is often compared to its high-brow counterpart, “literary fiction.” In practice literary fiction tends to be critically acclaimed, and to not involve things like aliens, magic, private investigators, or cowboys.

To understand what happened in the 1990s, we wanted to separate out the many different kinds of fiction. Using a [subject heading database](#), we were able to classify every book on the list by genre.

Best-Selling Novels by Genre



Genres in the "Other" category: historical fiction, domestic fiction, religious fiction, legal fiction, war fiction. Books labeled "Literary/None" could not be classified into any particular genre.

Genre fiction sold the best in the 1980s. Though it remained prominent in the 1990s, it gradually waned in popularity over the decade and dropped off significantly in the early 2000s.

This matters because the gender breakdown of best selling authors varies a lot between genres, and over time. If a genre dominated by male authors dwindles on the Best Seller list, the overall gender balance changes. If female writers become more prevalent in a popular genre, that affects the overall gender balance, too. Today, most of the books on the list fall in the literary/none category, which means the gender breakdown of this category has far more representation on the Best Seller list.

Let's examine at the gender ratio within each category (examining decades with at least 10 books within the genre on the Best Seller list).

Gender Ratio of the Best-Selling Genres by Decade

← PERCENT MEN PERCENT WOMEN →

Spy/Politics



Adventure



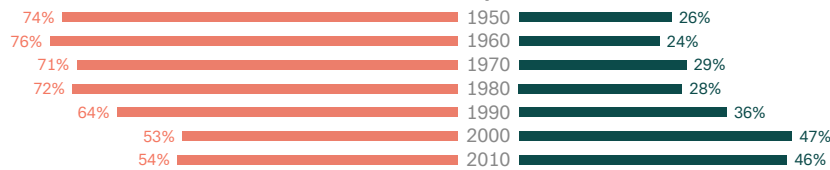
Fantasy/Scifi



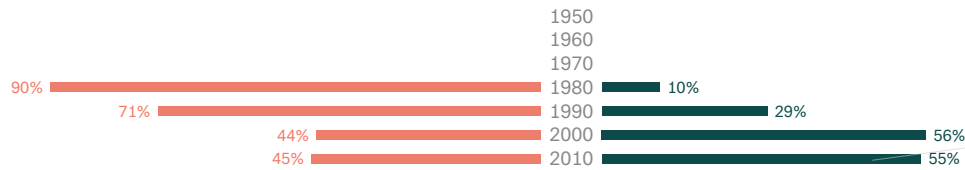
Suspense



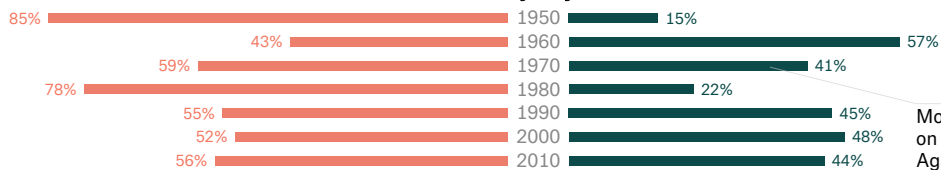
Literary/None



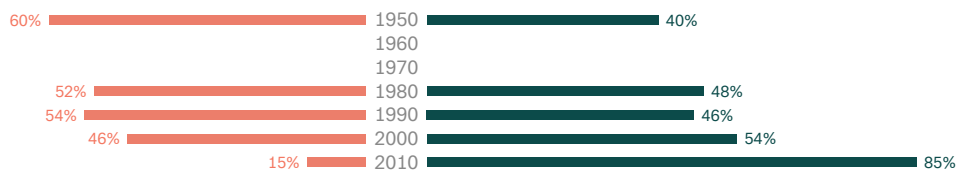
Horror/Paranormal



Mystery



Historical



Domestic



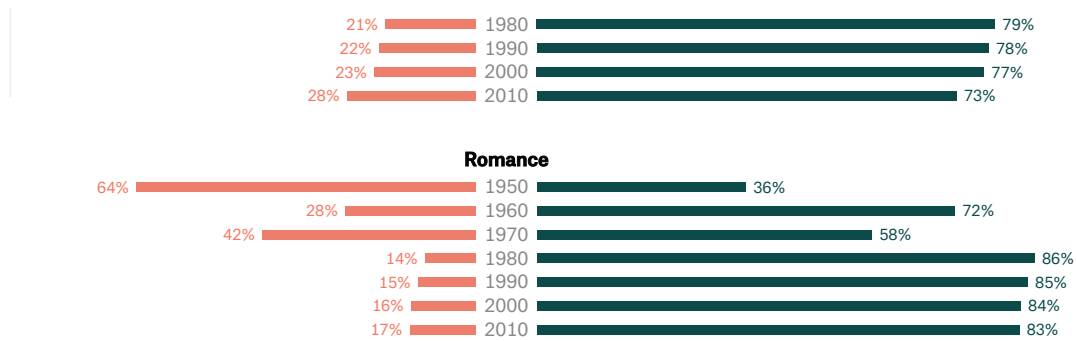
Consistently male-dominated genres

Most best-selling books are in this category, and it closely matches the overall gender ratio

1/4 of female-authored Horror/Paranormal fiction in the 2010s is also Romance

Most Mystery books by women on the list in the 1970s were by Agatha Christie

Relatively small genres, but gender balanced or female-dominated



Almost every category started out as heavily male-dominated, and many have stayed that way. These categories align with stereotypes about male interests: fantasy and science fiction, spy and political fiction, suspense fiction, and adventure fiction, have all been consistently male-dominated since their introduction to the list. A best-selling female fantasy/sci-fi author today is just as rare as a best-selling female literary author in the 1950s.

Then, there are the genres that have flipped. The horror/paranormal genre is now almost at gender parity, owing no small thanks to paranormal romance novels. Mystery is the most balanced genre over time, which shouldn't be surprising given the genre's history. The 1920s and 30s are known as the "Golden Age of Detective Fiction," and were dominated by a quartet of female authors known as the Queens of Crime: Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham.

Best-selling romance novels were mostly written by men in the 1950s, but in the 1960s women took over. By the 1980s, female authors solidly dominated the genre, probably because female writers had a natural advantage writing for mostly female readers about mostly female experiences of love and sex.

The Feminization of Literary Fiction

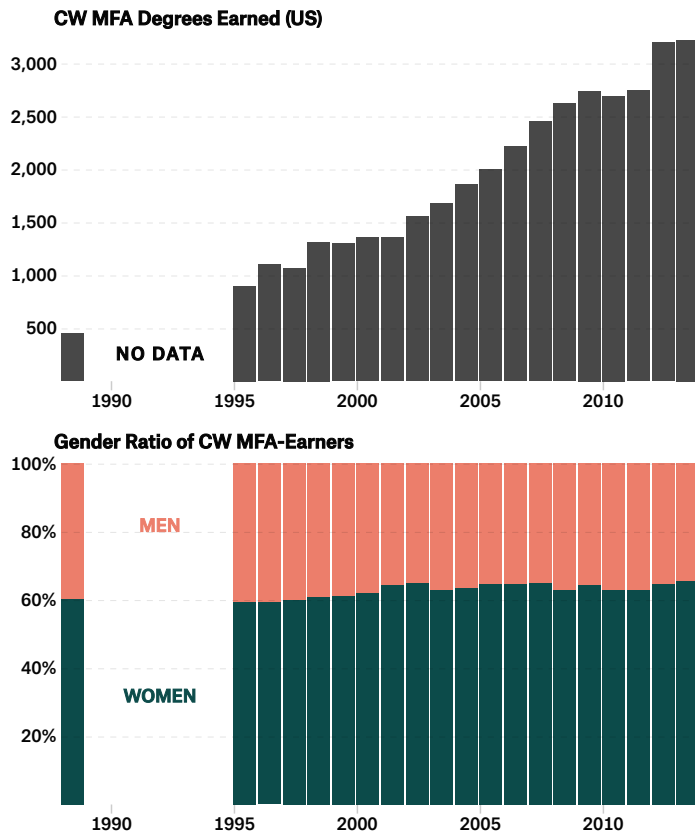
If we are looking for a single category to explain why women are better represented among best-selling authors today, the Literary/None category is our best candidate. Most best-selling books fall into this category, and its change over time closely matches the overall gender ratio, shifting from extreme bias in the 1980s to close to parity in the 2000s.

This is more good news. For better or for worse, literary fiction is more prestigious than genre fiction. It's what wins book awards and Nobel prizes. The major literary prizes still skew male, but in the case of novels, there's clear market signal that women authors are just as commercially viable as men. It's a tension that exists in many industries: what does well in the box office may not win an Oscar.

While we can't say for sure why literary fiction trended toward parity, or why it regained popularity over genre fiction, we can theorize.

It turns out that in the 1990s, colleges started training people to produce non-genre fiction at record rates. Between 1988 and 2000, the number of people earning MFAs in creative writing tripled. What's more, these new degree-earners were 59-66% female.

Creative Writing MFA Degrees



Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young collected the above data from IPEDS, a federal database. Prior to 1988, and from 1989-1994, IPEDS didn't distinguish creative writing MFAs from other graduate studies in English. Data includes poetry as well as fiction students.

The vast majority of MFA programs in fiction focus on teaching students to produce non-genre or literary work. Many MFA students graduate with workshop-polished first books and the contacts to at least have a shot at publication. Colleges are now graduating thousands of MFAs per year, pumping many more disproportionately female authors into the market.

The Market vs. The Publishing Industry

So far, this might look pretty OK to you. But we're not done here!

The data seems to say that, today, books by women are as valuable to the book-buying public as books by men. So why doesn't the publishing industry seem to recognize this?

Like many institutions, the publishing industry has long been accused of gender bias. Every year, the [VIDA Count](#) organization goes through literary journalism outlets and tallies the genders of the writers whose works are featured and reviewed in those outlets. According to their most recent study, in 2015 books by women made up less than 20% of books reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, 30% in *Harper's*, 29% in the *Atlantic*, and 22% in the *London Review of Books*.

A lot of the bias in reviews reflects a bias in publishing. In 2011, inspired by VIDA, Ruth Franklin at the *New Republic* did a [small-scale analysis](#) of the upcoming catalogs of 13 publishing houses. Franklin found that 11 of the 13 publishers, including Harper, Norton, Little Brown, Knopf and FSG, had heavily male biased catalogs – around 30% or less of their books were written by women. The *Huffington Post* followed her study up in 2012 with [similar findings](#) of widespread gender bias.

If you're persuaded that most of the trend towards gender parity in the 1990s was due to the expansion of the MFA, the biases in publication and criticism might explain why the growth of female authorship on the Best Seller list did not continue into the 2000s.

MFA programs have continued to expand, and about 2/3s of MFA earners are women, but the gender ratio on the Best Seller list has been frozen at under 50% since the early 2000s. The statistics suggest publishers and critics aren't giving these new young authoresses the chance they deserve.

Sources and Methodology Notes: *New York Times* Best Seller list data was taken from the [Hawes Publications](#) website. Analysis is limited to hardcover fiction.

Gender was tagged by linking a book's entry in the Library of Congress [OCLC classify system](#) to the author's page in the [Virtual International Authority File](#) database, which includes gender information. Books credited to mixed-gender writing teams, corporate entities, and fictional characters were excluded from the analysis.

Genre was tagged by using [OCLC classify system](#) to fetch [FAST Subject Headings](#) for every edition of the book, which are assigned by [Library of Congress partner libraries](#) around the country. Some FAST Subject Headings indicate work of a particular genre. When more than 1% of tagged holdings of a book were tagged with a genre-specific subject heading, the book was assigned to that genre. When a book was tagged with subject headings for multiple genres, the book was assigned to the genre that corresponded to the subject heading with the most holdings. Books without sufficient FAST Subject Headings to assign a genre were classified "Literary/None".

The *New York Times* has a long-standing policy against commenting on its best seller methodology beyond the [public information](#) posted online. However, Danielle Ha Rhoades, VP of Communications, clarified in an email: "There has been no change in our methodology that would affect the female-to-male author ratio."

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When Robots Take Your Job

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