

# IN A LAND (NOT SO) FAR AWAY...

## Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books and Impacts on Career Choices

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My name is Andreia Nunes. I am a researcher and a children's book author. I'm currently doing my Phd in sociology investigating about gender stereotypes in Portuguese children literature. I also wrote a book, published by Caminho in 2019: "Mighty Valentina" - which pays tribute to the 1st woman cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshkova.

For this ENAA meeting i would like to reflect on how children's books may reinforce gender stereotypes about skills, professions and careers.

## KEY IDEAS

- The phase between two/seven years of age is especially permeable to the acquisition of gender stereotypes (associating roles, characteristics, as more/less appropriate for girls and boys. Interest about books also arises around this time.
- There are several sources from which these stereotypes and cultural representations emerge and that might have an effective impact on our identity and aspirations: family, school, advertising, cartoons, toys, children's books.
- Even though we can't prove that that is a direct and unambiguous transfer of information from the books, and assume that children are merely receiving these ideas, passively, we do know that picturebooks can provide children with the frames to see the world. These frames can perpetuate stereotypes but can also promote nonconformity, resistance, and alternatives (Mallan, 2002).

## MY PREVIOUS RESEARCH

- The interest about the presence of gender stereotypes in books started several decades ago, in the 1970s, in the wake of feminist movements. In Portugal, this interest emerges later, due to the legacy of dictatorial repression.
- In 2017 I carried a research on the books awarded by Portuguese Society of Authors in partnership with the public service broadcaster Rádio Televisão de Portugal between 2010 and 2017 in the category of "Best Children's Book" (Nunes, 2017; 2019). Most of these books were also present in the Lists of Recommended Books launched by the portuguese National Reading Plan Initiative.
- From my analysis I concluded that household tasks and responsibilities were one of the dimensions where most gender inequalities were found, reinforcing and mirroring those existing in our society and failing to reflect the shy progresses in terms of male participation in household chores and care.
- When it comes to skills and competences, there is greater diversity associated with the male characters, with a widely recognition of the intellectual sphere and the reinforcement of stereotypes in areas with a high deficit of female presence, such as STEM areas.

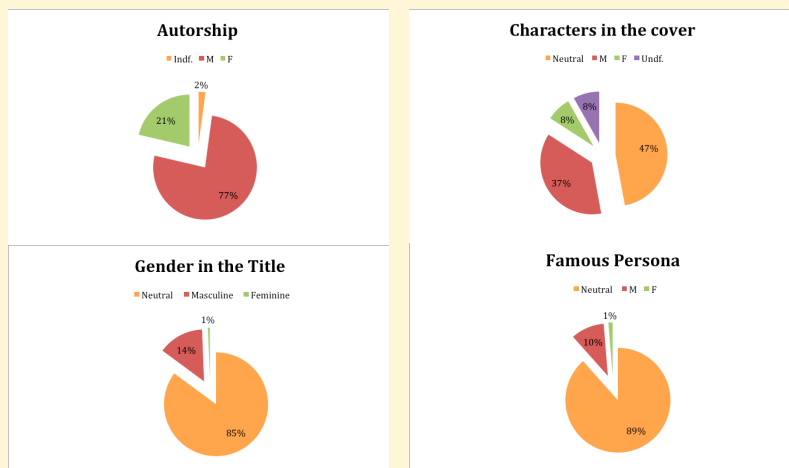


## MY CURRENT WORK (PHD)

- Thanks to my previous research I started to become interested on how the books have been presenting female and masculine characters through time and so in my doctorate I expanded the number of books analysed and also the time window, investigating books published between 2009 and 2019 recommended by the Portuguese National Reading Plan initiative.
- This Plan is a public policy initiative whose purpose is to increase literacy levels and reading habits among the population. It started in 2006, but is still going strong. It's stamp "Ler+" on the cover of the books, and it's Lists of Recommended Books have a strong impact for parents, schools when selecting a book, so it still works as an important validation mechanism.
- From the preview, once again, no big changes are foreseen. Stay tuned for the results, as I have only just begun :)

## THE POWER OF BOOKS - SPACE CAREERS

- For the purpose of this meeting i went to find out more about "Ler+Espaço," a reading project by the Institute of Astrophysics and Space Sciences, in partnership with the National Reading Plan and the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon. The goal of this project is to motivate young people towards Astronomy, Astrophysics and Space Science through inspiring readings. They provide reading recommendations about Space and the Universe. I went through the List of Book Recommendations in 2020 (available in the IA website) and analysed some gendered elements in all of the 162 books mentioned: who is writing these books? Who does the title and the cover represent? Who are the field personalities being praised? Here are some of the results:



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Gender imbalance is widely seen in every category analysed.
- Men seem to be the specialists and the ones with the power to shape the narratives and history, to be visible and acknowledged.
- In 17 mentions of Space personalities only two were of women: Valentina Tereshkova and Sally Ride,
- Books are important allies to promote gender equality, acting both as mirrors of we are, and windows to whom we can become.
- I challenge IA to make a more inclusive list! :)