

*Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present*

# **GENDER BY THE BOOK**

**21ST-CENTURY FRENCH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Julie Fette



*Gender by the Book* is a must-read for anyone interested in gender and equality in children's books and magazines in the third millennium. Alternating between historical accounts of institutions and close readings of literary corpora, carefully documented, audacious in its analyses and its spotlight on the limits of "French-style" universalism, Julie Fette's essay should encourage other research of this kind, and open the eyes of those with ideological or commercial interests in silencing feminism. This is an essential reflection of public and academic utility on both sides of the Atlantic.

Nelly Chabrol Gagne, *Associate Professor of Children's Literature*  
*Université Clermont Auvergne*

We live in societies that proclaim equality between the sexes as a fundamental value. Then how come inequality persists? Of course, gender norms reproduce sexual hierarchies. But what explains the reproduction of norms? Fette's highly rigorous and readable analysis of French children's literature provides answers thanks to her methodology: representations are studied in light of the social conditions of their circulation. Taking context into account raises a disturbing question: why is the French cultural exception, supported by the State, not helping undo gender? *Gender by the Book* is essential reading.

Éric Fassin, *Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies,*  
*Université Paris 8 Vincennes - Saint-Denis*

This important and overdue book foregrounds a range of different forms of French reading materials and infrastructures, many of which are entirely unfamiliar to an Anglophone audience. It sheds fascinating light on the role of individuals in processes of selection and pruning, which have received little attention in any context to date. *Gender by the Book* effectively opens up important new research avenues for scholars working across French studies, children's literature, childhood cultures, and beyond.

Kiera Vaclavik, *Professor of Children's Literature*  
*and Childhood Culture, Queen Mary, University of London*



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# Gender by the Book

*Gender by the Book* investigates the gender representations that French children's literature transmits to readers today. Using an interdisciplinary, mixed methods approach, this book grounds its literary analysis in a socio-historical examination of three key institutions – libraries, book clubs, and subscription magazines – that circulate reading material to children. It shows how French policies, cultural beliefs, and market forces influence the content of children's literature, including tensions between State support for unprofitable artistic endeavors and a belief in children's right to high-quality products on the one hand, and suspicion of activism as anathema to creativity and fear of losing boy readers on the other. In addition, the notion of universalism, which asserts that equality is best achieved when society is blind to differences, thwarts a diverse and equitable array of literary representations. Nevertheless, conditions are favorable for 21st-century French children's publishers to offer a robust body of richly entertaining egalitarian literature for children.

**Julie Fette** is an associate professor of French Studies at Rice University in Houston. She is the author of *Exclusions: Practicing Prejudice in French Law and Medicine, 1920–1945* and co-author of the French civilization textbook, *Les Français*. She holds doctorates from New York University and the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. She teaches modern French history, society, and culture.

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# Gender by the Book

21st-Century French Children's Literature

Julie Fette

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For Charlotte, Talia, and Rémi





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# Acknowledgments

The idea for this book began while reading bedtime stories with my daughter in the early 2000s. As an untenured academic, I didn't always have time to make careful selections at the library or bookstore, so I occasionally found myself tossing dreadful picturebooks to the floor. Nearly 20 years later, I am pleased to substitute a scholarly analysis for that exasperation.

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# Introduction. Gender and the French Children's Literature Market

Children's literature is an ideal object of analysis for comprehending cultural norms. As comparatist Emer O'Sullivan asserts, "Adults... assign texts to children and, in the process, transmit dominant morals, values, and ideals."<sup>1</sup> But such norms, of course, have to do with an enormous range of complex topics, making it necessary for the researcher to limit the scope of the investigation in some way. This book focuses on gender identity, a constitutive element of children's developing sense of self. Children absorb primal conceptions about gender roles and expectations through lived experience, and also through reading books. Psychologists Carole Kortenhaus and Jack Demarest note that "there can be no doubt that the characters portrayed in children's literature mold a child's conception of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how males and females are supposed to act."<sup>2</sup>

*Gender by the Book* analyzes gender representations in French children's literature available in the first two decades of the 21st century. Using an interdisciplinary approach melding social sciences, history, and literature, this study also examines the role that producers, intermediaries, and arbiters play in developing and disseminating reading material to children. This book is constructed around three influential institutions in French society – libraries, book clubs, and the periodical press – whose histories and dynamics inform their approaches to gender equality.

Dozens of literary, psychological, and sociological studies since the last quarter of the 20th century, many of which will be addressed throughout the chapters of this book, have demonstrated that children's literature in many countries, including France, portrays a world in which women and girls are often absent, protagonists are overwhelmingly male, animals and objects are most often personified in the masculine, and storylines reify stereotyped gender roles. While boys take center stage in most stories, they, too, are confined to prescribed norms. As sociologist Sylvie Cromer argues,

Publications for children are very powerful because they legitimize rules, norms, and values and they guarantee, in the eyes of parents and

## 2 Gender and the French Children's Literature Market

educators, academic success and access to the dominant culture. [...] This socializing role is, in fact, loudly proclaimed and showcased by editors: in a mutating society this influential sales pitch seizes upon parental anxiety over their children's success. [...] Representations in reading material stabilize systems of thought for young readers, by circulating images and texts, to advantageous socializing effect.<sup>3</sup>

Despite critiques of the typologies that affect children's developing self-identity and despite a half-century of efforts to address bias in children's literature,<sup>4</sup> my research shows that as of the first two decades of the 21st century, less progress has been made than the feminists of the 1970s might have hoped. This book does much more, however, than provide a status update on gender inequality in children's literature. It explains *why* biased gender representations are so persistent.

### The Scholarly Intervention of *Gender by the Book*

Few scholarly inquiries into representations of gender in contemporary French children's literature exist, and none exist in English. One monograph squarely on the topic is literary specialist Nelly Chabrol Gagne's *Filles d'albums: Les représentations du féminin dans l'album* (2011), an excellent and richly illustrated source. *Filles d'albums* analyzes representations of females through all the stages of the life cycle from birth to death. Inspired by Judith Butler, Chabrol Gagne seeks narratives, images, and themes in picturebooks that trouble gender, that question consensus, and that free themselves from sexist commonplaces. Her hope is that such books exist, or can exist in the near future, all while maintaining aesthetic beauty and without falling into moralistic message delivery. Chabrol Gagne worries about picturebooks' influence over child readers because their simple form tends to promote normative values as natural rather than socially constructed. She recognizes the power of "all that is unformulated (*les impensés*) in our phallogratic and phallogratic culture" that is found in literature and that socializes children.<sup>5</sup> After a perseverant 238-page journey across the landscape of French children's literature, Chabrol Gagne's disappointment with the state of gender is incontrovertible. Noting that only privileged children have wide access to "supposedly quality" books, which also reproduce stereotypes, she concludes, "In the end, rare are the children who will come into contact with the few picturebooks that tell of non-stereotyped girls."<sup>6</sup>

Sylvie Cromer has published a multitude of studies about gender in French children's reading material, first with Adela Turin. The European association Du côté des petites filles (On Girls' Side) was founded after the strong negative reactions to Turin's presentation about sexism in picturebooks at

the International Board on Books for Young People conference in Seville in 1994. The association's name was inspired by Elena Gianini Belotti's bestselling 1973 title (translated from the Italian) denouncing sexist socialization of girls,<sup>7</sup> whose feminist publisher, Des femmes, used the title as the name of their children's collection in partnership with an Italian publisher.<sup>8</sup> Cromer thus began her decades-long effort to document gender bias in French-language picturebooks, magazines, and textbooks for children, often in collaboration with demographers Carole Brugeilles and Isabelle Cromer. Facing denial of the existence or importance of gender disparities in children's literature, Cromer and her colleagues decided to undertake large-scale investigations using complex quantitative data from vast corpora. These studies, cited throughout this monograph, identify many gender tropes that are also evident in my samples of more recently published children's literature. Such quantitative data is necessary, for it is only when facing the cumulative mass of gender stereotyping – as counted by the number of protagonists and title characters, the personality traits, occupational activities, social and emotional behaviors, as well as biased visual imagery and language – that one becomes aware of the sexist foundations continuously laid in contemporary literary production for children.

Swiss social psychologist, Anne Dafflon Novelle, draws similar conclusions from large samples of francophone children's literature, and furthermore measures the effects of gendered literary representations on children's perceptions.<sup>9</sup> Many earlier inquiries into Anglo-Saxon children's literature, including a 1972 groundbreaking study by sociologist Lenore Weitzman and her team of researchers, found stereotypic roles in American picturebooks.<sup>10</sup> In a 1975 study of French picturebooks published in the American *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Susan Béreaud sampled the Père Castor collection from Flammarion and the Albums Roses from Hachette.<sup>11</sup> Girls and women were "seriously underrepresented" in the Castor books as opposed to "almost totally neglected in every category studied" in the Rose collection. As she concludes, "Like many American children's books, our French sample offers children a narrow range of traditional models instead of an expanded spectrum of modern role choices."<sup>12</sup>

Some two dozen studies aimed to measure change in male and female representation in picturebooks in the decades since Weitzman; most demonstrate that there is hardly any change, or that disparities have become more insidious because commonly accepted gendered schemas are so ingrained that they are invisible.<sup>13</sup> Some studies added new criteria for evaluation, such as material objects, adjective use, and characters' orientations to moral questions.<sup>14</sup> Most researchers account for the gender of the author and illustrator as a factor of analysis, and they generally conclude that female authors write books that are as stereotyped as male-authored books.<sup>15</sup> Social psychologist Mykol Hamilton and three coauthors studied

#### 4 *Gender and the French Children's Literature Market*

200 bestselling and prize-winning books published between 1995 and 2001 and observed the well-established split of females portrayed indoors and males outdoors. In addition, not only are females pictured in images less often than males, but male figures are also larger, foregrounded, and more central in the images. The team declared, “[M]odern children’s picture books continue to provide nightly reinforcement of the idea that boys and men are more interesting and important than are girls and women.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition, francophone scholars have published a good many articles and chapters, a few edited volumes and doctoral theses, and a half-dozen master’s theses that investigate various angles of gender in French children’s literature and are cited throughout this book. Inspired by this scholarship,<sup>17</sup> I employ both literary and socio-historical methodologies to understand gender representations in French children’s literature in the 21st century. The overall aim of my literary analysis is to comprehend persistent tropes in textual and visual representation across multiple genres of children’s literature marketed to readers from birth up until age 13. Picturebooks (*albums* in French) are unique as primary sources.<sup>18</sup> The link between text and image is critical: often in stories, one complicates or undoes the other, delivering messages to readers in ways impossible with text-only sources.<sup>19</sup> The same applies to the illustrated short stories in children’s fiction magazines, whereas comic strips and nonfiction invite observations particular to them. By analyzing individual works and their features but also the corpus of my samples as a large body of literature, I limn a French literary landscape that, in spite of burgeoning feminist productions, remains entrenched in atavistic gender conceptions.

An innovation of *Gender by the Book* is the grounding of gender representations in a socio-historical analysis of the French literary marketplace. I interrogate the forces and institutions that play key roles in circulating literature to children today. I describe, for example, the comparatively late development of libraries and librarianship, the monopoly of a single publisher’s book club that is widely distributed in public schools, and a voluminous magazine industry that would be unrecognizable to American children. I aim to historicize the literary landscape that influences circulation and to contextualize French culture and history, which are sometimes complicit with the marketplace and sometimes resistant to its influences. To grasp how adults shape and accommodate the market to their desired socialization for children, I conducted dozens of interviews with producers (publishers, editors, authors) as well as intermediaries (teachers, librarians, bookshop owners, civil servants in the ministries of Education and of Culture, and critics).<sup>20</sup>

*Gender by the Book* aims to contribute to socio-historical scholarship on France, to global perspectives in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon field of children’s literature, and to gender studies. My goals are threefold:

regarding French society, to further our understanding of attitudes about citizenship and gender and to proffer new perspectives on fundamental social institutions like schools, libraries, and publishing; regarding children's literature, to offer a national study that provides particular reflections on universal questions about childhood and the literary marketplace; and regarding gender studies, to demonstrate how stereotypes are introduced and reified in text and image in reading material for even the very youngest children.

### **What Is French about the French Children's Literary Market?**

The beginnings of children's literature in France are much older than commonly credited; Penny Brown dates the earliest incarnation of the genre as far back as the early 1600s.<sup>21</sup> Her two-volume survey in English documents the many evolutions that have occurred in centuries since. The field as it stands during the first three decades of the 21st century traces its most recent origins to the 1960s and 1970s, when a renaissance of literature for children was spurred by the baby boom and by new attitudes toward childhood that respected children's autonomy, favored child-centered pedagogy, encouraged children's leisure, and demanded cultural products for them. Compulsory education was extended in age, child psychology became a specialization, and children's libraries began to grow in number. The anti-authoritarianism of the May 1968 social revolution in France contributed to new ways of writing and drawing for children, and the literary market shifted in approach from didacticism toward entertainment. New publishing houses opened, many titles were translated from abroad, a new generation of French talent emerged, and children's publishing modernized and commercialized.<sup>22</sup> Sociologists Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Louis Fabiani captured their contemporaneous period in a 1977 groundbreaking Bourdieusian study of children's literature as a field.<sup>23</sup> Brown asserts that "the second half of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first can be seen as another 'golden age' in children's books, even exceeding that of the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>24</sup>

In the 2020s, there is broad consensus among insiders and analysts alike that the French children's literature industry remains extremely prolific and innovative. Producers are also widely diversified, ranging from French-origin multinational corporations such as Hachette (owned by Lagardère, which was bought by Bolloré in 2023)<sup>25</sup> to publishing houses run by one person such as Valérie Cussagnet's *Les fourmis rouges*.<sup>26</sup> In 2022, the French children's publishing industry earned over 378 million euros in revenue, representing nearly 14% of all book publishing earnings.<sup>27</sup> France occupies a vast pavilion at the annual Children's Book Fair in Bologna, the international copyright exchange hub (see Figure 0.1). The



Figure 0.1 The entry to the French pavilion at the 2023 Bologna Children's Book Fair.

same vibrancy and market range characterize the children's press, which offers close to 300 magazines to French-speaking children.

These industries are highly professionalized, with a union for authors and illustrators (*La Charte des auteurs et illustrateurs jeunesse*, founded in 1984 and counting 1,400 members in 2024) that helps them negotiate contracts and obtain regulations such as a standard fee for school visits, as well as a publishers' union (*Syndicat national de l'édition*) with a children's literature division of some 50 members, which gathers statistics and provides market reports, surveils freedom of speech and copyright, organizes conferences, and in 2016 established the *Vendredi* book prize for young adult literature. Independent children's bookshops are found throughout French cities and are organized in an active trade association. Nearly a hundred children's book fairs take place throughout France every year, including the national *salon* in the Paris suburb of Montreuil since 1984.<sup>28</sup> The creation of prizes for French children's books took off in the 1960s;<sup>29</sup> today, there are approximately 200. The most prestigious are the *Prix Sorcières* organized by wide networks of bookshops and libraries, and *Les Pépites* from the Montreuil salon. When in 2002 the Ministry of Education established recommended reading lists of children's books as an addition to the national curriculum from nursery to secondary school, it signaled that children's literature had achieved State accreditation. Although school

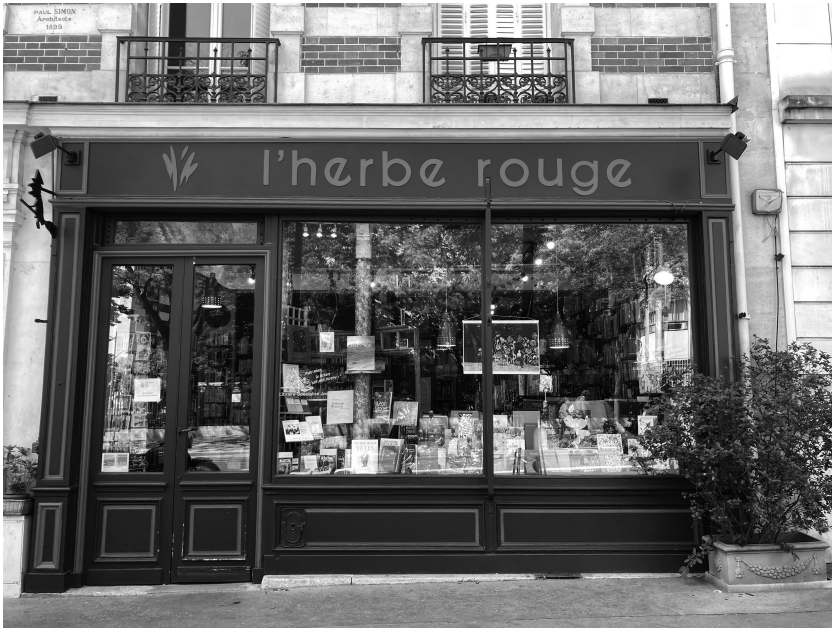
and municipal children's libraries have only intermittently been prioritized by the public sector, the 2009 incorporation of the National Center for Children's Literature (Centre national de la littérature pour la jeunesse or CNLJ) as a division of the Department of Literature and Art in the French National Library, with its own reading room, staff, and journal, bestowed scholarly recognition on the genre.

Several political and cultural factors specific to France contribute to the vibrancy of both children's literature itself and the industry that produces it. For example, most actors involved in children's literature strongly subscribe to the philosophy behind *la chaîne du livre* or book chain, the notion that all the roles between producer and consumer are cohesively linked in a balanced ecosystem of solidarity that preserves the value of the book as a cultural object rather than a mere commercial product. The book chain begins with authors and illustrators, extends to editors, then printers, distributors, retailers, and to buyers, with *prescripteurs* or mediators such as librarians, critics, prize committees, teachers, and parents as additional links in the chain. For several decades, however, the tasks of diffusion and distribution have been increasingly designated to large conglomerates that serve as middlemen between publishers and retailers,<sup>30</sup> an evolution that impacts the industry and its products in yet-to-be-determined ways. Furthermore, as Chapter 3 will elucidate, the book chain is not as sacrosanct as many wish it were.

A related French uniqueness is the single book price (*prix unique*) instituted by the Lang law in 1981, named after then Minister of Culture Jack Lang, that requires a book to be sold at nearly the same price everywhere by limiting discounts to a maximum of 5%.<sup>31</sup> Editors set their book prices and booksellers have a very small margin of deviation. This law has protected small bookshops from extinction, including those dedicated to children's literature (see Figure 0.2). It is singularly responsible for the fact that France did not experience the retail desertification wreaked first by chain bookstores such as Barnes and Noble and then by Amazon that transformed the American landscape: France counted 3,000 independent bookstores in 2018 compared to 2,300 in the United States, whose population is five times larger.<sup>32</sup> As Nelly Bourgeois, proprietor of the children's bookshop L'herbe rouge in Paris's fourteenth arrondissement exclaims, "I revere the *prix unique*. Obviously."<sup>33</sup> The Lang law also allows publishers to maintain control over their market and enables many niche children's publishers (for example, MeMo, known for its high-quality graphics or Les Grandes Personnes, known for its pop-up books) and tiny operations often managed by no more than one or two employees to stay in business. As editor Marie Lallouet explains, "The law was not enacted to protect small business but to protect cultural diversity."<sup>34</sup>

Another explanation for the diversity of producers is the longstanding and consensual French support for a strong State role in promoting culture.





*Figure 0.2* The children's bookshop, *l'herbe rouge*, in a residential neighborhood of the fourteenth arrondissement in Paris, 2023.

For example, the Centre national du livre (National Book Center) offers grants to publishers for book projects that are not commercially viable.<sup>35</sup> As just one manifestation of the French Ministry of Culture's active financial support of artistic initiatives, such subsidies not only give more creative license to independent publishers but have also contributed to greater legitimization of children's literature as part of French culture. In accordance with the State's longstanding valorization of pluralism in publishing and of a free and independent press, books benefit from a reduced sales tax of 5.5% rather than the normal 20% TVA. The press benefits from an even lower rate, 2.1%, in addition to a variety of other Ministry of Culture subsidies.<sup>36</sup> Reduced postal rates for qualifying children's magazines have also enabled publishers to depend on a comfortable subscription sales model. These subsidies have helped sustain a children's press industry in 21st-century France that is extraordinary in the world for its number, quality, and diversity of producers and titles.

An additional French exceptionalism is a widespread belief among actors in publishing, as well as librarians, teachers, and a good portion of parent-purchasers, that children deserve books that stimulate their imagination and sense of wonder. While this belief might also be found in other

countries, in France a critical mass of children's publishers is singularly dedicated to outdoing each other in producing literature of superior quality. To a person, the people that I interviewed asserted their commitment to offer child readers quality fiction that expands curiosity, invites individuality, and encourages agency. Inherent to this emphasis is the presumption that a child has the right to high-quality cultural products. One manifestation of the State's participation in socializing youth to become culturally inspired citizens is *le Pass culture* or Culture Pass created in 2021 that gives teenagers a 380-euro debit card to spend as they wish on books, magazines, or cultural activities.<sup>37</sup>

The supply of literature for children is bountiful. Over 18,500 children's book titles were published in France in 2022, of which nearly 7,000 were new titles.<sup>38</sup> These figures have been rising steadily since the turn of the century and represent a significant increase from approximately 1,500 children's titles published in 1960 (of which 650 were new) and 4,500 in 1980 (of which 2,700 were new).<sup>39</sup> Indeed, a situation of overproduction has been acknowledged in publishing circles beginning in the early 2000s. Commercial director David Dermigny explained that in response, Gallimard jeunesse reduced its output to 400 new book titles in 2022 after a peak of 550 new titles in 2018.<sup>40</sup> The children's press in 21st-century France is just as teeming, if not plethoric, as the book industry.

The unique market and cultural contexts described above might lead one to expect a certain progressiveness in terms of gender representations in stories written and illustrated for children. With so many types of publishers – many of whom can afford to publish pet projects, such as artistic creations using expensive paper or complicated flaps,<sup>41</sup> archaeology magazines for children, or oddball stories or unclassifiable genres that will never make a profit; many of whom define their brand identity around “quality;” and many of whom vaunt their avant-garde reputations – surely readers would be unlikely to encounter much gender stereotyping in their books or magazines? But a number of competing factors, some particular to France, have so far forestalled an overthrow of the gender status quo in children's literature.

First, marketplace pressures prevent publishers in France and elsewhere from retiring profitable formulas from the past. For example, publishers perceive demand from adult consumers to be predominantly nostalgic. According to a journalist writing about the French children's magazine *J'aime lire*, a kind of “nostalgic happiness” contributes to an “intergenerational bridge” between adult purchasers and child readers that allows adults

to share a piece of our childhood with our kids, and this is reassuring. They are growing up in an uncertain world that may be off kilter, a

world that we don't always understand. So it is soothing to see our kids with their heads buried in something we know. Furthermore, we take pride in playing a role of transmission.<sup>42</sup>

Catering to nostalgic demand, whether real or imagined, leads publishers to reissue old bestsellers that tend to contain outdated social norms. Nathalie Brisac, director of communications at L'Ecole des loisirs, explained that because grandparents want to offer books that they themselves received, change is slow to come. In this sense, children's literature is "by definition" conservative.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to reissues of classics from previous decades, sales-driven decisions have led to and perpetuated so-called "pink" and "blue" books aimed separately at girls and boys, whose very conception and structure begin with gendered assumptions.<sup>44</sup> Self-respecting independent publishers disdain this gendered marketing, just as they loathed the return of magazines for girls in the 1990s after a long period of periodicals aimed at a mixed-gender audience. But large publishers such as Fleurus or Disney whose books are for sale in big-box French stores – such books are often referred to pejoratively as "supermarket" books because they are sold in *supermarchés* or *hypermarchés* and tend to be part of profitable standardized series or collections – hold no such scruples and continue to consider the pink and blue formula a sound investment. Some respected publishers have also occasionally indulged in the practice, such as Gallimard's *Les 15 plus belles histoires pour les petites filles* and *Les 15 plus belles histoires pour les petits garçons* published in 2014.

In fact, the fear of losing boy readers is a not-so-secret secret – and powerful motivator – in publishing, even among so-called quality publishers and especially prevalent in the minds of magazine editors. Even when books are not explicitly marketed as pink or blue, every scholarly study on various corpora of children's literature has shown that boy characters are extraordinarily predominant, meaning that the market is essentially blue. One study demonstrates that librarians favor acquisitions of "boy" books in a ratio of 2:1,<sup>45</sup> because of a combination of adults' perception that boys refuse to read books about girls and their increasing social anxiety about boys being outperformed by girls in early education.<sup>46</sup> Pinking and blueing is nothing new: children's literature specialist Marc Soriano's 1956 survey found that at least four French children's publishers – all of them Catholic – actively targeted girl and boy readers with differing content.<sup>47</sup> Some 70 years later, Marianne Zuzula, co-founder of La ville brûle, claims that large publishing houses do not offer more gender-equal content because boys are not educated to read stories about heroines: why would publishers go out of their way to adapt when what sells sells? The solution, she argues, is educating boys.<sup>48</sup>

The fear of losing boys encourages the widespread assumption by both publishers and educators that girls are willing to “gender jump,” the term I use for a reader’s projection into the identity of a character of the opposite sex. Over the course of the last century or more, this assumption has become a credo, as well as a self-fulfilling prophecy since girls have been obliged to gender jump for lack of alternative.<sup>49</sup> If girls have only rare female characters with which to identify, and even rarer active positive heroines, they are obliged to identify with the male protagonists or to reduce their self-image to the minor roles for girls depicted in so many books. Béreaud conjectures,

One must wonder if they do not also begin to wish they were boys, like the heroes they admire. When they read story after story about boys or boy-animals, how can little girls, or boys for that matter, help concluding that the male sex is the more important of the two?<sup>50</sup>

After finding similar results 30 years later, Hamilton and her collaborators affirm, “The potential for harm is great.”<sup>51</sup>

An additional reason that may explain why reading material for 21st-century French children is largely adhering to stereotypic gender norms has to do with the French notion of universalism. A legacy of the French Revolution, republican universalism subscribes to the idea that equality is best achieved when society is blind to difference. Whether emphasizing national origin, race, religion, or sex, universalism considers assertions of separate collective identities such as “Franco-Moroccan” or “feminist” to be a divisive categorization that threatens equality as well as French national identity. Although some French people and social movements today contest the potential exclusionary effects of universalism, it remains widely prevalent in society, including among children’s literature creatives, intermediaries, and critics. While the pinking and blueing of texts is seen as crass by some, it is paradoxically not considered in conflict with universalist beliefs, and yet many see such a conflict in any attempt to redress gender stereotypes. What is widely considered problematic is the stirring of the pot on behalf of any collective identity.

In this vein, resistance to any hint of activism in children’s literature is a cultural reflex – which also emerged repeatedly in my interviews – that impedes a significantly revised body of more gender-equal children’s literature. Since the sexual revolution and the 1970s birth of modern French children’s literature, many publishers consider advocacy in picturebooks as passé and gauche because it is reminiscent of the moral lessons inherent to 19th- and early 20th-century children’s literature and believe that feminist or gender-conscious storytelling is incompatible with “quality” literature for children. Equality, because it is considered ideological, thwarts

universalist standards for “quality” literature. Such ideology is divisive, in this view, because it is associated with minority claims, and furthermore, it attaches an external narrative or agenda to a fictional story. Outspoken users of universalist rhetoric would deny that universalism is itself an ideology.

I also suspect that resistance to activism is linked to children's literature's quest for legitimacy as a respected field on par with adult literature. Not being taken seriously remains a popular complaint among contemporary French children's publishers, librarians, authors, and illustrators. Literary criticism of children's texts is rarely reported in press, radio, or television outlets, where, in France, adult literary criticism and debate thrive. Already in 1977 Chamboredon and Fabiani attributed children's literature's “inertia” and its “slow renewal” to its lack of cultural legitimacy.<sup>52</sup> The quest to matter in the cultural sphere can also explain editors' insistence on the autonomy of their authors and illustrators, and their proclaimed abhorrence of intervening with creative genius. The pursuit of legitimacy is, of course, related to the cult of the author long established in literature as well as later in cinema: “the romantic tradition of the artist as solitary genius who engenders an oeuvre that escapes social determinations” of gender, class, or race and “the sacralisation of creative licence which has the effect of forbidding any critique of the work.”<sup>53</sup> Even feminist publishers have had trouble breaking out of this dogma.<sup>54</sup> Gender equality is inhibited at each cycle of the production process: authors understand what typically gets published and orient their manuscripts to a house's norms. In turn, editors afford carte blanche to authors because they pride themselves on a no-touch policy toward manuscripts.

Another instance of French exceptionalism is the law of 16 July 1949 regulating content of children's literature, aimed at books but especially at magazines and their comics, still in existence and exerting pressure on publishers. No such law has ever existed in the United States. In Chapter 5, I explain that some scholars claim that this law, ostensibly protecting child readers against violence and immorality but blamed as an instrument of censorship, has had the effect of erasing female characters from comics for decades.

Finally, my research has found that, despite good intentions, intermediaries such as librarians and teachers are disempowered by institutional structures and inadequate professional training in children's literature. As such, they have little agency to significantly customize their institutions' holdings from publishers' literary supply. *Gender by the Book* examines the interplay among these factors and how they create a landscape that is conservative in some ways but dynamic in others. Whereas my wide sampling substantiates an overall maintenance of stereotypic gender representations in children's reading material, favorable sociocultural

circumstances in France detailed above as well as active efforts to create literature that is more gender equal indicate a shifting horizon whose story cannot yet be definitively told. With its analysis of institutional history and literary samples spanning the first two decades of the 21st century, this study seeks to blend comprehensiveness and analytic depth within the academic fields that it spans – children's literature, French studies, women and gender studies, childhood studies, girlhood studies, media studies, and library science.

## Chapter Overview

The structure of *Gender by the Book* – three parts of two chapters each – reflects its multiple objectives. In order to interpret the social, economic, political, and cultural roots of gender representations found in contemporary French children's literature, it is first critical to describe the history and dynamics of the institutions that circulate fiction to children. Therefore, the first chapters in each part (Chapters 1, 3, and 5) provide institutional histories of children's libraries, book clubs, and periodical press, respectively. Then, each part dedicates a companion chapter to an analysis of gender representations in the literature on offer from these three institutions in the early 21st century: samples were taken at various points in the 2010s up until 2020 in order to present a full picture of the recent past. Chapters 2, 4, and 6 evaluate their literary sample through a gendered lens in order to demonstrate the sociocultural norms and values that children's literature proposes to young readers. The three parts together aim to apprehend the contemporary French children's literature market holistically by analyzing the philosophies, mechanisms, and outputs of cultural, educational, and commercial institutions.

Part I's opening duo of chapters examines libraries and library books. Chapter 1 analyzes the historical factors that affect what children can read in 21st-century French school and municipal libraries and scrutinizes the enduring challenges of these institutions as public services. The professionalization of librarianship – a process that began at the end of the Second World War and continues to the present – must be understood, for it is librarians with specific training who run libraries. A final section of the chapter is dedicated to acquisition and selection decisions that bring library books into children's hands. As the gatekeepers who choose the reading material on their shelves, librarians can heavily influence child readers' notions of gender.

Chapter 2 analyzes two samples of picturebooks taken in 2011 and 2015 from a school and municipal library to uncover the gender representations that are transmitted to child readers. The chapter begins with a profile of the municipal and school libraries chosen for analysis, as well as an

explanation for the sample methodology commonly used by psychologists and sociologists. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of 49 picturebooks constitute the thrust of Chapter 2: the stereotypes that emerge from the stories include the absence of female characters, disparities in parental division of labor, differences in adult characters' socio-professional status, and the male = neutral trope in visual imagery. While Chapter 1 traces the distinct institutional histories of school and municipal libraries, Chapter 2 demonstrates that children's books circulating in both kinds of libraries during the 2010s continued to offer gendered messages to their readers.

Part II of *Gender by the Book* explores another major means of children's access to literature in France: the book club. Since 1981, the book-a-month clubs known as "Max" from publisher L'Ecole des loisirs have monopolized this share of the literary market despite other publishers' attempts to compete. Further, the majority of club books are distributed in French schools, enjoying the enthusiastic collaboration of teachers and principals. In Chapter 3, I investigate how the imprimatur of school officials allows the Max book clubs to play an outsized role in delivering selected books from a single publisher to schoolchildren, outweighing the influence of the Ministry of Education's Eduscol recommended book lists and the shelves of classroom or school libraries. L'Ecole des loisirs' editorial policy and branding, based on specific notions of what constitutes quality literature and on a belief in the French value of universalism as an approach to diversity, are key factors, I argue, that affect representations of gender in its picturebooks.

Given their dominance, it is important to scrutinize the picturebooks in Max to comprehend the moral values, social models, and imaginative possibilities mobilized by L'Ecole des loisirs for future French citizens of all sexes. To do so, Chapter 4 uses a 32-book sample from the 2019–20 Max offerings. I selected the four book clubs that are marketed to children in age segments from birth to age seven in order to make sense of the messaging delivered to the very youngest readers. Several types of gender bias emerge from the sample: for example, boy protagonists outnumber girls by three to one and star in adventure plots much more than girls, and mothers are more prevalent than fathers but are occupied with domestic chores compared to paternal playfulness. This chapter also investigates the question of anthropomorphism and argues that the use of animal characters does not afford authors and illustrators an escape from gender stereotyping.

The final duo of chapters in Part III shifts from the picturebook genre to the children's magazine, which constitutes an appreciable category of reading for francophone youth. Grounded in history, Chapter 5 describes the landscape of the children's press, an industry long dominated by publisher Bayard Presse; with healthy competition from Milan, Fleurus, and Disney; and one that also abides multiple start-up presses sometimes run by one

individual producing a single successful magazine. Magazines may have more impact than picturebooks on socialization, according to child social psychologists, since the sales model for many titles is predominantly by subscription, thereby exposing captive readers to at least a year's worth of gender norms. The targeting of magazines to boys, girls, or a mixed audience has evolved over the last century: I contend that the mixed-gender approach or *mixité* has comforted editors into believing that they are producing gender-equal content. Further, Bayard's ownership by a formerly reactionary Catholic order of priests may continue to influence, to some extent, the company's journalistic content. Nevertheless, given the publisher's secular turn after the 1960s, its explicit educational mission, and its frank embrace of editorial intervention to fashion authors' manuscripts as they see fit, one might expect more gender-equal representations compared to picturebook publishers who pride themselves on respecting authors' creativity.

Chapter 6 investigates gender representations in Bayard's educational fiction magazine *J'aime lire Max* for ages 9–13, which offers in every issue a short story and several comic strips, as well as jokes, games, puzzles, and submissions from readers. After a profile of the magazine, I examine 12 issues of the annual subscription from 2013 to 2014. The quantitative findings show that two-thirds of the short story main characters in *J'aime lire Max* are male, as are five of the seven recurrent comic strip protagonists. While the existence of so many males allows for more varied representations of masculinity than are usually attributed to boys and men in children's fiction, the magazine deprives girls of starring roles and communicates a number of stereotypical messages about gender, including ways of experiencing romantic love, professional hierarchies, and double standards in physical appearance. In instances of direct address to subscribers, the magazine uses *écriture inclusive* – inclusive language techniques that hack the male-centric nature of the French language in order to speak to girls as well as boys – only intermittently. In contrast to the picturebooks examined in Parts I and II of *Gender by the Book*, this chapter looks beyond fiction to the nonfiction sections of the magazine written by the editorial staff, which reproduce remarkable gender disparities.

Although the already wide scope of this study does not allow for formal comparative investigations into other French book or magazine publishers, my experience reading children's literature as a primary source allows me to hypothesize with confidence that L'École des loisirs and Bayard Presse are not exceptional. They were chosen for sampling because they are both the most dominant in their markets. Their mindsets and editorial policies, however distinct from each other, are not unique but instead representative of the French children's publishing world. Samples are necessary for evidence – and the random library samples placed a swath of publishers



under the microscope – but readers should know that my intention is not to target L'École des loisirs or Bayard. On the contrary, I emphasize throughout this monograph the institutional and sociocultural dynamics operating in French society that induce all publishers to make commercial decisions for child readers and for the adults that purchase literature for them, decisions that communicate particular ideologies about gender on the page.

Many observers think of French children's publishing as two separate industries, one of mass production and another of high-end creativity, or as Lallouet describes, editorial systems operating at two different speeds.<sup>55</sup> A conception of the market as bifurcated, in turn, affects observations about gender. Pierre Bruno's 2012 essay about sexism in children's literature notices that most criticism is aimed at low-brow supermarket books. In a 2014 study of representations of masculinity, Stéphane Bonnéry finds that after the 1970s, "legitimated" literature, as he terms it, offered a model of "controlled virility" to bourgeois boy readers whereas cheap literature (*bon marché*) continued to offer brutish or productive representations of virility.<sup>56</sup> And in 2021 Sophie Van der Linden notes,

The plethoric production of French children's literature renders a rigorous scientific evaluation of stereotypes in such a large corpus difficult or even impossible. But my empirical impression is that these gender stereotypes are pretty flagrant in mass market production, but undoubtedly much rarer in quality books (*oeuvres d'auteurs*).<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Chamboredon and Fabiani identify the separating of the field between popular or low-brow on the one hand, and noble or learned (*savant*) literature, on the other, as a strategy embraced especially by publishers and critics of the latter to create a "symbolic demarcation" that denies the reality of circulation and interrelation across the industry.<sup>58</sup> This artificial demarcation is commonly summoned during conversations about gender representations, according to author and former Charte president Guillaume Nail, to exonerate "quality" literature from any accusations of sexism.<sup>59</sup> Bruno points out, "Rare is the criticism that studies sexism in what is considered 'quality' children's literature, partly because the definitions and boundaries of 'quality' are debatable."<sup>60</sup> I take up this challenge in this book, by evaluating three large corpora that come from respected institutions that nearly all actors in the French children's literature world would identify as purveyors of quality reading material for children: libraries, book clubs, and educational magazines. To pierce such reflexive defenses (that quality children's literature is not or is much less stereotyped), not only have I excluded bestsellers from my study but I have also eschewed award-winning picturebooks as a corpus – a common approach in sociological and psychological studies of sexism in anglophone children's literature – since the political dynamics of prizing make for distorted book lists.<sup>61</sup>

It is opportune to describe what else my book does not do. Although Part III examines as its sample a fiction magazine that is targeted to 9–13-year-olds – and purposefully so, in order to engage with gender representations on display for more advanced readers – this periodical reading material should not be confused with young adult literature nor even with what would be called junior novels. The stories in *J'aime lire Max* magazine are more like advanced chapter books: 34 pages long with illustrations on at least every other page. Young adult literature is, therefore, not in the purview of this book. Regarding gender representations, it is a commonplace to claim that unlike literature for young children, YA novels, both in French and English, feature more heroines than heroes.<sup>62</sup> If this is true – and at least one study documented that it is not<sup>63</sup> – many of them may nevertheless traffic in stereotyped character roles, personality traits, and actions, as the dark romance genre that is popular among teenage girls unquestionably does.<sup>64</sup>

This book does not study representations of non-heteronormativity, non-heterosexual orientation, or non-binary gender identity, for the simple reason that such representations barely exist in French literature for young children.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, extremely few minority characters are found in contemporary picturebooks. As children's author and editor Christian Bruel remarks, "One of the major gaps in the supply of illustrated children's literature in the first quarter of the 21st century remains the quasi-exclusive omnipresence of white characters. Although racism is forbidden by the 1949 law, erasure is not prohibited."<sup>66</sup> In fact, the majority of my interviewees in the publishing world made a double claim: that they are doing well in gender representations but still failing to offer any ethnic or racial diversity of any significance.<sup>67</sup> My samples confirm the latter evaluation: three of the 49 library books (6%) and one of the 32 book club books (3%) feature a main character who is a minority; non-white secondary characters are not more common. In the magazine sample composed of short stories, comic strips, and nonfiction content, minorities are also lacking save for one comic protagonist.

After exploring the representations of gender in reading material available in libraries, book clubs, and magazine subscriptions, the Conclusion of this book points to the phenomenon of feminist children's literature, whether it be called gender equal or nonsexist, and whether it be explicitly or subtly so. Both terms, feminist and sexist, in fact, have negative connotations for most French producers of children's literature; neither term has ever been iterated by my interviewees, a sign, I might argue, of a universalist mindset that prefers to consider sexism an anachronism and feminism therefore unnecessary. Accordingly, I tend to use the expression "gender-equal" throughout this monograph to describe the opposite of gender-biased, gender-stereotyped, sexist – call it what you will – literary content for children.

Since the turn of the 21st century, almost every French children's publisher has produced at least one nonfiction book about gender equality, some of which since 2017 may be a token nod to the #metoo movement, the most recent social movement in France to raise consciousness about sexism. Fictional stories that portray gender in progressive ways can also be found across the publishing spectrum. But publishers with explicit missions to produce gender-equal literature for children are decidedly French, and, I may add, absent from the American landscape. Throughout this book, I endeavor to explain what is particularly French about the questions I raise; the flourishing of feminist publishing for children is another such exceptionalism, however marginal the sales figures. Analyzing these outliers' production fully, as well as the feminist or nonsexist narratives produced by mainstream publishers over the years, is necessary, but it constitutes a separate vast subject that is beyond the purview of this book, which instead seeks to understand gender norms in reading material that many children are likely to encounter, children without active feminist adults carefully stocking their shelves. Four publishing houses, Talents hauts, La ville brûle, On ne compte pas pour du beurre, and Cambourakis, and the magazine *Tchika*, are all attempting in their own ways, in the third decade of the 21st century, to disrupt the conservative gender norms that pervade children's literature. These initiatives include "girl power" narratives but also stories featuring what I call mainstreamed gender equality – that is, gender-equal representations that are simply a normal part of the story, not the story itself (as the French say, "sans que cela soit le sujet," or "without it being the topic").

If the mainstreamed style were to become normalized and popular, the girl power emphasis would be no longer necessary. Children's literature specialist Kiera Vaclavik once said that she hopes this book "will have a short shelf-life in that the situation described will evolve quickly."<sup>68</sup> Her hope has potential, even though the conditions have already been in place since the end of the last century. Because French children's literature is a thriving industry characterized by a broad range of large and small publishers, because a wide swath of them actively endeavor to produce "quality" literature, and because they are already capable of resisting commercial pressures in order to pursue audacious and progressive literary inventions, the conditions have long been auspicious for French editors, authors, and illustrators to manifest egalitarian creativity.

## Notes

- 1 Emer O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2005), 14.
- 2 Kortjenhaus and Demarest, "Gender Role Stereotyping in Children's Literature," 220.

- 3 Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 1*, 7. All translations throughout this book are my own.
- 4 Belotti, *Du côté des petites filles*; Michel, *Non aux stéréotypes*; Baudelot and Establet, *Quoi de neuf chez les filles?*
- 5 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 3–9.
- 6 Chabrol Gagne, 224.
- 7 Belotti, *Du côté des petites filles*.
- 8 Baccolini, Pederzoli, and Spallaccia, "Gender, Literature and Education," 5–6.
- 9 Dafflon Nouvelle, "Pourquoi les garçons n'aiment pas le rose?"; Dafflon Nouvelle, *Filles-garçons*; Mieyaa, Rouyer, and Le Blanc, "Identités sexuées et expériences scolaires."
- 10 Weitzman et al., "Sex-Role Socialization."
- 11 See another 1970s critique of gender bias in French children's literature: Chombarth de Lauwe and Bellan, *Enfants de l'image*.
- 12 Béreaud, "Sex Role Images in French Children's Books," 197, 206.
- 13 Berton-Schmitt, "Les représentations des deux sexes dans la littérature jeunesse contemporaine," 76, 88, 122, 131.
- 14 For example Turner-Bowker, "Gender Stereotyped Descriptors in Children's Picture Books"; Oskamp, Kaufman, and Wolterbeek, "Gender Role Portrayals in Preschool Picture Books"; Williams Jr. et al., "Sex Role Socialization in Picture Books"; Gooden and Gooden, "Gender Representation in Notable Children's Picture Books"; McCabe et al., "Gender in Twentieth-Century Children's Books"; Kortenhaus and Demarest, "Gender Role Stereotyping in Children's Literature"; Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place."
- 15 See for example Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 36. On both the conservatism of and constraints on 19th-century women writers such as the Comtesse de Ségur, see Heywood, *Catholicism and Children's Literature*, especially Chapter 5.
- 16 Hamilton et al., "Gender Stereotyping and Under-Representation of Female Characters," 764.
- 17 For an overview of "the way in which the major areas of contemporary gender studies – such as feminism, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, transgender studies and masculinity studies – have influenced representations of gender in children's fiction," see Flanagan, "Gender Studies," 26.
- 18 See Nières-Chevel, *Introduction à la littérature de jeunesse*, 123–44.
- 19 See Alary and Chabrol Gagne, *L'album: le parti pris des images*.
- 20 Few scholars have endeavored to investigate children's reception of gendered stereotypes from reading material (reader-response theory). Some examples include Ferrière and Morin-Messabel, "Contre-stéréotypes et développement de l'identité de genre"; Dafflon Nouvelle, "Histoires inventées"; Montmasson, "La réception de la littérature de jeunesse par les enfants."
- 21 Brown, *A Critical History of French Children's Literature: 1600–1830*, 1–2.
- 22 For an overview of 20th-century evolutions, see Guijarro Arribas, *Du classement au reclassement*, 63–91; Piquard, *L'édition pour la jeunesse*.
- 23 Chamboredon and Fabiani, "Les albums pour enfants - 1"; Chamboredon and Fabiani, "Les albums pour enfants - 2."
- 24 Brown, *A Critical History of French Children's Literature: 1830–Present*, 308.
- 25 Clavreul, "Principaux contours du paysage éditorial"; Lallout, "Vincent Bollore et l'édition."

20 *Gender and the French Children's Literature Market*

- 26 On the relations between large corporations and independent publishers, see Utard, "Les bibliothèques et l'édition indépendante."
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Part I

# Libraries





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# 1 The Library Landscape

The public library is a primary source of reading materials for children. Whether municipal or school-based, libraries can significantly impact French children's socialization, not only by promoting reading and literacy for future adult citizens but also through their collections of reading material that contain and promote cultural norms. Scholar and librarian Viviane Ezratty describes the primary mission of a children's library as a cognitive and cultural portal: "To open children and young people to the world, to awaken their curiosity, to stimulate their desire to read, to promote quality children's literature."<sup>1</sup> According to a Ministry of Culture 2018 report, 40% of all French library loans are children's books,<sup>2</sup> making children's libraries vibrant spaces of socialization.

Although libraries are public institutions, they are also an economic marketplace where supply and demand meet. On the demand side, readers seek, browse, and select materials that they can read on-site or borrow for short periods of time. Librarians are key actors in the supply chain. They exercise their principles of selection based on many factors including budget, market (anticipated and real demand), users' profiles, and institutional supply chains (which most often operate at levels above the individual library), as well as any personal or didactic biases that an individual librarian may hold. A librarian's job is to simultaneously respond to demand and ignore demand, by offering a supply of literature and nonfiction that will surprise readers and broaden their perspectives. Librarians must build collections that are balanced in multiple ways, for example, by genre, historical period, and target age. Constrained by budgets and occasionally by censors, library collections are the cumulative result of acquisition decisions that range from the pragmatic to the political. Their materials serve as vectors of cultural transmission and reveal much about the identity of any nation.<sup>3</sup>

Libraries are a key institution in *la chaîne du livre* (book chain); that is, they are a critical actor that puts books in the hands of children. Contrary to the idea that free library books may hurt book sales, most publishers view

libraries favorably as allies for potential sales.<sup>4</sup> In an interview, founding editor of the publishing house L'Ecole des loisirs Arthur Hubschmid contrasted a bookstore owner who might have three chances a year to advise a particular client to purchase a particular book to a librarian who has 30 to 40 years of experience and sustained contact with young readers. Along with teachers, according to Hubschmid, librarians are “advisors to generations of children.”<sup>5</sup> Librarians share this view of their role in the market. A founding librarian of the children’s library La Joie par les livres, Geneviève Patte, recalled a kiosk bookseller visiting her library in Clamart in its early years and telling her that “he had never had as many customers as he did since the library’s opening.”<sup>6</sup> Further, public library purchases account for 5% of the children’s literature market in France. This may not seem significant, but because half of all library acquisitions are purchased through small or medium bookstores, libraries help sustain a diverse network of small commerce. The large annual orders placed by libraries through local bookstores, especially outside of large cities, can help owners negotiate better terms for publisher discounts and diversify their own in-store offerings.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter examines the historical, socioeconomic, and political factors that affect what children can read in contemporary French libraries and can be considered a long introduction to Chapter 2. The story I tell is partly transatlantic, because French children’s libraries took shape through international exchanges on education, psychology, and literacy initiatives. Yet representations in children’s picturebooks – including gender representations – telescope a uniquely French political, cultural, and professional history. As I show, children’s libraries and their practices are embedded in a legacy of French beliefs that range from peaceful citizenship, coeducation, and the right of the child to fine cultural products, on the one hand, to a suspicion of charitable undertakings, a bipartisan embrace of paternalism regarding the government and civil service, and a devotion to “classic” works of literature, however dated, on the other. In short, the books that sit on 21st-century French library shelves are artifacts of a complicated and contested history.

The chapter begins by limning children’s municipal and school library development from their beginnings in iconic private institutions such as L’Heure joyeuse following the First World War, in order to comprehend the present roles and enduring challenges of these institutions as public services. In the second section, I examine the professionalization of librarianship throughout the 20th century and until the present to better understand how educational and political history has shaped librarians’ background and training and in turn influenced their philosophies. I also interrogate the acquisition decisions and selection imperatives that bring library books into children’s hands. Despite the creative renaissance of French children’s

literature since the 1970s that might have stimulated concomitant expansion of libraries and professionalization of librarianship, cultural, political, and institutional tensions have led to a different trajectory for libraries and librarians, as well as for the content on library bookshelves.

This chapter lays the groundwork for the investigation in Chapter 2. In that corresponding chapter, I analyze samples of books available on the shelves of a municipal library and a school library to evaluate the representations of gender available to child readers. While some institutions and librarians are attentive to gender politics in acquiring and assessing library holdings, not all are. My findings indicate that many of the library books that children can access continue to portray gender norms that have not kept pace with progress toward gender equality in French society, no matter how imperfect that progress has been. In this chapter, I examine the institutional, professional, and marketing histories and practices that have contributed to this anachronism.

### Libraries and Their Institutionalization

Both municipal and school libraries experienced a slow and fitful development in the century since the First World War. This first section will trace their institutionalization in order to contextualize the discussion of librarians' training and acquisition practices in the second part of the chapter. Municipal and school libraries will be treated separately in this part since their missions were conceived distinctively. While both institutions aim to foster literacy, municipal libraries have historically focused on pleasure reading (commonly referred to as *lecture d'évasion* or *lecture publique*) and schools on reading skills (commonly referred to as *lecture scolaire* or *lecture littéraire*). Since in the public mind libraries have long been associated with cultural enjoyment, the development of school libraries has encountered even more resistance and inertia than municipal libraries. To overcome this segregated concept of mission, teachers and librarians have often actively coordinated to give schoolchildren access to municipal library books. Given the discontinuous institutionalization for both types of libraries for children, the training and professionalization of librarians have suffered concomitantly.

#### *A History of Municipal Children's Libraries*

French cultural historians agree: the development of children's and adult libraries in France was irregular and "late" compared to library systems in other Western democracies. When British public libraries were lending an average of six books per inhabitant in 1934, French libraries lent only 0.5 books per inhabitant. The Bibliothèque nationale de France (French

National Library), originally founded in the 14th century as a depository for royal records, was considered an embarrassment in comparison to the British Library in terms of space, research activity, and openness to the public. It was similarly eclipsed by the Library of Congress, which had evolved into a vibrant public institution by the mid-20th century.<sup>8</sup> Despite archival spaces for conservation and specialized scholarship, public libraries in their most democratic form – open to the public with open-stack access – only developed in France in the 20th century.

The history of the children's library is a tale of a struggle between weak State commitment and two formidable mavericks. On the one hand, public children's libraries appeared in various forms over the course of the 20th century, from book nooks, to *bibliobus* (bookmobiles), to children's sections, to dedicated children's libraries, but without successful centralized coordination even until today. On the other hand, two extraordinary children's libraries, L'Heure joyeuse (The Joyful Hour) founded in 1924 and La Joie par les livres (Joy through Books) in 1965, were isolated initiatives but had great symbolic impact on the conceptions of children's libraries as public missions.

The history of children's libraries in France begins after the First World War, with an American chapter. Several American charitable institutions, including the Carnegie Foundation, the American Junior Red Cross, the Book Committee on Children's Libraries,<sup>9</sup> the American Committee for Devastated Regions,<sup>10</sup> and the New York Public Library, organized outreach in France. Upon the suspension of hostilities, books were distributed to adults and children, mobile libraries began to circulate in rural communities, and the first weekly storybook hour was established in Vic-sur-Aisne in northern France. In 1920, five municipal libraries opened with children's sections. Children's sections within adult libraries also opened in the early 1920s in Soissons and on the rue Fessart in Paris's 19th arrondissement.<sup>11</sup> During this time, proposals were made for training librarians specifically in children's collections. These initiatives – American-funded with French supporters – were inspired by the peace movement and the founding of the League of Nations: reading books was seen as central to training young children to become future citizens of a peaceful world.

In this postwar moment, an international icon in library science was born in central Paris: a municipal library meant entirely for children.<sup>12</sup> L'Heure joyeuse opened its doors in 1924 in the Latin Quarter, two years after the Book Committee on Children's Libraries' first experiment of the same name in Brussels. In Paris, the American group provided 2,000 books, child-sized furniture, training for three librarians, and funding for one year of operations. In exchange, the city of Paris agreed to provide a space on the rue Boutebrie and to take over expenses after the first year. Based on American models, notably the New York Public Library, L'Heure

joyeuse established library practices and approaches to children's reading that were novel for France, beginning with the principle of open access. Books were placed on low shelves and children could help themselves. The atmosphere was bright and welcoming, with the comforts of a home away from home. In its first month, 366 children registered for L'Heure joyeuse.<sup>13</sup> (See Figure 1.1 for a contemporary view of L'Heure joyeuse's interior.)

L'Heure joyeuse was a radical innovation in French librarianship. A key ethic was the sense of community between librarians and child users. Young readers were expected to be engaged in their own discovery of reading as well as in the maintenance of the library. When they registered for a library card, children signed this pledge: "By signing my name in this book, I become a member of L'Heure Joyeuse and promise to take care of the books and to help the librarians keep our library enjoyable for all."<sup>14</sup> Making child users responsible citizens was an explicit goal: librarians took considerable time to instruct visitors in the card catalog and the Dewey decimal system for classifying nonfiction. In addition, librarians made immediate connections with teachers in three nearby schools and organized storytelling and other activities. Further to these innovations, L'Heure joyeuse was perhaps the first formal public institution in France where girls and boys could freely mix. French elementary schools were still separated by sex in the 1920s – coeducation only became standard after the 1975 Haby law – as were scout organizations. According to Patte, the library's *mixité*, or mixed-gender interaction, was nothing less than "revolutionary."<sup>15</sup>

While L'Heure joyeuse blossomed in the capital's fifth arrondissement, calls for more municipal children's libraries and even for adult libraries were only occasionally heeded during the interwar years, including during the short-lived progressive Popular Front government from 1936 to 1938. In Paris, each arrondissement counted an adult public library of its own by 1940, though they offered no range of services like those expected today: rarely were the libraries located on street level, they did not hold regular hours, and their task was primarily one of conservation rather than diffusion. In other words, there was little "public" about them. A children's library had opened on the rue Sorbier in Paris's 20th arrondissement in 1936, but Ezratty and literature scholar Hélène Weis concur that by the outbreak of the Second World War, fewer than 30 children's sections of varying sizes had opened in libraries throughout the nation.<sup>16</sup> Several children's sections, such as in Troyes, Versailles, and Toulouse, were calling themselves "L'Heure joyeuse," a sign of the impact that the unique Parisian institution was having across France.<sup>17</sup> Thus during the interwar period, some visionary and progressive initiatives belie the painfully slow development of the children's library.



*Figure 1.1* The reading room of L'Heure joyeuse in 2015.

At the end of the Second World War, despite attempts by activists such as Eugène Morel, Ernest Coyecque, and Henri Lemaître, the state of public libraries was widely recognized to be highly deficient. Wartime destruction added to the pre-war neglect.<sup>18</sup> Weis attributes “this famous ‘French backwardness’” – particularly for children’s libraries – to several causes: financial lack, weak state commitment, an absence of any legislation for libraries, and a particular French mentality that viewed literacy as belonging solely in classrooms.<sup>19</sup>

The postwar period in France known as the “*trente glorieuses*” (Thirty Glorious Years) (1945–75), a term coined by economist Jean Fourastié, was marked by major economic and demographic trends that affected children’s libraries. Due to the baby boom, the education system faced a dramatic influx of students, including those from immigrant families and from the working classes who stayed longer in school. More children and more students meant more readers. Libraries began to be seen as more necessary.<sup>20</sup> In the 1950s, children’s libraries opened in Orléans, Toulouse, La Rochelle, Montluçon, Limoges, Colombes, and Bordeaux.<sup>21</sup>

Other major social and cultural shifts attended the baby boom, especially from the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, and spurred efforts to expand reading spaces for children. French youths’ assertion of their

identity and demand for recognition was a key driver of the revolutionary events of May 1968 and partly influenced societal recognition of younger children as a special social category with unique needs.<sup>22</sup> New theories in psychology brought attention to the child as an integral, complete person, and the discipline's new focus on early childhood (*la petite enfance*) impacted libraries and public literacy programs. Collaboration between Patte and child psychologist René Diatkine, for example, led to welcoming very young children (0-3 years old) into children's libraries for the first time, such as in *La Joie par les livres*.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of new attention to early childhood education, the association Actions culturelles contre les exclusions et les ségrégations (ACCES) was founded in 1982 to foster activities in public libraries for very young children and in particular, the underprivileged.<sup>24</sup>

In education, new pedagogical theories respecting students' freedom of expression and agency were being embraced in France. It was during the exponential increase in students and accompanying democratization of the education system in the decades after the Second World War that pedagogy known as *éducation nouvelle*, like that propagated by Elise and Célestin Freinet, became popular. In addition, family life was becoming less authoritarian over the course of the second half of the 20th century, bringing new attitudes that looked more favorably on childhood and individualism.<sup>25</sup>

These sociocultural changes, combined with a renaissance of French children's literature in the late 1960s and 1970s, stimulated a major expansion of both the supply and demand for children's books.<sup>26</sup> The children's publishing industry's exponential growth was driven initially by translations of American and British picturebooks. In time, French creations followed and children's literature began to be recognized as a literary genre. The new attention to infants and toddlers also changed the publishing industry, leading to books created for the very young.<sup>27</sup> The exciting new wave of children's books contributed to the establishment of more children's libraries, and vice versa. Both phenomena coincided with the last decade of the baby boom and the culmination of a significant wave of immigration to France, bringing many potential young readers to bookshelves.<sup>28</sup>

The shifting cultural winds of the 1960s were not extraneous to the founding of a second dedicated children's library of tremendous importance. This initiative was just as exceptional as *L'Heure joyeuse*, in particular, because it was founded with private funding.<sup>29</sup> It also became just as iconic. Anne Schlumberger Gruner, one of three daughters of the protestant Alsatian industrial Schlumberger family, began a charitable campaign in the 1960s to found a children's library.<sup>30</sup> *L'Heure joyeuse* was then 40 years old and had not been duplicated in a meaningful way anywhere else in France. For decades, Schlumberger had toyed with the idea: she had lived abroad, including many years in the United States where she





Figure 1.2 Martine Franck's 1965 photo of La Joie par les livres published in *Life* magazine. Courtesy of Martine Franck/Magnum Photos.

appreciated the mission of public libraries, and she closely followed the new pedagogical theories of *éducation nouvelle*. Yet, suspicion of private charitable projects – a legacy of State paternalism dating from at least the 1930s depression – was formidable. More than one town declined her offer to pay for the construction of an architectural building and 18 years of operating costs for a children's library. Finally, the city of Clamart, a blue-collar suburb nine kilometers southwest of Paris, agreed to grant Schlumberger a plot of land.<sup>31</sup>

The project of bringing a public children's library to an underprivileged neighborhood was revolutionary. Unlike L'Heure joyeuse in the intellectually prestigious Latin Quarter, the location was in the middle of a low-income housing development in Petit-Clamart called La Plaine. Whereas L'Heure joyeuse had been installed in a preexisting building, never before in France had a library been built expressly for children (see Figure 1.2). No expense was spared on its construction: distinguished architectural design, custom furniture made for children out of Finnish wood (still in excellent condition more than 60 years later), bright natural light, inviting fireplace and hearth, curated garden. The library's defining motif consists of large intersecting circular structures that constitute the main rooms.<sup>32</sup> It was named La Joie par les livres.<sup>33</sup>

The library became an essential institution of a working-class suburb.<sup>34</sup> Patte, along with two colleagues Christine Chatain and Lise Encrevé, served as founding librarian when it opened in 1965 and remained its director until 2001. Upon the grand opening, 3,000 Clamart youths registered for library cards and were able to access the 4,000 books in the collection.<sup>35</sup> *La Joie par les livres* was so successful that the State was not willing to wait out the contractual 18 years to take over the private venture. After only seven years, the Ministry of Education assumed control of the library in 1972. Later, in 1997, the library's institutional home was transferred to the Ministry of Culture, where all public libraries are since managed.<sup>36</sup>

*L'Heure joyeuse* and *La Joie par les livres* were exceptional in both senses of the term. On the one hand, they were extraordinary institutions in their time with unusual benefactors outside of the public sphere (respectively, the United States and Schlumberger), and they concretized practices of librarianship that are still universally admired. On the other hand, despite their success, these two libraries did not inspire the proliferation of their model. Although they both later came under the umbrella of the public library system, children's libraries of the sort did not multiply quickly. In 1965, France still counted only 70 public libraries with offerings for children. In the absence of a State commitment to children's libraries, a few charitable associations tried to fill the gap. The *Ligue de l'enseignement*, for example, driven by its focus on public literacy, offered 30-some circulating book collections in the early 1960s.<sup>37</sup> Two government surveys of the state of public libraries, in 1968 and 1989, confirmed a persistent inferiority compared to France's European neighbors.<sup>38</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, library access began to broaden slightly. Two hundred adult municipal libraries with children's sections opened between 1969 and 1975,<sup>39</sup> constituting a moderate expansion of public services. In the 1970s and 1980s, libraries also expanded children's activities and class visits for schoolchildren.<sup>40</sup> Linked with the decentralization trend of that period, marked by the public's increasing desire to undercut Parisian dominance in academic life and governmental decision-making, regional public libraries also finally began to garner more attention. A medium-sized town such as Beauvais, for example – 56,000 residents, the capital city of the Oise department in Picardie located 75 kilometers north of Paris – is served by four municipal libraries, three of which are in underprivileged neighborhoods.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, policies promoting literacy helped stimulate the growth of more public libraries. The State budget for public libraries increased from 17 million euros in 1980 to 68 million in 2000. Library lending increased concomitantly from 80 million loans in 1980 to 290 million loans in 2000. Publishers took notice of these changes and began to recognize the importance of the library's role in the promotion of literature, especially children's literature.<sup>42</sup> The election of the socialist president

François Mitterrand in 1981 also ushered in an era of democratization of culture and general appreciation of literature, embodied most clearly by Minister of Culture Jack Lang's 1981 law that limited discounts on book sales to 5%, known as the *prix unique* law that guaranteed a "single price" for a book. In so doing, Lang fostered the growth of both independent bookstores and small publishing houses.<sup>43</sup>

In the first two decades of the 21st century, public libraries have become physically established with greater success. In 2016, France counted approximately 16,000 public reading spaces, of which 7,000 are proper libraries, though rural areas still lack access to free books.<sup>44</sup> Of the 16,000 total public reading spaces, 3,500 offer material for children, either in stand-alone children's libraries or children's sections in adult libraries.<sup>45</sup> A good portion of the population embraces these lending institutions in the new century. A 2016 Ministry of Culture survey showed that 95% of French consider public libraries useful or very useful. Children and adolescents are active library users, and 28% of borrowers are parents taking out material for their children. Fourteen percent of library users come specifically for children's activities.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the growth in popular demand, the century-long history of French public libraries is one of struggle for financing, establishment, and legitimacy and one of mitigated success. The next part will elucidate how school libraries have also been thwarted by limited central State power and the vicissitudes of educational policies. Both of these institutional histories contribute to our understanding that the professionalization of librarians has hardly been a State priority.

### *The Unfulfilled Development of the Primary School Library*

The history of children's libraries in the French school system is distinct from that of municipal libraries but intersects with them in important ways. Geneviève Patte, as founding librarian of La Joie par des livres, long held "this conviction":

[T]he school library is a necessity. Class visits to the public library – no matter how fine the library or how available the librarians, no matter how good-willed the teachers – cannot replace a library inside the school, a reference center permanently accessible to students and their teachers.<sup>47</sup>

Whereas many educators believed that libraries – with their focus on child agency and pleasure reading – had nothing to do with formal education, others such as Patte held that schools should be a crucial place to stimulate reading. In part due to this conflict in vision and to the education system's

overall resistance to pleasure reading, school libraries developed even more slowly and haphazardly than municipal libraries over the course of the 20th century.<sup>48</sup>

One of the most lauded achievements of the long-lasting democratic regime of the Third Republic (1870–1940) was the Jules Ferry laws of 1881 and 1882 that established a free, secular, and obligatory national education system in France. Yet primary school students would have to wait another century – until the 1980s – to frequent anything resembling a proper school library. The word *bibliothèque*, in fact, means vastly different things, from a library to a mere bookshelf, lending to confusion and overestimation. It was a bookshelf that generations of schoolchildren considered a *bibliothèque* until the turn of the 21st century.<sup>49</sup>

*Classroom* libraries or book nooks (also called *armoires bibliothèques*, *bibliothèques de classe*, *foyers de lecture*, or *coins lecture*) had been legislated by *arrêtés* in 1860 and 1862 to offer textbooks and literature for school and home use. One-quarter of primary schools had such an armoire by the time of the Ferry laws.<sup>50</sup> By 1915, 73% of primary schools had an armoire. Weis highlights several inadequacies with these classroom shelves: first, the yellowed and dated materials were unappealing for children. Second, at odds with L'Heure joyeuse's principles of open stacks and reader agency, books were most often under lock and key. Finally, to control schoolchildren's access to morally or politically dangerous material, the books were preselected into "a very limited and strictly chosen collection."<sup>51</sup> In 1915, another *arrêté* tried to transform the armoires into veritable reading rooms with lending policies and teacher managers. Its Article One stated that "All primary schools must possess a library." Still in force in revised form, the 1915 order has not been enforced.<sup>52</sup>

Despite their limited and irregular expansion, Weis argues that throughout the first half of the 20th century, school libraries had more books to offer child readers than municipal libraries, a point that does not improve one's esteem. A 1948 survey, for example (one of the rare sets of documentation on this question), concluded that of 76,000 schools in France, 46,000 had a library. Of these libraries, 29,000 housed fewer than 500 books, and 14,000 had fewer than 100 books.<sup>53</sup> Though school libraries were "the first source of supply for children without books at home," Weis deems their materials far too few to significantly foster reading for schoolchildren.<sup>54</sup>

French historiography is often delimited by political regimes. The founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, as France waged war in Algeria to retain its last colony, coincided with the baby boom and the Thirty Glorious Years of economic growth and ushered in trends of modernization and democratization. The regime has also overseen significant changes in the

education system and in cultural policy. In 1958, the Ministry of Education took notice of the unfulfilled mission of the 1915 *arrêté*:

Let us not call the school armoire where a few dusty books lay ‘a library’. We urgently request principals of small and large schools to consider the constitution of classroom libraries one of their primordial objectives.<sup>55</sup>

Here, what was proposed was not yet the concept of a veritable primary school library – distinct from classroom collections and centrally serving the whole school – but still a vibrant classroom library inspired by principles from *L’Heure joyeuse* such as free access and child participation.

Much like society in general, classrooms and schools were experiencing dramatic change. During the Thirty Glorious Years after the Second World War, the number of students increased exponentially in a phenomenon called “massification” by historians. The 400,000 preschoolers before the Second World War had doubled by 1958 and continued to grow to 1,344,000 in 1968 and 1,860,000 by 1978.<sup>56</sup> The postwar immigration wave and several educational policy reforms also brought new types of students of all ages into the classrooms. In addition, a 1959 law increased the obligatory school exit age from 14 to 16. The extension meant not only that children were staying longer in school but also that primary schools were less burdened by a mission to provide a complete education in the essentials and could theoretically incorporate more pleasure reading into the curriculum. The Ministry of Education budget and recruitment of personnel increased concomitant to the growth in students. Well before the civil unrest in French universities in May 1968, some educational authorities recognized the need to adapt pedagogical practices to the rapid democratization of education. A new generation of library activists was also emerging through associationist movements and inside school systems to promote public literacy and reinforce the links between libraries and schools.<sup>57</sup>

Although the opposition between *lecture scolaire* and *lecture d’évasion* created some conflict between teachers and librarians over the course of the 20th century, they began to find more common purpose by the 1970s when the baby boom and further democratization of education brought new social classes into French classrooms. The 1970s rebirth of children’s publishing in France also furnished more interesting stories for librarians and teachers to choose.<sup>58</sup> These and other sociocultural shifts in the 1960s and 1970s described earlier affected schools’ approaches to reading in important ways: they contributed to the development of new pedagogical approaches toward more child-centered practices, increased recognition of the role that library science could play in education, stoked appreciation for the notion of pleasure reading as a complement to, or even part of,

the curriculum, and fostered greater tolerance for disdained literary genres such as series and comics.

In the wake of these changes, a new concept of the central school library, the *bibliothèque centre documentaire* (BCD), was created by a 1984 circular cosigned by the Ministries of Education and Culture.<sup>59</sup> By 1988, about 5,000 BCDs had been created in primary schools throughout France. They were not all created equally, and ambiguity over their mission hindered the overall success of the initiative: some considered the BCDs a means to improve the pedagogy of reading and others hoped they would entirely transform primary school education.<sup>60</sup> The Ministry of Education furnished the BCDs with books: archives show that attention was paid to supplying books for different reading levels and from an equitable range of publishing houses.<sup>61</sup> But the BCD never became universal in French primary schools, in part due to the lack of trained, professional librarians, a topic I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the Ministry of Education financed various other new programs to foster reading and build up school library collections. It also began to actively promote the incorporation of children's literature into the curriculum. In 2002, the Ministry started to provide nationwide recommended reading lists in children's literature to primary teachers, organized pedagogical materials around the book lists for teachers, and revised the curriculum to incorporate children's literature more purposefully.<sup>62</sup> Chapter 3 will analyze this remarkable initiative known as the Eduscol reference lists, but suffice it to mention here that not only did these recommended book lists confer the Ministry's approval of pleasure reading in the schools, they also provided a boon to children's publishing houses. Because the lists promote literature and literacy via classroom activities led by teachers, they can be considered an alternative to school libraries.

The most recent attempt to give schoolchildren access to books came in 2017, when Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer began his mandate with yet another State initiative to bolster libraries, reading, and children's literature within the school system, in the form of a new *Plan lecture* in coordination with Minister of Culture Françoise Nyssen. The creation of school libraries was again a central pillar of the Plan, with priority for rural zones where municipal libraries were rare and often far from schools. The Plan proclaimed, "The school library is an essential means to achieve these goals. The library is the hub of a school's culture, it is its heart." It encouraged students' daily access to materials. Before applying for Plan grants, school personnel were asked to submit an inventory of their reading areas, books, and needs. If building space would not allow for a wholly separate school library to be created or renovated, grant applications for enriching classroom libraries were an acceptable alternative.<sup>63</sup> In the first academic

year of the *Plan lecture* (2018–19), 2.5 million euros were granted to 1,500 preschools and elementary schools, benefitting 150,000 students,<sup>64</sup> and some 300,000 new books were purchased for schools.<sup>65</sup> The Plan came to an end in 2022, having dispersed 10.5 million euros over five years. The Ministry requested feedback from grantees in 2023 regarding what books were purchased from which recommended lists, and what renovations were made to which reading spaces in schools,<sup>66</sup> but it is doubtful the Ministry will ever account for the impact of its own investment, making the task of the historian arduous. Although new books were distributed, I would surmise that any newly constructed school library under this Plan was exceptional.

It is a commonplace among specialists of France to view the State as a highly centralized national-level organism whose tentacles control many facets of French life. In fact, the Ministry of Education's centralized control is limited to three areas: the curriculum, the vacation calendar, and school hours. Everything else is managed by other entities, that is, municipalities for primary schooling and *départements* for secondary. Even if libraries in schools were a national prerogative, the central State can only promote literature and literacy with various injections of money and Plans such as the one described above from 2017 to 2022, or another launched in 2021 called Adage offering the Culture Pass to collectivities that allows teachers to invite authors and artists for half-day classroom visits.<sup>67</sup> As a result of the limited power and oversight of the central State, there is little capacity to establish school libraries. A 2021 Ministry of Education report on the status of primary school libraries confirmed that there are no statistics on the number and type of libraries in primary schools and therefore no concrete or comprehensive knowledge, in fact, of their state of affairs. Nevertheless, the insufficiencies of school libraries and the lack of training of personnel to manage them, the report's authors regretted, are well established.<sup>68</sup>

Given the disjointed and decentralized evolution of school libraries, municipal libraries have continued to serve schoolchildren and their teachers as an off-site library space since the 1920s. In 2016, 92% of public libraries partnered with their neighborhood primary schools to coordinate activities for students.<sup>69</sup> Class trips are organized for students to visit the municipal libraries, and public librarians come into the schools for special events.<sup>70</sup> Municipal libraries often do *dépôts* in schools, whereby up to 300 books are lent to a school for three months, for example, when several classes are studying a special topic. Once the books are in the school, teachers organize their own lending system for students. The deposit practice is customary in both cities and rural areas but even more common when a school is far from a library.<sup>71</sup>

Teachers' influence in persuading schoolchildren to read particular books will be analyzed in more depth in Chapter 3. Given the relationships

between schools and municipal libraries, public librarians also can influence schoolchildren's choices. As Ezratty notes, "Teachers have always been librarians' 'natural' partners."<sup>72</sup> The city of Rennes, among the larger of French cities, offers an example of vibrant collaboration between municipal libraries and public schools in the 2010s. Its 11 municipal libraries were serving 210,000 inhabitants, of which 45,000 held library cards. An eight-person team organized the Rennes library consortium's outreach to 81 preschools and elementary schools in these ways: book deposits in schools for up to three years to enrich the BCDs' collections, one-year loans to schools on certain themes in response to teacher requests, collaboration with teachers on event organization, class visits in the library, circulation of annual brochures for students and for teachers, and regular meetings with school administrators for long-term planning.<sup>73</sup> Conscious of their role in public service, municipal librarians have also attempted to adapt to the multiple reforms of school hours since 2008 by changing their programming and hours to respond to the needs of schoolchildren and their families.<sup>74</sup> To avoid redundancy in places where excellent municipal libraries existed near schools, the *Plan lecture* encouraged schools and municipal libraries to complement each other. In all these ways, educational personnel and municipal librarians have partnered over the years to facilitate children's access to library books outside of the schools.

In the middle of the third decade of the 21st century, even though almost all French secondary schools (middle school and high school) have a central library, dedicated primary school libraries are still rare. The fact that the Ministry of Education keeps no statistics on how many primary school libraries exist<sup>75</sup> is a testament to the State's neglect in assessing its own initiatives, and to its powerlessness in domains other than the official curriculum. The fitful evolution of the school library is summarized well by former Ministry of Education official and activist scholar of school literacy, Françoise Lagarde:

It has been difficult, over the course of the last century and a half, to coordinate legislation, financing, management, and curriculum requirements toward the creation of school libraries.<sup>76</sup>

This has proven especially true within the primary school. Two concrete reasons explain why school libraries are not found universally in primary schools: lack of physical space in preschool and elementary school buildings that were constructed mostly in the 19th century and lack of funding. Despite the highly centralized French education system in terms of teacher training, recruitment, regulations, and curriculum, the education budgets come from municipalities, not from the central State. Hence, no centralized decision to mandate school libraries can be enforced.<sup>77</sup>



Individual school heads decide how to spend their allocated funds: some consider well-stocked and up-to-date libraries essential while others spend their budgets elsewhere. In sum, without a legal mandate and a guaranteed source of funding, primary school libraries are unlikely to become a nationwide reality.

In addition to these explanations, however, the slow, uneven, and unfulfilled development of primary school libraries has also been due to what literary scholar Serge Martin characterizes as “the swings in approach from instruction to animation, from prescription to promotion, from openness to withdrawal, from the useful to the pleasant, and back again.”<sup>78</sup> These inconsistencies have also affected the holdings of existing libraries and the qualifications of those who manage access. Although officials at the Ministry of Education claim that book nooks exist in all primary school classrooms across France,<sup>79</sup> others argue that classroom bookshelves cannot meet students’ reading needs: their structures are inconsistent and resources are redundant. Moreover, literacy specialist Max Butlen notes that what BCDs have lacked most were librarians themselves.<sup>80</sup> School systems have historically not posted job listings for library personnel or provided any training. *Assistants d’éducation* used to fill the role of managing BCDs, who later evolved into *surveillants*: in other words, school librarian tasks were fulfilled by untrained employees or teachers filling in gaps. Many of these positions have also since disappeared.<sup>81</sup>

The next section of the chapter will analyze the professionalization of librarians, including the fits and starts of their training and their approaches to acquisition and selection. The conclusions to draw from the history of municipal and school libraries traced above are twofold. First, despite the different trajectories of municipal and school libraries, their common history is one in which these institutions might have taken a different direction toward the vibrancy, joyfulness, and progressiveness of the two exceptional institutions, L’Heure joyeuse and La Joie par les livres, but, for a variety of reasons, did not. Instead, public libraries manifested a weaker sense of mission, purpose, and content over the course of the last hundred years. Second, while the progressive librarians at L’Heure joyeuse and La Joie par les livres did not explicitly manifest feminism or gender consciousness, their embrace of *mixité* and emphasis on child agency were revolutionary for their time period. Indeed, these approaches testify to the deontological standards that librarians at these exemplary libraries held that might well have established a foundation for formalized standards for representative, equitable content in later decades. The lack of such standards belies the progressive political origins of French libraries and their ambitious postwar mission of shaping the citizenry. Ultimately, I argue that libraries’ checkered institutional history has adversely impacted

the mission, professionalization, and working conditions of children's librarians and further, that a lack of professionalization has handicapped librarians' acquisition practices.

### Librarians and Their Professionalization

Over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the occupation of librarian has evolved alongside the development of libraries themselves. Before public libraries existed, librarianship was a quasi-academic field focused on rare books, archiving, and conservation. Because women were excluded from the secondary and higher education necessary for these jobs until the last quarter of the 19th century, such librarians were mostly male in the early 20th century. Once public libraries began to develop, the people that worked in them began to transform from an ensemble of volunteers and activists, some of whom were women, into a more professionalized corps. The century-long process was not smooth or centralized, nor is it complete. For children's librarians in particular, training, accreditation, and legitimacy continue to remain elusive in the 2020s. Weis declares that a position in a children's section has always been considered an assistant-level job, and the term *sous-bibliothécaire* (under-librarian) often describes children's librarians.<sup>82</sup> The mix of titles currently used for various types of librarians – *archiviste*, *conservateur*, *assistant de conservation*, *assistant des bibliothèques*, *médiathécaire*, *bibliothécaire*, *bibliothécaire spécialiste*, *documentaliste* – attests to persistent disorder and a lack of established status for many. Employees in municipal children's libraries are only considered proper librarians (*bibliothécaires*) if they supervise a very large children's section, such as the Médiathèque Marguerite Duras in the 20th arrondissement of Paris, or the rare stand-alone children's libraries concentrated in Paris such as the Bibliothèque Benjamin Rabier in the 19th arrondissement or Gutenberg in the 15th.<sup>83</sup>

Loss of prestige for librarianship is not disassociated from gender, in a pattern one can recognize from other feminized professions such as teaching and nursing.<sup>84</sup> Women librarians started to outnumber men in the 1930s, but feminist librarian Anne-Marie Pavillard notes that the top librarian posts still belonged to men in 2018.<sup>85</sup> One reason children's librarianship struggles for its professional footing is that specialized training and credentialing have never been coherently organized and recognized by the State; this may have been due to its feminized status.<sup>86</sup>

### *Emergence and Decline of Specialization in Children's Librarianship*

After the First World War, American charitable organizations influenced not only the development of French libraries, as noted earlier, but also the training of librarians. One of the earliest known training programs

for librarians in France began in the 1920s at the American Library in Paris: the Ecole des bibliothécaires (School for Librarians) or Ecole américaine (American School), as it was known, was meant to prepare French librarians to replace the departing American envoys. But the school closed in 1929 without much legacy.<sup>87</sup> The three founding librarians of L'Heure joyeuse, Claire Huchet, Marguerite Gruny, and Mathilde Leriche, were all self-taught. Given the lack of formal training for children's librarians available to them in France, they partly learned their trade from internships abroad: Huchet in London and Gruny in London, Brussels, and an American summer training program in France. At L'Heure joyeuse, Gruny invented her own internships for future children's librarians on cataloging, shelving, display, book abstracts, children's reading, special projects, and advising readers.<sup>88</sup>

Attempts were made to create a common nationwide diploma for all librarians with options for specializations beginning in the 1920s. The Ecole nationale des Chartes, which had been training students in information and archival organization since 1821, created a diploma of librarianship in the 1930s. Different diplomas and entrance and exit exams (*concours*) have been created and replaced on a regular basis since the 1950s. One of the most durable was the CAFB, *le certificat d'aptitude aux fonctions de bibliothécaire* or Certificate of Librarian Duties, created in 1951 and revised several times. The CAFB was open to any holder of the high school diploma. Importantly in the same year, an optional track of the CAFB was created for school and municipal children's libraries; this constituted the first nationwide recognition of a specialization in children's librarianship. Gruny was hired to direct the specialized track,<sup>89</sup> which entailed 35 hours of coursework and 200 hours of internship.<sup>90</sup>

It is useful at this juncture to consider the personal trajectory of Geneviève Patte, founding librarian of La Joie par les livres. Her academic training in the 1950s began at the French National Library, where she received her *diplôme supérieur des bibliothèques*. This prestigious degree credentialed her to pursue a career in the French civil service at an academic library.<sup>91</sup> Instead, Patte sought practical training in children's library science abroad, like her predecessors at L'Heure joyeuse. Her first internship was at the International Children's Library in Munich in 1959-60, where she organized the French language collection. In 1961 on a Fulbright grant, she crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary* to intern at the New York Public Library for two years, arriving shortly after the death of the iconic Anne Carroll Moore, director of the NYPL's children's division from 1906 to 1941.<sup>92</sup> In Patte's words, "From its inception at the beginning of the 20th century, the American model was an inspiration to every children's library around the world."<sup>93</sup> In 1964 upon her return to France, her decision to accept Schlumberger's invitation to manage La Joie par les livres,

rather than join a specialized State institution, shocked her professors.<sup>94</sup> She claims that if she had not been so ardently recruited to Clamart by Schlumberger, she would have chosen a first job at L'Heure joyeuse where she had interned in the late 1950s over a high civil service library position for which she was qualified. Patte later taught in the CAFB program.

The 1960s was a period of change regarding professionalization for librarianship. In 1964, the year Patte began working in Clamart, the Ecole nationale supérieure des bibliothécaires (ENSB) was founded and replaced the French National Library's diploma that Patte had completed. At the same time, various regional programs helped students prepare for the CAFB test; their preparation varied in coverage and ambition.<sup>95</sup> During this decade, La Joie par les livres gradually took over from L'Heure joyeuse in offering internships and practical training for budding children's librarians.

Important changes to librarian training next came in 1992. To the consternation of the Association des bibliothécaires français (ABF, founded in 1906, the French equivalent of the American Library Association (ALA)) and most library personnel, the CAFB was canceled as part of sweeping changes to civil service employment.<sup>96</sup> The ENSB was transformed into the Ecole nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques (ENSSIB), located in Villeurbanne. To students who pass an entrance exam, the ENSSIB offers master's degrees. About half of graduates are guaranteed employment in the State civil service.<sup>97</sup> To help students prepare for the ENSSIB exams, a network of regional training centers, Centres régionaux de formation aux carrières des bibliothèques (CRFCB), was put in place. In addition to ENSSIB, more than a dozen *licences professionnelles* (professional bachelor's degrees) have become available in related fields such as *métiers du livre* (book trades) or *métiers de l'information* (information trades), which can serve as preparation for general librarianship.

Despite these programs, the demise of the CAFB and its *option jeunesse* means that specialized obligatory training and standardized credentialing for children's librarians have not existed in France since the early 1990s. Only two bachelors are offered at technology institutes (IUT) in La Roche-sur-Yon and Grenoble. At the master's level, a specialization in children's literature directed toward careers in publishing, retail, or librarianship exists at a handful of universities: Université Clermont-Auvergne, Université de Cergy-Pontoise, Université de Lille 3, Université de Rouen, Université de Lorraine, and Université de Bordeaux-Montesquieu. None of these programs offer similar curricula to each other.<sup>98</sup> Other than these options, what aspiring librarians can pursue is an undergraduate or master's degree in general literature; if a faculty member at some such program happens to specialize in children's literature – such as the University of

Tours or Sorbonne Paris Nord – students who wish to be librarians can find mentors with expertise in children’s literature. Finally, children’s literature certificates (*diplômes d’université*) are available in a handful of universities but are also not focused on librarianship.<sup>99</sup>

To fill the lacuna of a centralized national required curriculum in children’s librarianship, continuing education programs are available: the CRFCB network offers programs as does the Centre national de la fonction publique territoriale for municipal employees.<sup>100</sup> Professional workshops are organized by the French National Library’s CNLJ, by departmental libraries (bibliothèques départementales de prêt, BDP), by associations such as the ABF and ACCES, and by the Salon du livre et de la presse jeunesse Seine-Saint-Denis.<sup>101</sup> In order to facilitate their *Plan lecture*, the Ministries of Education and Culture launched in-service trainings for teachers and librarians, implicitly acknowledging the inadequate training of librarianship.<sup>102</sup>

Librarians are the first to lament the absence of a centralized and obligatory higher education track or accreditation for children’s librarianship.<sup>103</sup> Besides the feminization of the field, another possible reason for the absence of a credentialed single status for children’s librarians is the structural distinction between municipal employees and national civil servants. Just as shared control between the State and municipalities over education has translated to unequal primary school libraries, the multiple forms of employee status have hindered the centralization of librarian accreditation. The haphazard and inadequate training is especially striking considering that more than half of public literacy programs target children under 15 years old.<sup>104</sup> The bottom line is that many practicing librarians in the 2020s have no specialized training at all. This influences the choices of books that they acquire and promote. The next part will examine how children’s librarians have viewed and performed their roles in acquisition and selection.

### *Librarians’ Acquisition and Selection Processes*

Acquisition and selection are the bread and butter of librarianship and the key to understanding the ways that certain books circulate to child readers. As intermediaries, librarians acquire books and materials for their institutions and also select and promote particular items to their patrons from among the inventory they have constituted. As libraries evolved, so too have principles of acquisition and selection. Over the course of the 20th century, the personnel of L’Heure joyeuse and La Joie par les livres served as thought leaders for municipal and school librarians, especially regarding decisions around stocking collections, engaging child patrons, and promoting certain books. And yet in the 2020s, acquisition and selection

processes across libraries are informal and unstandardized, leaving the decision-making up to individual librarians with little to no guidance.

Librarian and scholar Jean-Claude Utard has urged libraries to adopt more reflective and purposeful acquisition policies.<sup>105</sup> In fact, every municipal library is supposed to have a *politique documentaire*, a written internal guideline that states its goals, activities, and criteria for acquisitions and purging (*désherbage*).<sup>106</sup> But acquisition criteria in these guidelines tend to be very general, for example, ensuring a balance among literature, science, and social sciences and among users' interests and reading levels, and are anyway largely obstructed by budget constraints. Although this chapter has heretofore set aside the issue of gender representation, guidelines for book content regarding gender equality and other social values such as equitable representation of diverse characters in picturebooks do not figure in such *politiques documentaires*.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, many municipal libraries have never developed any criteria in writing.

The contributions of L'Heure joyeuse and La Joie par les livres librarians to library science, and especially to acquisition practices cannot be overstated. Beginning in the 1920s, the three pioneers of L'Heure joyeuse, Huchet, Gruny, and Leriche, took great pains to develop formal principles of selection for the books on their shelves. Advocate Henri Lemaître suggested what was at stake: "Books in children's libraries must be much more rigorously chosen than those in adult libraries because first impressions leave the deepest marks in children's psyches, and such impressions should never turn a child away from reading."<sup>108</sup> Whereas other early libraries based their order purchases simply on the books listed in the *Bibliographie de la France* (the weekly national bibliography of all print publications in France, begun in the early 1800s), the custodians of L'Heure joyeuse read every book before purchase, generally by committee.

Decades later at La Joie par les livres, Patte continued the L'Heure joyeuse tradition of a highly discerning acquisitions process. Records attest to an unwavering commitment to stocking Clamart's shelves with only quality children's books. She developed elaborate procedures for book selection for her library. She also rejected the facile method of purchasing books straight from the children's rubric of the *Bibliographie de la France*. Instead, she believed that the expertise of engaged librarians, in tune with young readers' literary interests, was paramount. Patte recruited fellow librarians into a permanent working group, which ultimately became a documentation center and research arm of La Joie par les livres. No book was purchased for the library before being read, reviewed, discussed, and evaluated by the group, which met regularly. Scholars of children's literature and actors in the publishing world were routinely invited to lecture to the group.

Grounded in a spirit of intellectual generosity, the working group shared its research about children's picturebooks with all other interested librarians

throughout France in the form of the trimestral *Bulletin d'analyses de livres pour enfants*, circulated since the 1965 opening of the Clamart library. The working group's name changed in 1980 from *La Joie par les livres* to the Centre national du livre pour enfants (CNLE), which later moved to the French National Library and currently constitutes a rich and centralized source of research on children's literature in France. In 1976, the *Bulletin d'analyses de livres pour enfants* became *La Revue des livres pour enfants*, and since 2009 is housed in and published by the CNLJ (renamed from the CNLE). In other words, Patte's working group became the CNLJ.

Librarians have historically prioritized putting "quality" literature on their shelves. The notion of "quality" literature has long been widely shared by children's librarians yet remains ill-defined. When pressed, librarians will generically describe a quality children's book as one that captivates child readers, whether through skilled storytelling or masterful illustration. Incidentally, no librarian that I have interviewed has spontaneously offered gender equality as one of their criteria for quality children's literature.

What librarians dislike is more readily identifiable. They almost all dismiss "supermarket books" (*littérature de supermarché*). The term refers to books in big-box retail chains that are sold a few aisles away from the canned food and cleaning products. Supermarket books are cheap both in price and in their reputation in elite circles for lacking literary or aesthetic merit. They are popular because they are inexpensive and within consumers' easy reach, forestalling a special trip to a bookshop. Furthermore, in many non-urban regions in France, supermarkets or hypermarkets are the only place to buy books. Not coincidentally, less expensive and widely available books tend to be bestsellers; books that became international sensations such as the Belgian-origin *Schtroumpfs* (Smurfs) fall into this category and are often produced by mass-market publishers such as Hachette. Historically, librarians have held book series such as *le Club des cinq* (*The Famous Five* by Enid Blyton in translation) or *Max et Lili* and comic books such as *Tom Tom et Nana* in low esteem. Notwithstanding their distaste, librarians have long been resigned to stocking their shelves with some such books in response to user demand.

Many factors in fact constrain librarians in their acquisition decisions. To begin with, they depend on the regional and departmental civil services that manage most public libraries to approve their purchase orders.<sup>109</sup> All acquisition steps are regulated by codes, laws, and decrees from multiple levels of administrative authorities.<sup>110</sup> The supply chain also limits librarians' acquisition choices. Utard has called the publishing market in France (in both adult and children's literature) an oligopoly – one in which several major houses dominate the production. On the margins, however, a populous set of independent publishers produce books that are easily missed by librarians and in turn by child readers. Given the shape of the market, as

well as the limits on information that librarians can gather when making purchases – sometimes they do not have access to complete lists of new publications – librarians are structurally hindered, Utard argues, from acquiring creative and diverse books by lesser-known publishers.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, librarian and scholar Claudine Belayche worries that librarians' acquisition policies are determined by commercial and bureaucratic pressures rather than their own intuition.<sup>112</sup> Librarians are constrained in their acquisition decisions in other ways too. They face obstacles, for example, if they seek to purchase books in foreign languages, which mainstream suppliers often cannot obtain. School library collections must also meet curricular needs. Given the practical constraints on municipal and school librarians, and despite their general bias in favor of “quality” literature, the books made available to children on library shelves are the result of multiple economic and political forces.

Whereas librarians' margin of maneuver in acquisitions is affected by the forces just described, they typically wield full control over the weeding out or purging of books in a process known as *désherbage*. The discarding of outdated, irrelevant, or damaged reading materials is almost as important as the acquiring of books for a given collection in terms of its effects on child readers. This quiet process that usually takes place annually in libraries around the country receives no media attention despite what amounts to multifarious individual decisions about whether or not a picturebook continues to respond to or belong in the contemporary cultural zeitgeist. The next chapter will reveal some ethnographic evidence of librarians' practices of *désherbage* in the two sample libraries.

What becomes obvious from this brief examination is that there are no generalized standards across France for stocking, renewing, or purging library collections. There are no clear best practices, no well-established standards of acquisition, and no methodological logic to weeding out books. The books that land on shelves are a result of informal and individual decision-making and they constitute the material traces of a deontological void. Furthermore, despite librarians' vague sense of shared understanding over what comprises quality literature, my interviews with library professionals, as well as my familiarity with the scholarly literature, attest to a noticeable absence of attention to the establishment of orienting principles for the acquisition and selection of reading materials for children. It is possible that libraries' historical emphasis on pleasure reading has played a part in their staff's lack of training as well as in a lack of standards over the content on shelves. Under these circumstances, therefore, it is not surprising that many library picturebooks contain outdated gender norms.

Beyond the constitution of their collections via stocking, renewing, and purging, librarians have full autonomy in deciding to promote particular



selections from their shelves. Librarians influence the reading choices of children in multiple processes known to fall under the umbrella term of selection. In addition to directly advising library users on choosing a book, librarians' daily activities are occupied with four main types of selection: showcasing, prizing, animating, and recommending.

Librarians showcase their collections, regularly making particular books more accessible and others less so. They "feature" certain books from their collection by propping them on stands or placing them on shelves that are easily accessible for young children, creating special exhibits, or advertising them. Via such publicizing, librarians' effect on reading choices, and more generally on the book market, goes well beyond mere acquisition.

In addition, librarians influence children's reading choices through book prizes. They have participated in the prizing of children's literature since the phenomenon began in France. Leriche and Gruny of *L'Heure joyeuse* launched the first prize, the *Prix Jeunesse*, in 1944.<sup>113</sup> Although librarians are far from the only actors in the book world to serve on book prize committees, they are especially active and sought-after members. They play a role in prizing not only as representatives of their specific places of employment but also as members of regional library systems or professional associations. Often librarians are invited to serve on committees to add gravitas to prizes organized by more commercial interests, for example, in collaborations with publishing houses. In one study of librarians' impact on prizing children's books, Weis concludes that librarians' decisions were generally more based on didactic objectives than on literary trends, especially in the decades between the Second World War and the upswing of French children's literature in the 1970s.<sup>114</sup> As noted in the Introduction to this book, while book prizes are theoretically meant to reward a published piece of literature, they also serve to promote sales of that book, so much so that the very purpose of prizes is now considered by some cynics to be entirely sales-oriented. Indeed, much money is at stake in prizing children's literature and this aspect of the book industry plays an important role in putting books in small hands.<sup>115</sup> In this circular economy, librarians tend to favor prized books when they make acquisition decisions.

Librarians' influence also occurs through animation. The organization of activities for users, called *animation* or the current preferred *action culturelle* (because it assumes children's own agency in planning and execution), has always been at the heart of children's librarians' daily activities. Animation distinguishes a living library from one in which a librarian reigns over a staid collection and merely responds to inquiries from behind a desk. The two archetypical children's libraries examined earlier, *L'Heure joyeuse* and *La Joie par les livres*, shared similar philosophies around animation, rooted in the concept of *joy* figuring prominently in both of their names. Accompaniment and reciprocity were central operating principles:

librarians at these two institutions fostered dialogue with child users, and their ultimate goal was to help children become autonomous in the library. For children to obtain a library card at La Joie par les livres, a solemn ceremony took place with a signature and an out-loud pledge to become an active member of the library. Taken seriously by the librarians, child users embraced their responsibilities with earnestness and purpose. For example, children were in charge of the loan checkout process: this particular participatory practice stemmed from children's own initiative, according to Patte.<sup>116</sup> Like the librarians of L'Heure joyeuse, those at La Joie par les livres organized author and illustrator visits, workshops around a specific picturebook, simple theater productions, and read-aloud storytimes. From the beginning, La Joie par les livres was also engaged in endeavors outside of its walls. It collaborated with schools and it welcomed editors and publishers to test their prototypes out on young readers.<sup>117</sup> The exceptionality of L'Heure joyeuse and La Joie par les livres was a challenge to accepted practices of librarianship in the 1920s and even in the 1960s, not least because they accommodated child readers on their own terms.

In the 21st century, many public librarians enliven their spaces with activities meant to connect child users with books. When a child first steps inside, librarians generally welcome, register, and explain the organization of the library and its rules, thereby inculcating children with the social values and culture of library science from the beginning. Activities to stimulate children's expressive qualities such as drawing, painting, sculpting, or puppetry have been common for decades in children's libraries and usually are tied to a theme such as a holiday or to a particular book.<sup>118</sup>

However disjointed training has been for librarians, animation has always been an integral part of it and constitutes a distinctive element of their professional identity vis-à-vis teachers. As one scholar puts it,

Animation has been without a doubt the key path to children's librarians' professionalization. Librarians were able to invest heavily in 'pleasure reading,' a niche left vacant by the education system, thanks to the growth of children's publishing and an anti-didactic pedagogy focused more on expressiveness and pleasure than on obligation and rules.<sup>119</sup>

Last but not least, librarians influence the types of books that children read – beyond their own physical collections – through recommended book lists. The assembling of bibliographies or *sélections* of recommended books first began in the 1920s, according to Ezratty.<sup>120</sup> The *Bulletin d'analyses de livres pour enfants* assembled by librarians at La Joie par les livres for distribution to other librarians beginning in the 1960s, we saw earlier, is one such list that ultimately became part of the current professional and academic journal, *La Revue des livres pour enfants*. Its affiliation with the

French National Library accords to this list a higher degree of prestige than most others.<sup>121</sup> The *RLPE*'s end-of-year book list published in an annual special issue constitutes "a selection of a selection" of recommendations published in the five previous issues of the journal each year. Distinct committees of National Library staff, external librarians, and experts in children's literature evaluate each genre separated into up to six different age groups as well as new editions and heritage editions: picturebooks, tales, poetry (including songs and nursery rhymes), theater, junior and adolescent novels, comics, nonfiction, audiobooks, films, apps and video games, magazines, and literary criticism.<sup>122</sup> In addition, two *RLPE* lists recommend books of multiple genres published in the francophone regions of "Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Arab world" on the one hand and in Quebec on the other.

Other contemporary examples of librarians' recommended book lists abound, for example, the annual list by the children's librarians of Paris libraries, "Tu lis déjà? Tu lis quoi? 100 livres pour les enfants de 6 à 9 ans" ("You can read? What do you read? 100 books for 6–9-year-olds").<sup>123</sup> Librarians' recommended book lists are typically organized by genre or target age group and come in many forms: they can be librarians' favorite publications of the year, or classified by theme such as racism, war, or gender equality. In addition to the annual selections in the *RLPE*, the French National Library offers over 200 thematic bibliographies for children.<sup>124</sup> Some wholesalers or bookstores provide ready-made bibliographic selection lists to libraries as a service along with their book order, which librarians can then transmit directly to their users<sup>125</sup> (a practice that raises some concerns about the commercial interests of list makers who instrumentalize librarians). Book lists put together by librarians target various audiences: some address children directly while others speak to adult consumers such as parents. Many librarians make lists for other librarians. Teachers are also considered among the foremost readers of librarians' book selections. Selected book lists have been distributed across many media: newsletters, published sources, and now on websites.

Librarians' recommended book lists compete with those of other mediators in the book world such as critics, specialists, bloggers, and associations, many of which are assembled without any librarian input. At the same time, librarians have regularly collaborated with actors in publishing, education, and charitable associations to develop recommended children's book lists, just as librarians have been sought after as prize committee members. For example, the trade union that represents publishers, the *Syndicat national de l'édition*, has recruited librarians with literary critics and activists to create an annual selection of children's books published in the monthly magazine *Lire* and circulated to libraries.<sup>126</sup> Since 2002, municipal librarians have also served on the committees for Ministry of

Education official book selections known as the Eduscol lists, which will be analyzed in Chapter 3.

No matter who they represent – whether a grouping of a consortium of libraries, an association of librarians, or as individual employees of a library – librarians’ recommended bibliographies are clear windows into their editorial biases.<sup>127</sup> Some librarians are explicit about their list’s mission. In 2020, the CNLJ explained the philosophical and methodological anxieties behind its annual *RLPE* selections:

To transmit one’s enthusiasm and one’s reservations while relying on rigorous argument. [...] We must consider who will read our recommendations; keep at arms-length the moral and educational expectations that suffuse cultural objects addressed to children; lend special attention to images and the material object; and finally accept that what happens between a book and a child remains a mystery. A sensitive and humbling art.<sup>128</sup>

In a study of librarians’ book selections from 1945 to 1975, Weis claims that French librarians, taking a cue from the ALA networks, considered list-making one of their important roles and that their motives were driven by their notions of quality literature: “French children’s librarians never let go of the imperative of choosing ‘good’ books.”<sup>129</sup> Despite the claims of the CNLJ quoted above, she found that librarians have historically promoted a pedagogical and cultural vision of children’s literature in contrast to the consumerist or popular approach that dominates choices from other list makers.<sup>130</sup>

Weis’s research on recommended book lists is useful for thinking about the influence of librarians on the actual production of children’s literature. The constant expansion of the children’s publishing market over the course of the 20th century and the deepening relations between publishers and libraries, however, make it difficult to draw explicit correlations.<sup>131</sup> While scholars can never fully evaluate the impact of librarians’ prescriptive lists on the market, what is certain is that book lists constitute one way that librarians can control the publicizing of particular books, influence purchasing choices, and push back on the commercial forces of the publishing market. Weis asserts,

Libraries such as L’Heure Joyeuse or la Joie par les livres seek first and foremost to build collections that meet the needs of their users and to avoid passively accepting whatever the publishing world proposes. [...] The goals of [librarians and publishers] are not always in harmony.<sup>132</sup>

Weis' study shows that even though the production of children's books increased significantly over the course of her research period (1945–75), librarian lists remained constrained in size, "borderline austere." One reason for this is that 77% of children's books published in 1973 were reprints, and even "new" books were very often adaptations of old stories, for example, versions of Charles Perrault's fairytales adapted for specific age groups.<sup>133</sup> Finding that "classic" books came and went over time in the selections, she concludes that neither did librarians' recommended book lists contribute to the publishing industry's stagnancy and lack of novelty in the early postwar decades, nor did they serve in the revolutionizing of children's literature that began in the mid-1960s.<sup>134</sup> Weis' research on recommended book lists may also provide an explanation for why publishers may not have tried very hard to develop new children's stories, at least until the mid-1970s when her study ends: if the classics continued to appear on lists, publishers could continue to make profits and avoid the cost of producing new books. This factor – the commercial drive for inexpensive reprints of bestselling classics – explains in part why gender representations in children's books did not keep up with actual social change during the second half of the 20th century.

At the same time, librarians and publishers have been historically disconnected on one key issue relevant to gender. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, publishers expanded the practice of segregating their production by gender. This process known as "pinking and blueing" targets specific books to either girls or boys.<sup>135</sup> From their beginnings, however, libraries never segregated girls and boys in physically separate reading spaces, instead offering early and mid-20th-century children sometimes their first chances outside of the home to mingle with the opposite sex in pursuits of the mind. Nor have librarians classified their shelves or catalogs in any gendered way, putting books such as *Vous serez maman (One Day You'll be a Mommy)* in the same category of applied sciences as nonfiction texts about transportation, for example.<sup>136</sup>

Moreover, Weis's study shows that librarians have hardly ever categorized their recommended book lists by gender. She further found that pink books rarely made it to librarians' lists between 1945 and 1975. She explained,

We can observe from an analysis of their selections that children's librarians refuse to recommend texts that are stereotypical, but we cannot fully know if this is because these librarians were feminists before their time or because they had a general aversion to popular literature [which tended to reproduce stereotypical gender images].<sup>137</sup>

Weis notes that the two highly popular series, *Caroline* (adventurous heroine) and *Martine* (traditional heroine) that began in 1953 and 1954,

respectively, were completely absent from the librarians' lists she studied, not only because they were pink books, she conjectures, but also because they were series.<sup>138</sup>

Recommended bibliographies for children can serve researchers to better understand not only librarians but also their consciousness of gender equality. Although beyond the scope of this book, an analysis of recommended book lists – assembled by various actors in the book world – constitutes an important primary source that could convey whether gender-equal stories are being promoted to children in this way. Instead, actual books on library shelves will serve in the next chapter as samples of the gender representations that are made accessible to child readers for free in the 21st century.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has traced the development of municipal and school libraries in France from their origins until the present; it examined the professionalization of librarianship; and it focused on the key activities of acquisition and selection. While this history comprises multiple threads, the overarching narrative intends to show the role of libraries and librarians in the economic, political, and cultural processes that put books into children's hands. With this background in mind, I can now focus on this study's more specific concern, the gender content of books supplied to children in French libraries. In the next chapter, gender representations proposed in those books will be examined.

Unlike book clubs and magazine subscriptions, which will be analyzed in Parts 2 and 3 of this book, municipal and school libraries are public institutions that ultimately represent the State. For this reason, the acquisitions and selections they offer to the public are singularly meaningful. Despite the administrative and economic constraints they face, librarians are uniquely capable, given their non-commercial public service mission, of acquiring and promoting harder-to-sell books, and of expanding the reading horizons of their users, especially children, to include new and unusual literary production. Compared to booksellers under pressure to sell stock quickly, librarians are a key potential mediator in bringing modern, innovative, and gender-equal stories to children's attention.

Yet, this chapter has revealed several factors that have likely thwarted librarians' widespread conscious embrace of gender equality. The fitful and late development of physical libraries across France in towns and schools has not only hindered children's free access to books but also slowed the professionalization of librarians as stewards of literature for the young. Training and specialization of librarians and especially children's librarians remain inadequate and unstandardized well into the 21st century.

Lack of training, informal recruitment, and no firm orienting principles of acquisition are factors that all translate to the reality that librarians receive no guidance about gender representations in books that they stock. Given this disorder, the unrestricted autonomy of librarians in their practices of weeding and selecting books for promotion may further play a role in retaining biased content. Female domination of the children's librarianship field – as it is linked to State inattention and low prestige – may also play a role in gender representations on library shelves.

Another factor behind disparities in gender found in children's library books is the dated nature of the literature in the collections, since the *fonds* (stock collection) of any library only changes incrementally with piecemeal acquisitions. Social psychologist Annik Houël pointed out in 2018 that the presence of dated picturebooks in libraries continues to perpetuate sexist stereotypes for child readers.<sup>139</sup> Although public libraries typically spend their budgets on new books (65% of newly acquired children's books in 2018 were published in 2018 or 2017), borrowers continue to choose older books for children (only 9% of loans in 2018 were published in 2018 or 2017).<sup>140</sup> Indeed, readers' – and more likely their parents' – attachment to classics or nostalgia picturebooks is a widely recognized phenomenon both at the library and the bookstore.<sup>141</sup> But the next chapter will show that even library books published in the 21st century sustain gender biases in their stories.

The history traced in this chapter suggests in several ways that the idealism in *L'Heure joyeuse* and *La Joie par les livres* has not been realized. The values of *mixité*, agency, and delight in books have had to confront political, administrative, curricular, and financial realities. For one, municipal children's and school libraries do not abound throughout France, and when they do exist they rarely achieve the potential envisioned by those pioneers. And it must be noted that even in their time, the mission of these two exceptional institutions never included equal representations of gender in picturebook stories. If 21st-century librarians believe they agree upon what is quality literature, gender equality is still far from a universal feature of quality. For a more progressive approach to gender representations in library books – indeed for gender-equal representations to become a widely agreed upon criteria of “quality” literature for librarians – this chapter demonstrates that a more centralized, more professionalized institution with a more unified mission and trained staff would be required. In the following chapter, I examine how the issues raised in this chapter manifest in the actual collections of a municipal and a school library.

## Notes

- 1 Ezratty, “Bibliothèques pour l'enfance et la jeunesse,” 175.
- 2 Hervouët, “La météo des bibliothèques.”
- 3 See Mackey, “Libraries.”

- 4 Ezratty, "Un peu, beaucoup, à la folie, passionnément," 16.
- 5 Hubschmid, Personal Interview.
- 6 Patte, *Mais qu'est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*, 86.
- 7 Leymonerie, "La loi des marchés," 156; Bourgeois, Personal Interview.
- 8 Poulain, "Introduction," 4.
- 9 An organization founded in 1917 originally for families of soldiers and quickly converted to the cause of children's libraries.
- 10 Comité américain pour les régions dévastées (CARD).
- 11 Barnett, "La léthargie des bibliothèques municipales," 70.
- 12 Ezratty, Tenier, and Lévêque, *L'heure joyeuse*.
- 13 Barnett, "La léthargie des bibliothèques municipales," 71.
- 14 Ezratty, "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 208.
- 15 Patte, *Mais qu'est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*, 27.
- 16 Ezratty, "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 215; Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 13, 25.
- 17 Geneviève Patte. Email communication. 22 November 2020.
- 18 Unless otherwise noted, this summary of the early history of children's libraries in France is taken from Ezratty, "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 204.
- 19 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 14.
- 20 As before the war, figures for post-World War Two library development are difficult to assert with confidence, given the disparate nature of lending spaces. Children's sections were often located in the attics or basements of public libraries, encapsulating contemporary notions of childhood as marginal and unimportant. In libraries without a designated children's section, children's books could be shelved among adult materials, rendering elusive a historian's assessment of children's access to books.
- 21 Richard, "Les bibliothèques municipales," 338.
- 22 Heywood, "Children's 68: Introduction"; Heywood, "Power to Children's Imaginations."
- 23 Ezratty, "Bibliothèques pour l'enfance et la jeunesse," 181.
- 24 Hamnache-Gaessler, "Des bébés et des livres."
- 25 Fette, Brière, and Wylie, *Les Français*, 84–85.
- 26 Marinnet, "La Joie par les livres," 343.
- 27 L'École des loisirs' Max book club launched a subscription for two-year-olds in 1982 and for babies in 1987.
- 28 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 154.
- 29 This discussion is taken largely from Patte's account of the history of the Clamart library: *Mais qu'est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*
- 30 One of the other daughters was Dominique Schlumberger de Menil, who founded the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas.
- 31 The Schlumberger corporation had opened a major engineering center in Clamart in 1959, still in operation today; this was not an inconsequential factor in the municipal leadership's acquiescence to cede the land. Yet the deal only succeeded after encouragement from the influential, long-serving, and then honorary director of the French Bureau of Libraries, Julien Cain, as well as an intervention, it has been suggested, by none other than Charles de Gaulle.
- 32 The building and furniture were classified as historical monuments in 2009.
- 33 Since 2007 it has been called La Petite bibliothèque ronde.
- 34 Marinnet, "La Joie par les livres," 344.
- 35 La Petite Bibliothèque Ronde, "La Petite Bibliothèque Ronde."
- 36 CNLJ, "A propos."



- 37 Brillant, “Les actions de la Ligue de l’enseignement,” 278.
- 38 Belayche, “Les bibliothèques et le marché du livre,” 172–73.
- 39 Bouland, “De ‘l’Heure Joyeuse’ à ‘Minecraft,’” 17.
- 40 Legendre, “Les politiques de lecture pour les jeunes publics,” 97.
- 41 Bessière, Personal Interview.
- 42 Rouet, “Diffusion et distribution,” 134.
- 43 See Butlen, *Les politiques de lecture et leurs acteurs*, 53–60.
- 44 Ministère de la Culture, “Publics et usages 2016,” 2.
- 45 Soulé, “Des parents à la bibliothèque,” 130.
- 46 Ministère de la Culture, “Publics et usages 2016,” 41, 49.
- 47 Patte, *Mais qu’est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*, 176.
- 48 On La Joie par les livres’ influence on school and public libraries, see Butlen, “L’école, la bibliothèque et La Joie par les livres”; Weis, “Les bibliothèques face à leurs jeunes lecteurs.”
- 49 Libraries in French secondary schools (middle and high schools) are more common, have a separate history from primary school libraries, and are not part of this study.
- 50 Martin, “Bibliothèques scolaires, bibliothèques publiques.”
- 51 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 64.
- 52 Lagarde, “La bibliothèque d’école,” 23.
- 53 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 65–66.
- 54 Weis, 68.
- 55 Cited in Lagarde, “La bibliothèque d’école,” 24.
- 56 Sénat, “Accueil des jeunes enfants.”
- 57 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 83–87, 97.
- 58 Butlen, “Lire en bibliothèque, lire à l’école.”
- 59 Butlen, *Les politiques de lecture et leurs acteurs*, 60–74, 460–61.
- 60 Violet, “Le concept de BCD.”
- 61 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 109.
- 62 Lagarde, “La bibliothèque d’école,” 24–25.
- 63 “Bibliothèque d’école: vademecum.”
- 64 Lenglet, Personal Interview.
- 65 Ministère de l’Education Nationale et de la Jeunesse, “Réussir pour tous.”
- 66 de la Broïse, Personal Interview.
- 67 Eduscol, “ADAGE.”
- 68 Ministère de l’Education Nationale et de la Jeunesse, “Les bibliothèques d’écoles.”
- 69 Ministère de la Culture, “Publics et usages 2016,” 7, 13.
- 70 For a librarian’s account on how to optimize these activities, see Simon, “L’Education nationale.”
- 71 De Santis-Bocande, Personal Interview.
- 72 Ezratty, “Les bibliothèques pour la jeunesse: de nécessaires médiateurs,” 258.
- 73 Morel and Fétu, “Le réseau des bibliothèques de la Ville de Rennes,” 119–21.
- 74 Bouland, “Réforme des rythmes scolaires.”
- 75 Lenglet, Personal Interview; de la Broïse, Personal Interview.
- 76 Lagarde, “La bibliothèque d’école,” 22.
- 77 At the same time, school libraries served as a rationale against funding municipal libraries. See Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 79.
- 78 Martin, “Bibliothèques scolaires, bibliothèques publiques.”
- 79 Lenglet, Personal Interview.
- 80 Butlen, “Lire en bibliothèque, lire à l’école.”

- 81 Bessière, Personal Interview.
- 82 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 32.
- 83 De Santis-Bocande, Personal Interview.
- 84 Pavillard, "Bibliothécaires: un métier d'hommes ou de femmes?"
- 85 Cited in Giraud, "Sexiste? Pas notre genre!"
- 86 On women's work in American public libraries, see Chapter 2 in Eddy, *Bookwomen*.
- 87 Barnett, "La léthargie des bibliothèques municipales," 55.
- 88 Feinstein, "La formation des bibliothécaires pour la jeunesse," 81.
- 89 Gruny, "L'Epoque des pionniers," 59.
- 90 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 27.
- 91 Patte. Email communication, 22 November 2020.
- 92 See Marcus, *Minders of Make-Believe*.
- 93 Patte, *Mais qu'est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*, 48.
- 94 Patte. Email communication, 22 November 2020.
- 95 Feinstein, "La formation des bibliothécaires pour la jeunesse," 82.
- 96 *Le Monde*, "IX Salon du livre."
- 97 Seibel, "Les enjeux de la profession," 826–37.
- 98 Cartellier, "Formations," 293–94.
- 99 Bouland, "L'offre de formations et ressources du bibliothécaire jeunesse."
- 100 Feinstein, "La formation des bibliothécaires pour la jeunesse," 82–83.
- 101 Bouland, "L'offre de formations et ressources du bibliothécaire jeunesse."
- 102 Lenglet, Personal Interview.
- 103 Beau, Personal Interview.
- 104 Melot cited in Feinstein, "La formation des bibliothécaires pour la jeunesse," 83.
- 105 Utard, "Les bibliothèques et l'édition indépendante," 168.
- 106 Cavé, "Politique documentaire et collections jeunesse," 163–67.
- 107 Deparday, "L'évaluation des collections, un jeu d'enfant?," 168–73.
- 108 Lemaître quoted in Ezratty, "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 210–11.
- 109 Belayche, "Les bibliothèques et le marché du livre," 176–77.
- 110 Leymonerie, "La loi des marchés."
- 111 Utard, "Les bibliothèques et l'édition indépendante," 157–66.
- 112 Belayche, "Les bibliothèques et le marché du livre," 171.
- 113 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 142, 202.
- 114 Weis, 142.
- 115 Kidd and Thomas, "A Prize-Losing Introduction."
- 116 Patte, *Mais qu'est-ce qui les fait lire comme ça?*, 98–122.
- 117 Ezratty notes that publishers commonly tested picturebooks on child library users since the beginning of children's libraries in France: "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 213.
- 118 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 271–73.
- 119 Seibel, "Les enjeux de la profession," 838.
- 120 Ezratty, "Les premières heures des bibliothèques pour enfants," 211.
- 121 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 161.
- 122 Marine Planche, adjointe au Directeur du CNLJ, BNF. Email communication. 15 June 2020.
- 123 Ville de Paris, "Nos guides pratiques."
- 124 CNLJ, "Bibliographies."
- 125 Leymonerie, "La loi des marchés," 159.
- 126 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 150.

- 127 ALA, "For Children-Recommended Reading."
- 128 "L'art délicat de la critique."
- 129 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 159.
- 130 Weis, 218.
- 131 Weis, 162–63.
- 132 Weis, 169.
- 133 Weis, 179–81.
- 134 Weis, 181–84.
- 135 See also Beauvalet-Boutouyrie and Berthiaud, *Le rose et le bleu*.
- 136 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 170–71.
- 137 Weis, 172.
- 138 Weis, 190, 198.
- 139 Cited in Giraud, "Sexiste? Pas notre genre!"
- 140 Ministère de la Culture, "Baromètre des prêts et des acquisitions, 2018," 10–12.
- 141 The Ministry of Culture's most recent "Baromètre" confirms the persistence of library borrowers favoring older books: only six of the 100 most-loaned children's books in 2022 were published in the two years prior. Ministère de la Culture, "Baromètre des prêts et des acquisitions, 2022," 18–19.

## 2 Gender in the Awty and Buffon Libraries (2011, 2015)

This chapter analyzes a sample of picturebooks from a municipal and a school library to assess the gender representations in the stories available to child readers in the second decade of the 21st century. The chapter further clarifies how picturebooks reflect the libraries that house them and serve as material manifestations of these institutions' histories and policies. The samples in this chapter demonstrate that many books in children's libraries still promulgate stereotypic representations of gender. My argument is that the limitations of the institutional structures examined in Chapter 1, as well as the cultural embrace of universalism, a narrow conception of aesthetics, and the desire to protect a nostalgic approach to childhood – concepts that will be developed in later chapters – all contribute to library content that offers a limited range of gender norms to child readers.

Two samples of picturebooks – from a municipal and a school library – are exploited in this chapter to provide the widest possible coverage of the kinds of material that children can access for free (see Appendix 1). The Bibliothèque Buffon in the fifth arrondissement of Paris is a typical French urban municipal library. Though it may surprise to encounter a French school library sample from the United States, Chapter 1 described at length the unfulfilled development of the primary school library in metropolitan France. The Lower School Library of the Awty International School located in Houston, Texas was therefore chosen for the school library sample. It represents the best of French school libraries, serving hundreds of expatriate francophone children schooled in an identical curriculum to that of metropolitan France and licensed by the Ministry of Education. The previous chapter showed that erratic institutionalization and professionalization processes have affected librarians' book acquisitions and selections. My findings from the samples used for this chapter indicate that the collections in a municipal and a school library are more similar than different: despite their unique origins, the same kinds and degrees of gender disparities are found in both corpora.

Except for one, the picturebooks analyzed in this chapter have received almost no scholarly attention, for gender representations or otherwise. The exception is *Martine à la mer* (*Martine by the Sea*) (1956), the third book in a series of 60 books published between 1954 and 2010 at a rhythm of nearly one per year.<sup>1</sup> With 100 million books sold and multiple translations, Martine is an iconic personage of children's literature. Although author Gilles Delahaye and illustrator Marcel Marlier are Belgian, Martine has been adopted by generations of French readers, much like Tintin. Few francophone children of any nationality have grown up since the mid-20th century without reading a few of the *Martine* stories.

I will begin the chapter with a brief digression into critical receptions of *Martine*, as these crystallize some of the challenges of updating modern children's library collections in the absence of formalized professional standards. Today, *Martine* is the series that bohemian parents love to hate. Though the books depict the life of a young girl and rare heroine in her time, they are much criticized for their bourgeois presumptuousness and conservative values.<sup>2</sup> *Martine* is also ill-famed for its gendered storylines and visuals that often sexualize the titled character. See for example, *Martine fait ses courses* (*Martine Goes Shopping*), published in 1964, or *Martine petite maman* (*Little Mommy Martine*), published in 1968. Art historian Christine Davenne posits that the *Martine* series is "a catastrophe for the female gender" and a retrograde celebration of the protagonist's "insignificance:"

[S]he is the perfect embodiment of mother and wife in miniature, whose virtues she practices throughout her development on her brother and her dog. Since 1957, hundreds [sic] of these picturebooks reproduce the edifying adventures of a heroine navigating on an ocean of insignificance, bordering the innocent world of the postwar Thirty Glorious Years.<sup>3</sup>

The particular *Martine* book found in the Buffon municipal library sample, *Martine à la mer*, was one of a half-dozen books of the series on that library's shelves at the moment of the sample in 2015. In this story, Martine takes her annual vacation at the seaside home of her cousin Michel. Accompanied by her friend Nicole, the three children frolic on the beach flying kites, building sandcastles, climbing lighthouses. A peak event is a ride in Uncle François's boat. Soon enough, Martine receives a letter from her mother saying that it is time to come home. During the vacation, Uncle François is the only adult present, and he only appears in the boat scene.

In fact, Martine's adventures throughout the series are largely unsupervised: this story illustrates why some critics see two sides to this "complex medium creating an ongoing dialectic around the stereotypical and traditional image of the female gender versus a relatively avant-garde vision of

a young girl in search of pioneering and liberating physical activities.”<sup>4</sup> Three sports historians, Christian Vivier, Jean-Nicolas Renaud, and Jean-Yves Guillain, argue that *Martine* ultimately presents a progressive female character: “[A]lthough in children’s literature, male supremacy and sexual hierarchy are typically omnipresent, in the *Martine* books the little girl, who is generally depicted at play and outside, even manages to beat boys in some face-to-face competitions.”<sup>5</sup>

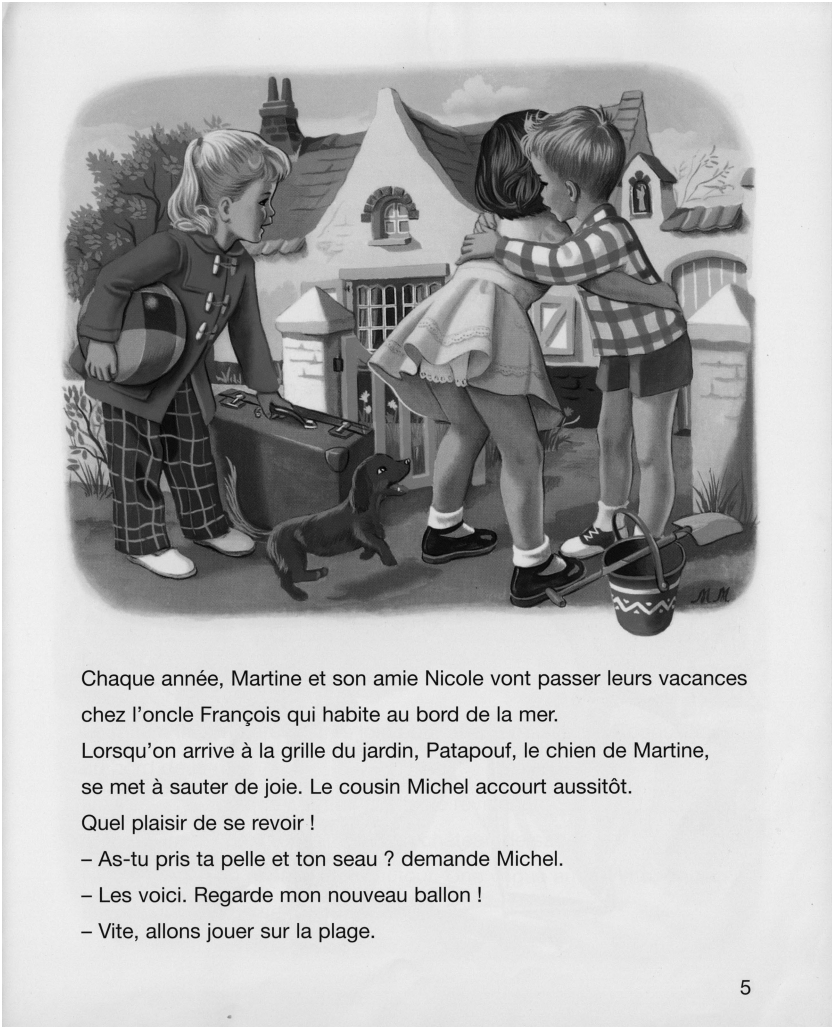
Yet, the sexualization of Martine, and in particular, the trope of her revealing undergarments, has been widely remarked upon by critics of children’s literature. In *Martine à la mer*, an attention to clothing is evident: the characters wear different clothes during the same events and Martine’s outfits are at times explicitly narrated. In an early page, she is drawn from behind as she bends forward to embrace Michel, exposing her ruffled underpants in the center of the image (see Figure 2.1). For Davenne, this choice of the illustrator positions Martine as the subject of the male gaze:

The authors of *Martine* work hard, in fact, to condense this icon of innocence into a girl always ready to show her white underwear and to pose in coquettish contortions. The illustrator does not refrain from shortening Martine’s little skirts up to the underpants and to starch the white collars of her coats on top in order to amplify the erotic charge of the contrast. Marcel Marlier scientifically doses out images of panties in each picturebook. The boys and the dogs in the stories are the spectators of certain troubling images.<sup>6</sup>

In a literature master’s thesis dedicated to stereotypes in the *Martine* series, Caroline Ramsay discusses the eroticism of the illustrations and documents the underwear fetish in 7 of 16 books in her sample: most images of Martine’s underwear are “entirely gratuitous.”<sup>7</sup> Ramsay’s study quantifies many other factors present in the series, including how the kinds of games she plays serve as evidence of the book’s underlying politics:

Even though Martine plays more often outside than inside, our classification of stereotyped activities show that the heroine engages in traditionally feminine activities in 87.5% of the picturebooks in our sample. [...] Thus, despite a likely effort on the part of the author to diversify the pastimes of his heroine, stereotypically feminine activities are what occupy Martine the most.<sup>8</sup>

*Martine* evokes nostalgia in many contemporary parents and the series remains popular: up to 400,000 books were sold annually in the 2000s.<sup>9</sup> Although the adventurous qualities of the protagonist may have counteracted the conventional facets of child readers’ daily lives in the 1950s,



Chaque année, Martine et son amie Nicole vont passer leurs vacances chez l'oncle François qui habite au bord de la mer.

Lorsqu'on arrive à la grille du jardin, Patapouf, le chien de Martine, se met à sauter de joie. Le cousin Michel accourt aussitôt.

Quel plaisir de se revoir !

– As-tu pris ta pelle et ton seau ? demande Michel.

– Les voici. Regarde mon nouveau ballon !

– Vite, allons jouer sur la plage.

Figure 2.1 Page 5 of *Martine à la mer*. Courtesy of Gilbert Delahaye/Marcel Marlier © CASTERMAN S.A.

1960s, and 1970s, and although Martine was in many ways ahead of her time, the creators nonetheless continued to propagate their message of female domesticity into the 21st century, in an age when swimming, sailing, and biking no longer constitute pioneering activities for girls. And yet this heroine remains on library shelves. Indeed, I can confidently hypothesize that at least one *Martine* book can be found on the shelves of every French municipal and school library.



Figure 2.2 A *Martine* display at the Children's Literature Fair in Montreuil in 2019.

I have included a lengthy examination of the *Martine* series in this introduction because it exemplifies what is at stake in this chapter's endeavor. When one examines gender representations in picturebooks, one often finds progressive and retrograde gender norms in the same story.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, gender politics are not unchanging, as the tensions inherent in the critical analysis above well illustrate. *Martine's* enduring popularity underscores how emotion influences decision-making. The publisher Casterman continues to promote the series, which remains profitable (see Figure 2.2). Because the series is a classic, it has not been weeded out of library collections and thus continues to influence young readers. As I will argue in the sections that follow, in the absence of formalized standards for acquisition



and of a clearly defined mission, individual biases and market pressures have room to exert influence over the books made available to children in libraries.

The chapter's first section offers a profile of the two libraries and describes the methods used for constituting the picturebook sample. The second section provides a high-level overview of certain features of the books in the sample such as publishers, narrative structures, and the use of animal characters. The third section of the chapter analyzes in detail the gender representations found in the stories, using a typology, delineated in Table 2.4, that classifies stereotypes into categories such as character traits and visual imagery.

## The Libraries

### *Profile of the Bibliothèque Buffon*

The Bibliothèque Buffon opened in 1972 in Paris's fifth arrondissement, facing the Jardin des Plantes and surrounded by large institutions, namely the Austerlitz train station, the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, and the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital. Residential areas of the neighborhood begin a few blocks away. In 2023, the library offered a diverse collection to its users: 12,000 items in the children's section, 27,000 items for adults, 19,000 musical items, and 9,000 DVDs.<sup>11</sup> Open Tuesday through Saturday, the children's section is reserved during most weekday hours for class visits, with late afternoon and evening hours open to the public. Of the 94,000 euros the Buffon spent in 2015, nearly 28,000 euros were allocated to stocking the children's section. In addition to that amount, the library subscribed to 32 children's magazines that year.<sup>12</sup>

As in many municipal libraries, becoming a librarian at the Buffon requires passing one of various *concours* (entrance and exit exams) described in the previous chapter, though many staff members started their careers under less exigent conditions. The lead librarian at Buffon is seconded by five section librarians, one of whom was Françoise Zamour, the head of the children's section of the library from 2010 until the early 2020s.<sup>13</sup> As Assistante spécialisée des Bibliothèques et des Musées de classe exceptionnelle, Zamour has been in charge of maintaining the children's collection through acquisitions and *désherbage* (weeding), of coordinating with the neighborhood schools, of public outreach, and of all the other tasks of a children's librarian. To do so, Zamour has led a small team of assistants: tasks are shared without much hierarchical division, and, according to Zamour, opinions are valued.

The Buffon's relationship with its neighborhood schools is very active, with a marked increase in activity since 2010 despite no increase in

personnel. In 2019, for example, the Buffon collaborated with nine daycare centers, 16 preschools, six elementary schools, one middle school, and an after-school activity center. All of the schools in Paris's fifth arrondissement, from preschool through high school, including private schools, are informally assigned to one of the five municipal libraries in the arrondissement, four of which have a children's section including Buffon. From October through July, the Buffon children's section puts itself at the service of schools. The library can handle at least five visits a week. During the summer months, most municipal libraries expand their public outreach even more, and the Buffon is no exception. In particular, Zamour highlighted in her interview with me the *Hors les murs* (outdoors) initiative in which books are carted into the Jardin des Plantes for read-aloud hours on carpets.

Every three years the Buffon Library bids out 300,000 euros worth of purchase orders – a significant budget – to book suppliers (*fournisseurs*).<sup>14</sup> Zamour claimed that her team is highly attuned to acquiring picturebooks that balance out the predominance of boy heroes typically found in libraries with new books that turn gender norms around on themselves, either explicitly or by quietly mainstreaming new modes of being for young readers. She affirmed with conviction that gender equality and neutrality “are part of our purchase orientation (*axes d'achats*). Our team is sensitized to this.” Zamour's purchases in nonfiction, for example, include books about women inventors, about women's roles during the First World War, and about women artists. She noted, “We take pains to obtain quality books for our collection. It is a job of reparation and transmission.” Chapter 1 showed that every municipal library is supposed to have a *politique documentaire*, a written document that establishes its goals, activities, and criteria for acquisitions and *désherbage*. But like many libraries, the Buffon Library had not yet formalized its guidelines by 2019. Furthermore, decision-making over the actual picturebooks and their content is left up to Zamour with no guidance from above.

As for Zamour's *désherbage* criteria, books are discarded first and foremost for poor physical condition. They are given a window of two years to be checked out: beyond that, the librarians assume the book is either lost or it requires promotion. A practical problem in the Buffon children's section is that large horizontal format picturebooks (*format à l'italienne*) cannot be well displayed – they fit only underneath the normal bookshelves – and are therefore less often checked out than standard sized picturebooks (see Figure 2.3). Nonfiction books are discarded if their information has become obsolete, and fiction books are discarded if their moral codes are outmoded (her word: *dépassés*).

Zamour elaborated on an example of the latter. One book that she had recently purchased was giving her second thoughts: should it actually go



Figure 2.3 Bookshelves in the children's section of the Buffon Library in 2015.

out on the library shelves? The book in question was *Les Filles* (*Girls*) by author-illustrator Agnès Rosensteihl. Rosensteihl had first broken ground in 1973 with her picturebook *La Naissance* (*Birth*), which depicted sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth with an uninhibited frankness never before seen in French literature for children.<sup>15</sup> Three years later, Rosensteihl's *Les Filles*, from the feminist publisher Des femmes, explored gender norms and childhood sexuality through the interactions of a girl and boy. In the story, the girl surprises her male friend in asserting that she will be an architect when she grows up. Annoyed by his disbelief, she further enlightens her friend about all the activities that girls enjoy: diving, cooking, discussing the cosmos, childcaring, playing rugby, trying on clothes, reading, hugging, spending time with cousins, winning chess games, dancing, dreaming. Page after page, Rosensteihl speaks through the girl, breaking the gender determinism prevalent in the mid-1970s. Toward the end of the book, the girl's demand that the boy make her a snack leads to a dispute and then a reconciliation. She calls him a "phallocrat, but cute" in her head, and they move on. *Les Filles* is a cult classic among feminists who grew up with it.<sup>16</sup>

The Buffon Library bought both *Les Filles* and *La Naissance* when they were reissued in 2018 by La ville brûle, a publisher whose mission includes tackling stereotypes and inequalities.<sup>17</sup> While Zamour originally

appreciated the feminism of the 1970s evident in *Les Filles*, she was concerned with one particular page in which the girl and boy compare their genitalia. The girl invites the boy to touch her genitalia; on the next page, they touch each other's, after which they go on to have a urinating contest, wrestle a bit, and continue with their conversation. In this moment, the children of the story are enacting an innocent and common developmental milestone. But Zamour worried that, given the contemporary awareness of sexual abuse, this scene could lead child readers to unfortunate conclusions about the appropriateness of such an invitation for physical contact. She told me that she shares all such decision-making with her library team, and they are divided on this book. As of 2019, *Les Filles* still sat in Zamour's office. This is one example of a librarian's struggles with acquisition when faced with a picturebook such as *Les Filles* – or *Martine à la mer* – that contains moral codes that can be simultaneously progressive for its time and outmoded for the zeitgeist a half-century later.

#### *Profile of the Awty International School's Elementary School Library*

As explained in the previous chapter, primary school libraries are not uniformly established in metropolitan France. Outside of the country, however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains a highly active consortium of accredited schools that follow the official national French curriculum, in many cases from preschool to the baccalaureate, and these schools have libraries. From Dakar to Vienna, from Mexico City to Beirut, from Shanghai to Houston, French schools abroad cater to the French expatriate community as well as to local populations wishing to provide their children with a French education. Given that such schools are located in places where Mandarin or English are the commonly spoken languages, few books in French are available to their pupils in bookstores, public libraries, or homes. The French school library abroad, therefore, serves a vital role in getting books into children's hands; indeed, it is essentially the sole means of access for the francophone diaspora of students that it serves. Generally, much more attention and larger budgets are given to libraries in French schools abroad than in metropolitan France. These schools are often semi-private with tuition paid for by expatriates' employers, typically large French corporations; they are tightly managed by the Ministry of Education; and they serve as a major pillar of the government's "francophonie" policy to promote the language abroad. The Awty International School library for elementary students in Houston, therefore, is an excellent source for the school library sample for this chapter. Known locally as the Lower School Library, it houses a voluminous collection, is managed by native French-speaking personnel, operates on a generous budget, and offers picturebooks that hundreds of children access daily.

The three Awty libraries (Preschool, Lower School, and Upper School) together house approximately 50,000 books.<sup>18</sup> In the 2018–19 academic year, the circulation in all three libraries reached 63,000 books: the Lower School Library accounted for greater than a third of the total. Its shelves offer equal amounts of reading material in French and English. In the year of the sample, 2010–11, the Lower School Library served 433 students in five grade levels. Each grade offers distinct French- and English-language curricula leading to the French *baccalauréat* and the International Baccalaureate, respectively. The French grades of *cours préparatoire* (CP), *cours élémentaire 1* (CE1), *cours élémentaire 2* (CE2), *cours moyen 1* (CM1), and *cours moyen 2* (CM2) correspond to the American grades of one through five. By the time of my 2019 interview with the two Lower School librarians, Céline Poirier and Ludmilla Jourdeuil, total enrollment in these grades had grown to 465 students. These full-time employees were not formally trained in librarianship and had become connected to the school as parents of students; native French speakers and fluent in English, they worked in concert with the Preschool and Upper School librarians.

According to Poirier and Jourdeuil, several factors influence their acquisition decision-making. Foremost among their criteria is student demand. Secondly, book purchases are driven by teacher requests, both for fiction and nonfiction, to complement the curriculum. Finally, the librarians' own preferences determine acquisitions. In order to place semiannual purchase orders, they search for prize winners, attend book fairs, scan literary websites, and scavenge bookstores in France during summer holidays. They take note when a student requests a book not already in the collection. At the same time, they resist the popularity of book series, whose familiar characters and plot formulas are immensely attractive to youth readers. They nevertheless allow for a judicious inclusion of some series books.

Every year the librarians perform *désherbage*, following similar criteria used at the Buffon Library. To qualify for the trash, an Awty Lower School Library book must be physically damaged or rarely borrowed. "A living library is a library that circulates materials," claimed head librarian Poirier. Although not as proactively eager as Françoise Zamour to find gender-equal books for their shelves, the Awty librarians displayed some inclination to discard books with blatant gender stereotypes. Poirier gave an example of stories in which the mother is always the parent doing the housecleaning.

The school librarians do much more than manage the collection and lend books. Class visits are a key part of the curriculum and the daily life of the library. Every Lower School student visits the library three times a week for a total of 125 minutes. The librarians offer a library curriculum for each grade level; for example, the early grades learn how the library is organized and how to distinguish literary genres, while the upper grades

learn how to use the catalog and how to cite a source. A good-sized area inside the library is reserved for such sessions. The librarians also manage students' L'Ecole des loisirs "Max" book club subscriptions, which will be examined in depth in Part II of this book. In addition, they organize incentive programs via summer reading lists.

The librarians also organize author and illustrator visits to the school, usually once a year. In the 2010s, they hosted French author Sophie Adriansen, Mexican-American author-illustrator Duncan Tonatiuh, and American Greg Pizzoli. Given Awty's multilingual curriculum and student body, they tend to invite widely translated authors in order to appeal to a maximum number of students. The librarians also follow the numerous literacy-promoting initiatives from the Ministry of Education, for example, *Lire en fête* (a celebration of reading every October whereby a guest reads aloud to a class) and *Rallye lecture* (an annual reading competition beginning in CP). Finally, the Awty International School holds a book fair every year that is an important fundraiser for the three libraries. The profits are used to finance the author visits, and unsold books are later incorporated into the library collections.

The profiles of these two libraries and their personnel demonstrate several commonalities. The Buffon and Awty librarians spend their time in similar ways, use similar approaches to book acquisition and weeding, and engage child users in similar activities to promote reading. While Zamour has been credentialed in librarianship, the school librarians have not, and none of them have training in children's literature. At the same time, they have a similar sense of dedication and thoughtfulness to the books they would like to see children read. And even though Zamour shows more attentiveness to gender representations than do the school librarians, none of the librarians use formal criteria regarding bias and inequality to acquire and weed out books, because none exist.

### *Methodology*

Many sociology and psychology studies on gender representations in children's books over the last few decades have assembled databases or samples of picturebooks according to particular criteria – say, award-winning books during a particular period of time – to assess the gender representations in children's books. A few of these studies chose to sample picturebooks from library shelves, using various methodologies. Psychologists Carole Kortenhuis and Jack Demarest, for example, assembled a 125-book sample through random selection in public libraries in New Jersey and Massachusetts: they selected every 25th book on the shelves until 25 books for each decade between 1940 and 1989 were obtained.<sup>19</sup> Psychology professor Jerome Tognoli's research team randomly chose 200 picturebooks

from a total of 16,000 picturebooks in three public libraries in the New York metropolitan region.<sup>20</sup> Psychologist Mark Barnett analyzed an entire children's book section of one public library, over 1,500 books.<sup>21</sup>

Not only do these studies of gender in books in American public libraries serve as methodological models for my sampling in French libraries, they also offer convincing evidence of gender bias in children's library books that, I argue, is not specific to the United States.<sup>22</sup> Like Turner-Bowker's study footnoted in the Introduction, Kortenhuis and Demarest found a trend of "modern discrimination:" while overtly sexist portrayals were decreasing, subtle discrimination remained ingrained. For example, males were represented in higher proportion in visual images,<sup>23</sup> and girl characters continued to be portrayed as incompetent or as "passive-dependent" as they were 50 years prior, whereas boys were as active and "instrumental" as before. In stories published after 1980, "Even when females were depicted as active, there was usually a more independent male character."<sup>24</sup> Females were still depicted as emotional, as responsible for any nurturing going on in stories, as prizes for boys' feats, and valued and devalued for their looks.

Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber's 1994 study of 200 American public library books divided its sample equally into books published before and after 1980. They hypothesized that more recent books would show a movement toward gender equality. Their data showed, however, that in books published after 1980,

Although boys acquire a sense of entitlement and security about the world by identifying with the variety of male characters, they also grow up with an unreal sense that a vast array of careers is almost exclusively open to them with little fear of competition from women. Boys are also likely to develop a distorted sense of women's employment [...] Expectations that women stay at home, that they basically don't work for pay, and that they don't venture too far from the home are likely to result from the continual (and unconscious) influence of such reading/picture material.<sup>25</sup>

While these scholars use different methods to constitute their library samples, they draw similar conclusions about gender: that equality has not been incorporated into stories available for children in library books. In this chapter, I will apply aspects of the sociological and psychological methodology described above to books on the shelves of the Buffon and Awty libraries. My results provide insights not present in these other studies because they are informed by a history of institutionalization and professionalization that limit librarians' ability to make gender-conscious choices in acquisition and *désherbage*. As this chapter demonstrates, awareness

and good intentions are insufficient in the face of employment realities and the profit-oriented publishing industry.

To obtain a representative sample of what girls and boys are reading in 21st-century French libraries, I adopted Kortenhaus and Demarest's approach of selecting books randomly but systematically, a technique known as *balayage de rayon* (shelf sweeping) in library science. The French elementary school library at the Awty International School in Houston was sampled in 2011, and Paris's Buffon municipal library sample was taken in 2015. Together these samples – representing the picturebooks available in the 2010s to francophone children in a single library in each of two major cities – yielded 49 books. Though the samples I collected contained some docu-fiction and beginner chapter books, these shelves were mostly composed of picturebooks, whose predominant reading public was children from kindergarten to grade three (ages five to nine) for the school library, and from birth to age eight for the municipal library.

Other methodological decisions deserve elaboration. First, to avoid sampling more than one book from a large series such as *Martine*, I chose every 25th author and not every 25th book. The risk that prolific authors of individual picturebooks (not series) might therefore be underrepresented did not prove to be a problem: my sample happened to include many widely published authors and illustrators, and several books in the sample are in fact part of a series. If I landed on a book of compilation – with or without an identifiable author – such as a collection of witch stories, treasuries of Charles Perrault tales, or illustrated nursery rhymes, I replaced that with the next book on the shelf. If I fell upon a book translated from another language (most often English), the next book on the shelf was chosen to constitute a French sample of books produced within its own culture:<sup>26</sup> as Colline Faure-Poirée, editor of *Giboulées*, a Gallimard imprint, expressed in an interview with me, “When we publish books in translation, we can not pass down what we want to pass down: our values, our way of seeing life and the world. Such passing down (*transmission*) is the magic word in children's literature.”<sup>27</sup> Beginning with the school library, arranged alphabetically by author according to the Dewey Decimal system, I chose every 25th author until I reached the end of the letter Z, wherein 30 books were obtained. In the smaller municipal library collection, the method yielded 19 books upon reaching the end of the alphabet: I chose to follow the same method rather than obtain the same number of books.

### Overview of the Sample

Some high-order features of the library samples will be highlighted in this overview section, before analyzing selected individual texts and their gender implications. There is little justification for dividing the 49 books by library



collection: the differences between the two samples in terms of gender representations are not overly remarkable, likely because the sample size is more ethnographic than sociological in dimension and because acquisitions in both libraries follow largely the same principles, however informal they may be. Nonetheless, worthwhile distinctions between the two samples will be foregrounded in this overview, regarding publishing houses and publication dates, author and illustrator profiles, narrative structures and themes, and the relative weight of human and animal characters, followed by three analyses of gender: of main characters, title characters, and cover images.

### *Publishers and Publication Dates*

In both samples, one publisher, L'Ecole des loisirs, dominates: 12 of 30 books in the school sample and six of 19 books in the municipal sample (37% of the total). Indeed, L'Ecole des loisirs is the predominant independent children's publisher in France, as Chapter 3 will explain. Gallimard and Casterman, the next highest represented in the library samples, each published four of the 49 books.

The publication date range of the two samples is disparate, with the school collection being less up-to-date. Two-thirds (20) of the school library books were published before the turn of the millennium, of which 13 were published in the 1990s, three in the 1980s, two in the 1970s, one in the 1960s, and one in 1959. In the municipal collection, only four of 19 books (21%) were published prior to 2000. One of the four was from the *Martine* series, first published in 1956. The other three pre-2000 books were all published in the 1990s. Besides differences in budget and space constraints, the differences in publication date may be partially attributable to the fact that the municipal collection was sampled four years later (in 2015) than the school library. Even though the school library abroad is well-endowed compared to school libraries in metropolitan France, the municipal library in Paris's fifth arrondissement is evidently more regularly refreshed. It should also be noted that because of the method of random systematic selection of library collections done in 2011 and 2015, this chapter is the only chapter that puts stories published in the 20th century under the microscope. One might, therefore, anticipate less progressive gender portrayals in this sample compared to the other 21st-century samples in this book. My research for Chapters 4 (book clubs) and 6 (magazines) demonstrates, however, that more recent reading material does not provide more gender-equal representations.

### *Author and Illustrator Profiles*

Children's literature is produced by adults. A great deal of social, cultural, economic, and political biases of individual creators, therefore,

is transmitted in picturebooks, making a brief examination of their professional and demographic profiles worthwhile. Several authors or illustrators in the samples have published upwards of 20 picturebooks. In the school library sample, they include Elzbieta, Olga Lecaye, Thierry Magnier (who started his own publishing house), Geoffroy de Pennart, Yvan Pommaux, Grégoire Solotareff (son of Lecaye), Frédéric Stehr, Michel Tournier (the author of *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (*Friday and Robinson*), widely taught in middle schools), and Gabrielle Vincent. From the municipal sample, Philippe Corentin, Gilbert Delahaye, Anne Gutman, Mario Ramos, and again Stehr are the most prolific. The popularity of some of the authors and illustrators comes from the success of their book series. In addition to Delahaye's *Martine*, the *Gaspard et Lisa* series by Gutman and her husband Georg Hallensleben has been translated into 15 languages, complete with the merchandizing of plush toys and a television show in 2010. Vincent's prize-winning *Ernest et Célestine* duo featured in more than two dozen books have also starred in an animated television series, a junior novel adaptation, and two animated films. *Gafi*, drawn by Mérel, lived through many authors and became a main character in over 30 reading literacy textbooks for schoolchildren published by Nathan. Other authors and illustrators in the sample have series of under ten books, such as Delphine Bournay's *Grignotin et Mentalo*, Alain Broutin's and Frédéric Stehr's *Calinours*, and Irène Schwartz's and Stehr's *Mariette et Soupir*. Librarians often lament "l'effet série" ("the appeal of the series") for garnering disproportionate attention from children.<sup>28</sup>

The authors and illustrators of the books in the library sample do not differ by gender in a statistically significant way. Women authors slightly dominate in the school sample: 16 female and 13 male authors. In the municipal sample, the trend reversed but was close to parity. Illustrators' gender is also nearly equivalent in these samples. One might conclude from this random sample that the publishing industry is awarding contracts for picturebooks rather fairly to women and men authors and illustrators, if it were not for the fact that women creators are more numerous overall. Much like gender representations in stories, women workers in the publishing industry are often overlooked in spite of their overrepresentation among creatives. Guillaume Nail, former president of la Charte des auteurs et des illustrateurs jeunesse, the union organization that represents children's literature writers and illustrators, has argued that despite the feminization of the field – over 70% of the Charte members are women – women get less lucrative publishing contracts than men and win literary prizes and receive lecture invitations much less often in proportion to their output.<sup>29</sup> All the same, researchers have documented that women authors and illustrators do not necessarily produce more gender-equal children's literature compared to men. For example, Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber's study shows that "although more women were

writing children's books in the period after 1980 [compared to before 1980 and to men after 1980], the sex of the main character continues to be overwhelmingly male or ambiguous."<sup>30</sup>

### *Narrative Structures and Themes*

The five most common narrative themes found in the sample are sequential quests, stories about children's daily lives, about romantic and family love, about the circle of life and death, and adaptations of classics. These formulaic themes and structures are apt to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Nine of the 49 library books (18%) can be categorized as sequential quest stories. In books for very young children who are new to storytelling and to human experience, the fairy tale technique of repetitive sequencing is often used as a pedagogical strategy, as well as a ploy to promote page-turning suspense. Male characters dominate the sequential quest stories in the sample. These include *Pourquoi tu ne m'aimes pas?* in which a fox asks many animals "Why don't you love me?" until an owl finally convinces him that he is loveable (all 16 animals are male); *La dent (The Tooth)* in which a baboon surveys different animals to identify the owner of a found tooth (eight of nine animals are male); and *Les bons amis (Good Friends)* a story about neighborly animals who share food amongst themselves (all four animals are male). With its focus on self-determination and outdoor adventure, the quest narrative may well be reserved for male protagonists in picturebooks.<sup>31</sup>

Ten picturebooks in the sample (20%) focus on children's daily lives and can be described simply as stories about kids doing kid stuff. The children in these books are playing, dreaming, imagining, testing boundaries, making mischief, and making friends.<sup>32</sup> The protagonists are quite evenly divided among girls and boys in this type of narrative. At the same time, in the one story in the sample that focuses on domestic chores, *Jour de lessive (Laundry Day)* the laundry lesson involves a young female protagonist.

Romance is a popular theme in the sample, emphasized in five books (10%): it happens to overlap with two sequential quests led by wolf protagonists, it involves adults in most cases, and is always heterosexual.<sup>33</sup> Family love is the primary theme of six other books in the sample (12%). In these stories that feature animal protagonists, parenting is foregrounded, and birth, infancy, siblings, adoption, and survival are sub-themes.<sup>34</sup> No clear gender patterns emerge among the child protagonists in these stories, but almost all of them focus on just one parent, the mother.

Death, or the circle of life, is foregrounded in three books in the school collection: but not in the municipal sample.<sup>35</sup> In two of these, an elderly female dies; in the third, it is an elderly male. Three other books emphasize

a theme of intergenerational memory and tradition: one is humorous and features a girl protagonist, one is festive, and one focuses on loss (the latter two have boy protagonists).<sup>36</sup> Finally, two books label themselves as tales<sup>37</sup> and two others are adaptations of *Little Red Riding Hood* and *A Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>38</sup>

Certain themes seem to call for male protagonists. Three books tell stories of young male protagonists sulking.<sup>39</sup> Another plot line that uses only male main characters is the cocky protagonist who is eventually put in his place: three books cast animals, monsters, and dragons in these scenarios, two of which overlap with sequential quests.<sup>40</sup> While putting male protagonists in such situations confirms gender stereotypes about arrogance, three other books in the sample that deal with emotional vulnerability feature young males at the center.<sup>41</sup>

### *Animal Species and Anthropomorphism*

Children's literature commonly uses animals as characters because anthropomorphism allows authors and illustrators to convey messages about human existence in coded terms. For example, in a picturebook not in the library sample, *Lili vient d'un autre pays* (*Lili Comes from Another Country*), a young crocodile must integrate into a country of elephants:<sup>42</sup> the differences among animal species are employed to address a difficult topic such as xenophobia. The same anthropomorphic coding applies to books with nonhuman characters, which appear in the sample as a personified water drop, an extraterrestrial, and a monster. In the 49 picturebooks, animal or nonhuman characters are numerically greater than human characters: they feature in 22 books (45%) without any humans at all, compared to 16 books (33%) that cast only humans. In 11 books (22%), animal and nonhuman characters play a role alongside humans.

The use of animal characters poses a challenge to analysis of gender representations since in the French language, animal species are gendered feminine or masculine, and stories typically cast their characters' gender by the gender of the species: *un ours*, *le renard*, *la mouche* (a bear is male, the fox is male, the fly is female). At the same time, the use of animal characters exacerbates gender disparity since authors tend to favor those of masculine gender. In the sample, *Les bons amis*, for example, features four animals, all male: *le lapin* (rabbit), *le cheval* (horse), *le mouton* (sheep), *le chevreuil* (roe deer).

When authors explicitly cast their animal characters against their linguistic gender origin, they can use an alternative gender form that exists for some species: for example, *la louve* and *le loup* (female and male wolf), but many animal species do not have separate names by gender. One reason that authors may shy away from this degendering practice is because it

requires awkward textual gymnastics. It was attempted in one book in the sample, *Le roi crocodile* (*Crocodile King*), and a few lines reveal how degendering a species can be verbally cumbersome: “Un matin, pour déjeuner, on apporta au petit roi **un** éléphant. Mais **il** n’était vraiment pas grand. C’était **une** fille, **elle** n’avait que trois ans.” (“One morning for breakfast, **an** elephant (male) is brought to the young king. But **he** was not very big. It was a **girl**; **she** was only three years old.”) (my emphasis)

One study by Eliane Ferrez and Anne Dafflon Novelle that sampled all books published in French in the year 2000 featuring anthropomorphized animal characters found nearly all characters to be clearly identifiable by gender, thanks to the French language and other clues. The count was significantly masculine-dominant: 68 male main animal characters for 20 females. Further, in a subset of books meant for readers from ages zero to three, the disequilibrium is “much more flagrant” with 31 male main animal characters and three females.<sup>43</sup> They conclude that even for animals, “Characters thus tend to be male by default.” In dismissing the idea that authors and illustrators simply gender their characters by their species’ grammatical gender, Ferrez and Dafflon Novelle argue that the lopsidedness of these numbers is unjustified: many animal species are gendered feminine and could be chosen as characters.<sup>44</sup> Other reception studies examine how readers interpret animal characters of indeterminate gender. Studies on anglophone mothers<sup>45</sup> and children,<sup>46</sup> for instance, have shown that both tend to assume that neutrally depicted characters are masculine, thereby further reinforcing the effect of masculine domination in the stories.

### *Main Characters, Title Characters, and Cover Images by Gender*

Three key aspects that strike child readers immediately when choosing a book, and that inescapably involve gender, include the main character, the book title, and the cover image. Simply put, a main character or protagonist is defined as a person on whom the story is focused: a clearly identifiable personage, from whose point of view the story is often told, and with whom a child-reader would most likely identify. As social scientists Carol Brugeilles, Isabelle Cromer, and Sylvie Cromer argue, “Since as a genre, picturebooks rely on pictures, minimal text, a schematic storyline, a lesson of some sort, and a very young readership, the main character takes on a remarkable importance.”<sup>47</sup> They also suggest that since picturebook stories tend to be timeless and not located in a specific geography, a bit like fairy tales, the protagonist becomes an even more important feature of the story.<sup>48</sup> Some books in the library sample have no single identifiable main character, such as *Gafi et le trésor du monstre* (*Gafi and the Monster’s Treasure*), which features four characters of equal prominence. Such a book is counted as a “shared” protagonist in Table 2.1. Both library

Table 2.1 Protagonists in the 49-Book Library Sample

<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female/Male Duo</i>	<i>Shared/None</i>
27% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	61% ( <i>n</i> = 30)	10% ( <i>n</i> = 5)	2% ( <i>n</i> = 1)

samples reveal striking gender disparity among main characters. In total, males are more than double the number of female protagonists.

Main characters are not always title characters. And several title characters in the sample are not the main characters in the story. For example, the *Petite Plume* (*Little Feather*) title refers to a female character, but her husband is the main character and he is also the only one in the cover image. Female/male duo title characters are numerous in the sample, and three of the five titles list the female first: *Larivette et Catimini*, *Solange et l'ange*, *Ernest et Célestine*, *Petite feuille et le grand chêne*, *Jean Toutou et Marie Pompon*, *La fessée de Mariette et Soupir*. The shared title role does not mean, however, that the characters play equal roles in the stories. Finally, several titles do not mention their main characters, for example, *L'invitation* (*The Invitation*) and *Et après...* (*And After...*), both of which feature boy protagonists.

Table 2.2 shows that male title characters outnumber female title characters by almost two to one.<sup>49</sup> Another noteworthy observation is that among the 49 titles, four (8%) use the word *petite* (small) to describe a character, all of whom are female. The masculine *petit* is not used in any title to refer to a male character. Finally, one book is titled *La baby-sitter*, as if that job could only be filled by a female, when in fact the plot revolves around a male babysitter.

Further to the predominance of male main and title characters in the library sample, Table 2.3 demonstrates that the cover images of the

Table 2.2 Title Characters in the 49-Book Library Sample

<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female/Male Duo</i>	<i>None Identifiable</i>
16% ( <i>n</i> = 8)	31% ( <i>n</i> = 15)	12% ( <i>n</i> = 6)	41% ( <i>n</i> = 20)

Table 2.3 Characters in Cover Images in the 49-Book Library Sample

<i>Characters in Cover Images</i>	<i>Library Books</i>
Female title or main character alone	10% ( <i>n</i> = 5)
Male title or main character alone	37% ( <i>n</i> = 18)
Female characters only	6% ( <i>n</i> = 3)
Male characters only	14% ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Female and male duo	14% ( <i>n</i> = 7)

picturebooks emphasize male ascendancy in visual ways. For 18 male characters depicted alone in cover images in the 49-book sample, five females are depicted alone: greater than a three-to-one ratio (or 37% of the sample versus 10%). For seven books that show a group of male-only characters on the cover (including animals), fewer than half that number of books (three) show a group of female-only characters. Whereas all books with a male main or title character place that character prominently on the cover image, only one book does not illustrate its protagonist on the cover (see Figure 2.4): she is a girl.

The three factors of main character, title character, and cover images can mutually compound each other in favor of masculine dominance. Ferrez

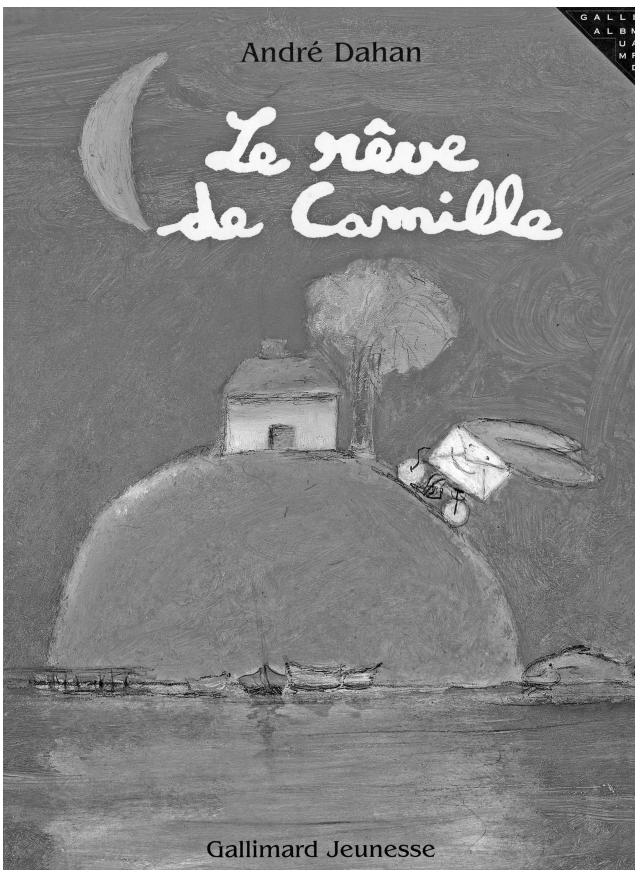


Figure 2.4 The cover of *Le rêve de Camille*. Courtesy of André Dahan.

and Dafflon Novelle's study of picturebooks published in 2000 found that male main characters not only outnumber female protagonists by a ratio of more than three-to-one, but are also granted the status of title characters much more than females (21% vs. 10%). Furthermore, whereas male and female main characters appear in cover illustrations in equal proportion, twice as many boy secondary characters than girl secondary figures appear in cover images.<sup>50</sup>

### **Gender Representations in the Stories**

Now that I have examined the libraries behind the 49 picturebooks and described the sample's high-order features, this third section of the chapter offers a literary analysis of selected stories to understand how gender representations are communicated to child readers. To manage the large sample and discern patterns, I use a system of categorization for eight different types of gender representations found in the books: stereotypic female behavior or traits, stereotypic male behavior or traits, stereotypic adult relationships, stereotypic social or professional status, stereotypic physical appearance of characters, stereotypic framing of characters in visual imagery, and stereotypic settings in visual imagery. In addition, in some books, female characters were nearly or totally absent, constituting what is known as symbolic annihilation. A typology of these eight categories of stereotypic representations will organize this final section of the chapter. Graphed in Table 2.4, it provides another layer of our understanding of the library sample; while quantifiable, this approach analyzes the narratives qualitatively. A more elaborate explanation of each category will precede a reading of gender in selected books.

In her study of stereotypes about Germans in British children's literature, comparatist Emer O'Sullivan is careful to interpret authors' use of stereotyping, noting the importance of form, context, and purpose. While some authors make conscious use of them, others reveal biased worldviews unconsciously, what O'Sullivan calls "the not so voluntary use of stereotypes."<sup>51</sup> In the books in the library sample under examination in this chapter, the stories rarely present anything resembling conscious play with gender stereotypes, so the analysis is forced to remain mostly on the first degree.

In Table 2.4, if a picturebook includes more than one instance of, for example, stereotypic female behavior or traits – something that happens often in the library sample – only one X is marked in that column. In other words, the methodology does not count the number of instances of stereotypic female behavior or traits in a particular book, just the presence



Table 2.4 Typology of Stereotypic Representations in the 49-Book Library Sample

<i>Picturebook</i>	<i>Publication Date</i>	<i>Stereotypic female behavior or traits</i>	<i>Stereotypic male behavior or traits</i>	<i>Stereotypic adult relationships</i>	<i>Stereotypic social or professional status</i>	<i>Female symbolic annihilation</i>	<i>Stereotypic physical appearance of characters</i>	<i>Stereotypic framing of characters in images</i>	<i>Stereotypic setting in images</i>	<i>Total stereotypic categories</i>
<i>Blanche dune</i>	1998				x	x				2
<i>Calinours va à l'école</i>	1994				x					1
<i>C'est moi le plus fort</i>	2001		x							1
<i>Chalumeau le dragon</i>	1992		x		x	x	x			4
<i>Dans la gueule du monstre</i>	1992		x		x	x				3
<i>Du bout des doigts</i>	1997			x					x	2
<i>En attendant la pluie</i>	2001									0
<i>Ernest et Célestine: les questions de Célestine</i>	2015 (orig. 2001)									0
<i>Et après...</i>	2002	x	x		x		x			4
<i>Gafi et le trésor du monstre</i>	1993									0
<i>Grignotin et Mentalo</i>	2006					x				1
<i>Hip hop</i>	2005	x	x	x	x		x		x	6
<i>Jean Toutou et Marie Pompon</i>	1996			x	x		x			3
<i>Jour de lessive</i>	2010	x								1
<i>La baby-sitter</i>	2006			x			x			2
<i>La chasse aux pirates</i>	1998		x		x		x			3
<i>La dent</i>	2014						x	x		2
<i>La fessée de Mariette et Soupir</i>	1986	x	x		x					3
<i>La petite fille... et la souris</i>	2012	x			x		x			3
<i>La petite soeur de Lisa</i>	2001	x	x	x			x			4
<i>L'arbre à Kadabras</i>	2007		x							2
<i>Larurette et Catimini, au jardin de Luxembourg</i>	1988									0
<i>Le crocodile et les six nains</i>	1993	x					x	x		3
<i>Le garçon qui ne connaissait pas la peur</i>	2009	x	x							2

<i>Picturebook</i>	<i>Publication Date</i>	<i>Stereotypic female behavior or traits</i>	<i>Stereotypic male behavior or traits</i>	<i>Stereotypic adult relationships</i>	<i>Stereotypic social or professional status</i>	<i>Female symbolic annihilation</i>	<i>Stereotypic physical appearance of characters</i>	<i>Stereotypic framing of characters in images</i>	<i>Stereotypic setting in images</i>	<i>Total stereotypic categories</i>
<i>Le loup qui cherchait une amoureuse</i>	2012			x			x			2
<i>Le rêve de Camille</i>	1997									0
<i>Le roi crocodile</i>	2005		x		x		x			3
<i>Les bons amis</i>	1996 (orig. 1959)					x				1
<i>Les deux maisons</i>	2011 (orig. 2004)	x	x	x						3
<i>L'île du monstrol</i>	2000	x	x				x			3
<i>L'invitation</i>	1998	x	x	x			x		x	5
<i>Ma nounou, c'est pas ma maman!</i>	1997	x			x					2
<i>Ma p'tite couche</i>	2007	x		x					x	3
<i>Mademoiselle Sauve-qui-peut</i>	1996						x			1
<i>Martine à la mer</i>	1983 (orig. 1956)				x		x			2
<i>Minouchet trouve un ami</i>	1976				x			x		2
<i>Moi, je boude</i>	2003	x	x	x	x		x		x	6
<i>Noël</i>	1987	x	x		x		x		x	5
<i>Peau noire peau blanche</i>	2000	x	x	x	x			x	x	6
<i>Perlette, goutte d'eau</i>	1997 (orig. 1960)				x		x			2
<i>Petite feuille et le grand chêne</i>	2007									0
<i>Petite plume</i>	2007	x	x		x		x	x	x	6
<i>Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit</i>	1982 (orig. 1979)			x			x			2
<i>Pourquoi tu ne m'aimes pas?</i>	2009		x			x				2
<i>Solange et l'ange</i>	1997			x			x	x		3
<i>Suzanne</i>	2004									0
<i>Un baiser à la figue</i>	2009				x		x			2
<i>Un bébé tombé du ciel</i>	1996									0
<i>Zéphyr le lapin volant</i>	1997				x	x				2
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	

of a specific category of stereotypic gender representation. My purpose is thus to distinguish between *types* of stereotyping found in the picturebooks. Furthermore, I avoided double counting stereotypic categories when they overlapped. For example, an image of female character ironing was counted only as a stereotypic visual setting and not as a stereotypic female behavior. Therefore, the chart should be understood as a considerable underestimation of gender disparity found in the library sample.

Table 2.4 shows that 35 of 49 library books (71%) contain two or more types of stereotypic gender representations in their stories. Twenty-one books (43%) contain three or more types of gender stereotypes. In contrast, only eight books (16%) do not depict any type of gender stereotyping. And while six books (12%) exhibit “only” one type of gender stereotyping, the plot may revolve around a female learning to do laundry (*Jour de lessive*), or the category may eliminate females entirely, also known as symbolic annihilation (*Les bons amis*). From the analysis that follows below, I argue that although symbolic annihilation is common in this sample of picturebooks available on library shelves in the first two decades of the 21st century, what is more pervasive than absence is the *presence* – both textual and visual – of multiple forms of gender stereotyping in stories meant for children.

### *Symbolic Annihilation: Forms of Exclusive Masculinity*

The first category of gender stereotypes in the sample is found in stories that eliminate the female gender entirely. Symbolic annihilation is a media studies concept that describes the absence or gross underrepresentation in any medium of a social category based on sex, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc. The notion holds that by featuring predominantly white males, stories in books, films, video games, television shows, and the news media serve to exclude or subordinate “others” and to maintain social inequality.<sup>52</sup> In children’s literature, symbolic annihilation of females and non-whites is common. Because it is cumulative, symbolic annihilation can communicate to young child readers that girls and women do not merit being in stories, even as secondary characters. As we will see throughout this book, the desire to market a book to the widest possible audience and the common adult assumption that boys will not read stories led by female characters are two factors that combine to nudge authors and editors toward male characters.<sup>53</sup> In turn, librarians can reify this belief system through their acquisitions. In the library sample, symbolic annihilation is found in eight books (16%).

Books with symbolic annihilation fall into various narrative patterns that offer different forms of exclusive masculinity. One pattern celebrates male-male relationships that exclude females but is not necessarily

denigrating, including three books in the sample: *Les bons amis*, *Pourquoi tu ne m'aimes pas?*, and *Blanche dune*. *Blanche dune* (*White Dune*), for example, is about the communication of history and memory from one generation to the next, via the trope of an old man who teaches profound life lessons to a boy. "Blanche dune" is the name of a family's summer house rental. The images locate the narrative visually on the coast of the English Channel, probably in the Pas de Calais region, with its dreary beaches and decaying World War Two bunkers. "Le Capitaine" is the boy's landlord-neighbor who speaks to him of war, good, evil, and the permanence of certain things such as seashells and constellations. The story transmits such weighty matters from male to male: females are completely absent from these reflections about legacy. At the same time, the subject and tone depict a masculine bond that inveighs against violence, that quietly apprehends the passage of time, and that is awed by nature.

Another narrative pattern in books of symbolic annihilation shows an alpha male who gets his comeuppance. Females are omitted but the story is not at their expense, and the male protagonist ultimately learns a lesson. Yet, even in these examples, the stories are fashioned to appeal to boys. For example, in *Dans la gueule du monstre* (*In the Monster's Mouth*), the male monster is vicious, but none of the animals living nearby is afraid because he has a tiny mouth and can only eat insects. A doctor, a male crocodile, agrees to perform mouth-widening surgery on the condition that the monster will still not eat anything larger than insects. The monster readily agrees, and just as readily breaks his promise, promptly consuming ten rabbits, three hares, five squirrels, two wild boars, and a deer. The next morning the monster keels over and dies. Though his mouth was widened, his anus was not. In this story of schadenfreude, bathroom jokes are employed throughout, for example, from the beginning the monster's mouth is drawn to resemble an anus. After all, scatological humor is a subgenre generally pitched to boys.<sup>54</sup> Females are absent from the story: the monster and the doctor are male, and all the unnamed and unclothed animals are referred to collectively in the masculine.

Similar to the first narrative pattern of books devoid of female characters, *Grignotin et Mentalo* provides readers with atypical expressions of masculinity – a gentle, caring male friendship focused on core life values – but in this case, the story denigrates women. In one chapter about building confidence, the lesson comes at the expense of the opposite sex. Grignotin explains that while shopping for a blue baseball cap, he was pressured by a saleswoman to buy a plastic fruit-basket hat instead. The obvious suggestion from the images and text is that the hat is feminine and therefore undesirable. While Mentalo teaches Grignotin a lesson in expressing one's desires with firmness during commercial transactions, the sole female in the book – who does not appear in any visual, nor does she

speak – is described as pushy and manipulative. Author-illustrator Delphine Bournay won a prestigious prize, the Prix Sorcières, for this book, and it was also added to the French National Library’s CNLJ recommended list of all-time favorites known as “La Bibliothèque idéale,” demonstrating wide critical and commercial reception.

Whereas eight books in the library sample contain no females, only three books contain no male characters: *Le rêve de Camille* (*Camille’s Dream*), *Suzanne*, and *Ma nounou, c’est pas ma maman!* (*My Nanny Is Not My Mommy!*). These three have small casts of one, two, and three characters, respectively. No book in the sample contains a large cast of females without any males at all, whereas the reverse exists in four books: *Chalumeau le dragon* (*Chalumeau the Dragon*), *Dans la gueule du monstre*, *Pourquoi tu ne m’aimes pas?*, and *Les bons amis*. Of the entire sample, there is only one single page in one book that visually depicts a female group without males. This scene in *La petite soeur de Lisa* (*Lisa’s Little Sister*) illustrates five females surrounding a female newborn being breastfed. Such an example is best understood not as “male symbolic annihilation” but rather as male absence from domestic space. In contrast, one image in *Chalumeau le dragon* shows 13 male humans robbing the male dragon of his treasures.

While symbolic annihilation involves the total or near total absence of females, other stories in the sample offer secondary or tertiary roles to females but marginalize these characters to such an extent as to render them negligible, either by assigning them undeveloped roles (for example, the sisters of the boy protagonist in *Le crocodile et les six nains* (*The Crocodile and the Six Dwarves*), tokenizing them (as in the sole female – the heavily bejeweled giraffe – in *La dent*), or reducing them to feminine tropes (for example, the last-minute love interest in *Le garçon qui ne connaissait pas la peur* (*The Boy Who Knew No Fear*)). Such books are not counted in Table 2.4 as symbolic annihilation, further emphasizing my point that the table should be apprehended as a serious underestimation of gendered messages in this book sample.

#### *Stereotypic Female Behavior or Traits: The Domestic Sphere*

Seventeen books in the library sample (35%) exhibited stereotypic behavior or traits in their female characters. Examples include stereotypical femininity in physical appearance (long eyelashes, jewelry, the color pink), emotions, activities, or personality traits (crying, playing with dolls, being afraid), and performance of domestic tasks commonly associated with female homemakers (cooking, cleaning, parenting).

This section will hone in on three books from the municipal sample that – even though they feature female protagonists – depict stereotyped

female behaviors in stories focused on domestic situations: laundry in *Jour de lessive*, potty training in *Ma p'tite couche* (*My Little Diaper*), and welcoming a newborn sibling in *La petite soeur de Lisa*. They have happy endings: Helena the human learns to launder thanks to her singing animal friends on the riverside. Lola the badger grows out of her diaper. Lisa the rabbit embraces her baby sister Lila. The gender notions that readers might absorb from these books featuring central but stereotyped female roles are numerous. First, the very predictability of the narratives – clothes are washed, a child no longer needs diapers, family dynamics reset – serves readers a reinforced notion that domestic stories lack adventure. Second, the domestic scenes are portrayed in female spaces devoid of males.

In two of these books, the secondary characters are also predominantly female. It is Lola's female cousin who convinces her of the joys of underwear. Lisa is surrounded by her mother, grandmother, and older sister while anticipating her female sibling's birth, and two girlfriends of Lisa's older sister prompt Lisa's acceptance of the baby. In *La petite soeur de Lisa* and *Ma p'tite couche*, an intermediary female character – between the age of the female protagonist child and the mother – provokes positive change, situated in a role of maternal training in the story. On the last page of *Jour de lessive*, Helena adds mothering to her laundering duties and teaches her newfound skills to her doll, who is female. The takeaway for readers of these three picturebooks is that potty training, laundry, and parenting are women's work, and that males do not belong in these spaces. Lisa's father is not even in the drawing of the nuclear family on the page depicting the resolution, wherein Lisa proudly pushes the baby carriage through a park. The father and brother are not major actors in Lola's story either. Invisible fathers have been documented in other studies of children's literature.<sup>55</sup> As Sylvie Cromer remarks, “[W]e are still waiting for the new father.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Stereotypic Male Behavior or Traits: Entitlement and Violence*

Male behavior or traits are stereotyped in the library books more often than female behavior or traits: 19 books in the sample (39%) exhibit at least one instance. Examples include personality traits such as fearlessness, entitlement, or mischievousness; interrelational tendencies such as bullying or protecting others from threat; and the performance of physical or outdoor activities.

Four picturebooks, *La baby-sitter*, *Du bout des doigts* (*At Arm's Length*), *Moi, je boude* (*I'm Sulking*), and *La chasse aux pirates* (*Pirate Chase*), feature boy protagonists struggling to get their way. *La chasse aux pirates* is a salient example. A boy prince begins his seaside vacation annoyed by his female nanny, who doubts his assertion that pirates exist. She trails behind

him carrying his belongings as he runs to the sea. In short course, the boy does indeed meet a band of pirates who first capture him, but then make him their captain after he saves their treasure from the rising tide. While the storyline indulges a child's fantasy, this particular fantasy communicates to readers the main character's sense of entitlement with both sexist and classist tinges. Princes are capable of bringing fantasies to life whereas nannies are loathsome killjoys: the pirates were real, just as the boy prince asserted; the nanny was wrong.

Male stereotyping in books in the sample also affects adult characters. Several stories depict disengaged male parental figures. For example, in *L'arbre à Kadabras*, the father has left home to travel the world indefinitely, leaving his son behind, alone. In *Et après...* following the death of a grandmother, the father is significantly less present than the mother; she alone guides the child through the mourning process.

A subcategory of stereotypic male behavior or traits involves anger and violence, whether threatening or real.<sup>57</sup> This form of male stereotyping is present in seven books in the sample (14%).<sup>58</sup> In one example of threatening male power, *Le roi crocodile* is a take on *One Thousand and One Nights*. An insecure crocodile king, who satisfies his childhood anxiety about never being good enough by eating any beast in sight, is presented with a live female baby elephant on a platter. Lila convinces the king to let her live in order to fatten up. During the respite, she proceeds to charm and befriend all those in the kingdom, as the crocodile miserably nurtures his intention to consume her. Finally, Lila's irresistible joy makes the king laugh for the first time in his life, and he experiences a healing catharsis. In sum, the gendered tropes that drive this story are first, a male threatens to eat a female, and second, a female emotionally heals a damaged male. Like Scheherazade, Lila is clever and tricks her captor, in the meantime rescuing him from his own misery.

*C'est moi le plus fort (I'm the Strongest of Them All)* uses the threat of violence and the inversion of gender roles to lead to a humorous surprise. In this story, a wolf challenges those he meets with the question, "Who is the strongest of them all?" All cower and nervously assure him of his superlative strength. When wolf comes upon his final interlocutor, whom he takes for a wee frog, the unexpected answer – "My mother is the strongest of them all" – sets wolf into a verbal attack on the tiny amphibian, until mother shows up. It turns out that the frog is actually a baby dragon, and mother is exponentially bigger than the wolf. The anti-bullying messages are that there is always someone stronger, and bullies often get their just rewards. The reversal of an expected power dynamic creates the humor. Author Mario Ramos has published several dozen children's books with L'Ecole des loisirs and is widely promoted on their website. *C'est moi le plus fort* won the prestigious Bernard Versele prize in Ramos's native Belgium.

*Stereotypic Adult Relationships: Heteronormative Romantic Love and Parental Division of Labor*

Even though children's books are typically about children, my analysis shows that much of the gender stereotyping in the library sample is manifested through adult characters, via either their relationships or socio-professional status. This evidence corroborates the findings of previous studies.<sup>59</sup> Though adults are less common than children as protagonists, they often play important secondary, tertiary, and accessory roles in picturebooks. In the sample's picturebooks, adults in primary roles are featured most often in romance stories and in secondary roles most often as parents. Five books focus on heterosexual romance. In three of them, male desire constitutes the main plot, and all three protagonists win the girl.<sup>60</sup>

I will begin by analyzing one such book about a male wolf who seeks the affection of a female wolf. The title of *Le loup qui cherchait une amoureuse* (*The Wolf Who Was Seeking a Sweetheart*) indicates that any female might do. Though charming, the picturebook reinforces the tropes of male conquest and female seduction. The wolf is given behavioral advice and appearance tips to convince a potential lover: he must be original, speak well, and offer flowers. In the end, though, he wins the lady without trying. In a decisive act signifying female agency, she invites him to her home. Though it is merely an invitation for tea, her advance seems possibly promiscuous, reinforced by the flirtatious smile on her face. The text of the story ends by describing him with "beating heart, liquid legs, and chocolate heart" as he follows the female wolf home.

Because this wolf is the hero of a highly successful series, simplistic stories may suffice for readers who are presumed to be already sympathetic to his character. According to children's literature expert Marie Lallouet, the protagonist endears himself to readers with his atypical wolf personality and his "outlandish muzzle"; according to his author and creator Oriane Lallemant, he is the "anti-wolf."<sup>61</sup> This tickle may be enough to allow gender stereotypes to pass through. In fact, the *Le Loup qui...* brand is the primary profit maker for publisher Auzou, which has turned its "flagship protagonist"<sup>62</sup> into a product line of games, playing cards, plush toys, homework books, puzzles, calendars, figurines, stickers, and temporary tattoos. Over 200 objects form the brand.<sup>63</sup> *Le Loup qui...* books have been translated into almost every regional language in France, several forms of creole, as well as English and German. Auzou created an offshoot series, *P'tit Loup* (*Little Wolf*), for younger children: 138 books or derivative products are listed on its website.<sup>64</sup> In 2018, 78 seven-minute animated episodes of *Le Loup qui...* hit television screens, and season two began in 2020.<sup>65</sup> With this kind of commercial success, the mass appeal surely lies in a combination of the modern illustration, the easy humor, and the simplistic gendering that also employs stereotypic tropes, which small children may not understand as such.



*Solange et l'ange* (*Solange and the Angel*) offers a more complicated narrative about love relationships – in this case between a female pig and a male angel – whose progressive opening situation diverges into instances of female sexualization and humiliation. In the beginning of the story, Solange lives independently in her home, more interested in eating, learning, and painting than in housework. An avid museum-goer, she appropriates the male gaze by regularly admiring a naked angel in her favorite painting at the Louvre. Once the angel leaps out of the tableau, however, he takes over the story. As Little Angel interrogates Solange about her gazing, she is illustrated in a defensive position: petite, with arms crossed on a huge

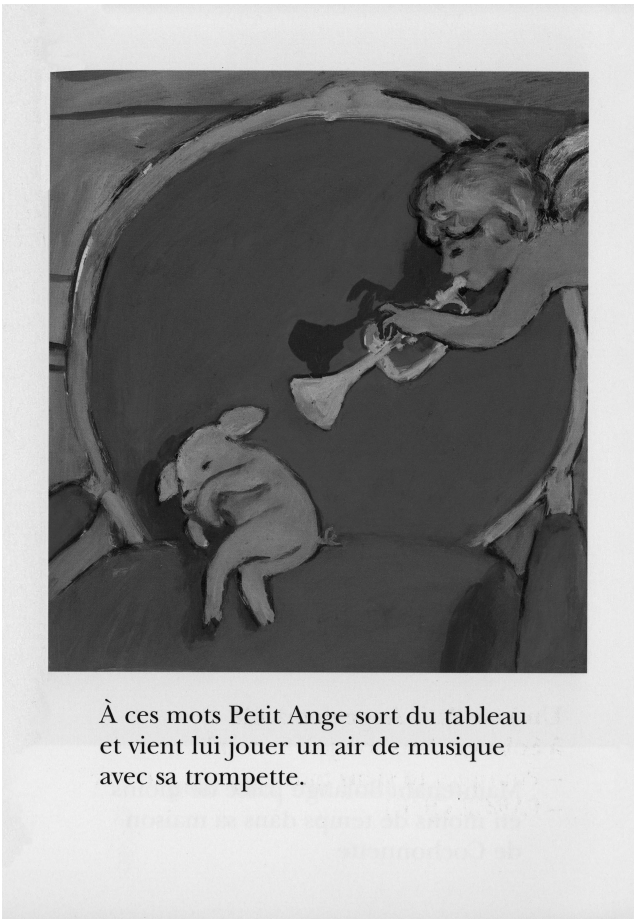


Figure 2.5 A page from *Solange et l'ange*. Courtesy of Thierry Magnier/Georg Hallensleben © Editions Gallimard.

chair, and even more submissively when he blows a trumpet into her ear (see Figure 2.5). The soft words on the page, “Little Angel is playing a musical air for her,” contradict the image, which shows Solange in fetal position turned away from the trumpet blare, the crack of her bottom at the center of the illustration.<sup>66</sup>

On the next page, Solange is changed. She spends more of her time seeking encounters with her new love. One day, he introduces her to a statue of a female beauty that renders Solange jealous. In response to her jealousy, he kisses her. In this image – which also appears on the front cover – Solange smiles meekly, her hands and arms imprisoned in his embrace. The combination of Solange’s jealousy and the kiss that resolves it serves to maintain both characters in their binary gender roles. Since the angel can never leave the museum, Solange becomes a museum guard to be near him. She dons clothes for the first time – a masculine guard uniform with overalls and cap. It is difficult for an adult reader to make sense of this story, still less what a child might infer from it. Written by well-known author-editor Thierry Magnier and illustrated by the highly successful Georg Hallensleben who offers shades of Boucher and Ingres in these pages,<sup>67</sup> *Solange et l’ange* seems primarily to be a celebration of French cultural patrimony and a product of this duo simply having a good time; gender hierarchies were likely not on their minds. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: while Solange is initially a free agent – the one who gazes – the dynamic is reversed by the story’s conclusion.

Adult couples in parenting roles exhibit a significant number of gender stereotypes in several books, as we have already seen with absent fathers. Five picturebooks, *La baby-sitter*, *L’invitation*, *Du bout des doigts*, *Moi, je boude*, and *Hip hop*, all feature boy protagonists who try to get their way in their domestic households, but more significantly, these five stories delegate highly stereotyped gender behaviors to the parents of the boys and implicate the couples in stereotypic relational roles. I will examine three of them.

*L’invitation* portrays a maternal figure with overt denigration. The story is of a young male bear overcoming boredom at his grandparents’ home. The second page opens to a textbook version of gender-stereotyped illustration: grandfather is seated with a newspaper spread widely before him, while grandmother is standing, clothed in a neck-to-knee kitchen apron, and managing the grandson’s whining (see Figure 2.6). The boy makes an offensive remark to his grandmother, and the author’s explanation of the remark further dismisses her: “He thought that a grandmother is kind of like a mother, she’s just *there*.” The grandson ultimately sets out into the woods to find friends. The three animals he meets are gendered by their species’ linguistic assignment. The first two are male: *le lapin* (rabbit) and *le blaireau* (badger) who decline his invitation to come over for a snack, either because they find it threatening (coming from a bear) or simply



Figure 2.6 Page two of *L'invitation*. Courtesy of © L'Ecole des loisirs, Paris © Olga Lecaye © Grégoire Solotareff.

uninteresting. The third, *une grenouille* (frog), offers a skin-deep excuse: she is too busy oiling her legs for a darker suntan, and she has an imminent appointment at the hairstylist. The bear returns home alone dejected but ultimately changes mood. As he bakes a cake – something his father taught him to do – he ruminates on his parent’s culinary tendencies. While dad is the playful baker of delicious things, “All that [mom] cooks is noodles and chicken. Never cake.” Grandfather affirms, “It is very important to know how to make cake in life.” Later that evening, grandmother makes... “guess what? Of course: noodles and chicken, just like mom!” The text drips with disdain toward the boring women. The story ends with grandmother reading little bear a bedtime story. Grandfather is nowhere in sight.<sup>68</sup>

*Du bout des doigts* (*At Arm’s Length*) is a story about a boy Raoul who uses his freakishly long arm to perform acts of kindness for his friend Josette that manifest attentiveness, generosity, and a yearning for connection, without the slightest romantic suggestion. These characteristics send positive messages to child readers of any sex, even if Josette is merely the receiver of Raoul’s sentiments. The parents’ division of labor depicted in the images, however, undermines the narrative and reveals gendered stereotypes. In two scenes, Raoul’s father and Josette’s father are reading a book while their spouses do nothing. While Josette’s father is kicking a ball

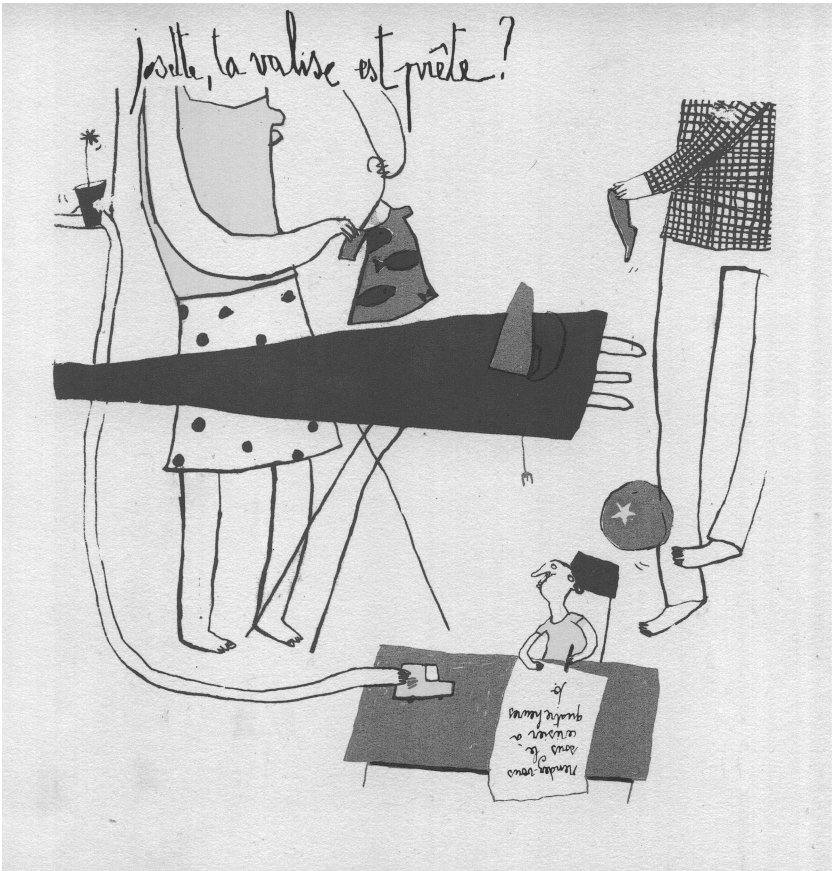


Figure 2.7 A page from *Du bout des doigts*. Courtesy of Camille Sauvage.

in one scene, her mother is ironing (see Figure 2.7). In another, her father is driving the car while her mother is in the passenger seat. As background, these pictures do the unspoken work of reinforcing traditional gender roles for readers.

*Hip hop* is a book that lives up to the standards of the older brother/little sister gender trope. Gilles comes up with the ideas, does the talking, and dominates Louise to a point where a reader may wonder why the series is titled *Gilles et Louise*.<sup>69</sup> In this comic-strip-style book's 70 dialogue frames, Louise has a speaking role in only six. The paradigm of Gilles lording it over Louise goes unexamined in this story: their dynamic is never challenged by their parents, nor by the author. Female subordination is thus normalized for readers in *Hip hop*, even though Gilles has female friends. When he wants to offer one a truck, rifle, or sword for her birthday, his

mother urges him to find a more “girl appropriate” gift. Consistently, Louise receives a doll and Gilles a truck at Christmas. In another chapter, Gilles gets angry when his mother will not let his friend come over to play. In four frames, he physically attacks his sister’s doll as a stand-in for mom: he flattens her with a rolling pin, cooks her in the play oven, poisons her, and beats her with a fly swatter. In the final frame of this chapter, Gilles gives up, exhausted, and proclaims, “It’s not easy to kill your mom.” Three of the ten chapters feature only mom and the children, suggesting that she is the primary caregiver and that domestic chores are her main occupation. She picks up the children up from school, works in the kitchen, does laundry, and waters plants. In a final chapter when Gilles’s friend sleeps over, the mother ultimately sacrifices herself on a child-sized mattress thrown on the floor, giving her husband the largest available bed because he has to “wake up early.” The suggestion is that, because of an implied paid job, he deserves a better night’s sleep than she.

*Stereotypic Social and Professional Status: Women Circumscribed as Mothers or Assistants*

One might not expect to encounter parents again in a category of stereotypes about social and professional status. But because few children know much about the adult world of paid work, and because many women are depicted solely in the role of motherhood in children’s books, stereotypes about social and professional status must include analysis of parenting, albeit from a different angle than stereotypic adult relationships. The dominance of mothers in a parenting role is so pervasive throughout the library sample that in books where there is no father present at all, books with single-mothering examples are not categorized in Table 2.4 as stereotypic adult relationships but rather as stereotypic social and professional status. Seven books in the sample (14%) depict mothers parenting alone: *La fessée de Mariette et Soupier* (*Mariette and Soupier’s Spanking*), *La petite fille... et la souris* (*The Little Girl and the Mouse*) *Ma nounou, c’est pas ma maman!*, *Mademoiselle Sauve-qui-peut* (*Miss Run-For-Your-Life*) *Minouchet trouve un ami* (*Minouchet Finds a Friend*) and the two docu-fictions, *En attendant la pluie* (*Waiting for the Rain*) and *Un bébé tombé du ciel* (*A Baby Fallen from the Sky*).<sup>70</sup> In comparison, only two books in the sample (4%) tell stories of fathers without co-parents: one is *Ernest and Célestine*, which is devoid of gender stereotyping and will be analyzed later. The other is *L’arbre à Kadabras*, the story of a son abandoned by his father.

Furthermore, not a single book presents a mother with a professional occupation outside of the home. The library sample includes seven books showing women characters with jobs but they are never mothers and are most often accessory characters appearing in the background of pictures with little to no speaking role. Whereas Solange the pig who becomes a

museum guard is the only female professional who plays a main role in any of the stories, seven of the 31 male professionals play main roles; a seven-to-one ratio of disparity. All the other working females in the library sample are confined to stereotypic female jobs (two nannies, one nursery school teacher, one launderer, three shop employees, one waitress).<sup>71</sup> In contrast to these nine women professionals in the 49 books, males portrayed as having either a paid occupation or important social status appear 31 times in the sample, not even counting the innumerable male cameos in *Chalumeau le dragon*. The male workers in the sample also tend to be in a wide range of exciting fields, some of which are nevertheless stereotypically masculine such as captain, fisherman, professor, dentist, forest ranger, barber, crane operator, artist, pirate. Among the 31 male workers, six also have paternal status in their stories, in comparison to zero overlap between women workers and mothers.

Mothering is the primary occupation that appears repetitively throughout the stories for both sexes and is inseparable from social status. One example is particularly complex. *Peau noire peau blanche* (*Black Skin White Skin*) is a text about racism and migration, but it also conveys tropes about a father-as-provider and a stay-at-home mother. Issam has a Black Senegalese father, a white – presumably French – mother, and four siblings. They move around France as the father looks for employment as a crane operator. Each time they move, Issam repeats his attempts to fit in but is increasingly bullied by white boys. His brothers protect him and his mother consoles him throughout. Ultimately, the family moves to Senegal where dad will be a boss and wear a suit. Once there, Issam's white mother suffers from exclusion because of *her* skin color, and Issam consoles her in reciprocation. The message is that racism will always follow a mixed-race family. One may wonder whether the gender representations in *Peau noire peau blanche* were purposeful authorial choices to reflect what might be a common gender-differentiated domestic structure for families moving between places for jobs. At any rate, Issam's mother plays the secondary role in the story. She has no occupation – paid or unpaid – as opposed to the father whose destiny determines that of the whole family. Despite the story's focus on race, it is the mother's gender that affects her place in both the domestic and social spheres. Yet even more salient to a child reader may be the differing activities for Issam's sisters and brothers depicted in the illustrations. The girls play with dolls and jump rope, whereas the boys watch television and kick a ball. In one double-page spread (Figure 2.8), the sisters pack the family belongings while the brothers sit around idly. The book's images are reinforced by gender disparities in the text: the brothers are the ones to protect Issam from bullies, and the girls have no speaking role.

In two books in the library sample, stereotypic representations of social and professional status co-occur with gender stereotyping within



Figure 2.8 A page from *Peau noire peau blanche*. Courtesy of Yves Bichet/Mireille Vautier © Editions Gallimard.

romantic relationships. Both *Petite plume* and *Un baiser à la figue* depict a female-male couple where the man is professionally engaged and the woman is derivative. The two women in the sample act as amanuenses to their romantic partners, conveying a double message to child readers: males can do interesting work in life and females can live in their shadows. In *Petite plume*, the first paragraph presents Monsieur and Madame: “Professor Plume carefully observed the birds all day long. His spouse, Madeleine, especially liked their songs.” He is first; she is second. He is a titled professional with a last name; she is on a first-name basis. He is science, she does art appreciation. The double-page picture conveys this dualism further: they are leaning out of windows to connect with the birds; he is a level above her on the third floor, analyzing a bird with a magnifying glass while she is feeding the birds below (see Figure 2.9).

In a story that riffs on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the male artist’s passion drives the narrative and the female is his assistant. *Un baiser à la figue* focuses on “Monsieur Cyril,” an artist whose large nose is both an object of ridicule and the source of his talent. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the mélange of garlic, onions, and herbs sautéing in olive oil inspire him to paint passionately all night long. His tableaux are filled with the colors of his olfactory intake. “The pretty Roxanne” is nonplussed by his nose, understands his gift, and becomes his muse

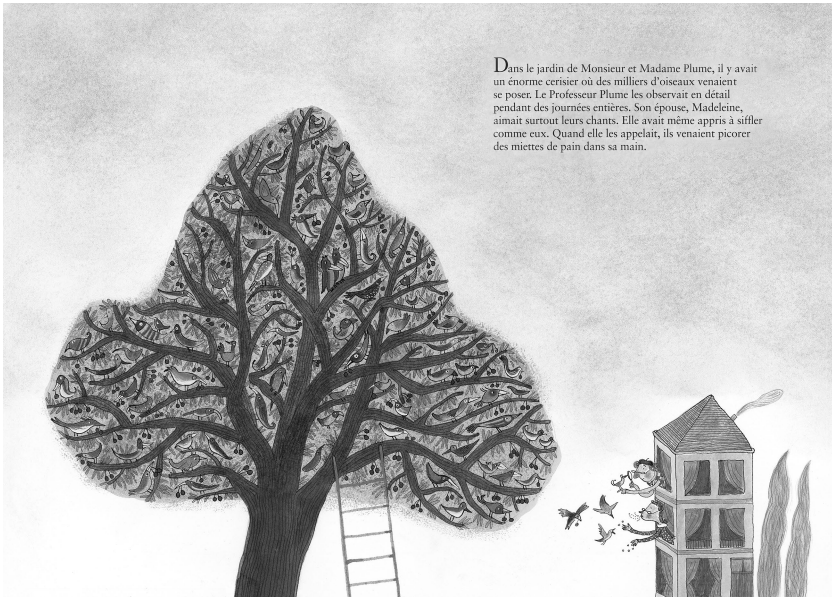


Figure 2.9 The first page of *Petite plume*. Courtesy of Kristien Aertssen © L'École des loisirs.

by encouraging him to discover a great variety of odors. The story culminates with Roxanne taking the artist through farmers' markets in the countryside. Under a fig tree, they kiss. (The title is a play on words with “a kiss on the cheek” – “*figure*,” and “a fig kiss” – “*figue*.”) Monsieur Cyril promptly opens his easel and executes an explosive painting, which is seen on the next page hanging in a museum (see Figure 2.10). Whereas the story concludes with the artist reaching the pinnacle of success, Roxanne's role remains that of a passive assistant.

#### *Stereotypic Visual Imagery: Femininity and the Male = Neutral Trope*

For pre-readers, the pictures in picturebooks play an outsized role in their socialization. Several books in the library sample contain stereotypic visual imagery among other gender stereotypes. Table 2.4 distinguishes three kinds of gender-stereotyped visual imagery: physical appearance, which considers the depiction of individual characters of both sexes; framing, which considers the foregrounding, backgrounding, sizing, and placing of characters in relation to each other; and setting, which considers a visual scene in its evocative wholeness. Twenty-seven of 49 books (55%) in the sample exhibit stereotypic visual images, 23 of which (47% of the sample)



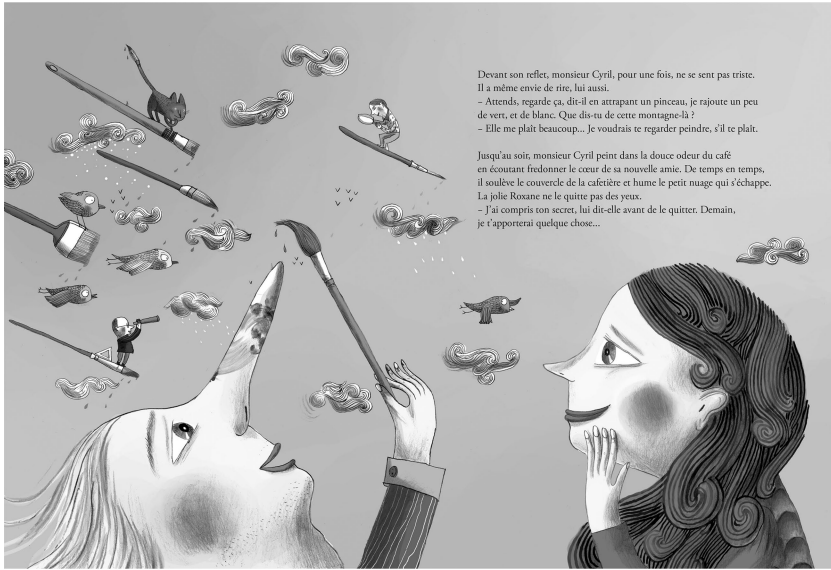


Figure 2.10 A page from *Un baiser à la figue*. Courtesy of Raphaële Frier/Clotilde Perrin © 2009 Mango jeunesse, Paris.

fall under the subcategory of physical appearance. Nine books (18%) contain multiple types of stereotypic imagery. Even when both sexes are stereotyped by physical appearance or multiple stereotypical appearances of one sex occur in the same story, Table 2.4 only recognizes that this type of gender stereotyping exists in the book regardless of a number of instances.

Let us be clear. Given the gender binarity that is still universal in children's books and the few tactics available for illustrators to distinguish their characters, almost every character, males included, can be considered visually gendered. Nevertheless, the visual imagery in children's literature generally depicts males neutrally, and females are differentiated from that norm. Whereas males are typically drawn with short hair and pants, the default device for alternatively identifying females has been via long hair and skirts. In my methodology, only counted in Table 2.4 are heavily accessorized female characters (jewelry, hair bows, pink clothing, high heels); females with accentuated physical characteristics such as eye-lashes, breasts, or lips; and females in seductive positions or mid-action in stereotypically feminine activities like ironing or cooking. A subset of images of females wearing aprons is so ubiquitous as to deserve reflection.<sup>72</sup> Two kinds of aprons emerge in the library books' imagery: aprons worn in or around the home related to domestic chores (100% of these cases in the sample are worn by females, found in eight books) and aprons

worn while exercising a paid occupation such as working in a food market or a florist shop (four women and one man in the sample). Male characters are considered physically gendered and included in Table 2.4 if they are wearing neckties (which signify not only masculinity but also professional status), if they are wielding objects associated with stereotypically masculine activities, such as footballs or axes, or if they are drawn in stereotypically masculine activities such as reading the newspaper while their wife cooks. However, most of the stereotypic physical appearances in the library sample are, in fact, female examples, given the male = neutral gender trope.<sup>73</sup> Simone de Beauvoir first identified the trope in 1949 in *The Second Sex*: “[M]an represents both the positive and the neutral, to the point that in French the word “men” is used to mean human beings. [...] Humanity is male and man defines the woman not in and of herself but relative to him.”<sup>74</sup> Other studies of gender representations in children’s literature have documented the male = neutral trope, in particular regarding analyses of reader reception. I will return to this theme in future chapters.

Most of the books in the library sample that contain gendered visual imagery also exhibit other types of gender stereotypes. Two books contain only gendered visual imagery without other stereotypes: *La dent* and *Mademoiselle Sauve-qui-peut*. The latter is a 1996 take on Little Red Riding Hood. The twist in this story by well-known author, Philippe Corentin, turns Red into a ferocious trickster who sends anyone in her path running for their lives, including the wolf. The adaptation’s empowering of Red offers a simple reversal of the tale’s traditional power relationship without questioning the system of violence. Furthermore, *Mademoiselle* is illustrated with an unflattering hairstyle and facial features, a frumpy dress, and a steady evil grin, reproducing the trope that to be a powerful female is to be unattractive. Nevertheless, *Mademoiselle Sauve-qui-peut* won the annual prize from the prestigious Société des gens de lettres in 1997 and was a runner-up selection from the International Board on Books for Young People, demonstrating that a feminist retelling of Red – however simplistic and regardless of innumerable competing examples from various linguistic traditions – was evidently a welcome addition to French children’s literature in the late 1990s.

### *Books without Gender Stereotypes*

After this exposé of eight categories of gender stereotypes, it is important to consider the potential of positive or balanced gender representations by examining picturebooks in the library sample that are stereotype-free and were not demarcated in Table 2.4. Eight books (16%) are examples of nonsexist children’s literature.<sup>75</sup> Some of them nevertheless contain

complicated messages about gender, and this final section will analyze a selection of them.

Two books in this category of positive gender depiction, *Un bébé tombé du ciel* and *En attendant la pluie*, are docu-fictions, stories about nature that are humanized via the naming of animal characters and the dramas in which they take part. Such hybrids are challenging for librarians to classify.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, librarians value such books for their child readers. Hélène Weis's research on librarians' recommended book lists showed that "From L'Heure joyeuse to La Joie par les livres, librarians are unanimous in their praise of the way that fictionalized nonfiction seduces readers."<sup>77</sup> Coincidentally, these two books in the sample – both classified in the fiction section of the school library – are part of the same collection, Archimède, published by L'Ecole des loisirs. Because the goal of the collection is evidently to instruct readers about natural behavior in the animal kingdom – both docu-fictions feature a scientific postface describing the species – the stories succeed perhaps more easily than most fictional picturebooks in portraying neutral gender roles. Both of these stories depict mothers who assume protective roles over their young, in particular, in roles marked by instinct and strength.

Two stories devoid of gender stereotypes grant a solo adventure to a girl protagonist: *Le rêve de Camille* and *Suzanne*. The title character of *Suzanne* whispers goodbye to her dog Hélice before embarking on a solo flight to faraway places. What she wants is to meet animals who do more than just wag their tails. Her first discovery is a Greek island where cats and dogs actually like each other. Suzanne wishes she could share this revelation with Hélice. At the South Pole, she marvels at the penguins' everyday tuxedos. She wants to teach Hélice to dress as well as they do. Eventually, she begins to tire and realizes that she simply wants to see a dog wagging its tail. She heads home, where Hélice is waiting. The reunification offers the reader the lesson that there is no place like home. *Suzanne* is boldly illustrated with modern flair. Although the message that home is more important than quest may appear gendered, many such examples abound in children's literature featuring boy characters, most notably Max, in *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963).

*L'île du monstreil* also permits a real adventure to a girl protagonist, albeit while sharing the main role with a boy her age. The book employs a narrative frame in which two male beavers observe two children, Elvire and Léon, and reflect on the state of "youth today." One beaver complains that children are no longer as handy or smart as they used to be. The observation emerges into a test that is shared with the reader but unbeknownst to the two main characters. As soon as they step in a boat, the beaver detaches them from shore, provoking an escapade to measure the children's mettle. The nested stories continue to intersect as the

beavers narrate and influence the events faced by the children. Gender tropes of passive female and active male are swapped at the very beginning. After surviving the river rapids and landing on the island of *Monstril*, an invented word harking to “monster” and rhyming with *île* (island), the pair encounters multiple challenges. The tasks are shared in interesting ways: she does the intellectual work to start a fire and he builds it; he catches a fish, she whacks it dead, and he cooks it. Gender norms reestablish, however, when the monster is finally upon them. Léon tells Elvire to “hang on” as he orchestrates their escape. Despite the final damsel-rescue trope, *L'île du monstril* subtly inverts a number of gendered automatisms without resorting to simplistic role reversals. This book is on the Ministry of Education’s Eduscol recommended list for grades in Cycle 3 in 2018, indicating an approval of its literary merit and generating a wider readership than normally would be expected.<sup>78</sup>

Though it is one of the oldest books in the library sample (1993), *Gafi et le trésor du monstre* has a modern feel and portrays the sexes in neutral ways. Two girls, two boys, and Gafi the ghost constitute a gang of friends who share adventures throughout this series. In this episode, a treasure hunt involves vanquishing a monster who is protecting a chest of books. Although Gafi and the monster are both male, and the triumph of one over the other involves a good deal of slapstick violence, the human girls and boys share equal doses of initiative, action, and speaking roles. The size and quantity of image placements are also equitably distributed among the sexes. When their names are listed, the order always follows as such: Mélanie, Rachid, Pascale, Arthur, in what seems like a conscious authorial choice of girl, boy, girl, boy. The success of the first Gafi book led to a full book series, and the ghost character and his four human friends have been adapted into school workbooks for reading literacy.

*Ernest et Célestine: les questions de Célestine* (*Célestine’s Questions*) is the last picturebook in a highly successful series that began in 1981 and ended with the death of its Belgian author-illustrator, Gabrielle Vincent. The series provides snapshots into the domestic life of Ernest, an adult male bear, and Célestine, an infant female mouse he adopted. More than two dozen books compose this series, a half dozen of which won awards. A Franco-Belgian-Luxembourgeois film based on the series was released in 2012, garnering a box office success, a César award for best animated film, and an Academy Award nomination. The adaptation was written by well-known author Daniel Pennac, with voiceover by star Lambert Wilson. In 2017, a 26-episode television series based on *Ernest and Célestine* launched on the channel France 5. In other words, of the 49 books in the library sample, *Ernest et Célestine* is one of the most popular among 21st-century francophone children. The book’s overall neutral portrayal of gender, therefore, touches many child readers. The book in the sample,

*Les questions de Célestine*, offers a flashback to Célestine's origins and to the main characters' first encounter. Célestine wants to know where Ernest found her ("Was it a garbage can?") and how she got there. Together, they traverse an emotional landscape as Célestine comprehends the enormity of the abandonment and the rescue that marked her birth. Vincent's drawings convey with delicacy the body language of intense feelings. The father-daughter relationship – one that is very rarely developed in children's literature – exudes tenderness without any power dynamic. The adoption that was always unspoken throughout the series is now finally elucidated. The raw emotion exuded by both characters – Célestine in her childlike need to know; Ernest in his parental instinct of softening the blow – is universal and free of gender bias.

### Conclusion

My combined quantitative and qualitative analyses of the picturebooks in the sample lead to serious implications of the representations of gender found in 21st-century French libraries. The great majority of picturebooks exhibit stereotypic behaviors, relationships, or socio-professional status. Books in the sample proffer both visual and textual stereotypes to readers: 27 of 49 books (55%) contain stereotyped pictures and 38 books (78%) contain stereotypes in their textual storytelling. Masculine stereotyping is just as common as feminine stereotyping, in large part due to the significant number of instances of violent behavior ascribed to male characters. Feminine stereotypes in the library books lean especially toward domesticity tropes, with several instances of sexualizing and denigrating portrayals of female characters.<sup>79</sup> Stories that stereotype females also stereotype males; these co-occurrences exist in 12 books or 24% of the sample. Adult characters are much more stereotyped than child characters, manifested particularly in parenting relationships and in socio-professional differences between the adult sexes. A key quantitative finding of this chapter is the significant absence of females on library shelves. In what can feel like a zero-sum game; every time a story portrays a boy hero or a mother engaged in parenting – neither of which is negative – it risks reifying gender inequalities and limiting the thought horizons for readers of any sex. Of course, a single story cannot be held to represent all of human experience for all sexes. Even the library books that received no X's in Table 2.4 are ultimately just narratives that do *not* vehicle common gender stereotypes. Any one book can span multiple stereotypic taxonomies and be progressive and sexist at same time. The aggregate reality of the nearly 50 books in this chapter's sample, however, is that the world that 21st-century French libraries present to young readers is filled with gender stereotypes.

Librarians have been making careful acquisitions and deletions of their collections since the 1920s when L'Heure joyeuse made it a practice to vet every book before purchase, as described in Chapter 1. A century later, many individual municipal libraries and consortia of libraries have standing *comités de lecture* (reading committees) that share decision-making. This is an especially important task given the explosion in the number of children's books since the late 20th century (over 18,500 French children's literature titles published in 2022<sup>80</sup>). Through sharing and comparing, librarians pool their expertise to distinguish quality books from mediocre ones and to choose new titles to complement their existing collections.<sup>81</sup> What the sample in this chapter makes clear, however, is that gender equality is not a standard criterion for a "quality" book in municipal and school libraries.

Some activist associations and library consortiums have made attempts in the last decades to encourage gender-conscious acquisition and weeding.<sup>82</sup> In 2011, French and Belgian specialists published a set of principles for libraries to diversify their collections, calling for more books authored and illustrated by women, more books with diverse characters, and more books in which gender is presented in non-stereotypical ways. Instead of segregating feminist children's books in a special section of the library, they recommended that labels be used to help readers identify nonsexist picturebooks. Storytimes and writing contests should be organized, this consortium argued, around books selected for their neutral and egalitarian qualities. The report also advised librarians to "wear gender glasses" alongside young readers to teach them critical awareness. Finally, the group published recommended lists of gender-equal picturebooks.<sup>83</sup>

The Institut EgaliGone hosted a 2013 workshop for librarians, "On the Hunt for a Nonsexist Library."<sup>84</sup> Because of the kinds of books that children's publishers continue to market, this association lamented that it was "next to impossible to stock a library with only egalitarian picturebooks." To rectify the supply, it recommended four criteria for library acquisitions: numerical parity in characters, a mix of sociocultural roles and situations, a wide variety of physical and personality traits for female and male characters, and non-sexualized characters. The workshop also urged librarians to use picturebooks with sexist stereotypes as learning opportunities with children.<sup>85</sup>

In other examples, students in ENSSIB organized a colloquia in June 2018, "Sexist? Not Us! How Libraries Can Work against Gender Stereotypes and Discriminations."<sup>86</sup> And the Médiathèque départementale of Ille-et-Vilaine in Rennes organized a one-day roundtable and workshop in 2019, "In Favor of Non-Sexist Libraries."<sup>87</sup> Such actions that continue into the 2020s make blatant two beliefs of many librarians and other activists: first, that

publishers have not created enough children's stories that present diversified and balanced gender norms, and second, that librarians must establish standardized criteria regarding gender equality in their collections.

Activist librarians have taken steps toward change in recent years, not just in the quiet acquisition and weeding processes, but also via recommended book lists, events, and labeling.<sup>88</sup> As Chapter 1 showed, recommended book lists are central to librarians' efforts to shape the supply of books, and a method that some have deployed to move the dial on gender representations. The national Association des bibliothécaires de France (ABF) assembles book recommendations by theme such as gender, LBGQT identity, and interculturalities.<sup>89</sup> The CNLJ of the French National Library published a 14-page list of books, "Filles et garçons: égalité?" in 2014, updated in 2019. Les Médiathèques Pleine Commune in greater Paris publishes a list of recommended children's books regarding gender.<sup>90</sup> Several bibliographies presenting positive gender role models for multiple age groups are offered by the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.<sup>91</sup> Laura Vallet of the Bibliothèque Fessart in Paris's 19th arrondissement posts an anti-sexist picturebook list on her blog "Picturebook Girl: Resources for Anti-Sexist Children's Literature."<sup>92</sup> These are just a few examples of librarians' recommended book lists that are generally updated regularly and featured prominently on library websites. Libraries across France often host events or distribute brochures for their users in favor of gender equality. Sometimes events are coordinated around International Women's Day or Queer Week.<sup>93</sup> Another tool at their disposal is labeling, to help users find the nonsexist books in their collection. The Médiathèque Olympe de Gouges in Strasbourg labeled gender-equal books in its collection with stickers saying "Plus juste, plus égalitaire" ("fair and equal").<sup>94</sup> Multiple initiatives of librarians' activism to think about gender as professional practice are described in the 2021 volume, *Agir pour l'Égalité*.<sup>95</sup>

Challenges remain. Librarians recognize that their attempts to shape library collections are curtailed by the supply of books produced by publishers. Moreover, feminist activism such as the examples cited above is not universal among librarians.<sup>96</sup> Finally, as Chapter 1 argued, without standardized training, credentialing, and professionalization, and without formalized guidance to make gender equality a criterion in determinations of "quality" literature – legacies of the history of children's libraries – it is unlikely that librarians will be able to systematically stock diverse gender-equal content on their shelves.

## Notes

- 1 Unless published in translation, all translations of book titles are mine.
- 2 Chabrol Gagne, "Le montage dans les albums."

- 3 Davenne, "Martine et les stéréotypes," 273.
- 4 Vivier, Renaud, and Guillain, "Il était une fois les activités physiques de Martine," 157.
- 5 Vivier, Renaud, and Guillain, 175.
- 6 Davenne, "Martine et les stéréotypes," 275.
- 7 Ramsay, "Les stéréotypes dans la littérature jeunesse," 40.
- 8 Ramsay, 71.
- 9 Vivier, Renaud, and Guillain, "Il était une fois les activités physiques de Martine," 158.
- 10 Nelly Chabrol Gagne finds both elements in the Martine series: *Filles d'albums*, 34.
- 11 Ville de Paris, "Bibliothèque Buffon - Ville de Paris."
- 12 Rapport annuel d'activité, 2015, Bibliothèque Buffon, Mairie de Paris.
- 13 Unless otherwise noted, the information for this section comes from Zamour, Personal Interview.
- 14 For an account of the bookstore-library economic relationship, see Fransolet, Defrance, and Ponté, "Les libraires."
- 15 See Vallet, "La Naissance."
- 16 See Heywood, "Fighting 'On the Side of Little Girls,'" 217-18.
- 17 Certain modifications were made in La ville brûle's 2018 re-issue to eliminate lingering gender biases and heteronormative assumptions from the original text. For example, one of the activities that girls like to do, "talk about God," was changed to "talk about the cosmos." The author and editor agreed that the cosmos better captured the author's original intention of showing that girls enjoyed discussing elevated, philosophical topics. Email communication with Marianne Zuzula, cofounder and editorial director of La ville brûle, 26 April 2020.
- 18 Unless otherwise noted, the information for this section comes from Poirier and Jourdeuil, Personal Interview.
- 19 Kortenhuis and Demarest, "Gender Role Stereotyping in Children's Literature," 222.
- 20 Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place," 274.
- 21 Barnett, "Sex Bias in the Helping Behavior," 345-46.
- 22 See also graduate theses from the 1970s that used library samples: Koss, "Picture Book Sexism"; La Dow, "A Content-Analysis of Selected Picture Books."
- 23 Turner-Bowker, "Gender Stereotyped Descriptors in Children's Picture Books," 475.
- 24 Kortenhuis and Demarest, "Gender Role Stereotyping in Children's Literature," 227.
- 25 Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place," 278.
- 26 This would not have posed a problem in the reverse, since less than 2% of children's books published in the US and Britain are translations. See O'Sullivan, "Comparative Children's Literature," 191.
- 27 Faure-Poirée, Personal Interview.
- 28 *Le loup qui...* series by Orianne Lallemand and Eléonore Thuillier counted six of its books in the top 100 most borrowed library books in 2018 (after the 118-plus books in the Max et Lili series - 92 of the top 100 borrowed books - were eliminated), though the actual book in the sample, *Le loup qui cherchait une amoureuse*, was not one of the six. Ministère de la Culture, "Baromètre des prêts et des acquisitions, Palmarès 2018," 46-52.
- 29 Nail, Personal Interview.



- 30 Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place," 277.
- 31 See Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*.
- 32 *Du bout des doigts; Hip hop; Ma nounou, c'est pas ma maman!; Martine à la mer; La chasse aux pirates; Gafi et le trésor du monstre; Le rêve de Camille; Suzanne; Minouchet trouve un ami; La fessée de Mariette et Soupir*.
- 33 *Un baiser à la figue; Le loup qui cherchait une amoureuse; Jean Toutou et Marie Pompon; Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit; Solange et l'ange*.
- 34 *Larirette et Catimini, au jardin de Luxembourg; Ernest et Célestine: les questions de Célestine; Un bébé tombé du ciel; En attendant la pluie; La petite soeur de Lisa; Ma p'tite couche*.
- 35 *Petite plume; Et après...; Petite feuille et le grand chêne*.
- 36 *La petite fille... et la souris; Noël; Blanche dune*.
- 37 *Perlette, goutte d'eau; Les deux maisons*.
- 38 Respectively, *Mademoiselle Sauve-qui-peut* and *Le roi crocodile*.
- 39 *La baby-sitter; Moi, je boude; L'invitation*.
- 40 *C'est moi le plus fort; Dans la gueule du monstre; Chalumeau le dragon*.
- 41 *Peau noire peau blanche; Grignotin et Mentalo; L'arbre à Kadabras*.
- 42 Texier, *Lili vient d'un autre pays*.
- 43 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 27.
- 44 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, 35.
- 45 DeLoache, Cassidy, and Carpenter, "The Three Bears Are All Boys."
- 46 Arthur and White, "Children's Assignment of Gender."
- 47 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "Les représentations du masculin et du féminin dans les albums illustrés," 265.
- 48 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, 272.
- 49 If an unnamed character in a story was part of the title but that person was not the main character, I counted it as not identifiable; for example, in *Ma nounou, c'est pas ma maman!* the nanny in the story is a central character but not a main character, and she is never named but only referred to as "my nanny."
- 50 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 27–28.
- 51 O'Sullivan, *Friend and Foe*, 38.
- 52 The term is commonly attributed to Tuchman, *Hearth and Home*.
- 53 See Détrez and Lallouet, "J'aime pas lire..."
- 54 Curry, "Bums, Poops, and Pees."
- 55 Anderson and Hamilton, "Gender Role Stereotyping of Parents in Children's Picture Books."
- 56 Cromer, "Le masculin n'est pas un sexe," 104.
- 57 On gendered violence in children's literature, see Houadec, "Masculin-féminin dans la littérature de jeunesse"; Houadec, "Le genre et les modèles amoureux dans la littérature de jeunesse."
- 58 *C'est moi le plus fort; Chalumeau le dragon; Dans la gueule du monstre; Hip hop; La chasse aux pirates; Le roi crocodile; and Les deux maisons*.
- 59 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "Les représentations du masculin et du féminin dans les albums illustrés."
- 60 *Jean Toutou et Marie Pompon; Le loup qui cherchait une amoureuse; and Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit*.
- 61 Lallouet, "Le loup qui cassait la baraque," 205–6.
- 62 Auzou, "Qui sommes-nous?"
- 63 Auzou, "Loup."
- 64 Auzou, "P'tit Loup."

- 65 Samka, "Loup (saison 1)."
- 66 On the interplay of words and pictures, see Nodelman, *Words about Pictures*, 196.
- 67 Marcia Brennan, Email communication, 17 March 2014.
- 68 One study of children's magazines found that grandmothers were significantly more present than grandfathers. See Dafflon Novelle, "Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles," 98.
- 69 I found only one other book in the series.
- 70 Another eight books depict mothers parenting alongside fathers, six of which exhibit a marked imbalance of roles with women doing most housework and childcare: *Du bout des doigts; Et après...; Hip hop; La baby-sitter; La petite soeur de Lisa; Ma p'tite couche; Moi, je boude; Peau noire peau blanche*. Incidental cameos by parents in *Le crocodile et les six nains; Le garçon qui ne connaissait pas la peur*; or *Martine à la mer* are not counted.
- 71 Respectively, *La chasse aux pirates; Ma nounou, c'est pas ma maman!; Calinours va à l'école; Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit; Jean Toutou et Marie Pompon; Hip hop*. A single picture of a woman selling goods at a market also appears in *Martine à la mer* and *Peau noire peau blanche*.
- 72 See also Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "Les représentations du masculin et du féminin dans les albums illustrés," 286.
- 73 See Cromer, "Le masculin n'est pas un sexe."
- 74 de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, Tome 1, 16-17.
- 75 *En attendant la pluie; Ernest et Célestine; Gafi et le trésor du monstre; Larirette et Catimini; Le rêve de Camille; L'île du monstre; Suzanne; Un bebe tombé du ciel*.
- 76 Defourny, "Quand les documentaires racontent des histoires," 126.
- 77 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 215.
- 78 See Chapter 3 for analysis of the Eduscol program. Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, "Lectures à l'École: des listes de référence."
- 79 On the degradation of female characters, see Bruel, *L'aventure politique*, 279.
- 80 Syndicat national de l'édition, "Les chiffres de l'édition du SNE: L'édition jeunesse 2022-2023," 1.
- 81 Ezratty, "Un peu, beaucoup, à la folie, passionnément," 18-21.
- 82 Rajput, "Questioning Your Collection."
- 83 Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. "Un autre regard sur la littérature de jeunesse: conseils pratiques." The initiative was called "Ma bibliothèque est sympa dans son genre."
- 84 Institut EgaliGone was founded in 2010 to promote egalitarian socialization for girls and boys.
- 85 L'institut EgaliGone, "Sur la piste."
- 86 Giraud, "Sexiste? Pas notre genre!"
- 87 Médiathèque Ille-et-Vilaine: "Pour une bibliothèque 'non-sexiste'."
- 88 Simonin, "Stéréotypes et littérature jeunesse," 42-60.
- 89 Légothèque, "Légothèque – Bibliothèques, construction de soi et lutte contre les stéréotypes."
- 90 Médiathèques Plaine Commune, "Les malles thématiques."
- 91 Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, "Le Centre de ressources sur le Genre."
- 92 Vallet, "Ressources pour une littérature jeunesse antisexiste."
- 93 Cado, "Après des lectures par des drag-queens, une bibliothèque menacée."
- 94 Giraud, "Sexiste? Pas notre genre!"
- 95 Salanouve, *Agir pour l'égalité*.
- 96 Berton-Schmitt, "Les représentations des deux sexes dans la littérature jeunesse contemporaine," 67-71.



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Part II

# Book Clubs



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### 3 The Book Club Landscape

If a child were stopped on a French street and asked to name a picturebook publisher, chances are very good that they would name L'Ecole des loisirs. This publisher has been considered “the grande dame of children’s literature publishers” since the turn of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the cultural magazine *Télérama* called L'Ecole des loisirs “the Gallimard of children’s publishing.”<sup>2</sup> Though its owners portray their company as a modest independent next to giant international conglomerates such as Hachette, almost all actors in French children’s publishing – a landscape characterized by an abundance of tiny houses – regard L'Ecole des loisirs as the industry behemoth that is impossible to dethrone. It is to L'Ecole des loisirs that the other independent publishers compare themselves, since the conglomerates are producing mostly “supermarket” books for children, considered practically another industry altogether.

The reason for L'Ecole des loisirs’ market supremacy is its book club, called Max. The club subscription is promoted, sold, and distributed primarily in French schools, a practice that has raised eyebrows for over four decades at the same time that it has solidified the publisher’s reputation among teachers and parents as an agent for literacy and cultural elevation. Its inducements to students and teachers have for decades implied an imprimatur by the educational establishment on the publisher’s products. Through its curation and promotion of particular titles, Max serves to relieve parents of the need to navigate an overabundant book market, all while acting as a para-pedagogical institution. Like libraries, L'Ecole des loisirs is an institution that holds great sway over the kinds of books that French children can access. Its subscription has immovably cornered a significant piece of the French children’s book market. Although Max forms no part of the official curriculum, its impact is greater than any Ministry of Education initiative to bring picturebooks to students, including, as we saw in Part I, school libraries. Given the few other means of access for students, Max has significant influence.

This chapter will begin with a description of L'Ecole des loisirs' Max book club: its history, mechanics, demographics, and, most importantly, its philosophy and processes of selecting the picturebooks that will be included among the 64 chosen books each year. It will also show how the club has resisted any competition in the French book subscription landscape.

The second section will examine the publisher's carefully fashioned editorial identity to understand why the brand does not prioritize gender equality. L'Ecole des loisirs discourse emphasizes its family-owned independence from the stock market, and it positions itself as a cultural actor rather than a business, one whose mission is to provide children of all classes with access to high literary culture and to socialize young readers into able citizens of a democratic society. The publisher achieves these marketing goals by asserting its commitment to quality literature, which is defined by its artisanal approach to production, canonical books, focus on author-driven creativity, and insistence on pleasure reading over didacticism. I also argue that a universalist belief system shapes the books that are available to children in the Max clubs that are prevalent in French schools. Republican universalism – the French rhetoric surrounding the national motto of liberty, equality, and fraternity that aims to foster unity by de-emphasizing differences – is the pigment that colors attitudes about diversity that are broadly shared. However, this pigment permeates French culture to the degree that it is usually invisible to its beholders.

The third section of the chapter contextualizes the place of Max book clubs in schools by examining a Ministry of Education initiative known as the Eduscol reference lists. According to several studies, representations of gender in the picturebooks on these officially sanctioned recommended reading lists are disproportionate and stereotyped. Attending to gender inequalities has always been a fraught endeavor in French schools, despite multiple inter-ministerial conventions over the decades paying lip service to equity among girls and boys. Any change regarding gender in schools typically causes controversy, a risk that ensures that L'Ecole des loisirs will stay in its lane, abiding by universalism and scrupulously avoiding feminism or other “identity politics” in order to maintain its monopoly.

School is a place of high stakes. A government body, the High Council for Equality between Women and Men, affirmed in a press release announcing its 2017 report on gender and teacher training, “The school is a cradle of socialization and therefore of intellectual, social, and emotional development: students spend about thirty hours a week in school for an average of eighteen years.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, the report echoes many of the same findings that will be revealed in this and the following chapter: that schoolchildren are still regularly exposed to picturebooks – as well as textbooks, teaching methods, and playground dynamics – that potentially socialize them into sexist thinking and behavior. Chapter 4 provides evidence that

the characters, plots, images, narrative styles, symbolism, and other tropes in Max picturebooks reproduce gendered norms and stereotypes in quantitative and qualitative ways.

## L'Ecole des loisirs' Book Club "Max"

### *Roots in the School System*

L'Ecole des loisirs has deep roots in the schools, a fact that the publisher publicizes to justify its school-based book club and one that is reluctantly recognized by its would-be competitors. In its earlier incarnation, Les Editions de l'Ecole was a publisher of textbooks and other pedagogical materials for teachers sold directly to private – essentially Catholic – schools since at least 1922.<sup>4</sup> (Prior to taking over the company, in fact, Raymond Fabry, who became the long-serving head of the publishing house, had been employed in a Catholic school in southwest France.<sup>5</sup>) But a 1959 law named after Minister of Education Michel Debré became a milestone in the centuries-long battles pitting church against state over the education of future citizens. The Debré law provided significant state subsidies to private schools, which were mostly Catholic, on the condition that they follow the state's secular curriculum and practices. Its side effect was to upend the schoolbook market that had been previously split between public and private school clients. Les Editions de l'Ecole's clients essentially evaporated, and the publisher had to compete with textbook publishers already well established in the public system.

Just as the company began responding to the changing politics around French education, its second-generation leaders fell upon a new discovery: pleasure books devoid of any didactic imperative. At the 1963 Frankfurt Book Fair, the owner's son-in-law Jean Fabre, grandson Jean Delas, and young employee Arthur Hubschmid realized that France was far behind other countries in the development of children's literature. Indeed, by the early 1960s, children's books were "big business" in the United States, with the major American publishers earning up to half of their total revenue from children's literature, and in 1963, the legitimacy of the genre was crowned by the opening of the Children's Literature Center in the Library of Congress.<sup>6</sup> Even though the Père Castor books published by Flammarion since the 1930s were revolutionary for their time and still beloved, they were stale and rather didactic. As librarian Jean-Pierre Cressent explains, "Public awareness that a book was a cultural object that could contribute to a child's blossoming (*épanouissement*) had not yet manifested itself" in France.<sup>7</sup> At first as an experimental division of the original publishing house and by 1965 as a separate entity, L'Ecole des loisirs set out to create children's fiction, emphasizing picturebooks for preliterate children.



Given the paucity of French children's authors and illustrators in the mid-1960s, the company initially published translations from abroad, especially from the United States, thereby introducing figures such as Tomi Ungerer, Leo Lionni, and Arnold Lobel to French readers. The publishing house shortly began to develop French talent.<sup>8</sup> The new name, which translates to "The School of Leisure," vividly illustrates the reorientation. But L'Ecole des loisirs never left the schools, even after Les Editions de l'Ecole stopped publishing. In fact, schools have remained the key distribution point for L'Ecole des loisirs' profitable book club, Max.

L'Ecole des loisirs' pivot to picturebooks contributed substantially to the redevelopment of children's publishing in France, such that many historians see its move as giving rise to modern French children's literature. But that would be giving too much credit to one publisher, since as noted in Part I of this book, 1965 was the year that La Joie par les livres opened in Clamart, and as we will discover in Part III, it was the same year that Bayard Presse launched a revolution in children's periodicals with *Pomme d'api*. Nevertheless, while this book does not structure its intentions around a single publisher, L'Ecole des loisirs' book club is a peerless institution, ingrained in the school system, that merits specific treatment.

L'Ecole des loisirs is a family business, still run by members of the Fabre and Delas families, fourth-generation male descendants of the founder. While many publishers in France have been acquired by conglomerates, L'Ecole des loisirs manages to remain independent. This ownership model constitutes a source of pride for the house and is the basis of how it perceives its mission. In 2006, Director-General Jean Delas explained that because the company did not have to answer to quarterly bottom lines and because its editors were not operating on "ejector seats," its decision-making could sustain a more long-term vision, for example by giving unknown authors multiple chances or greenlighting manuscripts unlikely to sell well.<sup>9</sup>

Today L'Ecole des loisirs has expanded to become an umbrella to nearly 20 subcollections of children's literature such as Pastel, Loulou et cie., Mouche, and Kaléidoscope, to graphic novel and theater divisions,<sup>10</sup> and to subsidiaries in Italy and Germany. The publisher is unique in two ways. First, it employs over 100 people and produces around 300 books a year,<sup>11</sup> whereas most French children's publishers are run by a handful of employees and produce fewer than two dozen books per year. Second, unlike Gallimard, another long-lived family firm, and many of the larger children's publishing houses such as Albin Michel, L'Ecole des loisirs has no adult division.<sup>12</sup>

L'Ecole des loisirs' launch in 1975 of paperback books for children, the division "Renard poche," can be seen as a first step toward its book club scheme. The company copied the concept from the Rotfuchs children's

paperback collection of the German publisher Rowohlt. In so doing, L'Ecole des loisirs disrupted the common French attitude toward children's books as gift objects "that had to be heavy, that had to be beautiful, and that had to be big," according to Jean Delas.<sup>13</sup> Another paperback collection, "Lutin poche," was inaugurated in 1977 for picturebooks, and competitors such as Gallimard began to follow suit. The embrace of paperbacks, with their reduced production costs that could be passed on to the consumer, situated L'Ecole des loisirs favorably: the customer base expanded and profits increased, all while the publisher fashioned its identity of enabling underprivileged children to access books. In short order, softcover picturebooks would become the product on which the Max book club was based.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Founding of Max*

In 1981, just over 15 years after its turn to picturebooks, L'Ecole des loisirs created the book club that has come to define the publisher. Children's book clubs existed abroad decades earlier,<sup>15</sup> but France never had anything resembling a genuine book club for children, nor for adults for that matter, until much later than other countries.<sup>16</sup> The Junior Literary Guild flourished in the United States from 1929 to 1955, Britain's Puffin Book Club was founded in the 1960s, and the comparatively small Swedish market sustained several children's book clubs around that decade.<sup>17</sup> L'Ecole des loisirs filled a vacuum in France by copying from these models. Whereas Hubschmid claimed that the idea for Max was inspired by the Japanese publisher Fukuinkan Shoten, which had started its book-a-month in the 1950s, probably the most direct influence came from Scholastic, whose American club began in 1948, whereby schoolchildren made their monthly selections and teachers received bonus resources in proportion to their classes' sales figures.<sup>18</sup> Like Scholastic, the business model of L'Ecole des loisirs' Max, which has operated uninterrupted in France since 1981, depends heavily upon the school system, and, in particular, upon teachers' endorsement.

Over the decades, several publishers, including heavyweights Gallimard and Nathan, have tried to launch children's book clubs to compete with Max, without success.<sup>19</sup> Other attempts were made by entities that were not publishers.<sup>20</sup> France Loisirs, founded in 1970, was not a club of pre-selected books but a sales catalog with a discount rate for subscribers, which later included some offerings for children from multiple publishers, including L'Ecole des loisirs.<sup>21</sup> As of this writing, France loisirs is being dismantled, unable to compete with Amazon.<sup>22</sup> Le Disney Club is a Hachette partnership existing in multiple languages, selling monthly Disney classics in book form accompanied by a collectible trinket. Though Hachette

claims that it recruits “hundreds of thousands of new readers in Belgium and France” every year through its various schemes and derivative products, including the club,<sup>23</sup> none of the scholars, librarians, and publishers of French children’s literature I have met, save one, had ever heard of the Disney Club.<sup>24</sup> In sum, as children’s literature expert Cécile Boulaire summarizes, “To this day there is no equivalent to the Max subscription.”<sup>25</sup>

The first Max club was called kilimax, a play on words from “qui lit Max?” (“who reads Max?”), inspired by Sendak’s popular picturebook *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). The club addressed children aged four to seven. The following year, L’Ecole des loisirs launched a second club for two- to four-year-olds called minimax. Over the course of the next two decades, the publisher added more subscriptions, gradually increasing the total age range and settling on eight clubs by the early 2010s.<sup>26</sup> The segmentation by age serves to generate a sense of literacy progression for readers and uses the anticipation that derives from such progression to stoke continuous demand. Whereas some children’s book clubs in other countries such as the Junior Literary Guild segregated subscriptions by gender for certain ages, based on the belief that boys required explicit appeals to reading,<sup>27</sup> L’Ecole des loisirs has steadfastly resisted the strategy of segmentation by gender.<sup>28</sup> The eight Max subscriptions each offer eight monthly books per year. From November to June, books are distributed to members, typically in classrooms, across metropolitan France and in a hundred countries abroad. The most popular Max book club has always been the original kilimax subscription, today aimed at ages five to seven, the critical learn-to-read age when parents are more likely to spend for that purpose.<sup>29</sup>

### *School Distribution*

Although individuals can purchase subscriptions, Max’s discounted group rates have always favored distribution through the schools. Capitalizing on the publisher’s historic relationship with the school system, the book-a-month club emerged out of frustration that bookstores were not attracting enough children to their shelves and the conviction that L’Ecole des loisirs had to meet child readers “where they are, and where they are is in the schools.”<sup>30</sup> Director of communications Nathalie Brisac explains, “We always planned to go through teachers and schools so that parents would feel secure, so that the books were still considered objects for learning, not school learning but life learning.” In addition to numerous pedagogical materials offered to teachers – originally printed, now online – the publisher has for over four decades developed a “relationship of trust” with teachers to promote the book clubs.<sup>31</sup> Although many scholars consider the school monopoly illegal or at the least unscrupulous, L’Ecole

des loisirs employees congratulate themselves on their close bonds with teachers “outside of any master agreement with the Ministry of National Education.”<sup>32</sup> By marketing to teachers even more than students – since a single teacher can affect generations of readers – the return on investment is better.<sup>33</sup>

The lion’s share of Max subscriptions is distributed through the schools – both public and private – because the publisher structures that sales model to be most attractive, thanks in part to the cost savings of shipping to a single address. Unlike the hardcover books that L’Ecole des loisirs prefers to sell in the retail market, the club books are paperback and cost four to five euros each (six to seven euros for individual subscriptions); their hardcover equivalents retail for around 13 euros and more. The principle is “new books at low prices.”<sup>34</sup> The reward structure resembles Scholastic’s. For every six subscriptions in a group order, the class receives a free book. For every 12 subscriptions, the class receives a free subscription.<sup>35</sup> On a dedicated Max website, teacher subscribers receive bonuses such as online games, video books, and downloadable teaching materials.<sup>36</sup>

Though Cressent’s thesis observes that 18 of L’Ecole des loisirs’ 65 employees were already by the late 1970s “pedagogical delegates” whose job was to promote the publisher’s books to teachers, principals, teacher trainers, and librarians,<sup>37</sup> Nathalie Brisac explained that the school distribution model for Max was developed by Jean Delas in 1981:

He gathered his cousins, his aunts, all the women around him and his family, telling them ‘You, you cover all the schools in northern France,’ ‘You, you take western France or eastern,’ and he created the first network of an occupational trade that did not yet exist, which was to showcase books in schools in order to get teachers to encourage families to subscribe.<sup>38</sup>

Today this sales force is still feminized – they are called *animatrices* in the feminine form – but no longer composed of family members. Typically, women with backgrounds in teaching, librarianship, publishing, or book retail or local mothers of schoolchildren work part time as representatives of L’Ecole des loisirs, covering a territory comprising multiple nursery, elementary, and middle schools as well as daycares.<sup>39</sup> There are about 300 *animatrices* doing this work for Max in the 2020s,<sup>40</sup> 120 of whom operate outside of metropolitan France.<sup>41</sup>

Bookstore owners are not shy about lamenting the losses they suffer from the Max subscription. Yet, no level of displeasure overrides their need to stock L’Ecole des loisirs on their shelves; its canon and dominance make its books indispensable.<sup>42</sup> The publisher maintains its own double discourse, claiming vital partnerships with retailers while bypassing them,

either through the publisher's own bookstore Chantelivre founded in 1974 or through the book club begun seven years later. Chantelivre was one of the first specialized bookstores for children in France, and the low density of retail outlets at the time may have justified the school-distribution model for a publisher still selling pedagogical books. However, the arrival of the FNAC super-bookstores in the second half of the 1970s, with their steep price cuts and dizzying array of goods for sale, was a cultural phenomenon that changed French people's relationship to reading. In particular, children's books were becoming easily and inexpensively available. Appreciated by the public, the super-bookstore alarmed others in the industry, publishers and independent bookstores alike.

Just a few years later, the 1981 election of the socialist president François Mitterrand inaugurated a seismic shift in French society with emphasis on quality of life, artisanry and small business, and cultural and intellectual pursuits. One of the government's first laws was the Lang "single price" law described in this book's Introduction, which united all these objectives by prohibiting booksellers from offering discounts of more than 5% off list prices. The Max subscription was founded after the Lang law was passed but before it was enacted, and L'Ecole des loisirs might not have foreseen the ways that the law ultimately protected and fostered small independent bookshops. Before 1981, L'Ecole des loisirs justified Max's bypassing the "book chain" (*chaîne du livre*) or standard distribution network that is supposed to go through retail establishments by arguing that there were not enough children's bookstores. But by 2010, there were plenty, both the superstores and – thanks to the Lang law – independent shops. The publisher thus had to change its justification for selling subscription books outside of these retail markets. At this point, Jean Delas claimed that, on the one hand, independent bookshops are concentrated only in large cities, and on the other hand, although suburban and rural areas are, in fact, well served by hypermarkets that sell books, these *grandes surfaces* do not sell "books that we like, that we like to publish, or that we like from our fellow publishers."<sup>43</sup>

### *Book Selection*

Max readers' lack of book choice sets the club apart from most other book clubs around the world. Brisac used a succinct restaurant metaphor, "It's prix fixe, not à la carte." When asked whether it would be better to give subscribers a choice, Hubschmid responded without hesitation, "*Non.*" The annual decision-making over which books from the publisher's list are chosen for the clubs is high stakes. In Max's early years, Hubschmid alone decided (he also decided on which picturebooks would be published at all). More recently, a committee of four editors and directors makes

the subscription decisions over the course of a dozen meetings. With eight books in each collection, they claim to seek a varied selection in terms of topic, style, narration, illustration, and creator.<sup>44</sup> Hubschmid admitted that commercial strategies have occasionally influenced book choices, for example, promoting a particular author on the verge of fame or another needing a nudge. A generation younger than Hubschmid, Brisac has been keenly aware of the challenges presented by selection. While she favors audaciousness or irreverence (*impertinence*), she laments how hard it is to please a large constituency of club members' parents "who reproach us for everything and its opposite" from subject matter to the difficulty of certain vocabulary words.<sup>45</sup>

Brisac worries about the "90,000 parental eyes hidden behind every book selected for them." The L'Ecole des loisirs book, *Jean a deux mamans* (*John Has Two Mommies*) by Ophélie Texier, published in 2004, would still not be chosen for the clubs, she said in 2019, because of its depiction of homosexual parents.<sup>46</sup> (The book has nonetheless been used in schools by teachers whose nursery school students had homosexual parents.<sup>47</sup>) *Caca boudin* by Stephanie Blake, published in 2002, is also not an option, Brisac said, not because of its title's infantile expression – akin to "icky poo" – but because teachers do not consider the book to be proper reading.<sup>48</sup> Brisac regretted the current moral climate among parents which she considered "not the most open-minded." She was convinced that one particular book would delight club members, *Classe de lune* (*Field Trip to the Moon*) by John Hare, translated from the English in 2019), but she knew that teachers and parents would consider it scandalous for a book club because it is wordless. For many adults, the club books should teach children to read.<sup>49</sup>

Most of the books in each subscription have been published in the previous year's cycle, but there are usually a handful from the backlist (*le fonds*). In fact, the discounts provided by the book club are regulated by article four of the single price Lang law, which obliges book clubs to delay placing books in discounted subscriptions until nine months after publication. As noted above, the spirit of the socialist Minister of Culture's law was to foster a diverse competitive landscape for literature, and this particular clause gave bookshops a momentary chance to sell new L'Ecole des loisirs books. A scan of the four youngest clubs in 2019–20 reveals that only four of the 32 books had been published prior to the previous publishing cycle, two of which were just a few years old and two of which were more than 15 years old. In other words, Max favors the most recent publications of L'Ecole des loisirs within the limits of the law. Still, however new the books in the subscription may be, they do not embrace gender equality: as we will see in more depth in Chapter 4, male protagonists outnumber females by almost three to one.

*Access to Club Membership*

Even though Max books cost much less than retail and subscribers can pay in two installments, not every child can afford the 36–43 euros to join the club at school. Because schools benefit from the number of subscriptions paid by families, inequalities can be measured not only individually but also institutionally, and one might reasonably surmise that underprivileged students have fewer L'Ecole des loisirs books at their disposal. Yet, the publisher claims that for various reasons, rural and underprivileged suburban schools subscribe to Max more in per capita terms than do wealthier schools in city centers. In Paris, *intra muros* as well as Marseille and Lyon, the generally higher standard of living permits families to buy full-priced hardcover books, precluding the attraction of the discounted club paperbacks. In areas across France where children are poorly served by bookstores, libraries, and other cultural institutions, Max is more popular. Teachers there tend to value the book club more than do teachers in urban school districts. In addition, some municipalities (for example Brest) and parent-school cooperative associations subsidize subscriptions for less fortunate students.<sup>50</sup> Despite the publisher's emphasis on its outreach, the classroom delivery can leave children from low-income families feeling empty handed. More than a few parents I surveyed lament that this monthly spectacle of socioeconomic disparity takes place in the public education system.

*Market Share*

Max is the most successful and longest-running children's book club in French history and has crushed any competition. It has disrupted the children's literature market in several important ways: promoting particular books and authors, bypassing the *chaîne du livre*, offering discounted paperbacks despite the "single price" law, and monopolizing schoolchildren's attention for its brand. Although other publishers' books can be included in catalogs that vendors hawk to teachers and schools every year along with other school supplies, these catalogs are never passed to families, and this contact point between publisher and educational establishment is nothing like a club or subscription.<sup>51</sup> The Max subscription also gives expatriate children access to new books in their own language, but only from one publisher. Through its monthly deliveries, the club has stimulated children's desire to consume and own books, offering literature at relatively low prices.

Within France's nationalized educational system where learning objectives are centrally dictated by the State, L'Ecole des loisirs has for over four decades maintained a quasi-monopoly on the picturebook market inside

French schools. Receiving a monthly L'Ecole des loisirs book is a classroom tradition. The success in getting particular books from a single publisher into schoolchildren's hands is underwritten by teachers' and school administrators' trust in the brand's quality and heritage. Direct-to-customer sales further save the publisher from paying retailers. In addition, the clubs foster customer loyalty (*fidélisation*): schoolchildren renew their club memberships year after year, and they also recognize the brand in bookstores.<sup>52</sup> Although sales figures are not public, club membership has experienced constant annual growth since its founding, and the majority of French schools sell subscriptions today, according to Brisac.<sup>53</sup> Director of marketing Agathe Imbault claims that 50,000 schools "partner" with Max, which is very close to the total number of nursery, elementary, and middle schools in all of France and its overseas territories.<sup>54</sup>

Even more than gross sales figures, the total number of subscriptions to the Max clubs is considered a company secret at L'Ecole des loisirs.<sup>55</sup> Master's student Eléonore Le Tannou, who worked at the publisher, was granted archival access, and conducted interviews with its leaders, noted, "It is impossible to know how many subscriptions are sold each year."<sup>56</sup> However, Hubschmid estimated in 2019 that L'Ecole des loisirs sold 650,000 subscriptions a year.<sup>57</sup> This figure, though it is not confirmed and should be taken with circumspection, represents approximately 10% of all primary schoolchildren.<sup>58</sup>

### New Competition

Accordingly, other publishers have long been envious of L'Ecole des loisirs' occupancy of French schools, while many deplore the commercializing of public education: "It's borderline illegal;" "scandalous;" "If it were Coca-Cola, it would never be accepted." Bookstore owners have never been pleased because the school subscription bypasses them. Laurence Tutello, owner of Le chat pitre children's bookshop in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris (see Figure 3.1) and former president of the Association des librairies spécialisées jeunesse (ALSJ or "Sorcières"), lamented that "We lose an enormous amount of money as a result."<sup>59</sup> School administrators have also expressed astonishment at the advertising permitted in schoolchildren's *cahier de correspondance*, the formal means of parent-teacher communication in all French schools.<sup>60</sup>

Despite several failed attempts over the decades to overcome Max's monopoly on children's book clubs, the 2021 *rentrée* (back-to-school season) witnessed something of a market disruption. A collaboration of Gallimard, Flammarion, Casterman, and Sarbacane, who share the same parent company, launched a book club called Le livreur d'histoires (The Story Deliverer) that followed the Max model closely: a book a month for the nine





Figure 3.1 The children's bookshop, Le chat pitre, in the thirteenth arrondissement in Paris, 2015. Courtesy of Laurence Tutello.

months of the school year, with separate clubs for various age ranges. Publicized as an endeavor “born of a collaboration with bookstores,”<sup>61</sup> this club competed with Max on different terrain: in retail shops rather than schools. Books were delivered either to homes or to one of 160 partner bookstores, the latter offering free delivery. It cost more than Max at nearly 70 euros a year plus 20 euros for at-home delivery (a likely surcharge given the limited number of partner bookstores in year one). Launched late in the COVID-19 pandemic when schools, libraries, and bookstores had been shut down on and off for a year and a half, *Le livreur d'histoires* brought subscribers into bookstores, thereby respecting the *chaîne du livre*. Tutello noted that over 20 customers subscribed through her small neighborhood shop in 2021 and that more often than not, when they came in to pick up their delivery they would purchase an additional book.<sup>62</sup>

*Le livreur d'histoires* differed from Max in other significant ways. According to the club's website, bookstore owners participated with publishing houses in making book selections. Subscriptions came with three free gifts such as a coloring project or stickers, a marketing strategy that reinvented the gadget that marked generations of readers of the children's magazine *Pif Gadget*.<sup>63</sup> Finally, *Le livreur d'histoires* took a different tactic than *L'École des loisirs* in the ostensible collaboration of four publishers, even though they are all subsidiaries of the Gallimard group.

Despite the publishers' cultural capital and financial means, year two of the subscription was never activated. David Dermigny, commercial director of Gallimard Jeunesse, explained that the 2021 launch was actually a market test rather than a true inauguration. The pilot year offered two main lessons to Gallimard: that the logistics of a publisher's insertion between customer and retailer are difficult to manage even on a small scale (lost packages, for example), and that a subscription model that begins in the back-to-school period is unnecessarily constraining. After a pause of nearly two years, Gallimard launched a revised formula in October 2023 called *Noti Le livreur d'histoires*: a "box" delivery with a gift object and parent guide accompanying each monthly book; several payment and subscription options; the flexibility to join, change age level, or cancel at any point of the year; and home delivery only.<sup>64</sup> More of Gallimard's subsidiaries are included in the revised initiative, *Les Grandes Personnes* and *La Partie*, as well as *Père Castor* whose books had been part of the pilot without explicit mention. Gallimard also partners with television personality, Nathalie Le Breton, showcasing her as the children's book expert behind *Noti's* selections.

Multiple factors were surely at play to force the pause after *Le livreur d'histoires*. Tutello told a different story than Dermigny about the inaugural year. Although she was enthusiastic, other retailers did not appreciate Gallimard's reduced wholesale discount with the subscription. A shopkeepers' union had complained, and Gallimard backed away to avoid a crisis with its retailers, quite the opposite of what the publisher hoped to accomplish by grounding the subscription in the *chaîne du livre*. According to Tutello, the book selections were of high production and editorial quality, customer feedback was positive, and she had expected her second year of subscriptions to grow. She was angry that other bookstores caused this lost opportunity.<sup>65</sup> Regardless of where lies the onus for the failed pilot, what is clear from the revised *Noti* initiative is that bookstores have been bypassed again. Dermigny claimed, however, that its direct-to-customer distribution would be an interim step and that in a few years the initiative could return to bookstores.<sup>66</sup>

The Gallimard case shows that, despite widespread disgruntlement over Max's monopoly of subscription book clubs and its infiltration in the school system, established market forces make it difficult to mount a competitive alternative. Time will tell, but without an educational imprimatur, it seems unlikely that Gallimard's *Noti Le livreur d'histoires* will constitute a serious threat to *L'Ecole des loisirs' Max*.

### Universalism at the Nexus of the *L'Ecole des loisirs* Brand

Since its founding, *L'Ecole des loisirs* has cultivated and publicized a sophisticated editorial identity and the *Max* book club crystallizes this branding.

By depicting Max as an initiative that sells quality books to young students who might otherwise not have access to reading materials, the publisher has convinced the public of two key messages: that L'Ecole des loisirs acts in service of the democratization of literacy and culture and that it produces only quality books. The publisher asserts its quality in four ways: artisanal production style, heritage or canonical books, author-driven creativity, and pleasure over pedagogy. In the course of my years of research in the world of French children's literature, facets of this editorial policy have been reiterated by librarians, teachers, other publishers, and even scholars, proving the publisher's masterful messaging. This section will draw connections between this brand identity and representations of gender that appear in Max books, which will be examined in Chapter 4. It is the publishers' insistence on these aspects of its editorial policy that blinds it, I argue, to offering schoolchildren a more gender-egalitarian corpus.

There is another feature of L'Ecole des loisirs' identity that is so entrenched that the term universalism, which labels it, is invisible to the publisher's owners, editors, and probably its authors. They never use the expression in their publicity, but universalism undergirds and glues all of the features of the branding together, particularly the publisher's contributions to democratization and production of quality literature. As has been described earlier in this book, universalism in the French context is defined as an emphasis on commonly shared norms combined with deliberate ignorance of diversity: sexism, racism, and other forms of intolerance are best combatted when divisive differences are ignored and when primacy is given to what unites society. Universalism is often contrasted with the rhetoric of multiculturalism, which is considered by many French to be a poor method for battling prejudice. While the rationale and intention of universalism as a rhetoric has merit, I argue that it accounts for the reproduction of gender stereotypes found in many picturebooks in the Max sample analyzed in the following chapter. In fact, a universalist belief system continues to shape much of the reading material available to French children, not just from L'Ecole des loisirs but from many other publishers as well.

By positioning itself as a para-educational organization purveying quality literature, L'Ecole des loisirs tries to mitigate the risk of appearing profit-oriented. Although Max is a cash cow for the house, L'Ecole des loisirs' publicizing of Max as a means to democratize access to literature serves to de-emphasize its commercialism. The publisher consistently frames its promotion of the subscription in schools not as a marketing tactic but as an act of social welfare aimed at giving underprivileged children access to literature and overcoming social inequalities that begin at home.<sup>67</sup> That salespeople are called *animatrices* is a consummate example of the publisher's euphemizing of its commercial objectives.

Though Jean Delas said that he was initially wary of the subscription's image as "door-to-door peddling" (*colportage*), he "was also haunted by the idea of democratizing access to children's books."<sup>68</sup> He insisted that despite L'Ecole des loisirs' reputation as elitist, "It is exactly the opposite of who we are. We are obsessed with distributing our books to the working classes, and not out of profit motive. We invented the paperback for youths in France." Instead of reaching economically disadvantaged consumers by selling books in hypermarkets like the largest publishing conglomerates do, L'Ecole des loisirs uses its school subscription. This method is preferable because "Mass distribution mistakes *populaire* for *vulgaire*," Delas asserted (*populaire*, meaning both working class and popular in French; and *vulgaire*, meaning both common and coarse in French), "So we are popular but I like to believe we are not vulgar."<sup>69</sup> The publisher's efforts to portray Max as not-for-profit have succeeded. Indeed, from many teachers' point of view, Max is not a product sold in schools but a partner in the service of literacy. For parents, in turn, the book club's legitimacy derives from the de facto imprimatur of teachers and school authorities.

While children's book clubs are commercial enterprises, as literature scholar Anne Morey observes,

commercial imperatives do not prevent book clubs from supplying modestly situated children with affordable literature, expanding the types of texts available, and permitting children to recognize themselves as parts of a reading community. That book clubs often masterfully manipulate rhetorics of social concern does not mean that social concerns are in fact neglected or undermined.<sup>70</sup>

But L'Ecole des loisirs' insistence on a *prix fixe* menu drives selections toward a safe middle ground. Although the publisher extols the creativity and quality of its literature, the dynamics of a school subscription are grounded primarily in risk aversion, and in fact lead Max to propose often milquetoast stories that promote a universalist normativity.

#### *Four Notions of Quality*

L'Ecole des loisirs contrasts its picturebooks with bestselling books found in supermarkets in four distinct ways that intersect with each other: an artisanal approach to production, a valorization of canonical authors, an insistence on author-driven creation, and a stress on pleasurable reading that has neither a didactic nor political mission. Each of these facets of quality contains inherent contradictions, and they all contribute, I argue, to a blindness regarding gender equality.

One way that L'Ecole des loisirs defines its quality identity is through affirmations of artisanal production. In a 2006 interview, Jean Delas exclaimed that he was “very worried about the hamburgerization of children’s publishing,” meaning, production of the type of books generally sold in supermarkets as well as the drive to sell profitable popular series to the neglect of single carefully authored stories. He claimed that his was instead an artisanal approach, that L'Ecole des loisirs was a “publishing *housse*,” not a “publishing *factory*.”<sup>71</sup> In so doing, L'Ecole des loisirs elevates itself above the profit motive, tying this definition of quality to several others: the charitable identity, the heritage authors, and the author-driven creativity.

Despite this rhetoric, L'Ecole des loisirs does, in fact, publish successful series that might contribute to the very homogenizing, globalizing, and industrializing that Delas regrets. For example, almost half of the picture-books in the sample analyzed in the following chapter from 2019 to 2020 (14 out of 32 books) were part of series. The publisher does not mention this in its publicity and instead critiques the series that have earned great profit for its competitors. Most often the ire is anonymously directed to conglomerates (read Hachette) that produce inexpensive series that appeal to the least common denominator of consumers.<sup>72</sup>

Another way that L'Ecole des loisirs defines quality is through its heritage stories written by iconic authors and illustrators that have charmed generations. Claiming that it has always favored “long-sellers” over best-sellers,<sup>73</sup> the publisher relies on its earliest authors to mythologize its past and to create its own canon. The same names are eulogized in almost all the publishers’ communications: Leo Lionni, Arnold Lobel, Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer.<sup>74</sup> A second tier of L'Ecole des loisirs authors, occasionally promoted to convey that the publisher has not rested on its laurels, is also predominantly comprised of white male authors: Claude Boujon, Philippe Corentin, Philippe Dumas, Michel Gay, Yvan Pommaux, Claude Ponti, Grégoire Solotareff, Frédéric Stehr. Women appear more prominently among the latest generation of L'Ecole des loisirs authors, but they cannot escape the preeminence of their predecessors. As Jean Delas declared,

A library without Sendak is unimaginable today. And this past must continue. It continues with new creators who publish their own new stories but who, whether consciously or not, whether directly or not, are themselves completely impregnated by their childhood reading. I have often spoken with them about it. It is obvious that Sendak is essential for them in their personal creative journey, or Tomi Ungerer or Philippe Corentin, or even now Claude Ponti. So, what is essential is history.<sup>75</sup>

By emphasizing first and foremost its *fonds* or backlist, which Delas masterfully substitutes for the broader canon of French children’s literature,

L'Ecole des loisirs feeds a nostalgia and stokes demand for narratives from the mid- to late 20th century.

Although many of the heritage authors brought readers stories with transcendent themes of time, love, friendship, memory, and grief, their pantheonization by L'Ecole des loisirs does not leave much symbolic space for the new.<sup>76</sup> In addition, it is in older stories – but not only there – that conservative traditions and stereotyped gender norms are likely to be found. For example, the inclusion of an anthology of a book series by a heritage author in the 2019–20 subscription manifests the publisher's pride in its canon, but by doing so brings sexist stereotypes back to 21st-century readers. The newly minted anthology of Mellops stories is described in the Max club brochure without questioning the anachronism:

Impossible is not Mellops! When this father and his four sons dig oil wells, go spelunking, or search for underwater treasures, it is always with enthusiasm. And when they return home, Mom is waiting for them with a big yummy snack.

The seven-, eight-, or nine-year-old subscribers who likely will not know that Tomi Ungerer's first children's book about the Mellops family of pigs came out in the 1950s might not be equipped to see it as a product of its time.

A third way that L'Ecole des loisirs defines its quality identity is through its focus on a *politique d'auteur*; that is, its artists – authors and illustrators – are always driving the stories, not committees or managers or even editors. Along these lines, the antithesis of a quality picture-book is a commissioned book: in the publisher's view, commissioning a story on a particular theme is anathema. Jean Delas proclaimed: "In this house we have never commissioned a book from anyone," even though he acknowledged that editors help with "adjustments" (*aménagements*) of small details.<sup>77</sup> In his thesis on L'Ecole des loisirs, Cressent reiterated that "editorial policy refuses commissioned books."<sup>78</sup> The message is that the company's greatest asset is its creative capital.

The commissioned book is eschewed for its associations with school textbooks, nonfiction, and didactic literature for children. Furthermore, and most importantly, a commission is code for an activist agenda such as feminism. Self-respecting literary publishers make a show of avoiding commissions at all costs and instead foreground artistry and creativity driven by writers and illustrators. This phenomenon is not unique to L'Ecoles des loisirs: nearly every publisher I met put the same accent on the primacy of creativity. For her part, though, Elsa Kedadouche, founder of the LGBTQ children's publishing house, On ne compte pas pour du beurre, calls discourse that discredits commissions "very, very, very hypocritical," and

contends that children's authors regularly pen commissioned books for a wide range of publishing houses: "Call it 'prompts,' if you will."<sup>79</sup>

Whether a branding strategy or genuine editorial policy, the prioritizing of creativity and authorial freedom is one reason, I argue, that Max books continue to contain gender stereotypes. A no-touch policy on manuscripts handcuffs a publisher from culling bias and inequality from literature and from serving as gatekeeper and mentor. When asked, Brisac acknowledged that her house occasionally receives manuscripts containing a stereotype and that they work with the authors or illustrators to fix those scenes.<sup>80</sup> Thus, L'Ecole des loisirs is conscious of blatant sexism and willing to superficially clean texts, but it does not want to foreground gender equality as a criterion and resists focusing widely and deeply on the gendered results of its editorial practices.

The publisher's pride in a long-standing family of creative insiders, furthermore, may decelerate the renewal of its artistic pool. A comment from marketing director Imbault raises questions about the democratization of manuscript selection:

[I]t's very rare that we publish manuscripts spontaneously sent to us. Most often, we find our illustrators in art schools, where our editors seek talent. Some of our authors also introduce us to beginners that they have taken under their wing.<sup>81</sup>

Such processes for recruiting new talent are commonplace: fiction around the world is produced by elite coterie socially connected to publishers; publishers entertain long-term relationships with their authors; and contracts often oblige authors to offer their latest publisher first dibs on a new manuscript. Such endogamous customs nevertheless call into question a publisher's openness to new talent. *Livres hebdo* journalist Claude Combet points out that 123 of L'Ecole des loisirs authors have published ten or more books under the imprint.<sup>82</sup> The practices detailed by Imbault seem to lend themselves to an unmeritocratic ecosystem that excludes diverse voices that could bring avant-garde approaches to storytelling. L'Ecole des loisirs might have a *politique d'auteur*, but it is very often the same authors.

A fourth notion of quality that L'Ecole des loisirs uses to promote its books is its focus on giving child readers imagination, pleasure, and joy. Its editorial identity is the antithesis of moralization (whether secular or Catholic),<sup>83</sup> reading literacy, and academic drudgery. Above all, the publisher's messaging has been to not let pedagogy kill "Literature."<sup>84</sup> Already in the 1970s, Jean Fabre was criticizing "railway books," didactic stories favored by schools whose fixed trajectory, fixed speed, and fixed destination "standardized" children and squashed their ability to interpret independently,<sup>85</sup> a slight aimed at Hachette's commercially successful 19th-century collection

meant to be sold in train stations.<sup>86</sup> Even though well-known Ministry of Education official Françoise Lagarde proclaimed nearly 20 years ago that “the academic debate pitting school reading against leisure reading” was dead,<sup>87</sup> such anti-didactic rhetoric is not unique to L’Ecole des loisirs; it is an attitude shared by almost all publishers I met. But it is a more complicated strategy for a former school publisher whose business model relies on school teachers.

Despite the publisher’s anti-didactic rhetoric, the attachment to schools is too profitable to loosen. In fact, in the absence of formal teacher training in children’s literature from the Ministry of Education, L’Ecole des loisirs developed its own teacher training programs, seminars that promote its books as part and parcel of a national literary canon.<sup>88</sup> The company also creates a great deal of pedagogical material around the picturebooks in Max: online lesson plans, activities, videos, audiobooks, debates, and interpretations for both teachers and parents. Each year, all 64 Max books offer a companion pedagogical dossier. The material has evolved over time. Nathalie Brisac had criticized the guides when she was herself an elementary school teacher and teacher trainer in the early 2000s: “I found them useless, completely useless.” Recognizing Brisac as an insightful and energetic insider, Jean Delas hired her to rewrite the guides and ultimately convinced her to leave teaching for publishing. Her team of 15 at L’Ecole des loisirs continues to publish guides that she believes encourage teachers and students “to dream, to discuss, to debate, to open their eyes, to better understand” through literature.<sup>89</sup> Notwithstanding these elevated ambitions, the publisher’s pedagogical materials are ultimately an advertising tool, and one that harks back to the original Editions de l’Ecole in the 1920s. Indeed, the very existence of pedagogical dossiers dispels the publisher’s claims to an anti-didactic orientation. Paradoxically, then, despite its disdain for didactic thematics such as feminism in stories, the publisher engages in much didactic work to stoke the market.

In tension with its purported eschewal of didacticism, L’Ecole des loisirs is proud of its role in shaping future citizens. Another one of its mantras can be found in almost every press appearance of company leaders: *Lire, c’est élire; le lecteur est l’électeur*. These expressions draw on the similarity in French of “to read is to elect” and “a reader is a voter.” Nathalie Brisac has been credited with coining the maxim; her managers have repeatedly used it to affirm their desire for their readers to grow into critical thinkers. Though the publisher claims that it is committed to shaping citizens, it has not invested in gender equality as a fundamental basis for a democratic society.

*Impertinent*, meaning audacious or irreverent in French, is an adjective that L’Ecole des loisirs frequently uses in describing its identity. Impertinence is understood by the publisher’s spokespeople, in fact, as a



bulwark against minority demands of inclusion or left-leaning attempts to bowdlerize texts. For example, Imbault asked in 2022, “How can we remain impertinent in an era of political correctness?” She took solace in reflecting that because picturebooks do not get much attention from the press (to the chagrin of publishers), picturebook authors do not have to worry as much as television-show developers about writing “consensual” stories.<sup>90</sup> To her and her colleagues, consensual is negative, signifying a conformism demanded of society under pressure of political correctness, whereas impertinence is its opposite.

All of these facets of L’Ecole des loisirs’ definition of quality literature – that it has roots in an artisanal and canonical past, that it emerges spontaneously from its author’s creativity, that it avoids preachiness, that it focuses on fun – blended with a universalist outlook, make a “political” theme such as gender equality antithetical to “quality” literature and something to be strictly avoided in picturebooks. Because universalism is positioned as a rampart against propaganda, it does not generally register in France as an ideology in itself or as supporting any type of political position at all. As such, it is viewed as neutral or normative and its influence is usually not evident to those who embrace its tenets. In fact, L’Ecole des loisirs utilizes both pedagogy and politics as marketing tools, and their conviction that universalism “sells” reveals a great deal about the market and about teacher and parent desires.

During interviews with Hubschmid and Brisac, I broached the topic of representations of gender equality and ethnic diversity in picturebooks. Hubschmid was indifferent, explaining that the two things he avoided in picturebooks were ideology and religion. As one example, a book about the environment is ideological, in his view: what was the point when children have no power and no money? “I am not a propagandist,” he explained, “I work for the children.” When I pointed out that on the company’s website, a thematic repertory allows picturebooks to be searched by theme such as “gender” and “migration,” he dismissed the idea, arguing that children pay no attention to such things. As our interview concluded, he verbalized what I already understood, “You know, I really don’t believe in your gender thing.”<sup>91</sup>

Brisac explained that for Hubschmid and his generation, “what counts is the strength of the story, the strength of the illustration.” To this end, she reiterated that L’Ecole des loisirs never commissioned books on themes and that editors must “leave authors and illustrators free to do what they feel.” One can see thus how universalism melds the various aspects of the publisher’s identity: creativity, anti-activism, anti-commissioning.

By juxtaposing artistic creativity and feminism, it becomes clear that, just as for librarians’ criteria for selection and purging that Part I described, equality of gender representations is not part of the definition of

a quality book for Max subscriptions. Nor is it for most other mainstream publishers. As Colline Faure-Poirée, editor of *Giboulées*, declared to me, a gender-conscious or feminist editorial line “is one way of publishing, which is perhaps necessary to change behavior. But I prefer universal (*polyvalente*), polycultural, polyphonic creativity. A reader should not be endocrinized.”<sup>92</sup> Of course, inclusive children’s literature is not necessarily good: it could be poorly written and lacking in creativity. Literary work that is universalist is not necessarily good either: it could be milquetoast and ignorant. *L’Ecole des loisirs* is suspicious that books that are “politically correct” are not actually children’s books at all, but vehicles for an adult agenda.<sup>93</sup> Because universalism is inextricably intertwined with what it means to be French, it is difficult to separate universalist values from criteria for quality. For its adherents, universalism is not unlike essential values such as truth or beauty. In contrast to identity politics, for example, universalism is unifying, transcendent, timeless. Nevertheless, appeals to universalism can cloak motivations that are neither cultural nor civic. More insidiously, universalist rhetoric can deflect scrutiny and criticism of books that undermine egalitarian values.

### Eduscol Reference Lists

Despite Max’s predominant access to student readers, children can encounter books in French schools in a few other ways. Chapter 1 described the network – however limited – of primary school libraries, the Ministry of Education’s literacy Plans, and attempts to embrace *La Joie par les livres*’ joyful approach to reading. But curricular demands do not allow for much variance, and historically there has been little time for pleasure reading in school.<sup>94</sup> Only as obligatory ages for schooling were prolonged over the course of the last 150 years (ages 6–13 since 1882, ages 6–14 since 1936, ages 6–16 since 1959, ages 3–16 since 2019) did independent reading gradually become a part of the school day. In France where the compulsory age for beginning school is now three, storytime is incorporated into the curriculum in nursery school.<sup>95</sup> And picturebooks have been mentioned in pedagogical instructions since 1977 for older students,<sup>96</sup> but it was only in 2002 that the curriculum formalized their use in classrooms.

Schoolteachers’ lack of training in children’s literature has been a long-standing lament for librarians, and one most often made by schoolteachers themselves, whose education has only allowed for scattered electives in children’s literature. Meager, optional, and intermittently-available training means that teachers have most often been left to their own discretion to select picturebooks. Yet teachers are key mediators, *Hélène Weis* argues: it is the picturebooks that they choose that schoolchildren read.<sup>97</sup>

This section will examine how the State has promoted picturebooks in school via the establishment in 2002 of reference lists from Eduscol, the organism responsible for all pedagogy and didactics for primary and secondary education under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education's Governing Body for Instruction (Direction générale de l'enseignement scolaire or DGESCO). Over the course of their 20 years of existence, the Eduscol picturebook lists that supplement the curriculum have been contested by many parties for their selections; they have been imperfectly implemented; and they have been critiqued for their unequal and stereotypical gender representations. The polemics over what books schoolchildren have been instructed to read by the State will be analyzed here as an interlude in this chapter on the Max book club. It is into this porous educational system with a historically weak commitment to children's literature that the Max book club has been able to gain traction, corner the market, and coopt the schools to disseminate and distribute its books.

### *The Notion of a National Canon*

In 2002, Eduscol revised the curriculum as it does every few years, but this time it recommended that literature and in particular picturebooks be incorporated into formal requirements. To integrate literature in the curriculum, Eduscol established reference lists of books by grade level to be strongly recommended to teachers in all schools across France.<sup>98</sup> Even though some children's literature was used in schooling before 2002 on an ad hoc and voluntary basis, "the famous reference lists" – as they are referred to by most – were just short of a revolution for both education and children's publishing. The curricular change and the reference lists were clear signs that children's literature as a field and an industry had, by the turn of the 21st century, achieved the legitimacy it had been seeking in both educational and literary circles.

More specifically, the lists resulted from a lobbying effort on the part of children's literature mediators in both the private and public sector and were given the green light by socialist Minister of Education, Jack Lang, the same official who some 20 years earlier as Minister of Culture had signed the single book price law described earlier. As recognition for children's literature was increasing, the pedagogical conflict over literacy versus literature was decreasing, such that the Ministry of Education introduced its new literature-focused curriculum in 2002 by declaring, "One cannot truly understand a book, even a simple picturebook, without understanding the subtle dynamics that make a work a literary work."<sup>99</sup>

The Ministry's two main criteria for its reference lists are that books be of "quality" and that they lend themselves to the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural competencies of the curriculum.<sup>100</sup> In addition, by assembling

and consolidating a corpus of stories for schoolchildren, the reference lists envisage a “shared culture” among future generations. Ministerial instructions for teachers, for example, explain that “By guiding [teacher’s] choices via a national reference list of literary works, we aim to make school culture a shared culture,” and exhort teachers to choose two-thirds of their assigned literary works in a given year from the lists “so that a literary culture structured all throughout the third cycle truly becomes a shared culture.”<sup>101</sup> Such discourse exposes the State’s intention to erect a national canon of children’s literature, which is why the Eduscol reference lists have attracted much controversy, as well as interest from scholars of gender.

The first list of 180 books concerned Cycle 3, that is, third to fifth graders,<sup>102</sup> and was expanded to 300 books in 2004, and updated in 2007, 2013, 2018, and 2022. A reference list for Cycle 2 (kindergarten to second grade) was created in 2007 and updated in 2013 and 2018. For Cycle 1 (ages three and four), the first reference list of 250 books came out in 2013 and was updated in 2020.<sup>103</sup> Books on the lists are labeled with a P for *patrimoine* (heritage oeuvres) and a C for classics (books that are well known). The third category of contemporary books has no letter label. Books are rated by difficulty from one to four. The lists are available in printable format or a searchable table. The Ministry of Education regularly promotes them to teachers,<sup>104</sup> and in 2022, it also created a 407-page pedagogical dossier for the 2018 Cycle 3 list, featuring one page of classroom activities for every book on the list.<sup>105</sup>

As with any change in public education, critiques of the lists arose from multiple factions over various issues. One of the concerns was whether children’s literature was going to be corrupted by entering the classroom – a revival of the pedagogy-pleasure binary.<sup>106</sup> The loudest criticism, unsurprisingly, was about the books chosen. Secondary but related critiques addressed the credentials of the members of the commission and the modalities for choosing the books. Other complaints focused on the implementation of the lists such as budgeting, purchasing, obtaining books, teacher training, enforcing, and tracking compliance. Critiques of the gender representations in the books on the Ministry’s reference lists have only been made by researchers. I will address some of this criticism below but will first remind the reader that within this context of discord and disarray, the Max club has been uncontested.

The Eduscol lists gave a significant lift to children’s publishers in general, but they also established winners and losers among them. When the first list came out, the Syndicat national de l’édition or SNE, the union that represents publishers, complained to the Ministry that it featured too few books from small publishers, and that the *patrimoine* and classic designations favored older books to the detriment of new creations.<sup>107</sup>

While editors have complained that commission members lack the expertise to constitute the lists, professionals in the library world have noted that the members are unpaid volunteers. (Ministry officials maintain that commission members are paid a standard stipend.)<sup>108</sup> The commission of 14 people includes three categories: librarians (of whom two come from the Centre national de la littérature pour la jeunesse (CNLJ) at the French National Library), teacher trainers or inspectors, and researchers.<sup>109</sup> Virginie Houadec, who wrote a dissertation on gender representations in books on the Cycle 3 list, finds the secrecy of commission members' identities strange.<sup>110</sup> Some have remarked on tensions inside the commissions between librarians and teacher trainers, with the former typically enthusiastic about new books and the latter more reluctant to force more change on teachers.

Publishers' most prevalent criticism of the reference lists is the opacity of the book selection process. In fact, the commission does not evaluate every book published but relies on publishing houses to send books for consideration. The process thus favors publishers with the largest staffs because the call for submissions is not well communicated. Many children's publishers are so small they do not have the personnel to ensure that their books are considered for inclusion. This is the case for *Les fourmis rouges*, which had lost track of the Eduscol lists over time.<sup>111</sup> It is also the case for *La ville brûle*, which has never been able to establish communication with the Ministry but whose well-reputed feminist books would contribute to the Ministry's stated agenda of gender equality in its multiple inter-ministerial conventions over the years.<sup>112</sup> Albin Michel, a larger well-staffed publisher, did not send any books to the commission the year I interviewed its editor because no one knew where to send them.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the submission process is difficult to navigate.

A Ministry of Education official claimed that to establish a new or updated reference list, the commission invites publishers to submit books, provides them a list of criteria (having to do with curricular objectives), and asks the union, the SNE, to inform its publisher-members. Commission members read every submitted book, meet three to four times a year, and make their selections by unanimous vote. They aim to have a diverse and balanced list in terms of publishers and authors, limiting the choices to only one book per author. They favor "quality literature" and stories that enrich child development. It is a well-oiled process that is not haphazard, she maintained.<sup>114</sup> Another Ministry official explained that the commission also relies on esteemed partners such as the CNLJ since they already produce multiple recommendation lists,<sup>115</sup> in other words, they do not solely rely on publisher submissions.

Thierry Magnier, a children's publisher as well as former head of the SNE, insisted that the process is onerous and that publishers have to

supply multiple complimentary copies of books to the commission for consideration. Contrary to what officials say, many editors never receive the call for submissions.<sup>116</sup> Emmanuelle Beulque, editor at Sarbacane, explained why some books are never considered for the reference lists: the address and deadline are poorly communicated, no receipt confirmation is sent by the Ministry, and small publishers can simply not afford to send free books.<sup>117</sup> Almost everyone is against the process of obliging publishers to propose their own books.<sup>118</sup>

Alongside criticism of the reference lists themselves, another complaint shared by most publishers and librarians is that teachers are not adequately trained in children's literature, so official book lists cannot be properly utilized and might even backfire.<sup>119</sup> Many teachers would agree.<sup>120</sup> Catherine Bitard, an educational inspector in Paris, explained that in the early years of the reference lists, more teacher training was available. But the curriculum has since changed to focus on skills over literary analysis and indeed, such training is optional, not obligatory. She reminded me, too, that not all teachers use the reference lists, since they are only recommended.<sup>121</sup> All the same, Virginie Houadec argues in her dissertation that

For a very large majority of teachers, being on the list gives books a moral, pedagogical, didactic, and most importantly institutional endorsement. [...] Teachers will choose one author over another 'because they are on the list.' It is a way to avoid trouble with parents, with the administration, and with the school cooperative.<sup>122</sup>

Their flaws aside, the reference lists have created a market disruption in children's literature, and this is another reason why publishers criticize them. Lucette Savier of Albin Michel explained that in the very beginning when schools first began buying books on the lists, this did not necessarily benefit publishers whose books were selected because their other books sold poorly in comparison, and because only the authors on the lists were invited to schools.<sup>123</sup> The SNE president also expressed exasperation that books out of circulation were put on the list, leading to teacher frustration and publisher embarrassment.<sup>124</sup>

The Eduscol reference lists distorted the picturebook market in ways that only some publishers were able to exploit. L'Ecole des loisirs was one of them. In her master's thesis, Lucie Lechanoine-Durand remarks on "the omnipresence of L'Ecole des loisirs books on the reference lists of children's literature by the Ministry of National Education."<sup>125</sup> Le Tannou calculates that L'Ecole des loisirs has been the top publisher on all three lists: it cornered 22% of the Cycle 1 list (54 out of 251 books), 14% of the Cycle 2 list (38 out of 270), and 12% of the Cycle 3 list (37 out of 300). Her study of the lists "proves – if it were even still necessary – that L'Ecole des loisirs is

recognized as the blue-chip publisher in French schools.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, twenty years of Max’s establishment in the schools and L’Ecole des loisirs branding seems to have had an effect on Eduscol commission members. For its part, the publisher highlights its books that made the lists on its Wikipedia page, in company communications, and in the Max brochures.<sup>127</sup> Scholar Florence Gaiotti conjectures that over time, able publishers such as L’Ecole des loisirs are likely to adapt their production to match curricular objectives, further profiting from the lists.<sup>128</sup>

L’Ecole des loisirs is not alone in celebrating its inclusion on the Eduscol lists. Many publishers emphasize their books that have been chosen for the reference lists on their websites or in their catalogs: Talents hauts,<sup>129</sup> Genevriér,<sup>130</sup> and Gallimard,<sup>131</sup> to cite a few examples. Gallimard’s webpage for teachers, called “The Teaching Circle,” is specifically built around the Eduscol reference lists: highlighting the Gallimard books on the list, providing downloadable lesson plans for each, suggesting related books, and inviting teachers to click on the button, “Add to my syllabus.”<sup>132</sup> The Eduscol lists have thus become a marketing tool for publishers. As Nelly Chabrol Gagne sees it, “The enmeshment is perfect: the certification operates and the sales machine fires up.”<sup>133</sup>

### *Gender Representations*

After this overview of the main controversies surrounding the Eduscol reference lists, let us turn to gender representations in their books. A hypothesis might postulate that the *patrimoine* and classic designations that give older books pride of place on the lists risk perpetuating outdated gender stereotypes. Even though recent books do not necessarily offer less biased representations of gender, Houadec points out that new books added to updated Eduscol reference lists do not automatically reach classroom shelves anyway, since schools already made a long-term investment by purchasing hundreds of copies of particular books from the initial lists. The stakes are high, she argues, because “in some milieux, students will not know or read any other books excepts those on the reference list.”<sup>134</sup> This is why the books on the reference lists – with their Ministry stamp of approval – have attracted researchers’ attention, unlike Max books.

A French research team with experience in large-scale studies of gender in children’s literature quickly grasped the first Eduscol reference list of 2002 as a chance to measure the State’s commitment to its own objectives set forth in the numerous inter-ministerial conventions since the 1960s calling for efforts toward gender equality in schools. Carole Brugeilles, Sylvie Cromer, and Nathalie Panissal analyzed a corpus of 128 stories from the 2002 Cycle 3 list and found that 64% of the stories featured male heroes compared to 22% with heroines. They calculate that readers of

these stories will encounter 112 different male characters with a profession but only 19 females at work, a particularly glaring revelation considering that the succession of inter-ministerial plans have been responses to persistent data showing that despite girls' higher academic performance, they continue to choose undervalued study tracks leading to lower-status careers compared to boys.<sup>135</sup> Brugeilles and her coauthors conclude,

The contradictions are undeniable between the choice of books and the Ministry of Education's stated ambition to fight gender inequalities. Despite the proclaimed goals, those who were responsible for choosing the recommended books seem to have not been concerned with the value of gender equality. Did they think that the masculine could serve as a neutral model? But how can the value of equality be transmitted to little boys by showing them a world where equal female partners are rare? For their part, little girls lack models they can directly identify with and they are relegated to secondary status both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>136</sup>

Another team of researchers, Josette Costes and Virginie Houadec, analyzed the cover images of the 52 picturebooks chosen for the Cycle 3 reference lists in 2004 and 2007. Their fascinating results show that males appear on book covers more often than females, that males are twice as often portrayed in an open space than females, and that 44% of males are shown with arms and legs wide or with objects prolonging their limbs compared to 28% of females. One-third of females are missing a piece of clothing or are depicted with some of their body cut off in the image, whereas only 7% of male bodies are cut off and none at all are missing any clothing. Eighty percent of females are drawn in a static position in the cover images compared to 60% of males. In addition, 20% of males are depicted in an elevated position, for example, standing on the top of a staircase, compared to only 7% of females. When a female is on a picturebook cover, most of the time (36% of instances) she is accompanied by a male and she is never accompanied by another female. For males on cover images, they are most frequently (49% of instances) portrayed alone, and next often (18% of instances) with another male. Costes and Houadec conclude,

Without the necessity of words, an image instantaneously conveys a stereotyped system of values, attitudes, behaviors, hierarchies, and relationships between the sexes that is received directly by children without the mediation of language. The selection of books by the Ministry of National Education contributes to the persistence of inequalities between girls and boys.<sup>137</sup>



When Costes and Houadec presented their research at a conference attended by Eduscol commission members as well as others in the children's literature world, the reaction was one of stupefaction and denial regarding both the results and the validity of the research objectives. "We were practically booed," Houadec recalled.<sup>138</sup>

Inspired by the Bruegilles team's study, scholar Lydie Laroque set out to discover whether the 2002 Eduscol list for Cycle 3 had improved in gender representations in its 2013 updated version and to analyze the lists for Cycles 1 and 2 in the same year. Employing the wordplay from the first study's title, "Sexism on the Syllabus?", Laroque concludes that "sexism is still on the syllabus." Only 31 of the 126 new books (24%) added to the 2013 Cycle 3 list feature a female protagonist and that "the main characters in adventure and detective stories are exclusively male." For the youngest students in Cycle 1, the most prevalent thematic among the books on the list is a mother-child relationship.<sup>139</sup>

"Is gender equality a criterion?" was a question I was able to pose to a former member of the Eduscol commission.<sup>140</sup> The answer was no. To these mediators of children's literature, the idea of a quota – setting the number of female main characters in the selections at 50%, for instance – is anathema. This librarian admitted that the evidence of gender inequality in picturebooks documented by researchers such as Adela Turin and Sylvie Cromer has been a revelation,<sup>141</sup> and at one point the commission considered a purposeful addition of stories with heroines, but this never came to pass since members insisted that creativity and literary quality remain the fundamental criteria, echoing the rhetoric of L'Ecole des loisirs seen earlier in the chapter. Combined with the orientation of the Eduscol lists that gives prominent place to time-honored works, a universalist mindset also plays a part in prolonging conservative cultural norms in the books selected for schoolchildren. Amandine Berton-Schmitt, former head of education of the Centre Hubertine Auclert, a Paris-region organization involved in equality initiatives that is funded 25% by the Ministry of Education, actively discourages teachers from using the Ministry's reference lists.<sup>142</sup>

It is clear from this interlude that, like the Max clubs, the Eduscol commission subscribes to an orthodoxy of universalist values wherein the masculine is understood as neutral and any consideration of feminism is objectionable. Eduscol and Max also share some assumptions about what constitutes quality literature: gender equality is not a criterion for either of these institutions. That both a commercial enterprise and an educational organization mirror each other closely manifests the invisible omnipresence of universalism in French society in general, and in particular, among mediators of children's socialization.

In France where girls were for centuries taught in separate schools from boys – if at all – it is not difficult to imagine that gender equality

in education might still be affected in the 21st century by vestiges of the past.<sup>143</sup> Until the late 19th century, historian of education Rebecca Rogers informs us, debate was still common about whether girls should be educated at all, and very few girls were, and only among the upper classes.<sup>144</sup> The Ferry laws of 1882 made primary school public, free, and obligatory for both sexes, but secondary school was not, and the curriculum differed for girls and boys for another century or so. Historian Michelle Zancourini-Fournel argues that, even after coeducation was legislated by the Haby law of 1975, “the fiction that mixed school spaces would be, by definition, egalitarian requires rethinking.”<sup>145</sup> Recognizing gender differences in performance outcomes (girls tend to earn better grades) and in career orientation (girls tend to choose less prestigious and less financially rewarding educational tracks), the Ministry of Education has launched many inter-ministerial conventions over the decades to address gender inequality in the school system.<sup>146</sup> One plan in 2013 known as the ABCD of Equality set off a reactionary backlash that forced its abandonment. Because the government was accused of proposing a “gender theory” to young children, a term that came to crystallize outlandish falsities about the plan, the word “gender” has since been dropped from Ministry usage in favor of the more anodyne expression, “girl-boy equality.”<sup>147</sup>

That new conventions – some of which specifically call for eliminating gender stereotypes in children’s literature and in textbooks – continue to be perceived as necessary, and that Eduscol reference lists have been wholly indifferent to concerns about gender-equal representations in picturebooks, demonstrates that the education system participates in, rather than counters, gender-biased socialization found throughout society in other institutions such as the family, the media, and religion. Indeed, sexist stereotypes are widespread in formally sanctioned school textbooks. Even more than the Eduscol reference lists, representation of gender in textbooks has been a particularly well-studied area by scholars,<sup>148</sup> as well as by state organisms, non-governmental organizations, and national and international associations over the years.<sup>149</sup> As this brief foray into gender’s “disruptive potential”<sup>150</sup> in national education elucidates, picturebooks in schools are just one example of the fraught dynamics.<sup>151</sup>

Yet the Eduscol reference lists were considered important enough to legislate, and they began ambitiously. As with many initiatives in national education, however, they were subject to political vicissitudes – the incoming right-wing government immediately downgraded the lists from obligatory to recommended – and for several reasons they have not been carefully implemented. One main reason is the controversies that the Eduscol lists provoke in the publishing world, and another is that public education is simply a vast and sluggish machine with chronic challenges of follow-through.

The Eduscol reference lists within the French education system provide necessary context for understanding the place of the Max book clubs. The lists are not just “another way” that children come to read certain books: they are a State-approved way that is still not egalitarian. If the market does not prompt commercial publishers as a whole to offer gender-equal books to students, one might expect that an objective party, such as a public education system, would be emboldened to do so. Instead, because of an omnipresent universalist outlook, 21st-century students are presented with picturebooks – from both Max and Eduscol – that remain stereotyped and unequal. Some pressure for change exists in French society, from those who endeavor to get more balanced books on the market to those who wish to train teachers, librarians, and other mediators to help child readers navigate the stereotypes they find in stories. But these change agents are weak and from the margins, and they are dismissed as political by the majority.

### Conclusion

Because L'Ecole des loisirs, like many other children's publishers, puts much emphasis on respecting the spontaneous creative impulse of its authors, it is important to understand basic demographics about those creators. I do not subscribe to the notion that women authors and illustrators will produce more feminist picturebooks. On the contrary, every study cited throughout this book that examines authorship has proven that there is no difference in equality of gender representations in the fictional output of women and men creators. The main reason to examine the gender of authors and illustrators chosen by L'Ecole des loisirs for the Max clubs is because it can inform about the dynamics of gender in the children's publishing workplace. There are slightly more female (805 or 51%) than male authors and illustrators (761) ever published by L'Ecole des loisirs.<sup>152</sup> The slight majority of female creators is not a surprise; in fact over 70% of members of the trade union, the *Charte des auteurs et des illustrateurs jeunesse*, are female.<sup>153</sup> It is noteworthy then that women are underrepresented at L'Ecole des loisirs compared to the industry, and further that L'Ecole des loisirs women authors are chosen less than men for the coveted high-sales guarantee and reputation boost that comes with inclusion in Max: of the 41 authors and illustrators in the book club sample, 19 are female (46%).

L'Ecole des loisirs has been in a considerable transition during the time of the research for this book. In 2013, Louis Delas joined the family firm after a career at Casterman and immediately founded a graphic novel imprint called *Rue de Sèvres* under L'Ecole des loisirs. Hubschmid retired around 2020, the last to leave of the trio who ran the company for 50 years. He was replaced not by one person but by several. During the COVID-19

pandemic, the company developed its online offerings with greater zeal. New directions envisaged or being tested in the early 2020s include toys and board games, audio productions, video co-productions, an online subscription, video games, and a direct-to-customer shopping website.<sup>154</sup>

Late in 2015, “the Geneviève Brisac earthquake” struck.<sup>155</sup> Just a few months earlier, the publisher had celebrated its 50th anniversary, with honors going to longtime editors including Geneviève Brisac, who since 1989 headed the three highly reputed collections of junior and young adult novels, Mouche, Neuf, and Médium, and who managed a “hit parade of authors.”<sup>156</sup> At L’Ecole des loisirs, Brisac was to the young adult novel what Hubschmid was to the picturebook.<sup>157</sup> But suddenly Brisac was fired, and several signed contracts with her authors were cancelled. In response, outraged authors published a blog exposing their individual relations with management.<sup>158</sup> Louis Delas declared publicly that a new editorial line was going to favor “novels with positive and dynamic characters on adventures, with whom readers can identify and can grow in a complex world,” a statement that was mocked as simplistic and prescriptive, the opposite of a supposed *politique d’auteur*. In the only critical allusion I have ever seen to the publisher’s universalist mindset, well-known author and filmmaker Christophe Honoré, who quit the publishing house in the wake of the “bloodletting,” penned an editorial in *Le Monde* in which he accused the publisher of canceling book contracts for one story that featured a Black orphan and another with a lesbian character.<sup>159</sup> Other writers critiqued the house for being out of touch with young readers by firing Brisac, and still others blamed what they saw as a recent obsession with bestsellers and profits, contrary to the publisher’s carefully promoted identity.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, Geneviève Brisac’s 2022 tell-all “novel” describes a workplace culture at L’Ecole des loisirs where sexism and sexual harassment were normalized.<sup>161</sup>

Children’s literature scholar Leonard Marcus gives us reason to consider this affair when he writes, “To understand the thoughts and actions of the people responsible for the creation and dissemination of children’s books is to glimpse the inner machinery of one of literate society’s primary means of self-renewal.”<sup>162</sup> That the four-generation family business has been led by only fathers, uncles, sons, and brothers was underscored in the first lines of a commissioned book on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, which claimed that the story of L’Ecole des loisirs is “a man’s story” (“*une histoire d’hommes*”).<sup>163</sup> The consequences of the Brisac earthquake are not yet known, and a new generation at the helm of this dominant publisher in children’s literature may favor change over continuity. But it is likely that the house that founded Max will ensure that any new editorial and commercial directions do not upset its stable and profitable relationship with teachers. Or with parents: as children’s literature specialist Jean Perrot

claims, parents think of L'Ecole des loisirs as “moderately avant-garde,” creative yet reassuring in its middle-class approach to childhood.<sup>164</sup>

The following chapter will provide a good deal of evidence that the picturebooks in the 2019–20 Max subscriptions do not excel in gender equality and inclusivity. Will the professional transitions at L'Ecole des loisirs translate over time to more progressive content in Max books? It is difficult to predict. Looking at the past, L'Ecole des loisirs has made smart moves that copied other publishers. It launched a new division in fictional picturebooks after seeing trends from other countries at the Frankfurt book fair in 1963. It signed the same authors, such as Ungerer and Sendak, that Ursula Nordstrom signed in New York. It created its own bookstore, Chantelivre, in 1974 after discovering one in London. It printed paperbacks beginning in 1975 modeled on the Germans (the American paperback revolution had long been completed by the end of the 1960s). It founded the Max book club modeled on well-established American and Japanese clubs. As Hubschmid told me: “I copy everything.” More skilled importer of trends from abroad than pioneer, then, the publisher can perhaps not be expected to expunge gender stereotypes from its stories nor to embed equality in its “quality” literature until such practices find a commercially successful formula abroad.

This chapter has explained the power that the Max subscription – in conjunction with the Eduscol reference lists – has on schoolchildren’s reading choices. Juxtaposing a commercial business with an educational institution, given their disparate missions, brings to light their astonishing similarities. Max and Eduscol are both risk averse and function to reassure parents. They both produce peripheral pedagogical materials that teachers have not been trained to use and that vary in usefulness. They are both opaque in their processes of selection. Both institutions have market implications. They seem to agree on what constitutes quality literature. And they both dismiss gender equality as a criterion. That an organization with a commercial motivation and another with an educational mission produce similar end results in their selections for students demonstrates, I argue, the penetration of universalism. The following chapter will delve into a sample of 32 Max picturebooks from 2019–20 to document the arguments in this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 Lechanoine-Durand, “L'école des Max,” 35.
- 2 Abescat, “Edition jeunesse.”
- 3 Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes, “Formation à l'égalité filles-garçons.”
- 4 For a detailed account of the publisher’s early history, see Le Tannou, “L'école des loisirs,” 8–14.

- 5 Imbault, "L'école des loisirs, l'utopie au long cours," 15.
- 6 Marcus, *Minders of Make-Believe*, 227.
- 7 Cressent, "Une maison d'édition," 7.
- 8 Arthur Hubschmid claimed in a 2019 personal interview that since the late 2010s, about two-thirds of new L'École des loisirs books are French creations and about one third are translated from abroad. Indeed, 22% of my sample of four Max book clubs in 2019–2020 were translations, a close reflection of the publisher's current production.
- 9 Delas, "En 2006, Jean Delas raconte sa maison d'édition."
- 10 Some of these divisions were independent houses acquired by L'École des loisirs over the years and others were created in-house with distinctive editorial lines.
- 11 Combet, "Le charme discret," 28; L'École des loisirs, "Foreign Rights."
- 12 Éléonore Le Tannou claims that Globe Editions, which publishes a half dozen books a year for adults, is owned by L'École des loisirs: "L'école des loisirs," 55–56.
- 13 Delas, "50 ans de révolutions dans la littérature de jeunesse 1960–2010."
- 14 Today the publisher's paperback and hardcover books can both be found on retail shelves. According to L'École des loisirs' Wikipedia page, the paperback versions are published 12–24 months after the hardcovers. "L'École des loisirs."
- 15 Cf Morey, "The Junior Literary Guild and the Child Reader as Citizen"; Morey, "The Junior Literary Guild and the Making of the New Canonical Works: The Case of *Waterless Mountain*."
- 16 Cerisier, "Les clubs de livres dans l'édition française."
- 17 Fette and Morey, "Book Clubs," 504–5.
- 18 Hubschmid, Personal Interview; Brisac, Personal Interview; Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 48–49.
- 19 Cussagnet, Personal Interview.
- 20 Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 42–48, 57–58; Le Tannou, "L'école des loisirs," 39; Leblanc, "La vente de livres club en magasin."
- 21 Cressent, "Une maison d'édition," 43.
- 22 Vulser, "Le groupe France Loisirs."
- 23 "Hachette Collections."
- 24 For a reflection on the classist blindspots in the children's literature world, see Boulaire, "Des albums pour toutes les classes (sociales)?"
- 25 Email communication, 25 July 2023.
- 26 Today, the eight age groups of the subscriptions are composed of bébémax ("up to 3 years old"), titoumax (ages 2–4), minimax (ages 3–5), kilimax (ages 5–7), animax (ages 7–9), maximax (ages 9–11), supermax (ages 11–13), médium max (ages 13 and up).
- 27 Morey, "The Junior Literary Guild and the Child Reader as Citizen," 294.
- 28 Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 73.
- 29 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 30 Brisac.
- 31 Brisac.
- 32 Imbault, "L'école des loisirs, l'utopie au long cours," 16.
- 33 Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 57.
- 34 Hubschmid, Personal Interview.
- 35 In French schools outside of metropolitan France with smaller student bodies, the same rewards are given for fewer subscriptions.

- 36 “L’Ecole des loisirs à l’école!”
- 37 Cressent, “Une maison d’édition,” 19, 46.
- 38 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 39 Christine Arnold, former *animatrice*, Personal email communication, 12 September 2023.
- 40 Imbault, “L’école des loisirs, l’utopie au long cours,” 20.
- 41 Le Tannou, “L’école des loisirs,” 38.
- 42 Tutello, Personal Interview.
- 43 Delas, “50 ans de révolutions dans la littérature de jeunesse 1960–2010.”
- 44 Hubschmid, Personal Interview; Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 45 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 46 On this and other books on homoparentality, see Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d’albums*, 107.
- 47 Pasquier, *Construire l’égalité des sexes et des sexualités*, 57.
- 48 A book in the same series by Stephanie Blake was offered in the minimax club in February 2020, analyzed in Chapter 4: *Va-t’en, Bébé Cadum!*
- 49 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 50 Brisac.
- 51 Bessière, Personal Interview; Lallouet, Personal Interview; Zuzula, Personal Interview; Cussaguet, Personal Interview.
- 52 Combet, Personal Interview.
- 53 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 54 Imbault, “L’école des loisirs, l’utopie au long cours,” 20.
- 55 Claude Combet estimated the 2013 balance sheet at 44 million euros. Combet, “Le charme discret,” 28–29.
- 56 Le Tannou, “L’école des loisirs,” 37.
- 57 Hubschmid, Personal Interview.
- 58 “Les chiffres clés du système éducatif.” Ministère de l’Education nationale et de la jeunesse. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/les-chiffres-cles-du-systeme-educatif-6515>. Accessed 13 Sept 2023.
- 59 Tutello, Personal Interview.
- 60 Bessière, Personal Interview.
- 61 “Le livreur d’histoires: Offrez une année.”
- 62 Tutello, Personal Interview.
- 63 “Le livreur d’histoires.”
- 64 “Noti Le livreur d’histoires.”
- 65 Tutello, Personal Interview.
- 66 Dermigny, Personal Interview.
- 67 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 68 Delas, “50 ans de révolutions dans la littérature de jeunesse 1960–2010.”
- 69 Delas, “En 2006, Jean Delas raconte sa maison d’édition.”
- 70 Fette and Morey, “Book Clubs,” 504.
- 71 Delas, “En 2006, Jean Delas raconte sa maison d’édition.”
- 72 See Heywood, “Modernising and Moralising.”
- 73 Moissard and Dumas, *On ne s’en fait pas à Paris*.
- 74 On why Ungerer is a classic, see Perrot, “French Classics,” 56.
- 75 Delas, “50 ans de révolutions dans la littérature de jeunesse 1960–2010.”
- 76 For a critique of the patriarchal “pantheonization” of *Where the Wild Things Are*, see Anne Larue’s review of Nelly Chabrol Gagne’s *Fille d’Album* (L’Atelier du poisson soluble, 2011) in the journal *Strenae* (2012).
- 77 Delas, “En 2006, Jean Delas raconte sa maison d’édition.”

- 78 Cressent, "Une maison d'édition," 20–21.
- 79 Kedadouche, Personal Interview.
- 80 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 81 Imbault, "L'école des loisirs, l'utopie au long cours," 20.
- 82 Combet, "Le charme discret," 29.
- 83 See Chapter 2 of Heywood, *Catholicism and Children's Literature*.
- 84 On the literary-didactic split in the anglophone classroom, see Gordon Ginzburg, "Children's Literature in Schools."
- 85 Cressent, "Une maison d'édition," 9–10.
- 86 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 83.
- 87 Lagarde, "La bibliothèque d'école," 23.
- 88 Delas, "50 ans de révolutions dans la littérature de jeunesse 1960–2010"; Combet, Personal Interview.
- 89 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 90 Imbault, "L'école des loisirs, l'utopie au long cours," 22.
- 91 Hubschmid, Personal Interview.
- 92 Faure-Poirée, Personal Interview.
- 93 See Bruel's *L'aventure politique*, which argues that every children's book is political.
- 94 For a summary of the uses of children's literature in schools in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Nières-Chevrel, *Introduction à la littérature de jeunesse*, 221–28.
- 95 Lécullé, "Comment lit-on à l'école maternelle?"
- 96 Boulaire, "Sur les usages de l'album en milieu scolaire."
- 97 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 82–83.
- 98 They were required in the first year but soon become recommended only.
- 99 Cited in Boulaire, "Sur les usages de l'album en milieu scolaire."
- 100 Lallouet, Personal Interview.
- 101 "Littérature, Cycle des approfondissements (cycle 3)," Documents d'applications des programmes, Ministère de la Jeunesse, de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche, Direction de l'enseignement scolaire, applicable à la rentrée 2002, Centre national de documentation pédagogique, 5, 9–10, 13. Thanks to Virginie Houadec for the reference.
- 102 Lagarde, "Les sélections de référence d'ouvrages de littérature de jeunesse de l'Éducation nationale."
- 103 Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, "Lectures à l'École: des listes de référence."
- 104 "Bibliothèque d'école: vademecum," 11.
- 105 Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, "Lectures à l'École: des listes de référence."
- 106 Ezratty, Personal Interview.
- 107 Magnier, Personal Interview.
- 108 de la Broise, Personal Interview.
- 109 Lenglet, Personal Interview; Bessière, Personal Interview.
- 110 Houadec, Personal Interview.
- 111 Cussaguet, Personal Interview.
- 112 Zuzula, Personal Interview.
- 113 Savier, Personal Interview.
- 114 Lenglet, Personal Interview.
- 115 de la Broise, Personal Interview.
- 116 Magnier, Personal Interview.



- 117 Beulque, Personal Interview.
- 118 Van der Linden, Personal Interview.
- 119 Beau, Personal Interview; Lallouet, Personal Interview; Baker, Personal Interview; Magnier, Personal Interview.
- 120 Plane, "Les livres jeunesse à l'école?"; Dobek, "Lecture d'albums de littérature à l'école élémentaire"; Mongenot, "Prince(sse), ogre(sse), auteur(e), lecteur ou lectrice."
- 121 Bitard, Personal Interview.
- 122 Houadec, "Le genre et les modèles amoureux dans la littérature de jeunesse," 23–24.
- 123 Savier, Personal Interview.
- 124 Magnier, Personal Interview; Poirier and Jourdeuil, Personal Interview.
- 125 Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 16.
- 126 Le Tannou, "L'école des loisirs," 40–42.
- 127 Lechanoine-Durand, "L'école des Max," 54.
- 128 Gaiotti, "Le livre à l'école, entre tradition et innovation: L'exemple de l'école élémentaire," 91.
- 129 Talents hauts, "Sélection Ministère de l'Éducation."
- 130 Genevrier, "Ecole."
- 131 Gallimard, "Livre CE1, CE2 & CP | Gallimard Jeunesse."
- 132 "Cercle Gallimard de l'enseignement."
- 133 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 7.
- 134 Houadec, "Le genre et les modèles amoureux dans la littérature de jeunesse," Abstract.
- 135 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Panissal, "Le sexisme au programme?," 119, 123.
- 136 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Panissal, 127.
- 137 Costes and Houadec, "La construction du genre à travers les images des couvertures," 483.
- 138 Houadec, Personal Interview.
- 139 Manuelian, Magnan-Rahimi, and Laroque, "La littérature pour la jeunesse et le genre," 56–57.
- 140 Fette, "Heureux comme stéréotype en France," 138–40.
- 141 Cromer and Turin, "Que racontent les albums illustrés aux enfants?"
- 142 Berton-Schmitt, Personal Interview.
- 143 Baudelot and Establet, *Allez les filles!*; Thébaud and Rogers, *La fabrique des filles*.
- 144 Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom*. See also Fette, *Exclusions*.
- 145 Zancarini-Fournel, "Coéducation, gémination, co-instruction, mixité," 32.
- 146 Morin-Messabel and Salle, "Introduction."
- 147 Blézat, "Les ABCD de l'égalité, cas d'école des paniques morales."
- 148 Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne*; Brugeilles and Cromer, "Genre et mathématiques"; Brugeilles and Garcin, "Les images dans les manuels de mathématiques"; Chevalier, "Enseigner la grammaire du genre"; Collard, "Représentation du masculin et du féminin dans les manuels scolaires"; Decroux-Masson, *Papa lit, maman coud*; Guillaume, *Le destin des femmes et l'école*; Miot, "Images de la femme dans les manuels scolaires"; Pomart, "Analyse des représentations du féminin et du masculin dans les manuels scolaires"; Lignon, Porhel, and Rakoto-Raharimanana, "Étude des stéréotypes de genre dans les manuels scolaires."
- 149 Bertrand, "Analyse des manuels scolaires de l'enseignement secondaire du point de vue de l'égalité des chances et du sexisme"; Michel, *Non aux*

- stéréotypes; INRP, "Image de la femme dans les manuels scolaires"; Rignault and Richert, "La représentation des hommes et des femmes dans les livres scolaires"; "Faire des manuels scolaires des outils de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes."
- 150 Rogers, "From the French Republican Educational Reforms to the ABCD de l'égalité," 149.
- 151 Berton-Schmitt, "Les représentations des deux sexes dans la littérature jeunesse contemporaine," 122-29.
- 152 This comparison is imperfect since the website includes authors and illustrators of all time, whereas the Max figures pertain only to a particular year. "Tous les auteurs | L'école des loisirs, Maison d'Édition Jeunesse."
- 153 Nail, Personal Interview; For a slightly divergent accounting of creators by gender, see Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: quels effets pour le développement des enfants?," 4.
- 154 Imbault, "L'école des loisirs, l'utopie au long cours," 18-22.
- 155 Le Tannou, "L'école des loisirs," 33-35.
- 156 Moissard and Dumas, *On ne s'en fait pas à Paris*, 86.
- 157 It has been said that Geneviève Brisac and Nathalie Brisac are cousins.
- 158 "La ficelle – Si ton cerf-volant est cassé, garde la ficelle."
- 159 Honoré, "'L'École des loisirs': la littérature menacée."
- 160 Abescat, "Edition jeunesse."
- 161 Brisac, *Les enchanteurs*.
- 162 Marcus, *Minders of Make-Believe*, xi.
- 163 Moissard and Dumas, *On ne s'en fait pas à Paris*.
- 164 Perrot, *Du jeu, des enfants et des livres à l'heure de la mondialisation*, 352.

## 4 Gender in L'Ecole des loisirs' Book Club "Max" (2019–20)

As I described in Chapter 3, the children's publisher L'Ecole des loisirs monopolizes the picturebook market in French primary schools with its book-a-month clubs. Teachers, administrators, and parents of schoolchildren enthusiastically collaborate in the program known as Max. The Max book clubs play a key role in putting particular books from a single publisher into the hands of schoolchildren. Its influence outweighs that of the Ministry of Education's Eduscol recommended book lists for teachers, the classroom bookshelves that are sustained by teachers, and the rare primary school libraries.

Given their dominance, examining representations of gender in the Max picturebooks yields insights about the values and social models for young French citizens mobilized by L'Ecole des loisirs and privileged by educators. Following an overview of the sample of 2019–20 Max clubs, this chapter will analyze gender representations in the stories (see Appendix 2). My findings show that these texts do not offer gender-equal stories full of imaginative possibilities for children of all sexes. Many of the stories contain numerous and various gender stereotypes, and males dominate the 32 stories of the subscriptions for the four youngest age groups, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This chapter clarifies how club picturebooks reflect the values of the publisher that produces them and serve as material manifestations of the company's history, market share, and editorial stances. I argue that the institutional features of L'Ecole des loisirs examined in Chapter 3 make Max club books impervious to inclusive gender norms. These features include narrow views of what constitutes quality literature, such as canonical authors; a disdain for activism and editorial intervention; and an overriding universalist approach to storytelling that insists, among other things, that the masculine is neutral.

### Overview of the 2019–20 Max Clubs

The eight Max book clubs range in age from birth to adolescence. All eight clubs will be discussed in this overview section though the sample for the

chapter will only include the four youngest clubs. Referred to in company materials in lower-case, the eight clubs are composed of bébémax (“up to age 3”), titoumax (ages 2–4), minimax (ages 3–5), kilimax (ages 5–7), animax (ages 7–9), maximax (ages 9–11), supermax (ages 11–13), and médium max (ages 13 and up). Chapter 3 described L'Ecole des loisirs' mission of offering pleasure reading; indeed, almost all of the club books are fiction and a majority of the stories, at least within the younger clubs, are comedic. Yet we also saw in Chapter 3 that L'Ecole des loisirs creates pedagogical materials for all 64 annual book selections. Indeed, a QR code is printed on the back cover of every book in this sample indicating, “For more on this book visit the subscription website.”<sup>1</sup>

Max books are all produced in a sturdy glossy paperback format, and they increase in size – both in square centimeters and in number of pages – as the club members advance in age. Bébémax books are typically a small square format with about ten double-spread pages; most kilimax picturebooks are 30-some pages long; and the maximax club for nine-year-olds and older offers books over 100 pages. Furthermore, the books in each club progress in terms of reading complexity and words per page. Within each club, a progression can also be noted from November to June. Monthly books are sequenced to meet or stimulate improving reading ability; this is especially notable in the minimax and kilimax subscriptions, which target the age range when many children are becoming independent readers. The final book in June of each subscription is often significantly advanced in comparison to preceding books, probably meant to nudge some readers to upgrade to the next club after the summer. For example, the June 2020 book for animax, maximax, and supermax all nearly doubled the average page length of the previous books in each club. For other clubs, a light-hearted or breakaway book was chosen for the final month, for example, an amusing large format and lengthy visual dictionary of sports for kilimax or a graphic novel for médium max. Each subscription features at least one book that nods to a season: an autumn theme for November in titoumax; holiday- or snow-themed books in December for minimax, kilimax, and animax; outdoor springtime stories in April and May for minimax; and an ocean-themed book for June in bébémax.

The content of the books naturally progresses in depth and complexity over and across the eight book clubs. Very little narrative is found in the youngest bébémax club, whose books offer, for example, a presentation of objects, simple sequences, a double-story flip book, or a lift-the-flap book. Only one bébémax book in the sample contains an actual plot. In titoumax, a few books have simple plots, and two books use direct address to implicate the reader in a hide-and-seek game. All eight books in minimax, for ages three to five, contain plots whose initial situation is perturbed and resolved in simple ways. Kilimax is the club that most closely matches the

level of the library books sampled for Chapter 2: almost all kilimax books have well-developed plots, and they have more text per page and smaller fonts compared to minimax, the previous club.

In the Max clubs for the four oldest age groups, which are not included in the sample for this chapter, the level of language and content advances apace. For example, the animax club for seven-to-nine-year-old children includes international settings: one book is set in China and another in Taiwan, whereas only one book in the four younger clubs takes readers to an identifiable setting outside of France, *L'Antarctique de Simon* (*Simon's Antarctica*) in kilimax. Imaginary stories are still featured in animax, with one book on elves and another on medieval trolls. The use of anthropomorphized animals as characters, which is predominant in the younger clubs, remains strong in animax, and all but disappears in the next club, maximax for ages 9–11. Exotic settings and historical time periods increase in the three clubs for the oldest children: ancient Greece, the Amazon, Sweden, Argentina, Texas, and postwar New York. Comics are introduced beginning with one selection in maximax, two in supermax, and three in médium max, all of which are published by L'Ecole des loisirs' subsidiary Rue de Sèvres.

Beyond the bébémax books, each Max club typically offers at least one idiosyncratic book that is not a standard fictional narrative: for example, an interactive hide-and-seek book, a visual encyclopedia about sharks, a Greek myth adaptation, a biography of Marie Curie, an anthology of a series, a reissue of a 1907 Scandinavian classic, a quirky etymology, and a comic book on gender inequality (more on this below). Max offers subscribers a variety of literary genres: whereas the clubs for younger readers focus on growing up and daily life, the older children consume drama, comedy, mystery, adventure, romance, and fantasy. Three books in the clubs targeting 9–13-year-old children have been selected for the Ministry of Education's Eduscol reference lists, which the Max brochures emphasize. It is interesting that L'Ecole des loisirs includes any Eduscol books at all in Max, since titles that do not already benefit from State approval would be more strategic. Likely the publisher believes that parents and adolescents need convincing to subscribe to the more advanced clubs compared to the better-selling early-level clubs, since adolescents already know how to read.

Almost half of the picturebooks in the 2019–20 sample (14 out of the 32 books for youngest subscribers) are part of series. Typically, these series are composed of a handful of books but could contain as few as two books (featuring the white male rabbit Simon from *L'Antarctique de Simon* in kilimax) and as many as 30 (featuring the white male rabbit Simon, coincidentally, from *Va-t'en, Bébé Cadum!* in minimax). Despite L'Ecole des loisirs rhetoric described in Chapter 3 blaming other publishers for overproducing cheap picturebooks that sell fastest in series, it publishes many series itself and also uses the club to publicize those series by exposing subscribers to one book of a series.

At first glance, the Max brochures suggest that the club promotes progressive themes of "*vivre ensemble*" (living together), a French expression that can signify anything from surmounting sibling rivalry to fighting for refugee rights. The term is often used to categorize children's books by theme: in the Children's Literature Room of the French National Library, the label leans toward the daily business of getting along with others, whereas in the library of the National Museum for the History of Immigration, it refers to books that address racism and xenophobia. The titles, cover images, and short descriptions in the brochures for the eight Max clubs of 64 books in 2019–20, when taken as a whole, encourage tolerance, curiosity, environmentalism, respect for science, valuing of the past, and internationalism. *Rouge de colère* (*Red Hot Angry*) in bébémax depicts a friend helping another friend deal with anger. *Un automne avec Pop* (*Autumn with Pop*) in titoumax demonstrates the value of inclusiveness. Disputes and fears are overcome in several minimax stories. *Le secret du rocher noir* (*The Secret of the Black Rock*) in kilimax is the most activist book of the sample, with a message about protecting the environment. Selections in the club for oldest readers are decidedly political: two are set during the Second World War, one returns to the Argentinian military dictatorship, and another deals with undocumented migrants in France.

Notably, however, the books in the Max clubs are not racially diverse. In the four youngest clubs, no protagonist or secondary character is an underrepresented minority. With the single possible exception of the girl title character in *La balade d'Asami* (*Asami's Stroll*), who may be of Japanese origin but whose mother is depicted as Caucasian, all of the main and secondary characters in the 32 books are white. As for anonymous characters, only one book, *Un petit pas de géant* (*A Small Thing... But Big*), features two child figures drawn with dark skin in the background of a few public park scenes. A majority of the books in the four clubs for youngest readers, in fact, use nonhuman characters. In the four clubs for oldest readers that do not form part of the sample for this chapter, more ethnoracial diversity is present in the stories, but only by virtue of the settings outside of France, notably in Asia. Thus, universalism is both gendered and racialized, with white male characters predominating in both number and treatment.

Although the Max clubs for the four oldest groups of children are not the focus of this chapter, the final book of the 2019–20 subscription for the most advanced readers (ages 13 and up) is worth examining as the culmination of an annual eight-club subscription. This book is a *bande dessinée* (BD or comic book) entitled *Pourquoi y a-t-il des inégalités entre les hommes et les femmes?* (*Why are there inequalities between men and women?*). In its brief chapter on prehistory, the book asserts that women never hunted while menstruating and instead hid in caves in order not

to attract animals. Later, a single frame summarizes the centuries-long fight for political rights with a caption in the passive tense, “In 1944, in France, the right to vote was given to women.” The image on the cover of the book depicts a caveman dragging a cavewoman by her hair on the ground. Described as a “joyous comic” in the médium max brochure, a reader’s review on the website of the FNAC bookstore chain calls the book “deplorable. The work is coarse, caricatural, reductionist, and inaccurate. It is also a vector of clichés.”<sup>2</sup> Another online review describes it as a “very bad book, stuffed with clichés and stupidities. [...] Completely off base.”<sup>3</sup> By publishing and showcasing in the Max club in the wake of the #metoo movement a bawdy take on gender inequality, L’Ecole des loisirs missed an opportunity to help teenage subscribers’ come to terms with issues they were encountering in the daily news.<sup>4</sup>

### **Gender Representations in bébémax, titoumax, minimax, and kilimax**

To constitute a sample of Max picturebooks for this chapter, the four youngest clubs consisting of 32 books in total were chosen to investigate messaging about gender norms to the youngest of children including babies and prereaders (see Figure 4.1).<sup>5</sup> By offering an examination of picturebooks for children beginning at birth, this chapter will enlarge our understanding of the reading material available to French-speaking children in the 21st century, expanding on the samples analyzed from school and public libraries in Chapter 2 and from magazines in Chapter 6, which do not include stories published for such young readers.

At first glance, there is nothing glaringly sexist about any of the 32 books in the youngest Max clubs in the final year of the second decade of the 21st century: no pathetic females, no macho males, no domination between the sexes, no retrograde storylines, no pink or blue books. One book even presents an extraordinary heroine. However, upon closer examination, gender imbalances and clichés are discernible. The body of this chapter presents three sections on main characters, adult characters, and animal characters. In quantifying the significant dominance of males throughout the sample, analyzing the parenting and professional modeling that adults play in stories, and debunking the myth that anthropomorphism enables picturebooks to evade gendering, I reveal insidious gender inequality in stories for child readers.

#### *Main Characters*

The sample contains significant gender disparity among the main characters. As Virginie Houadec claims, “Characters enable actions: they are responsible for them, are subjected to them, they relate them to one



Figure 4.1 Brochures for the four youngest Max clubs, 2019–2020. Reproduced with permission from L'Ecole des loisirs.

another, and they give actions meaning. Moreover, the character is one of the key elements of projection and identification for readers.”<sup>6</sup>

In *bébémax* books, where narratives are not highly developed, there is little complexity to analyze about gender representations in the storylines. Yet, males heavily dominate the main character roles in this club for



**Table 4.1** Protagonists in the 32-Book Club Sample

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female/ Male Duo</i>	<i>Male Same Sex Duo</i>	<i>Female Same Sex Duo</i>	<i>Mixed Group</i>	<i>None</i>
bébémax	0	3	1	1	0	0	3
titoumax	1	4	0	0	0	2	1
minimax	3	3	0	0	0	2	0
kilimax	2	4	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

newborns and toddlers: three individual male protagonists, one male duo, and one male sharing the main role with a female. That computes to six male leads overall, compared to one female lead who shares her role with a male. Table 4.1 shows that the gender imbalance of main characters slightly improves for the three next older clubs. In the four clubs together, male protagonists outnumber females by a ratio of 18 to eight.

The symbolic annihilation of female characters in *bébémax* mirrors what Anne Dafflon Novelle finds in her three studies of children's literature: "The asymmetry between the two sexes is at its apogee in anthropomorphized stories targeted to zero-to-three-year-olds."<sup>7</sup> Given the heavy presence of male protagonists in *bébémax*, the stories do allow these infants or toddlers to express their masculinity in ways that do not play to stereotypes. The domination of male main characters in the library sample in Chapter 2 also has the merit of offering a variety of traits and behaviors to the boys in the stories. In *bébémax*, for example, the male rabbit in *Sèches tes larmes, Petit Lapin!* (*Dry Your Tears, Little Rabbit!*) has fallen and hurt himself. Tears are flowing on the front cover as well as on six pages of the short book. The narration encourages compassion for the rabbit and directly addresses the reader to console him. It is not shameful for a male to cry in this book, even over the most minor boobo. In *Rouge de colère*, female Lola and male Malo share the main role. It is Lola who experiences the emotion of anger and Malo who gently helps her manage her feelings. Although a common stereotype assumes that females are at the mercy of their emotions, anger is an emotion considered more permissible for males. This picturebook also puts Malo in a helping role.<sup>8</sup>

Studies have documented that even when characters are portrayed without a clearly identifiable gender, both adult and child readers usually interpret them as male.<sup>9</sup> Two of the male protagonists in *bébémax* books are in fact drawn in neutral ways that could confound readers: Lou in *T'en as plein partout!* (*It's all over you!*) and the unnamed character in *C'est qui chat?* (*Who Is Cat?*). The rudimentary language necessary for baby books allows authors to avoid obvious gendering, which is next to impossible

in French for anything other than the simplest picturebooks. If pronouns, adjectives, and reflexive verbs are eschewed, if first names are not indicated or gender neutral (Lou could be Louise or Louis), if hair has not grown long enough yet, if baby clothing avoids pink and blue, and if shoes and accessories do not signal gender, then child readers are free to interpret these protagonists as they wish, notwithstanding interpretations from the adults who accompany them. Once these books become series that require more language and more artwork, it becomes difficult to maintain a semblance of gender neutrality, if such neutrality is actually purposeful. Indeed, whereas both protagonists in *T'en as plein partout!* and *C'est qui chat?* are devoid of any feminine vestment signifiers, both are clearly identified in other books in their series or promotional materials as males. Incidentally, these series offer an important secondary role for the boys' pet, a male cat in both instances.

Titoumax male protagonists outnumber females by four to one and they occupy more space outdoors. Lolotte in *Lolotte se déguise* (*Lolotte Plays Dress-Up*) is the first individual female main character encountered by subscribers to bébémax or titoumax: her book appears in January 2020. In the story, this anthropomorphized pig character uses a trove of costumes to inspire adventures with her two female friends, a crocodile and a chick. Though the drawings depict exciting imaginary locations, for example, a circus tent and a pirate ship, the girls are in fact engaged in indoor play. In *Le cache-cache des animaux* (*Animals' Hide-and-Seek*), like Lolotte, the male dog protagonist also plays only with friends of his own sex and stays indoors. In contrast, Pop, the striped male dinosaur in *Un automne avec Pop* (*Autumn with Pop*), roams freely outdoors but is surrounded by a same-sex male entourage. Three other stories in titoumax bring readers outdoors: they are led by groups of mice, groups of dogs, or a mix of animals. In most of these cases, the animal species' gender is male and the characters are described as such, for example, *le mouton* (the male sheep) or *le cochon* (the male pig).

The main characters in minimax appear in Table 4.1 to be well-balanced between females and males, but the difficulty in identifying protagonists in several of these eight stories for three-to-five-year-old children leads, in fact, to an overestimation of female presence. I categorized *Une histoire à grosse voix* as a mixed group, with the father frog and his three tadpoles totaling three male and one female characters. But really the father dominates the storyline, the speaking roles, and the images, and it is his loud voice that figures in the book's title. To be fair, the protagonist in *L'orage* is also counted as a mixed group, whereas two females stand out: the teacher who leads the class, composed of a variety of young birds in a dancing lesson, and the student who already knows how to dance. It has been assigned a mixed-group designation because all of the chicks have speaking roles,

the girl dancer is absent from much of the story and depicted centrally only on one page and on the front cover, and the story is not titled after her. In *Va-t'en, Bébé Cadum!* (*Go Away, Baby Cadum!*), Simon's younger brother plays a strong second to his older brother protagonist, and in *Coup de foudre*, which is a love story between two hedgehogs, I identify the protagonist as female since the story is told from her point of view. This context for minimax stories demonstrates that the data in Table 4.1 should be considered an underestimation of male dominance in the sample.

There are twice as many male protagonists than females in kilimax. In three of the four stories with male mains, furthermore, another male plays an important secondary role: Berk's pal Croco-sac-à-dos in *La nuit de Berk* (*Berk's Night*), Billy's friend Jean-Claude in *Billy cherche un trésor*, and Simon's friend Bob in *L'Antarctique de Simon*. The one kilimax book that does not contain any main character is a compendium of athletes, almost all male. In all four stories with male main characters, the male is also the title character. Neither of the two female protagonists in the kilimax subscription is granted a place in the title: *Le secret du rocher noir* and *Quelle horreur!*

Not surprisingly, more outdoor adventures appear in Max stories as the readership ages. Of the eight kilimax books, five are outdoor adventure narratives (compared with the previous club, minimax, which offered six stories about daily life at or close to home). Of the five kilimax adventures, four are bestowed on male protagonists and only one on a female. We also saw in Chapter 2 and will encounter in Chapter 6 that publishers and creators seem to reserve adventure stories for males.<sup>10</sup>

As is evident from this overview of main characters in the 32-book sample, males are overrepresented as protagonists but also as all types of characters; male protagonists are four times more likely to be title characters compared to females (there are eight male characters that are both main and title characters, compared to two females); and male protagonists have more outdoor adventures. In these ways, males accumulate greater status than female characters. Furthermore, even if a female is granted a starring role in a story, she is often saddled with stereotypical feminine traits. In *Quelle horreur!*, Paty doubts her ability until the story's final page. In *Coup de foudre*, Mathilde worries about her appearance. In *La balande d'Asami*, Asami is obedient and calm. In *Un petit pas de géant*, Lizzie's primary trait is fear of dogs.

Finally, it is important to notice the dominance of male protagonists in books that are part of series. Earlier, I explained that series are a fraught aspect of the publishing industry: although librarians and publishers such as L'Ecole des loisirs denigrate series as cheaply produced easy sellers that lack literary merit, they are also irresistibly profitable products that keep children reading. Series offer publishers a multiplier effect on sales by

capitalizing on the popularity of main characters whose role goes beyond a single book. In French, the term *fidélisation* means customer loyalty; in publishing it refers specifically to the marketing and sales technique that relies on series featuring an appealing character who becomes beloved to readers over time. It is the holy grail of both book and magazine publishers. Despite L'Ecole des loisirs leaders' stated contempt for series, almost half of the books in the sample are parts of series: 14 books out of 32. Of these, eight feature male protagonists and only one features a female protagonist.<sup>11</sup> This differential is similar to a sample of picturebooks examined by Eliane Ferrez and Anne Dafflon Novelle: of the main characters who are part of series, 33 are male and eight are female.<sup>12</sup> By virtue of starring in series much more often than females, male protagonists multiply their dominance in readers' consciousness.

Finally, two of the stories in the Max sample that feature a female and a male character with a lot of interaction allow for additional layers of gender analysis: *Coup de foudre* and *Le géant, la fillette et le dictionnaire*. In *Coup de foudre* (*Love at First Sight*), even though Mathilde is counted as the protagonist in this love story between two hedgehogs, she is highly gendered in traits and actions.<sup>13</sup> A knock at her door in the middle of the night perturbs the initial situation: a male hedgehog, Félix, needs shelter from the storm. For Mathilde it is love at first sight. When he comes back a second time, she is horrified to discover that she has rabbit excrement in her hair. She locks Félix outside, runs to the mirror, and makes him wait an hour while she preens. Ultimately, they become a couple and reminisce about such silly first encounters. *Coup de foudre*, taken at face value, shows what is at stake for child readers of simple narratives: stereotypes about feminine attention to physical presentation can be easily reinforced. Several large studies of textbooks, for example, have shown that in school reading materials, girls "are more often portrayed to be more attentive to their bodies, to their appearance, and more involved in seduction dynamics than boys."<sup>14</sup>

*Le Géant, la fillette et le dictionnaire* (*The Giant, the Little Girl, and the Dictionary*) offers a twist on the narrative trope of a helpless female imprisoned by a violent male. A door-to-door dictionary salesman knocks on a giant's door. Upon seeing the size of the inhabitant, the salesman runs away scared, calling him an ogre and dropping a dictionary in his haste. Surprised by all this, the giant looks up the word "ogre" in the dictionary and reads that he is supposed to eat children. He decides to try it out. He finds a girl in the forest and brings her home to cook. She was in the forest alone, frowning with arms crossed, because she had run away from her parents who forced her to eat vegetables. The giant wants to cook her with her favorite vegetable on the theory that she would taste better, but she hates all vegetables. During their negotiations, the reader is led to believe

that the girl is oblivious, seated as she is in a pot about to be cooked. Finally, it becomes clear that she understands the danger she is in and will not submit. At the climax of the story, there is another knock at the door: soldiers arrive to arrest the ogre. To the reader's surprise, the girl sends the soldiers away, claiming that the giant is not an ogre and that she was there to recover her dictionary. When the giant asks her why she saved him, she replies with aplomb, "Because when I have a problem, I solve it myself." In gratitude and admiration, the giant decides not to eat her because she is "*coriace*," literally both leathery and tenacious, figuratively, a tough cookie or a hard nut to crack.

*Le Géant, la fillette et le dictionnaire* counters several stereotypes for males and females with humor. The giant does not eat children, is afraid of the dentist, and is a knitter. The girl is sullen and stubborn and is drawn with matted hair, large nose, and permanent frown, but she wins the reader's appreciation through her risky defense of the giant. At the same time, the plot banalizes the trope of fragile female and male predator, "hardly an emancipating model for boys,"<sup>15</sup> according to the Centre Hubertine Auclert, the Paris-region organization involved in equality initiatives described in Chapter 3, even if the plot is surprisingly undone at the conclusion. Moreover, the story shows that even the most valiant attempts at defying gender norms – if this is indeed the author's intention – can result in an unsettling critique of feminization, and the equating of weakness with feminineness. Although a shut-in, the knitting, dictionary-reading, easily influenced giant is indeed funny, and the narrative makes us question why certain behaviors are feminized and consequently associated with weakness. It also shows why strength cannot be easily coupled with beauty for fictional females, since the girl's position outside of gendered expectations of compliance and care for presentation turns the plot. While the author's reversal of gender tropes is mostly successful – the girl is stubborn, clever, not concerned with her appearance, and not open to a rescue – the weakness of the giant is feminized. Females can be hellions, but human men cannot occupy the position of the giant, that is, they cannot be depicted as knitting recluses.

### *Adult Characters*

As Chapter 2 made clear, adult characters in picturebooks are often carriers of gender stereotypes, whether as parents or professionals, via their roles, activities, or visual depictions. In the Max sample, it is only in the older two clubs that adults claim roles with as much importance as child characters: in five of the eight minimax books and a strong presence in kilimax. In contrast, in bébémax, three silent adults appear in images in just two of the eight books, and an adult character features in only one

titoumax story, leaving the large majority of stories in the two youngest clubs devoid of grown-ups. This section will look at the gendering of adult characters, first as parents and then as professionals.

Gender differentiation manifests itself clearly in the parenting roles that are a significant part of the Max stories. Titoumax for two-to-four-year-olds and minimax for three-to-five-year-olds offer simple plots that address daily life and are most often set in or around the home. Parent roles begin in one book in titoumax, accelerate to be featured in half of the minimax books, and continue in two of the kilimax books for five-to-seven-year-olds. This progression sensibly matches stories to readers' psychological development and comprehension ability. By the kilimax club, family importance diminishes slightly while main characters become more autonomous and are not always children.

Overall, seven books in the sample depict parents in important secondary roles to their children. In each of these books, interestingly, there is only one parent present. Women in the role of mother outrank fathers by five to two, thereby reproducing for club readers a traditional family arrangement with women as the primary caregivers. Furthermore, the mothers are mostly doing mundane parenting tasks such as feeding and putting to bed, whereas the fathers are having fun with their children. I will take an in-depth look at these seven stories featuring a parent in an important secondary role.

In titoumax's *C'est pour qui?* (*Who Is It For?*), a mother is in every double-page image next to her son at the kitchen table, coaxing him to eat his soup (see for example, Figure 4.2). No father is present or mentioned.



Figure 4.2 A page from *C'est pour qui?* Courtesy of Michaël Escoffier/Matthieu Maudet © L'Ecole des loisirs.

The mother tries increasingly zany methods to force the boy to eat the soup: encouraging a wolf to eat her son; when the wolf refuses, she calls on an ogre to eat the wolf. The sequence resolves when the ogre wants the soup, which provokes the boy's territoriality, and he finally submits. The story succeeds because of its pace and its outlandishness. Mom's role is not denigrated: she comes across as good-natured. She is not physically gendered in an exaggerated way: a hairbun and small breasts under a purple top are all that readers can see of her, seated next to her son behind the kitchen table. She is, however, performing prosaic parenting without any participation from a father. It is also clear that she prepared the meal. Finally, mother does not merit a part in the book's cover image; only the boy is there, staring down at his unwanted soup.

In *minimax's Tout le monde dort?* (*Does Everybody Sleep?*), another mother fulfills routine duties with her reluctant son with no father in sight (see Figure 4.3). The story centers on bedtime rather than mealtime. While patiently cajoling her son to bed, responding to his many questions with loving answers, the mother ultimately falls asleep before he does. The story nods to *Goodnight Moon* (Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd, 1947) with its dialogue focused on naming people and things that sleep. Whereas the boy in *C'est pour qui?* could conceivably have a father since an absence during mealtime does not preclude a father's existence, the mother in *Tout le monde dort?* comes across as a single parent. She shares some aspects with the mother in *C'est pour qui?*: she is likeable; she is drawn neutrally, with only her long hair to physically gender her; and despite her important role, she does not appear on the front cover either.



Figure 4.3 A page from *Tout le monde dort?* Courtesy of Audrey Poussier © L'École des loisirs.

Two minimax books offer stories in which mothers are parenting alone in a secondary role to their daughters. They are in back-to-back selections for April and May of 2020: *La balade d'Asami* and *Un petit pas de géant*. In *La balade d'Asami*, a mother is too busy to read her daughter a story. Whether or not the father is available is not raised in this initial situation, thereby reinforcing the commonplace that childcare is mother's work. The text explains that Asami's mother "is very busy in their house and out in the fields." Even though other images in the book suggest that the family lives in a rural area with agricultural fields around, the mother is drawn on this page inside the house, holding a cleaning product with a dishtowel draped over her forearm (see Figure 4.4). This woman's role is thus not only parenting but also housekeeping.

When Asami requests permission to go for a walk with her dog, her mother agrees and offers her a basket for collecting. The body of the story depicts the girl and her golden retriever in the surrounding nature; she collects flowers, fruit, and shells. Upon her return home, she makes a garland with her treasures to drape over her younger brother's cradle, in what amounts to a culmination of her feminine stereotyped activities. Until the last page, the father is absent, but he appears in the final textless family portrait in a stereotypically masculine pose, embracing Asami, her mother, and her infant brother from behind. The book offers an example of a gendered trope in children's literature known as the *père de passage*, that is,



Figure 4.4 A page from *La balade d'Asami*. Courtesy of Delphine Roux/Pascale Moteki © L'Ecole des loisirs.



a fleeting inclusion of a father figure, despite the central domestic role of a mother, that serves to reify the heteronormativity of families.

In *Un petit pas de géant*, translated from the English, a mother accompanies her daughter Lizzie to a park where the girl overcomes her aversion to dogs. Accompany is the accurate verb, for this mother has no speaking role. Once inside the park, she monitors Lizzie occasionally while a kind elderly man gradually encourages the girl to surmount her anxiety and befriend his small female dog. A story that melds intergenerational connection with childhood development, it offers a main role to a girl. Her principal personality trait is trepidation, though she does overcome it in the end. Lizzie's mother's role falls into the gendered norm as the only obvious caregiver.

An exception to the traditional maternal role in the sample is *Le secret du rocher noir*, a story about a girl whose mother captains her own fishing boat. It is translated from British English and set in a landscape that would seem exotic to a French reader. The protagonist girl's name, Erine Pike; her dog's name, Archie; the intricate drawings of undersea life that surrounds the black rock of the title; and the long-bearded locals in the fishing port also contribute to a general sense of strangeness. In this context, Erine's mother, a can-do captain who manages her ship alone, is an additional peculiarity. Erine herself has spunk: she is not afraid of the legendary black rock that all the fishers apprehend, and one day she finally sneaks onto her mother's boat to approach it. A storm arises and Erine falls out of the boat, only to be rescued by the black rock, which turns out to be a gentle sea creature and host to a vast array of marine life yet undamaged by human abuse. The sea creature serves as a proxy for Nature, and Erine defends it against the misguided adults who try to destroy it. *Le secret du rocher noir* is the most consciousness-raising book in the sample. As one online critic said: "The protagonist acts like a preachy child, but the message carries well."<sup>16</sup> The book is exceptional for both its activist message and its unfamiliar gender roles. In addition to a brave and determined girl protagonist, it is the mother who is most extraordinary, engaging as she does in a highly atypical profession for a woman. Furthermore, of the seven stories featuring active parents in the sample, Erine's mother is the only parent with a profession at all. The library sample in Chapter 2 demonstrates that professional identities are the exclusive purview of fathers. If her mother's captainship is what unconsciously empowers her, the girl's determination influences the adults and saves the sea creature in *Le secret du rocher noir*. Erine is a veritable superheroine.

None of these five mothers is at play with her child. In contrast, the two books in the sample that feature fathers offer them fun and adventurous roles alongside their children. In *Une histoire à grosse voix (Loud-Voice Story)*, the frog father plays the primary role to his three children.

His imperious figure on the front cover dwarfs his offspring by 15-fold. It is bedtime, and the tadpoles request a story. But they are quickly afraid of Papa's big bad wolf story, which commences in a very loud voice, and they find excuses to halt the story's progression. They solicit instead a soft-voice story, which father obliges, after which they contentedly bid him goodnight. The three tadpoles are identically dressed save for different colored neck scarves and are identifiable by their first names as two brothers and a sister. Through attentive matching of dialogue with neck scarves, one can deduce that the sister is the youngest and smallest of the three, a trope that reproduces the double age-gender discrimination commonly found in children's literature and elaborated upon in Chapter 6.<sup>17</sup> She is also the last to participate in the dialogue and has fewer lines in the story than her brothers. Yet all three are equally frightened by dad's big voice. These subtle gender dynamics among siblings are overshadowed by the father's role in charge of bedtime and his impressive physical presence on the page, yet he comes across as an endearing father who is intimate and patient with his children. *Une histoire à grosse voix* differs from the previous bedtime story, *Tout le monde dort?*, in that the latter features three times more dialogue between mother and son, which, while pleasant and loving, is goal-oriented and not playful like the frogs' interaction. In *Tout le monde dort?*, furthermore, their conversation references a morning routine wherein mother prepares breakfast for her son, an indication of domestic regularity, whereas story-time with dad in *Une histoire à grosse voix* seems exceptional.

*Billy cherche un trésor* (*Billy Seeks a Treasure*) also offers a role to a father in a story without mention of a mother. The adventure begins when Billy the hamster finds his grandfather's map to a treasure he once hid. Billy's father is unsure that the treasure actually exists, but with his earthworm friend Jean-Paul, Billy uses the map to explore an abandoned underground tunnel. After some scary encounters, they meet *une vieille taupe* (an old female mole: the species is feminine in French) accessorized with makeup and a scarf around her hair, who reminisces about Billy's grandfather. When she realizes that she happens to be sitting on the locked chest containing the hidden treasure, she gamely helps the boys transport the chest out of the tunnel so that Billy's father can open it. First, however, she mocks Billy for being afraid of spiders in the dark tunnel: "Ooh la la, be a little brave, young man. Here, take this lantern. Your grandfather was not as scared as you!" In this instance, an old woman enforces gender norms for readers by shaming a young boy for being fearful. Once the group emerges above ground, Billy's father heroically breaks the chest open with a set of tools. The treasure turns out to be a magnificent ukulele, and everyone celebrates with music and snacks. Though Billy's father does not participate in the treasure hunt and is also not portrayed on the book's front

cover, he plays a supporting role to his son's adventure. As in *Une histoire à grosse voix*, the daily travails of housework do not afflict these fathers.

Let us close this discussion of parenting with the findings of a master's thesis that scrutinized gender representations not in Max books but in the colorful brochures that advertise each of the eight clubs. Lucie Lechanoine-Durand shows that the brochure covers in the early years of Max featured original illustrations of children reading, very often in family scenes and most often with a mother and child, thereby emphasizing "the omnipresence of a woman as mediator between a child and a book."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Sylvie Cromer's study of 400 parental supplements to eight children's magazines in the 2000s finds that the content and tone of the guides are addressed to mothers rather than to both parents, especially the expectation of constant availability.<sup>19</sup> These paratexts meant for adult purchasers of subscriptions constitute another layer of gender norms that conform to those found in the children's reading material.

In addition to inequalities in parent roles, many studies have proven that reading material for children provides highly discrepant portrayals of female and male adults in the working world. A Centre Hubertine Auclert study of first-grade reading textbooks used in the second decade of the 21st century, for example, reveals that working women are highly underrepresented in text and image: of all humans in the 22 textbooks published between 2008 and 2015, only 22% of women have professions compared to 42% of the men; only 3% of scientists are women; and only 1% of people working in law-and-order are women.<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, "The total number of male characters with a profession amounts to 1,492, whereas female working characters are only 431; in other words, a difference of over 1,000 individuals." In addition, the careers that women do have are much less varied than men's; female nurses and male doctors are preponderate; and in the countryside, women are typically referred to as "peasants" (*paysannes*) whereas men are "farmers" (*agriculteurs*).<sup>21</sup> In an article about representations of the working world in 21st-century picturebooks, bookstore owner Laurence Tutello underscores that many publishers continue to produce books about working men aimed at boy readers.<sup>22</sup>

The Max club sample contains far fewer adult characters in professional roles to analyze compared to the library sample in Chapter 2 and the magazine sample in Chapter 6. This is surely due to the fact that the 32-book sample is aimed at younger readers and offers simpler stories overall. Indeed, adult characters who are not parents are scattered in just a handful of stories in the Max sample. As noted above, the only parent to have an identified profession is Erine's mother in *Le secret du rocher noir*. In the Chapter 2 and 6 samples, adult male characters are depicted in a wide range of exciting fields, some of which are stereotypically masculine: captain, professor, dentist, forest ranger, barber, crane operator.

In addition, a good portion (19%) of adult male characters in the library sample also have paternal status in their stories, in comparison to zero mothers holding a job. The very few women laborers who do appear in the samples from Chapters 2 and 6 work in stereotypically feminine professions such as nursery school teacher. In the Max sample, similar trends are evident with female preschool teachers in *L'orage* (*The Storm*) and *La nuit de Berk*, a male elf in *Le renard et le lutin* (*The Fox and the Elf*), and a male salesman and male soldiers in *Le géant, la fillette et le dictionnaire*.

One story in kilimax, *L'Antarctique de Simon*, invites closer inspection of its gender representations regarding work. One of a two-book series about a male rabbit named Simon, this story takes the protagonist to Antarctica, in a plane piloted by a male, to see his old friend Bob, a male human, who is the cook in a polar outpost inhabited by human scientists. The author makes an obvious effort to assign females to some of the roles but not in parity: four male and three female scientists are presented in this order: Jeanne, seismologist; Alain, geophysicist; Nadia, ornithologist; Pierre, doctor; Luc, meteorologist; Karim, chemist; and female Alixe, in charge of studying cosmic rays (see Figure 4.5). The team members are thus given first names and professional titles but are never mentioned again, and their characters are not developed after this page. The naming of the women scientists, therefore, feels tokenistic, especially because a later image of the team includes no discernable female. The entire cast of this story is composed of eight males and three females. Only Simon and Bob have speaking roles.



Simon rencontra Jeanne la sismologue, Alain le géophysicien, Nadia l'ornithologue, Pierre le médecin, Luc le météorologue,

Karim le chimiste, Alixe la responsable des rayons cosmiques, et Florian l'interprète manchots/humains. Bob, lui, était le cuisinot.

Figure 4.5 A page from *L'Antarctique de Simon*. Courtesy of Adrien Albert © L'Ecole des loisirs.

In illustration, adult characters have the potential to be more visually gendered than child characters, given the processes of post-puberty bodily differentiation and years of vestment socialization. Although the Max sample presents a few women who are not highly gendered in the imagery beyond long hair or a slight suggestion of a bust, two adult female characters are drawn with exaggerated feminine features. Asami's mother (*La Balade d'Asami*) is depicted in several pictures with a generous bosom, very long hair, a pink dress, defined red lipstick, and long eyelashes. Madame Mole (*Billy cherche un trésor*) is drawn with red lips and long eyelashes, wearing a headscarf and long dress. As for the male adults, the salient character is Billy's father, dressed in cowboy boots, a wide belt, and a large version of the same hat that Billy wears.

### *Animal Characters*

Animal characters are predominant in Max; most often they are anthropomorphized to dress, speak, or behave like humans. In proportion to much of children's literature, two-thirds of the books in the Max sample feature personified animals as main characters: four in bébémax, six in titoumax, five in minimax, and six in kilimax, or 21 out of 32 books (66%). Another five books could be added to the count with personified animal characters as secondary or background characters. A story with only humans is therefore very rare in Max books for children from birth to age seven.

Elsa Kedadouche, founder of the LGBTQ children's publishing house, On ne compte pas pour du burre, purposefully eschews animal characters in order to address human issues of diversity and tolerance explicitly,<sup>23</sup> whereas scholar Houadec recognizes that sometimes in children's literature "we need animals to represent things that are not in our norms."<sup>24</sup> Theoretically, animals allow authors and illustrators to escape the need to gender their invented characters, and they could furnish readers with gender-blind worlds. It is a stance that comforts those who believe that universalism, like color or gender blindness, is the most direct path to tolerance and *le vivre ensemble*. L'Ecole des loisirs director of communications Nathalie Brisac considers animal characters a fortuitous tool for children's literature since girls and boys, French and Chinese, can all identify equally with an animal. What she is suggesting is that not only can readers gender jump – as I call the act of female readers putting themselves in the shoes of male main characters, a necessary process of projection when so few heroines exist – but that readers can "species jump" as well. For children eight years and older, Brisac admits, the universalist nature of animal characters is less viable because that readership is less entranced by the imaginary that underpins anthropomorphism, whereas readers under four years old will

identify with a frog (*la grenouille*) or a rabbit (*le lapin*) regardless of their own gender, she argues.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, the neutrality of anthropomorphism in children's literature, I contend along with other researchers, is a chimera.<sup>26</sup> Through personification, animals typically fall into the socialized traits, actions, and roles of humans condemned to gendering. Even wild animals come in two sexes, and storytelling ultimately forces authors to use gendered pronouns. French grammar obliges much more gender consciousness than English since every species is designated with a gender. If an author chooses a pig, a giraffe, or a bear for a character, these animals are immediately, upon their introduction to a story, male, female, or male, respectively (*un cochon, une girafe, un ours*). Upon my suggestion, Brisac acknowledged that the French language disadvantages the neutralist, universalist potentiality of animal characters.

Moreover, evidence has shown that the use of animal characters in children's fiction does not foster sex parity or gender equality.<sup>27</sup> A 2003 study of more than a hundred French picturebooks found that it was simple to attribute a sex to most animal characters (405 of 414 characters were identifiable), and therefore argues that animal characters "do not constitute a solution in itself to evacuate asymmetries between the sexes. Our results attest to a significant quantitative and qualitative asymmetry in representations of the two sexes, most often to the detriment of the female sex."<sup>28</sup> The Centre Hubertine Auclert 2015 study of first-grade reading textbooks found that only 28% of anthropomorphized animals in the textbooks are female, that is, 335 out of 1,190 animals. The proportion of personified animals that are masculine (72%) is much higher than for all characters (fictional and actual humans, adults and children, personified and wild animals) taken together (61%).<sup>29</sup> Several American studies draw similar conclusions that animal characters are more often male than human characters.<sup>30</sup> Dafflon Novelle's and Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer's studies demonstrate that when animals are female, in fact, they tend to be small animals like mice, thereby adding a qualitative inequality to the quantitative gender disparities they also document.<sup>31</sup> And as I have already mentioned, other studies show that even gender-neutral characters are interpreted as masculine by readers.<sup>32</sup>

If books featuring animal characters are favored by L'Ecole des loisirs and chosen for the Max clubs for their supposed universality and ability to circumvent gender, an analysis of the sample makes clear that gender inescapably penetrates the stories via the visual imagery and the grammar and diction. Instead of a tool to neutralize gender, the use of animals as characters in *Vive le sport* (translated as *Sports are Fantastic Fun*) – originally published in German in 2017, translated in a French edition in 2018, and incorporated in the kilimax subscription in 2020 – for example, delivers

an overwhelming wallop of masculine dominance through both the language of the text and the visual imagery of anthropomorphized animals of varying species.<sup>33</sup> All of the soccer, football, rugby, basketball, and hockey team players are male. Every one of the skiers, fishers, golfers, horseback riders, runners, rowers, boxers, arm wrestlers, hikers, and bikers is male. The same is true for tennis, ping pong, billiard, and pétanque players. Children's literature specialist Nelly Chabrol Gagne claims that, indeed, there are hardly any sportsgirls in picturebooks.<sup>34</sup> The Centre Hubertine Auclert study found that only 33% of characters practicing a sport in the 22 textbooks for first graders are female,<sup>35</sup> and Dominique Epiphane's study of nearly 100 picturebooks documents only seven female athletes compared to more than 60 sportsmen.<sup>36</sup> In line with these studies, the female characters in *Vive le sport* amount to a mere 9%: 33 figures compared to 325 male figures. Although the publisher might argue that the animals are not drawn as male but are neutral, the females are specifically distinguished by exceptional traits that do not apply to the males. Because the females are drawn to be recognizably feminine, readers are led to assume that animals without skirts must be male. In addition, "The referees and coaches are male," remarked a child whom I asked to identify the characters' gender, page by page.

The females in *Vive le sport* include one ice skater (wearing a dress and being lifted by a male skater), two swimmers (in bikinis), three cheerleaders (encouraging the male football players), a ballet dancer (in a strapless pink tutu), and a jump roper. The only character to give pause on gender identification is a javelin thrower: the octopus is dressed in shorts, but the garment's eight openings for the tentacles give an overall impression of a pleated skirt rather than an eight-legged short. Counted as female, she contributes to the 9%. Beyond the quantitative discrepancies between the sexes, none of the female athletes in *Vive le sport* play on a team. Excluded from every team sport in the book, they are also relegated to stereotypically feminine sports that emphasize the artistic (ice skating, dancing, gymnastics). Furthermore, a portion of the very few females in the book are engaged in non-competitive sports or in activities that are not considered a genuine sport: jump roping and playing catch with an elderly man. In addition to the images, the language in the captions reinforces the male dominance for readers. The authors or translators of *Vive le sport* categorically refuse any form of *écriture inclusive*, the attempt to render French more gender neutral. In the French language, the use of the masculine as a generic is still standard. Indeed, terms like *le joueur*, a (male) player, or *un arbitre*, a (male) referee are used abundantly in *Vive le sport*, which puts these generic activities or occupations exclusively in the masculine. Proponents of more inclusive language argue that the practice renders the female sex invisible.

*L'écriture inclusive* has been a feminist cause for decades, in fact centuries, but has gained more steam since 2010 – and more backlash. In March 2017, following the recommendations of the government body, the High Council for Equality among Women and Men, the publisher Hatier issued the first French textbook using inclusive language. Aimed at third graders, the textbook *Magellan et Galilée: Questionner le monde (Magellan and Galileo: Questioning the World)* used the punctuation technique known as the median point or *point médian* to render professions gender neutral in French, for example, “agriculteur-rice-s” and “commerçant-e-s.” The textbook provoked a polemic.<sup>37</sup> Later in the year, in the throes of the #metoo awakening, 314 school teachers signed a manifesto proclaiming that they would no longer teach their students that mixed-gender plural nouns should default to the masculine, a grammar rule invented in the 17th century but fiercely defended by the Académie française as eternally proper. The teachers’ manifesto argues, “The repeating of this formula to children beginning at age seven (...) induces mental representations that lead women and men to accept the domination of one sex over the other and all forms of women’s social and political minorization.”<sup>38</sup> But in 2021, right-wing Minister of Education Michel Blanquer passed a circular banning the *point médian* in schools claiming that it would hinder language and reading acquisition.<sup>39</sup> These skirmishes in the education system – just one part of a larger debate in society – contribute to our understanding of why inclusive language has only been used in a very small handful of picturebooks by activist publishers.<sup>40</sup>

Without inclusive language in *Vive le sport*, children read about *le skieur* (the male skier), *le cavalier* (the horseman), *le lanceur* (the male thrower), *le coureur* (the male runner), *le gardien* (the male goalie), and *le gagnant* (the male winner). When female and male athletes are presented together, the masculine form dominates: “*Les patineurs sont bien habillés.*” (“The [male] ice skaters are [masculine] well dressed.”) The insistence on the masculine = neutral principle goes even so far as to describe a female gymnastics coach, dressed in high heels, jewels, and a purse, as “*le coach.*”

Some of the text of the book is written in direct address to readers: this dialogue is exclusively addressed to a male reader: “*Tu es fort? Tu es résistant? [...] Alors le rugby est le sport parfait pour toi.*” (“Are you [masculine] strong? Are you [masculine] tough? [...] Well then rugby is the perfect sport for you.”) The exclusion of girl readers in narratives that use direct address occurs in another book in the Max sample, *Sèche tes larmes, Petit Lapin!* After exhorting the reader to rub the rabbit’s back, the narrator offers positive reinforcement: “*Tu t’es super bien débrouillé, bravo!*” (You [masculine] did a good job!) This symbolic annihilation of girl readers themselves is considered particularly deleterious by the Centre Hubertine Auclert, which found several examples of direct address excluding female students in textbooks, “constituting an obstacle to their pedagogical efficacy.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly,



Chabrol Gagne is disappointed by publisher Seuil jeunesse's collection of *Les métiers de quand tu seras grand* (*Jobs When You Grow Up*), whose title excludes girls by the absent adjective "grande."<sup>42</sup>

Like *Vive le sport*, many other books in the sample show that the masculine = neutral thesis does not hold because of their visual imagery and gendered language. In *C'est quoi?*, the gang of nine dogs is all-male save for one dog named Zazie with a pink bow in her hair.<sup>43</sup> In *Mes amis de la mer* (*My Sea Friends*), a scuba diver, whose gender is indecipherable given all the underwater gear being worn, is ultimately revealed late in the story as a female when she exclaims: "*Je suis désolée.*" ("I [feminine] am sorry.") It is noteworthy that the gender reveal here comes via an apology; much research has been done on females' higher incidence of apologetic behavior compared to males.

As these examples demonstrate, the masculine continues to dominate the feminine in the text of Max picturebooks, as well as in the larger landscape of French children's literature. Publishers seem to be unconscious of recent calls for change, or impervious to them. For its part, the Centre Hubertine Auclert takes an unequivocal position on the grammar used in reading material for children: "There should be no confusion regarding the use of the indefinite singular article: if it is in the masculine, it cannot apply to both sexes."<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

As described in Chapter 3, Max books are not incorporated in the official curriculum, but the club's influence on students is significant. It is not excessive to call the dominance of L'Ecole des loisirs over the picturebook market inside French schools a monopoly. Max's success is underwritten by teachers' and librarians' trust in the quality and heritage of the brand. The majority of French schools sell Max subscriptions, and it is sold in a hundred countries. No publisher has been able to compete with this access to schoolchildren over the last four decades. L'Ecole des loisirs' profitable command of the picturebook market in schools will likely persist, while projecting its vision of providing creative cultural products to schools, students, and their parents demanding pedagogical uplift. Gender representations in the club books therefore can continue to influence the socialization of a significant number of French-speaking schoolchildren in the present and the future.

The sample analyzed in this chapter gives evidence to serious gender imbalances and stereotypes in Max stories up until 2020. In interviews with L'Ecole des loisirs editors, I noted an absence of sustained reflection about representations of gender in picturebook content, as well as a resistance or at best, ambivalence, to redressing these disparities. Several factors account for this resistance, as I have argued in the previous chapter.

First, publishers' primordial emphasis on creativity, that is, their refusal to impede the author and illustrator in their creative act, enables a significant number of stereotypes, automatisms, and imbalances to proceed to publication unchallenged. Related to this is editors' distaste for any hint of prescription or activism in stories. Since its transition away from textbook publishing in the 1960s, L'Ecole des loisirs has actively promoted its editorial identity as the antithesis of didacticism. With its stance against moralizing and its singular focus on stimulating the imagination of readers, the former school publisher's mantra has been pleasure over pedagogy. This kind of mission unsurprisingly leaves the publisher cold to thinking about representations in their corpus of children's books.

Another force is also at play here: the universalist impulse that is well-known in various French socio-historical contexts. In children's publishing, universalism resists identifying disparity in its characters, storylines, and imagery, the better to avoid divisive categorizations and confrontational political correctness. Although many French individuals and social movements today contest the potential exclusionary effects of universalism, interviews I have conducted attest to its wide prevalence among children's literature creatives, intermediaries, and critics. This Part II of this book has aimed to show how such a universalist and laissez-faire editorial approach translates into unequal gender representations that hundreds of thousands of French schoolchildren absorb every month.

The books under analysis for this chapter end with kilimax, the oldest club in the sample, which is marketed to five-to-seven-year-olds. L'Ecole des loisirs editors say it is their most popular subscription because it helps channel parents' anxiety about their children learning to read. As Chapter 3 elucidated, the publishers are aware of the teachers' and parents' eyes on the picturebooks chosen for Max. This, combined with the backlashes in society over inclusive language and over the slightest change to the public-school curriculum, explains why L'Ecole des loisirs may be wary of challenging the gender status quo with its book selections for Max. The club books are safe, milquetoast, and do not rock traditional norms, including gender norms. That stereotypes are prevalent in books for an age group that is just beginning to read independently, as my analysis of the kilimax club has shown in this chapter, means that adults will be less likely to accompany the child during reading and less available to highlight and contextualize the clichés.

Gender stereotypes are also pervasive in the first-grade textbooks that are assigned to this same age group, which were investigated by the Centre Hubertine Auclert in 2015. As its report concludes,

Just when reading constitutes an attainment of autonomy for children who no longer depend on someone to decode the texts and words that

surround them, the first-grade reading textbooks are absolutely vectors of a restrained vision of the field of possibilities for girls and boys at this young age. The study of our corpus makes it clear that to learn to read is also to learn stereotypical roles.<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, therefore, French school children are fed a literary diet of gender stereotypes from both their textbooks and their pleasure books.

## Notes

- 1 The link expires after the subscription has ended.
- 2 D., “4 avis sur Nouvelle édition - Pourquoi y a-t-il des inégalités entre les hommes et les femmes?”
- 3 B., “Pourquoi y a-t-il des inégalités.”
- 4 At least two new editions were published and advertised as new, in June 2020 (the month the original 2018 book was delivered by Max) and in October 2021. Absent a systematic comparison of the editions, the material on political rights was noticeably edited and expanded, but other anachronistic and sexist storytelling remains. One may wonder why this book was not the subject of a scandal like that endured by Milan in 2018 for *On a chopé la puberté*, which made light of female puberty.
- 5 The sample year 2019–2020 was chosen because it was the most recent subscription when this research was begun.
- 6 Houadec, “Le genre et les modèles amoureux dans la littérature de jeunesse,” 18.
- 7 Dafflon Nouvelle, “Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: quels effets pour le développement des enfants?,” 2.
- 8 See Barnett, “Sex Bias in the Helping Behavior.”
- 9 DeLoache, Cassidy, and Carpenter, “The Three Bears Are All Boys”; Cromer and Turin, “Que racontent les albums illustrés aux enfants?”
- 10 See Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*.
- 11 For the males: *C'est qui chat?; T'en a plein partout!; Sèche tes larmes, Petit Lapin!; Un automne avec Pop; Va-t'en, Bébé Cadum!; La nuit de Berk; Billy cherche un trésor; L'Antarctique de Simon*. For the female, *Lolotte se déguise*.
- 12 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, “Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques,” 27.
- 13 On love stories in children's literature, see Houadec, “Le genre et les modèles amoureux dans la littérature de jeunesse,” 190.
- 14 “Faire des manuels scolaires des outils de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes,” 36.
- 15 “Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?,” 32.
- 16 Pixie-Flore, “Le secret du rocher noir.”
- 17 Cromer, “La littérature de jeunesse mise à l'épreuve du genre,” 59–60.
- 18 Lechanoine-Durand, “L'école des Max,” 62.
- 19 Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 1*, 54.
- 20 “Faire des manuels scolaires des outils de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes,” 14.
- 21 “Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?,” 29–30.
- 22 Tutello, “Raconte-moi le travail,” 123–24.
- 23 Kedadouche, Personal Interview.

- 24 Houadec, Personal Interview.
- 25 Brisac, Personal Interview.
- 26 Fraustino, "The Rights and Wrongs of Anthropomorphism."
- 27 Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: quels effets pour le développement des enfants?," 1-2.
- 28 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 35.
- 29 "Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?," 11-12.
- 30 Weitzman et al., "Sex-Role Socialization"; Grauerholz and Pescosolido, "Gender Representation in Children's Literature."
- 31 Ferrez and Dafflon Nouvelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 35; Dafflon Nouvelle, "La littérature enfantine francophone publiée en 1997," 320; Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, "La presse éducative, un outil," 9; Dafflon Nouvelle, "Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles," 100-101.
- 32 Cromer and Turin, "Que racontent les albums illustrés aux enfants?," 227-29; DeLoache, Cassidy, and Carpenter, "The Three Bears Are All Boys."
- 33 Digital rights of reproduction of images from *Vive le sport* were denied.
- 34 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 196-97.
- 35 "Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?," 20.
- 36 Epiphane, "My tailor is a man," 68.
- 37 Cini, "L'écriture inclusive ou la longue quête."
- 38 Battaglia, "Après l'écriture, la grammaire 'inclusive.'"
- 39 *Le Monde*, "Ecriture inclusive: Jean-Michel Blanquer exclut l'utilisation."
- 40 Inclusive language has been more widely embraced in Quebec by government, business, and society in general, but in children's literature, it tends to be used only by activist publishers there.
- 41 "Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?," 16.
- 42 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 182.
- 43 Only one other dog wears an accessory, a pink collar. If other books in the series reveal her to be female, that would increase the female contingent to two-ninths of the group and would prove my point that neutrally drawn characters are in fact male.
- 44 "Faire des manuels scolaires des outils de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes," 38.
- 45 "Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?," 39.



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Part III

# Magazine Subscriptions



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## 5 The Magazine Landscape

Children’s magazines are vital to French children’s culture. In 2022, no fewer than 289 magazines for children existed in France. An estimated ten million French youth between the ages of 1 and 19 read magazines, and more than 70% of French children between the ages of 1 and 12 read magazines regularly in 2021. Eighty percent of sales of French children’s magazines are through subscription, a proportion that is the envy of publishers anywhere (only 48% of adult magazine sales are via subscription in France). Furthermore, child magazine readers spend an average of five hours a week reading the press.<sup>1</sup>

In number, quality, and diversity of children’s magazine titles, France is exceptional in the world. French exceptionalism was made evident when publishers tried to exploit their success by globalizing in the 1980s and 1990s by exporting their business model via partnerships abroad, but most renounced the strategy by the turn of the 21st century. As press specialist Jean-Marie Charon explains, the attempts failed because of “the absence of a comparable press elsewhere in the world: no educational press, not much entertainment press for the very young, no age gradation (outside of Japan).” In addition, he confirms, “Foreign publishers have no subscription sales model via direct marketing, and even less so via networks of *animatrices* in schools, which they never created.”<sup>2</sup> Without a partner or a market abroad, the French model can only thrive in France. To anyone who did not grow up or raise a child in France, the phenomenon – the popularity of the press with children, the trust of parents, the sway of publishers over children’s attention, and the deep roots of magazine reading as a childhood cultural practice – is singularly French.

Signs of vibrancy are not waning in the third decade of the 21st century. Charon notes that the children’s press competes very well with multimedia and the “large palette of leisure” offered to youth since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Delphine Saulière, editor-in-chief of Bayard’s fiction collection of four magazines as well as director of its 13 magazines for children under age 12 (which includes nonfiction and other themed magazines)



at the time of our interview in 2020, asserted that print magazines have tranquilly weathered the onslaught of digital reading platforms and the Internet because children like to touch and turn pages.<sup>4</sup> For all these reasons, magazines are a necessary primary source for analyzing gender representations.

Several key features distinguish children's magazines from books. Magazines contain multiple genres or sections through which to reach readers: fiction, *bande dessinée* or BD (comic strip), nonfiction, games, jokes. They are interactive: drawing contests, letters to the editor, and website fora connect publishers in unmediated ways with their readers. In addition, magazine publishers have a wealth of data on their subscribers: their age, gender, address, the socio-professional status of parents, as well as data on their siblings. Unlike book publishers, most press publishers wholeheartedly and publicly proclaim that educating youth – teaching literacy and citizenship – is core to their mission.

Sociologist Sylvie Cromer, who conducted a major study of magazines in addition to her projects on picturebooks and school textbooks, argues that the children's press deserves attention for several reasons. Not only have magazines attracted relatively less examination from scholars, they are choice objects of analysis because of their stated goals to teach reading and to favor family interaction. They thus provide a significant prism into socialization and education.<sup>5</sup>

Because children's magazine publishers claim to be positive socializing agents focused on education and citizenship, one might expect gender equality to be a given. Parts I and II of this book have provided evidence that any agenda in favor of gender equality in literature for children is generally suspect, and it is believed to detract from literary quality. My research shows that magazine publishers, despite their claims, seem as a whole to shift between two alternatives: well-publicized special issues on female empowerment amidst a landscape of content rife with unexamined assumptions, symbolic annihilation, and stereotyped role modeling.

This chapter paints the landscape of the French children's magazine field as a preparation for Chapter 6's analysis of gender representations in a magazine sample. It begins by tracing the history of children's magazines and highlights, for example, the Catholic origins of one major press and the 1949 law regulating print culture for children, two factors that reduced female roles in magazines. The next sections of the chapter survey 21st-century publishers, readers, and magazines and contextualize the market conditions such as subscription sales models, *chânage* or age gradation, magazines specifically for girls, and the clubby sense of belonging that magazines foster. A final section analyzes the singularities of children's magazines that affect gender representations found therein: for instance, the legacy of magazines for girls, confusion between *mixité* (a mixed-gender

target audience) and equality, and greater editorial intervention in content development.

Overall, I argue that despite most presses' frank embrace of a pedagogical mission and their pro-equality discourse, gender disparities and stereotypes are plain to see, as the evidence from my investigation into Bayard Presse's *J'aime lire Max* magazine will show in the following chapter. Much is at stake; as writer Alain Fourment remarks,

Over the years, [the children's press] has played an important role in shaping mindsets and in the way children and young people have discovered the world in which they live. These magazines bear witness to the evolution of mores, values, and aspirations of our society. They are a veritable mirror of the past and the present.<sup>6</sup>

### A History of the Children's Press

A brief history of children's magazine publishing in France is imperative to understand the 21st-century status of this cultural industry.<sup>7</sup> The earliest published material for children was always educational in nature. The first magazine for children appeared in France in 1768: the monthly *Journal de l'éducation* lasted 22 years. Other educational periodicals for children followed in the late 18th century. In the first half of the 19th century, a new wave of magazines offered children both educational and recreational content.

The golden age of the French children's press in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century – for the French press in general and for the children's press elsewhere, notably in Britain – was marked by an expansion in production and consumption, thanks to improved photography and color techniques, reduced printing costs, and increased literacy rates.<sup>8</sup> No fewer than 40 French children's magazines – monthlies, weeklies, and dailies – existed during this period; several were of high production value and long-lasting. Established publishers of textbooks and picturebooks recognized magazines as an attractive and distinct market and launched, for example, *La Semaine des enfants* (1857–76, Hachette), *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation* (1864–1906, Pierre-Jules Hetzel), and *Le Petit Français illustré* (1889–1905, Armand Colin). They hired well-known fiction authors and were committed to appealing illustrations. For example, the Countess of Ségur's stories “Les malheurs de Sophie” were published as a serial in *La Semaine des enfants* before their book form. Jules Verne was regularly published in French magazines for children, as were Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo. Children's literature chronicler Raymond Perrin asserts that given the fact that many French companies published both books and magazines over time, the two industries should be understood as symbiotic.<sup>9</sup>

As in England and the United States, Christian influence in French children's magazines – and books – was present from the beginning, since moral education was considered part and parcel of pedagogy.<sup>10</sup> Children's literature specialist Sophie Heywood argues that the success of the publications of the Countess of Ségur, a reactionary Catholic, exemplifies the grip that the Catholic Church maintained on French society throughout the 19th century. The paradox for this woman writer is that “although she defied conventions by entering public literary life, and engaging in political life through her family circle, she made her career out of producing the most successful gender scripts in modern France.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the title of the second volume, *Les petites filles modèles* (*Good Little Girls*), of Ségur's well-known trilogy has become shorthand for the submissive female roles that Catholic publishing promoted.<sup>12</sup> Heywood's research also shows that “for most of the nineteenth century, the Catholic publishers set the tone for the market.”<sup>13</sup>

La Bonne Presse, a press publisher that will be followed throughout this Part III, was founded by the Assumptionist congregation of Catholic priests in 1870. As a deeply conservative Catholic organization committed until the end of the 19th century to a return to monarchy – and one that was admonished by the Vatican for its extremism – the Assumptionists positioned La Bonne Presse in opposition to the “bad,” that is, secular, press. For adults, their *Le Pèlerin* founded in 1873 and *La Croix* launched in 1883 published violent anti-Semitic rhetoric dating from the Dreyfus Affair until the end of the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> Despite this history, La Bonne Presse manifested a remarkable adaptation to a rapidly modernizing and secularizing French society after Vatican II. Its success and wide readership via its adult and children's titles have given the publisher significant sway over the French population. As master's student Steven Pieragastini writes, “The Assumptionists may have been a small group of reactionary diehards, but they had an astonishing appreciation for cutting-edge means of communication.”<sup>15</sup>

The 1882 Ferry laws creating secular, free, and obligatory schooling and the 1905 law separating church and state are two legislations that marked a massive paradigm shift in French society that weakened the Catholic Church's access to children. Juvenile magazines were quickly understood to be the only surviving means to maintain influence. La Bonne Presse began publishing magazines for children in 1895. It was not the only religious organization to enter the children's magazine industry: another Catholic press group run by the Union des oeuvres catholiques de France or UOCF that would eventually become Fleurus competed for children's souls with their title *Coeurs Vaillants* in 1929, which included the Tintin comic strip alongside more religious content.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, La Bonne Presse would rebaptize itself as Bayard Presse in an attempt to secularize

its image, and would become the largest Catholic press in the world and the leading children's press in France.

As childhood literacy increased in France thanks to obligatory and longer schooling, the market of children's periodicals continued to grow throughout the 20th century. Childhood came to be perceived as a special age category and children as autonomous agents deserving of distinct forms of leisure. In turn, magazines became increasingly focused on entertainment, though some never lost their pedagogical and literacy foci, and many, for example all of the Bayard magazines, retained a central educational mission that nonetheless aims to appeal to children's interests and sense of humor.

Many magazines were intended just for boys, although a few 19th-century magazines were explicitly titled for both sexes, for example, *Les Dimanches, Petit journal récréatif, à l'usage de la jeunesse des deux sexes*, (*Sundays: A Small Recreational Newspaper for Youth of Both Sexes*) or *St. Nicolas, journal illustré pour garçons et filles* (*St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Newspaper for Boys and Girls*). A first magazine explicitly for girls began in 1790, and another in 1825. Overall, magazines for children favored conservative morality and the gender status quo, though a few magazines in the early 1820s began to advocate for girls' access to formal education. In 1905, *La Semaine de Suzette* was first issued, a weekly aimed at upper-class girls that lasted until 1960. It prepared girls to be stay-at-home mothers; the comic strip character Bécassine, a housemaid in Brittany, appeared from the first issue. Other long-lasting magazines for girls followed and targeted different readerships, for example *Bernadette* from La Bonne Presse for working-class rural girls that ran from 1914 until 1964. Overall, magazines for girls came much later than for boys, remained much more limited in number and variety, were produced very often by Catholic publishers, and promoted conventional perspectives for its female readers.<sup>17</sup> The distinctions between sex-segregated and mixed-gender (*mixte*) magazines entangle with notions of gender equality in complicated ways: it will be examined further in this chapter.

In the 1930s, American comic strips hit French shores, to the delight of children and to the horror of many adults. A key reason for adult wariness was exactly what made comics popular with youth: the pictures. Adults feared that literacy would falter. Although librarians, teachers, and politicians viewed the invasion as a threat, publishers could not afford to turn away from this literary trend. Some commercial French publishers copied the new styles while others bought the inexpensive rights to American comics and merely translated the speech bubbles. A related development in French magazine publishing in this decade was *Le Journal de Mickey*, a phenomenal success upon its 1934 launch. Determined to bring Disney's Mickey Mouse to France, European Paul Winkler's weekly magazine

quickly counted a circulation ten times greater than existing magazines, due to the popular American comics and prose stories in its pages. The weekly exists today and is still a *French* Disney operation, unique in the world. This magazine, as a proxy for comic strips in general, has over the decades crystallized various French fears of mass production, of American commercial domination, and of the decline of childhood literacy.

Magazines constituted in many ways a battleground for both religious and ideological influence over children, especially during the decade before the Second World War, fraught as it was with conflictual political currents and international turmoil. In a country where Catholicism was still omnipresent, the Catholic presses were one of the most virulent opponents of American comic strips for children, warning parents about commercial magazines' violent, corrupting, and immoral content. Perrin claims that it was common – even up until the 1960s – for churchgoers leaving mass services to be handed pamphlets that condemned secular children's magazines and promoted Catholic ones. Catholic children's magazines contained not only anti-American messages but also anti-communist and anti-Semitic discourse in their pages. For its part, a communist children's magazine was founded in the 1930s, publishing anti-fascist stories and denouncing what it labeled as the religious propaganda of *La Bonne Presse*. The boy scout and girl scout movements, historically important in France and linked with various political groups or religions, also published magazines for their members: up to a dozen existed throughout the second half of the 20th century. The commercial magazines meanwhile continued to pursue content and marketing techniques that boosted sales. The French children's magazine and comics industry up until the Second World War is summarized by Perrin in this way:

Francophone creativity, bridled by conservatism and by wariness of visual imagery that was tolerated only as an accessory to text, had to defend itself against the religious and political press, the former focused on literary texts and biographies of saints, the latter focused on the lives of great men.<sup>18</sup>

Since the 1930s, the BD or comic strip has been the heart and lungs of French children's magazines. When one says children's magazine, one thinks of comic strips: the two have essentially been synonymous. Of course, comics were also circulated as stand-alone pamphlets and ultimately as books, contributing further to the sense of their pervasiveness. Immediately after the Second World War, the fear of BDs – which were proxies for Americanization, violence, immorality, and decline in literacy – remained widespread and translated into sentiment hostile to children's magazines in general. Catholic presses led the resistance and

found strange bedfellows with communists and the secular political left in fighting American imperialism. For their part, librarians in the mid-20th century disdained the children's press for its connections to comics, and also because magazines' floppy format and cheap paper were not easily conservable. L'Heure joyeuse, for example, did not subscribe to any magazines until after the Second World War.

The conflict culminated in a piece of legislation enacted on 16 July 1949 that officially regulated all children's reading material. The law included books in its purview, but magazines were the real target since Tarzan, Zorro, and Mickey were thought to incarnate multiple dangers to children's well-being. The law banned any content for children that favorably presented "criminality, lying, stealing, laziness, cowardice, hate, debauchery, any crime or offense that might corrupt childhood or youth." The law can be interpreted in multiple ways: as child welfare, as censorship, and as nationalist protectionism. Legislative debates show that economic protectionism was a definite motivating factor for some politicians in favor; the law passed by a small margin. In 1950, Minister of Justice René Mayer instructed his inaugural commission members, charged with surveilling the children's press and with signaling potential infractions, to use restraint, insisting that the law did not infringe on freedom of the press because any punitive measures would only be taken *a posteriori*.<sup>19</sup> Of course to avoid trouble, however, presses would have to make careful decisions about what to publish. Many scholars consider that the law's legacy has been one of self-censorship, whereby publishers have internalized the commission's criteria in order to avoid hassle and opprobrium.<sup>20</sup> Some magazines were banned in the 1950s, others folded rather than wait for an accusation from the law's commission (the scholarship is not settled on whether Tarzan fell in the former or latter situation), and other magazines and books were given warnings of various degrees over the years.

The 1949 law has been revised nearly a dozen times to adapt to changing mores and technology: no longer is the promotion of laziness in children's literature a cause for alarm, but apologist portrayals of pornography, psychotropic drugs, and hate crimes are prohibited. The number of cases brought by the surveillance commission has dwindled to almost nothing since the 2000s, yet the law continues to impact the children's publishing industry. All publishers know what kind of content might risk a summons, and every children's publication must mention the law in its pages signifying the publisher's adherence to the law's principles.<sup>21</sup> An important aside is of interest to this book about gender representations, though it removes us from the postwar period: for a very brief moment between July 2010 and May 2011, the law made it illegal for publications for children to inspire or uphold sexist bias. More scholarship on how this clause came to be and why it disappeared so quickly would be especially welcome, for

if sexist bias in children's literature would have remained *illegal*, this book would be very different.<sup>22</sup>

After the war, France experienced the Thirty Glorious Years of economic and demographic expansion. More children meant more readers, and the children's press industry continued to mutate and thrive. As the industry institutionalized and sensed a need to organize in response to the 1949 law, publishers founded a union in 1954. After some name changes and mergers, it became the *Syndicat des éditeurs de la Presse Magazine* or SEPM.<sup>23</sup> The reactivity in society vis-à-vis comics declined, and ultimately even Catholic publishers yielded to commercialism and embraced the comic strip: Bayard created a strip, "The Life of Jesus," in 1953. Until the 1960s, however, segregation by sex remained the norm: girls had only three magazines after the war, but boys had a rich panoply of choices. What determined sex segregation: supply or demand? A 1957 survey of children informed publishers that girls and boys had different tastes: girls preferred fairytales and stories about orphans and unhappy children (!), and boys preferred stories about cowboys, pirates, and knights.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the survey's accuracy, the industry invested in fulfilling boys' wishes and it habituated girls to much less: girls had to content themselves with a meager supply of conservative girls' magazines or resort to their brothers' magazines.

The postwar era began in earnest only in the 1960s for the children's press. Two magazines that launched in this decade exemplify two important and long-lasting innovations in magazine publishing, both of a marketing and commercial nature. First, the "gadget." The idea was to attach a gift to the magazine cover such as a small figurine or wind-up toy that related to the issue's story. The magazine *Pif Gadget* became a wildly successful phenomenon upon its 1969 launch, stoking monthly excitement in French-speaking children around the world. Sales increased exponentially and the concept was soon copied by competitors.

The second major innovation of the 1960s was *chainage*, or the connecting of a publisher's various magazines across age ranges as a way to maintain subscriptions and brand loyalty, in a market where readers continuously age out. Age gradation was not just a commercial strategy but also a response to evolutions in child psychology that recognized early childhood and adolescence as particular developmental phases of special importance. The concept of childhood transformed from an amorphous life phase to a recognition of multiple specific growth stages with distinct needs. Even if *chainage* had already begun at the turn of the 20th century,<sup>25</sup> Bayard Presse responded to the new psychology and pedagogy by founding *Pomme d'Api* in 1966 aimed at a young age group, three-to-seven-year-olds. Fourment explains that for this launch, "management did not leave anything to chance to ensure its success: they chose special illustrators, created reading

committees, consulted graphic designers, speech therapists, mothers, and tested stories and pictures in daycares. The success was immediate.”<sup>26</sup> Although *Pomme d’Api* was “by nature, a Christian magazine” – much of its content was explicitly religious and it was originally distributed only in Catholic parishes – it also innovated by focusing on realistic daily life and attention to literacy.<sup>27</sup> Circulation reached 120,000 in just two years. Competitors copied by creating their own magazines for the very young.

Another 1960s phenomenon was the shuttering of almost all of the early magazines founded for girls after decades of print runs. Perrin claims that teenybopper culture killed these magazines more than war did, noting that *La Semaine de Suzette’s* “constant refusal to address real problems for girls and its confinement of girls in a submissive role of domesticity without any sharing of duties would inevitably be sanctioned one day.”<sup>28</sup> Charon explains, “The birth of the children’s educational press in the 1960s was part and parcel of the desire to end the traditional division between magazines for boys and magazines for girls, both of which cultivated traditional sexist models.”<sup>29</sup> Upon these magazines’ closures, coeducation in schools and the May 1968 youth revolution contributed to inaugurating 30 years of *mixte* magazine publishing for children. Nevertheless, a mixed-gender children’s press ranging from the 1960s to the 1990s did not mean gender-equal content: Fourment notes that girls’ magazines disappeared in favor of predominantly “masculine mixed magazines.”<sup>30</sup>

Children’s librarian and literature specialist Olivier Piffault also describes the market in the 20th century as de jure mixed but de facto masculine: magazines had long been populated by male characters and aimed at a male audience. He explains that for the first half of the 20th century, BD heroes were almost always male and they dominated supposedly mixed magazines. In many comic strips, symbolic annihilation of female characters was the norm; in others, females held secondary or tertiary roles of almost no significance and very often served a sexualized function. Only rarely did BD heroines exist and they were confined to girls’ magazines, for example, *L’Espègle Lili* in *Fillette*. The domination of male heroes in the market supply was an economic strategy, Piffault claims, but the 1949 law, having brought moral concerns about sexuality to the forefront of public debate, contributed to male dominance in BD magazines at least until the social revolution of 1968. Since most BDs were male-driven narratives written for boys, and since mixing female and male characters easily risked becoming romantic and sexual, the law’s effect was to further eliminate the female presence from mainstream magazines, Piffault asserts, essentially solidifying the norm of “fake mixed-gender magazines.” He blames the law rather than publishers for two decades of sex segregation and the disappearance of female roles, claiming it intimidated publishers into self-censorship. Piffault concludes, “Under the pretext of protecting and



educating children, [the law's] regulatory context upended the conditions of creation and profoundly modified the nature of the literary works." He contends that only in the 1970s did some BDs depict female characters in a secondary or shared role, and very rarely as single main characters: Yoko Tsuno, born in 1970 in *Spirou*, was an exception.<sup>31</sup> Fourment's and Piffault's arguments help us to understand why the concept of a "boys' magazine" – parallel to a girls' magazine – never became a commercial trend. Why would a publisher box itself into a niche title when the masculine = neutral tenet already guaranteed profits?

Even though girls' magazine content in the first half of the 20th century offered orthodox and restrictive models for readers, the shuttering of the last girls' magazine in the 1960s meant practically the end of female characters altogether, according to Fourment and Piffault. Girls then had no heroines on which to mirror themselves for three decades and were forced to perform the psychic projection that I call gender jumping, by identifying with male heroes. Market forces – undergirded by a plain disregard for girls' desires, socialization and developmental needs, and purchasing power – thus dismissed an entire category of consumers. Nevertheless, the era of supposedly mixed magazines from the 1960s to the 1990s is regularly celebrated by many in publishing, librarianship, and education as a progressive step and kindles much self-satisfaction about gender sensitivity. This satisfaction, based on the flawed belief that *mixité* means neutrality and equality, will be examined in more depth in the chapter conclusion.

But before leaving the 1970s behind, children's literature scholar Cécile Boulaire's analysis of one of Bayard's nonfiction magazines, *Okapi*, founded in 1971, provides some food for thought about gender representations in mixed-gender magazines during the *mixité* period. Boulaire finds *Okapi*'s editorial orientation in a post-1968 moment to be rife with contradiction in expressing a desire to be modern while remaining attached to Bayard's Catholic tradition. She argues that, on the one hand, *Okapi* was innovative in its first five years in encouraging young readers to claim their autonomy and to participate in progressive politics and social justice, for example, by reflecting on discrimination toward immigrants, fighting for workers' rights, and protecting the environment. On the other hand, *Okapi* projected dated and regressive messages regarding gender equality. Boulaire notices that jobs and abilities were represented in sexist ways: males were pilots, women were nurses, while girls vacuumed and renounced learning to drive automobiles. Gender stereotypes also prevailed in the editorial sections of the magazine written by the staff: in response to a letter-writer who asked why women could not have the same opportunities as men, the magazine responded that women's weaker bodies and pregnancies prevented them from holding many jobs. Conscious of Bayard's long history, Catholic roots, and subscriber base, Boulaire reminds her readers that one

could not expect a complete revolution in *Okapi's* pages by the mid-1970s and asserts that the magazine was “exceptional at its launch but has since become a classic.”<sup>32</sup> Boulaire’s assessment of *Okapi* confirms what Kristine Moruzi observes in her book about British girl magazines in an earlier period, that is, that any snapshot of magazine content will be composed of competing discourses and will reflect the social tensions of its time.<sup>33</sup>

Overall these changes in the children’s press since the Second World War coincided with the preeminence of secular content – whether commercial or educational – over religious content. *Le Journal de Mickey's* and *Pif Gadget's* circulation both approximated 400,000 in the 1970s. To keep up with these trends, in 1969, La Bonne Presse secularized its corporate name to Bayard Presse, named after the street of its headquarters. Bayard began *J'aime lire* in 1977 as a magazine with an original fictional story for autonomous six-to-nine-year-old readers, which could also be read by slower readers entering sixth grade: circulation quickly reached 100,000. *J'aime lire* innovated, according to former chief editor Marie Lallouet, by being half-book, half-magazine: a complete original story and a flat binding, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, games and comics in a monthly title for sale at newsstands or by subscription.<sup>34</sup> Other publishers soon created their versions of fiction magazines, which became the most enduring genre of the children’s press, and new nonfiction magazines launched, including the aforementioned *Okapi* in 1971 and *Astrapi* in 1978, both from Bayard. Magazines for pre-teens would soon focus on pop culture: music, film, television, and celebrities. It was during the 1970s that children’s magazines’ reputations ultimately pivoted. They had diversified, grown, professionalized, and began to be recognized for their qualities such as their ability to dialogue with readers. A survey in 1972 revealed that 143 public libraries made 2,000 magazines available to children.<sup>35</sup>

Steady consolidation meant that in 1978, 14 publishers owned 244 magazines out of 263. Three principal publishers commanded the children’s magazine industry in the last two decades of the century: Bayard, Fleurus, and Milan. Milan was founded in 1980 in Toulouse as a dynamic, secular press with high aesthetic and pedagogical standards. Milan’s agenda of providing secular magazines for children found quick success in a de-Christianizing French society and appealed especially to public school teachers.<sup>36</sup> Its *Toboggan* began for five-to-seven-year-olds, eating into *Pomme d’Api's* readership. At the time *Pomme d’Api* still contained a catechism insert.<sup>37</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, Milan’s six magazines, with age gradation from 9 months to 14 years, were each selling 100,000 copies or more.<sup>38</sup> Fleurus launched *Perlin*, *Fripounet*, and *Djinn*. Bayard inaugurated an educational magazine for high schoolers in 1981, *Phosphore*, which likewise reached 100,000 circulation. Disney also embraced *chainage* and added some educational content to its entertainment magazines: *Bambi*, *Winnie*,

*P'tit Loup*, and for girls, *Minnie*. Bayard's *Je bouquine*, begun in 1984, was another surprising success (70,000 circulation) that offered an original fictional story to a hard-to-attract age group of 12–15-year-olds. In the 1980s, the bottom of the age barrier – as low as nine months – was breached with magazines from each of the big three: *Picoti* from Milan, *Papoum* from Fleurus, and *Popi* from Bayard. By the late 1980s, Perrin says, “The most complete and the highest performing in [age gradation] was by far the group Bayard Presse. Its long-term experience, its pedagogical positioning, and its ability to adapt to a secular market all contributed to its success.”<sup>39</sup> *Chânage* continued to spread tentacles at the turn of the 21st century and, in addition, thematization grew. Magazines were created around more and more specialized themes: sports, science, video games, current events. Most magazines became monthlies. There remained multiple publishers of children's magazines beyond the big three – for example, *Sciences & Vie Junior* has been an important success since the 1980s – but Bayard continued to dominate the market with 15 magazines; Fleurus had 12, and Milan had 13.

In 1998, Milan rocked the industry by inaugurating *Julie*, a magazine for girls. After 30 years of *mixité* throughout the industry, *Julie* returned to sex segmentation as a business model. Aimed at 8–12-year-old girls, *Julie* included both mixed-gender content (news and activities) and “feminine” content (fashion, beauty, cooking). Many people saw it as a step backwards for gender equality, while Milan justified its move by claiming that girls read more than boys and it wanted to provide for the specificities of girls' tastes. Charon wonders if catering to girls or boys separately is truly possible “without slipping into sexist preconceptions.”<sup>40</sup> *Julie* reached 383,000 readers in 2000, demonstrating strong demand for this type of magazine. So, Milan applied a *chânage* approach to the sex-segregated genre by founding *Lolie* for older girls and *Manon* for six-to-eight-year-old girls, the latter of which still exists. Fleurus must have interpreted Milan's 1998 creation of *Julie* as a chance for it to exit the tacit compact of *mixité*: it founded three magazines for girls in succession in 1998, 2002, and 2005, which in a word can be categorized as pink. Disney also launched *Princesses* for girls in 2002.<sup>41</sup>

### 21st-Century Publishers

The children's magazine market in 21st-century France is as vibrant and diversified as ever. The children's press industry contains dominant players as well as an array of small publishers. Bayard, Milan, and Fleurus still corner a large part of the market with multiple titles each. According to Marie Lallouet, specialist in children's literature and former chief editor of Bayard, six publishers produced 90% of children's magazines in 2015.

The press range for children can be categorized into four main families: those focused on literacy and containing at least one work of fiction in each issue; nonfiction generalist magazines; nonfiction magazines specialized in a field such as science or art; and those focused on entertainment and games.<sup>42</sup> In a surprise move, Bayard bought Milan in 2004 and increased their market share exponentially to become the largest children's magazine publisher, in control of 27% of the French market.<sup>43</sup> Specialist of children's publishing Michèle Piquard explains that a significant motivation behind Bayard's purchase of Milan was "to further expand its youth offerings in particular for female readers thanks to Milan's three magazines, *Manon*, *Julie*, and *Lolie*."<sup>44</sup>

In 2022, Bayard employed 1,700 people; earned 342 million euros in annual revenue; published 120 press titles, 50 of which are published outside of France; and counted 30 million readers worldwide.<sup>45</sup> Bayard owns the highest selling magazine for children in France, *J'aime lire* (over 176,000 magazines sold in 2023), and the second highest selling magazine for adolescents, *Okapi* (over 49,000 magazines sold in 2023, after *Sciences & Vie Junior*).<sup>46</sup>

Bayard is still owned and run by the Assumptionist congregation. In the 21st century, however, the only references to religion in its children's fiction and nonfiction magazines might be stories that treat Christmas in a cultural rather than a religious light. In Bayard's large portfolio of magazines, teachings about the Catholic faith are contained to its two remaining explicitly religious titles for children, *Pomme d'Api Soleil* and *Astrapi Soleil*. Both are revenue-losers (the latter sells 7,000 magazines a month<sup>47</sup>) yet cornerstones of Bayard's *raison d'être* that it will not liquidate. Many French families are not aware of Bayard's ownership and origins,<sup>48</sup> and the publisher exhibits enough discretion about this topic that it must surely be a commercial strategy for a Catholic press in a secular society. Both religious magazines for children have a very low profile on Bayard's website, and a timeline of Bayard's role in the children's press claims only 50 years of history, beginning in 1966 with the *Pomme d'Api* launch, thereby erasing some 70 years of publishing, a dozen children's magazines, and the moniker of La Bonne Presse. The timeline curiously indicates: "Before, there was not much for children."<sup>49</sup>

Though Bayard has owned Milan since 2004, the groups have been kept separate, with Milan's headquarters remaining in Toulouse and the editorial teams entirely distinct. Milan's chain of fiction magazines goes from 9 months to 11 years of age: *Picoti*, *Histoires pour les petits*, *Toupie*, *J'apprends à lire*, *Toboggan*, *MordeLire* (formerly *Moi je lis*), each counting a monthly circulation of between 27,000 and 38,000. Its nonfiction magazines focused on nature and science, *Wapiti* and *Wakou*, also age-segmented and totaling almost 100,000 in monthly sales, have kept Bayard on its toes since the late 1980s.<sup>50</sup> In 2013, Milan innovated

with its launch of a current events magazine, *1jour 1actu* (1 Day, 1 Current Event), which has diversified to become a multimedia product today. Its two titles for girls, *Manon* and *Julie*, will be discussed in more detail below.

Because Bayard's sole stockholder is the Assumptionist congregation, the press benefits from a status of independence that is similar to that of the Delas and Fabre family ownership of L'École des loisirs, and rare in a global media market characterized by mergers and acquisitions that have led to megagroup consolidations. In Bayard's case, the Catholic organization is nonprofit. No dividend is issued, and all profits are reinvested. Free from stock market and shareholder pressure, Bayard practices *subsidiarité* or *solidarité*: its profitable magazines support its unprofitable ones.<sup>51</sup>

Fleurus, the other Catholic-origin press that maintained a place in the 20th-century landscape, has changed ownership several times since the 1980s and is now part of a large French children's media conglomeration, Unique Heritage Media, which has also absorbed Disney children's magazines, ending the Disney Hachette Presse control that began in 1934. Fleurus's circulation had not succeeded in competing with Bayard, partly, it has been suggested, due to its positioning itself as a conservative and traditional Catholic press in the decades when Bayard leaned into secularized rebranding.<sup>52</sup> All the same, Fleurus currently publishes 11 magazines and no longer offers any overtly religious title. Two magazines for girls, *Les Petites princesses* and *Sorcières*, exist in 2024, with circulations of 23,000 and 14,000, respectively,<sup>53</sup> whereas the one aimed at the youngest readers, *Les Petites filles à la vanille*, abruptly stopped publication in 2021 without explanation to subscribers. Librarians and some parents view Fleurus as outdated, if not retrograde: as Christophe Patris observes, its "pastel and old-fashioned representations of good little girls pleased some but bristled others."<sup>54</sup> However, under Unique Heritage Media's new ownership, Fleurus launched several new children's magazines in 2020. Having become the most recent rival media group for Bayard, the plans that Unique Heritage Media has for its Fleurus, Disney, and its own new magazines remain to be seen in the mid-2020s and are likely making Bayard nervous. Nevertheless, specialists foresee continuity. Brigitte Andrieux of the CNLJ affirmed, "In terms of number of issues sold, Bayard remains in first place. [...] If you ask any family what their children are reading, it is perforce a Bayard magazine."<sup>55</sup>

But in France, there is room for independents and startups. Faton is a second-generation family-owned publisher that offers six well-respected magazines with more elevated intellectual content than Bayard's educational titles, for example, its *Arkéo* magazine for 7–12-year-olds is dedicated to archeology. At the turn of the 21st century, PlayBac press innovated by launching a daily magazine about current events and has since expanded to

offer a daily news magazine for three age segments. *Pif le mag* is the latest incarnation of *Pif Gadget* and still linked with the communist movement. Below, I will briefly describe three magazines launched since 2000 that are still operating, that have garnered attention, and that all boast, in various ways, of sexism-free content.

Maison Georges was founded in Lyon in 2009 by a former Bayard journalist. Its first magazine *Georges* for 7–12-year-olds is sold via subscription or in bookstores, not on newsstands, conceived as it is as a magazine/book (mook or bookzine). Four thousand copies of each issue are produced, 1,500 of which are distributed by subscription. A similar magazine for three-to-six-year-olds came out in 2017, *Graou*.<sup>56</sup> Once every two months, the magazines offer a smorgasbord of fiction, BD, nonfiction, games, activities, and jokes. Proudly displayed on the website, *Georges* is described as “Mixed-gender: For girls and boys without distinction.”<sup>57</sup> Another version describes *Graou*: “Beautiful, mixed-gender, advertising-free, and made in France.”<sup>58</sup> For six issues, the annual subscription costs 54 euros for *Graou* and 57 euros for *Georges*.

*Biscoto*, begun in 2013, published its 129th issue in September 2024. Based in Angoulême, home of the International Comics Festival and the Comic Strip Museum, this independent monthly is not surprisingly focused on BDs. The founders resist designating an age range for their readers despite pressure from parents and librarians. The annual subscription is at the lower price range at 50 euros a year, or 4 euros per issue. Featured prominently on *Biscoto*’s website is this claim: “Since 2013, every month *Biscoto* champions a sassy, independent and audacious, feminist and anti-racist press and offers children a magazine with bountiful ideas and astonishing images.”<sup>59</sup>

These generalist magazines are of high production value. It is unusual that their positioning even mentions gender equality, but in fact, their content eschews any activist stance. This may be why *Georges*, *Graou*, and *Biscoto* remain respected by the literati and are taken seriously by the CNLJ. In addition, the promotional materials for these independent magazines emphasize a priority of being original and free of formulaic content (“*non formaté*”). In their 2020 catalogs, *Georges* and *Graou* proclaim that their magazines “value words and images that are free of formulas and stereotypes” and *Biscoto* claims to offer “nonfiction, comics, and stories that are not formulaic.” These promotional strategies are a direct attack on what they perceive as Bayard’s and Milan’s editorial approach.

With a very different goal, an overtly feminist magazine for girls, *Tchika*, was started in 2019 with 65,000 euros raised on a crowdfunding platform. *Tchika* bills itself as “the first empowerment mag for girls aged 7–12;” its subtitle is “Make Some Noise, Girls!” The four-issue-a-year subscription costs 40 euros. A spinoff for younger girls, *Tchikita*, was aimed at



Figure 5.1 Magazines for girls in the late 2010s. Courtesy of Elisabeth Roman/*Tchika*.

four-to-seven-year-olds. According to their founder, Elisabeth Roman, she had been disturbed that girls constituted only 40% of subscribers to the science magazine she worked at, and conjectured that a girls-only space might enable them to embrace science more readily. She researched the girl magazine market, was horrified by her findings (see Figure 5.1), and decided that her feminist magazine had to be about more than just science. Roman also wanted to use inclusive language in the magazine’s direct address to girl readers.<sup>60</sup> Although *Tchikita* has been shuttered, *Tchika* continues to attract just as many subscribers in 2024.<sup>61</sup>

*Tchika* was eyebrow-raising in France. One association of journalists announced, “Yes, you can believe your eyes: a feminist magazine that proclaims it loud and clear.”<sup>62</sup> Roman argues that her phenomenal crowd-funding success confirms that the zeitgeist aligns with a real market. Like *Talents hauts*, a feminist children’s book publisher that will be briefly discussed in the Conclusion to this book, *Tchika* has provoked a wary response from librarians, children’s literature critics, and other publishers. The suspicion stems from the widespread universalist attitude, analyzed in Part II of this book, that prefers gender- and color-blind content over feminist agendas and overt identity politics. Exemplifying this circumspection is the fact that *Tchika* is not displayed among the dozens of other children’s magazines on the open shelves of the Children’s Literature Room in

the French National Library, although Fleurus's pink line for girls is. The feminist startup is also not given much legitimacy in the pages of the *Revue des livres pour enfants*. After five years of existence, it deserves a scholarly examination that is outside the purview of this study.

Like these startups, it is noteworthy that even magazines owned by the large publishers are managed by remarkably lean teams. From my interviews with editors-in-chief, I learned that Milan's *MordeLire* employs a staff of two full-time and one half-time people, *Julie* has a staff of seven people, *Manon* a staff of three, and Bayard's *Astrapi*, as a bimonthly, employs 16 people.

This review of 21st-century children's magazine publishers is important because they position themselves as key cultural players in the socialization of children. An employers' organization that represents many key children's publishers, La Presse jeunesse du Syndicat des éditeurs de la presse magazine, likens their work to a "public service" that contributes to children's socialization, literacy, and sense of citizenship, as well as to their media literacy.<sup>63</sup>

### 21st-Century Readers

In 2022, the French population counted 15 million youths divided rather evenly into three age categories: 4.5 million one-to-six-year-olds; five million 7–12-year-olds, and 5.9 million 13–19-year-olds. A 2022 CNL/IPSOS study showed that 74% of one-to-six-year-olds, 71% of 7–12-year-olds, and 35% of teens read periodicals regularly.<sup>64</sup> Over 80% of all French children have read at least one magazine in the last year.<sup>65</sup> Although children of working-class backgrounds read magazines slightly less than those of educated professional parents, there is almost no difference between rural and urban children.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, magazines are commonly passed from child to child, more than books are. Their very disposability and the knowledge that a new issue will arrive in 30 days mean that children and parents are willing to pass copies to cousins and neighbors like hand-me-downs. In addition, magazine subscriptions, more than books, have for generations been a means for children all over the francophone world and elsewhere abroad to remain connected to French culture. In metropolitan France, most libraries and some schools stock the educational magazines, especially from Bayard, so any single issue can be read by hundreds of children whose families do not subscribe, thereby giving almost all children in France a chance to read them. Readership figures are therefore probably far superior to sales figures: Saulière told me that each issue of *J'aime lire* is read by an astonishing 2.7 million children.<sup>67</sup> The impact of magazine content is multiplied, therefore, not only 12 times a



year on individual subscribers, but exponentially with numerous readers of each hard copy of every issue.

Magazine publishers possess an enormous amount of data on their subscribers, which they can use to commercial ends by linking siblings, promoting *chaînage*, and rewarding loyalty. Of particular interest to this book are the breakdown of girl and boy magazine readers and the ways that gender differences in readership may affect content. The Ministry of Culture's National Book Center (Centre national du livre) conducts a regular study on reading practices of French youth. The results of the 2022 survey of 1,500 youth between ages 7 and 25 show that girls read slightly more than boys overall regardless of genre, and that both sexes read less in adolescence, though boys' decline is sharper than girls'.<sup>68</sup> In analyzing this data, sociologist Christine Détérez notes that sex determines children's reading tastes much more than any other factor such as social origin or school grade, though she warns against letting such data re-introduce essentializations about gender.<sup>69</sup>

Some information on subscribers' genders has variously been made available by publishers. But because the figures differ in ways that are not explainable by evolution in time, they raise questions about whether publishers are claiming more parity than really exists for reputational and commercial reasons, in other words, to prevent their mixed-gender magazines from becoming considered girls' magazines. Saulière claimed that Bayard's strength was its gender-balanced readership, that *J'aime lire* and *Astrapi* are subscribed to equally by girls and boys, that *Pomme d'Api* is very close to parity, and that *Je bouquine* for older readers has the least gender parity: 60% of readers are girls.<sup>70</sup> Also, in 2020, editor-in-chief of *Astrapi* Gwenaëlle Boulet told me that boys are slightly less than half of *Astrapi* readers at 47%–48% depending on the year, and that *Astrapi* has among the most mixed-gender readerships of Bayard.<sup>71</sup> Lallouet, who preceded Saulière as editor of Bayard's collection of fiction magazines, claimed in the mid-2000s some figures that were closer to parity than these and others that were significantly less balanced.<sup>72</sup> Despite discrepancies, one can fairly confidently conclude that magazine readership counts more girls than boys across the board. As I will elucidate further, girls are also more active participants in magazine communities.

We saw in Chapter 3 that even though for most intents and purposes L'Ecole des loisirs' Max is a book club, it never refers to itself as one, nor does it label its subscribers as "members," nor does it attempt to foster among them a sense of belonging in a community of readers. L'Ecole des loisirs calls Max an *abonnement* (subscription) and does not offer collective para-reading activities to be shared among subscribers, notwithstanding the classroom activities suggested on the Max website for teachers. In fact, it is the vast market of French children's magazines that

has historically created a sense of belonging in a clubby community for readers, such as the opportunity to mail in letters, react to stories, and send submissions for contests, activities that enable young readers to connect with each other despite reading's solitary nature. According to the head director of Milan in 2015, Marie-Anne Denis, the online discussion forum for *Julie*, for example, gathers more than 80,000 participants, half of whom are regulars.<sup>73</sup>

Magazine publishers maintain "permanent contact with their readers." As the union that represents many of them summarized in 2015, many publishers welcome subscribers and school classes to their offices for behind-the-scenes tours and media workshops; editors visit schools and scout groups; magazines host votes, contests, and other participatory events for readers; some scout magazines allow children to create some content; the affiliated websites for magazines have become considerable fora for exchange; publishers directly consult readers via opinion polls and focus groups; and of course, they exploit their subscriber databases for both editorial and commercial purposes.<sup>74</sup> Milan also trains its active readers to be ambassadors.<sup>75</sup> These practices are not new: *La Semaine de Suzette*, which folded in 1960, invited readers to its offices to participate in activities such as doll dressmaking.<sup>76</sup>

The clubby feeling around magazines is a confluence of the natural enthusiasm of child readers with the marketing strategies of publishers. Another way that magazine publishers build a sense of belonging among their readers is via the square bindings for some titles. When the magazines are arranged in order on a shelf, the bindings form a fresco, stoking a sense of ownership and collectability (see Figure 5.2).

Of all the features of a magazine that give child readers a sense of engagement, the *courrier de lecteurs et lectrices* or letters to the editor are revelatory of a magazine's readership and community culture. Some magazines are submerged by readers' letters and assign full-time employees to handle the flow. As authors of a book on the children's press argues,

A magazine's letters to the editor section is both the breath and life force that circulates between emitter and receiver, between journalist and reader, among readers, and between parent and child and the bloodline that irrigates and nourishes the body of the magazine.<sup>77</sup>

Scholars of children's literature have long been attracted to the treasure trove of information that can be gleaned from children's letters to their favorite magazines. Several have found that the active girl reader has been a steady phenomenon historically and across all types of magazines:<sup>78</sup> most magazines attest to receiving much more mail from girl than from boys. Indeed, my analysis of first names of published letter-writers in the 2010–11



Figure 5.2 The Victor Hugo quote on the binding of the 2015–16 subscription of *Je Bouquine*: “To read is to travel; to travel is to read.”

subscription of *J'aime lire* reveals that 80% are female, and a similar percentage of girls dominate the letters published in *J'aime lire Max*, as the next chapter will show. One study comparing letters received versus those published by *Pif Gadget* shows that the magazine provides affirmative action for boys, publishing boys' letters in a higher proportion.<sup>79</sup> The relationships between readers' gender, their active participation in magazine culture, and the ways that publishers handle the disparities and adapt content will be addressed in more detail below and in Chapter 6.

### 21st-Century Magazines

The children's press in the 2020s is as vibrant as ever. The reading material found in magazines is affected by several features that are legacies of

the industry's past and several that are new: *chainage* and the subscription versus newsstand sales models, institutional sales to libraries and schools, continuous updating, a commitment to print format, and the relationship between magazine BDs and BD books.

As every children's press publisher knows, magazines have to replace 100% of their subscriber base every three years.<sup>80</sup> As seen earlier in this chapter, publishers invented *chainage* because children grow up. Another key mechanism for stoking customer loyalty is the "recurring hero" in magazines' BDs. Lallouet asserts, "The press needs heroes, but heroes need the press, without a doubt because the bond between a magazine and its reader is of great emotional power and the hero perfectly embodies this loyal affection."<sup>81</sup> Given the high rate of subscribers, a magazine is almost never a one-off like a picturebook. Furthermore, age gradation means that a girl or boy may be exposed to a publisher's gender representations over the course of a six-year span of her or his crucial socialization years, multiplying the effect on girls' and boys' ideas of who they should become.<sup>82</sup> While a publishers' main goal may be to increase a loyal customer base, it has significant psychological, social, and cultural influence on readers whether they like it or not. Writing of anglophone periodicals, Moruzi argues that

the role of print culture in producing gender is not to be underestimated. [Magazine readers receive], on a weekly or monthly basis, depictions of femininity and girlhood across an array of genres, expressing diverse opinions and discussing current issues, making their magazines an ephemeral yet consistent mode for delivering (and resisting) contemporary gender, social, cultural, and economic ideologies.<sup>83</sup>

*Chainage* is especially important because 80% of children's magazines are sold by subscription.<sup>84</sup> Ninety percent of Bayard magazines are by subscription,<sup>85</sup> and only 5% of *Astrapi* sales come from newsstands.<sup>86</sup> While newsstand sales are a very small percentage of revenue for educational magazine publishers, Figure 5.3 nevertheless exemplifies the abundance of children's magazines found across French newsstands.

Institutional subscriptions from libraries and schools are the second largest source of sales after individual subscriptions. Lallouet states that 30% of Bayard subscriptions come from school sales networks;<sup>87</sup> the subscribers are the schools themselves that make educational magazines available to students on site (see Figure 5.4).<sup>88</sup> Even though Bayard, Milan, and Fleurus attempt to sell subscriptions to students via schools,<sup>89</sup> magazine marketing is much less present in schools than the Max book subscription. A teacher and teacher trainer with experience in multiple French schools, Florence Bessière, related to me that Bayard's school presence is patchy across French



Figure 5.3 Children’s magazines at a newsstand in Paris’s Charles de Gaulle airport in 2023.

territory and that she has not seen a Bayard representative in a school in a very long time.<sup>90</sup> There is no information about school subscriptions on Bayard’s main website ([www.bayard-jeunesse.com](http://www.bayard-jeunesse.com)); the company maintains a separate website for teachers ([www.bayardeducation.com](http://www.bayardeducation.com)) where subscription information is not transparent either. While Bayard offers



Figure 5.4 A display of magazines at the disposal of schoolchildren in the Awty Lower School Library in Houston in 2019.

some pedagogical resources, the efforts are more ad hoc than L'École des loisirs' linear connection with teacher subscribers. The most significant difference between books and magazines in schools is that Bayard magazines are always delivered by regular postal service directly to children's homes. One reason for this is that recognized magazine publishers benefit from a highly discounted sales tax (TVA) of 2.1% as well as discounted postal rates, regulated by the Commission paritaire des publications et agences de presse.<sup>91</sup> It is the home delivery – the private sphere – that is key to French cultural memory of children's magazines, marked by the nostalgia of anticipation and of checking the mailbox. As marketing and sales director of Fleurus, Frédérique Nodé-Langlois, notes, "Receiving a magazine by mail is not at all anodyne."<sup>92</sup> In contrast, contemporary middle-aged parents from the GenX and Millennial generations hold a distinct memory of Max book club distributions taking place in school during their childhood as well as during more recent decades of ushering their offspring through the education system. For all of these reasons, Part III of this book does not emphasize the magazine's presence in the public school system as Part II did for the book club.

Magazine publishers periodically update the content, format, and even sometimes the name of their magazines. Every evolution is carefully

calibrated to changes in subscriber data and coordinated with *chainage*. Such product changes often occur at the back-to-school season to establish a new look just in time for new subscribers. For example, Bayard Presse changed *DLire* to *J'aime lire Max* in August 2014, just before the next year's subscription. The *J'aime lire Max* logo uses the same colors as the *DLire* logo but a different font and shape. A subtitle was added, likely to maintain connection with the former title: "Maximum Reading, Maximum Fun!" ("Un Max de lectures, un Max de délires!")

Although new technology and digital platforms have momentarily unnerved the industry, by the 2020s magazine publishers – like most picturebook publishers – are unequivocally dedicated to print. They may have companion websites and some tablet applications, but paper remains their workhorse. A quick scan of Bayard's or Milan's website, for example, will reveal that their purpose online is to attract new subscribers rather than to provide content for children. Many other multimedia means are used to attract readers to their brand: special issues, gadgets, gifts, derivative products, television shows based on popular BD heroes, partnerships with radio stations for children's shows, or books are just supports for paper magazines, not replacements.<sup>93</sup> Although many children own cellphones, curling up in an upholstered chair or traveling on a train without wife, head buried in a magazine, remains an iconic yet ordinary moment of French childhood.

Earlier in this chapter, we saw that book publishers were the initial producers of children's magazines. In a reversal a century or so later in 2011, Bayard launched a book division, BD Kids, that transforms popular BDs from its magazines into book format, and Mini BD Kids in 2016 for younger children. This was not a new commercial strategy: other publishers had been converting successful magazine BD series into books since the 1950s (Fleurus) and 1960s (Dargaud and two Belgians, Dupuis and Casterman).<sup>94</sup> In the 21st century, Bayard's concrete data on the popularity of a particular comic strip from magazine readers' letters, polls, and focus groups that they conduct with their subscribers gives it an advantage over book publishers. BDs from *J'aime lire Max* have been published as books: "Les Enquêtes du Docteur Enigmus" (at least five books), "Tralaland" (at least three), and "Zélie et compagnie" (at least 13). Not only was "Mandarine & cow" also published in book form by BD Kids, it became a series on French television, which has been translated into English under the title "Tangerine & Cow." In addition, an offshoot strip, *Chico Mandarine*, by the same creator, Jacques Azam, was put into a small book series. Bayard also publishes some of its magazine's fictional short stories in book volumes.<sup>95</sup> Once again, the impact of gender representations found in these texts – analyzed in depth in Chapter 6 – is multiplied by their derivative cultural products.

## Magazines and Gender Questions

This last section of the chapter will examine a few unique qualities of magazines in general, and of Bayard in particular, that affect gender representations, providing a bridge to the next chapter, which examines in detail an annual subscription of one of Bayard's magazines in the 2010s, *J'aime lire Max*. The pertinent aspects of the children's press that explain the perdurable gender disparities found therein, I argue, include the legacy of girls' magazines, the false promise of *mixité*, and the drive to retain boy readership at all costs. The fact that subscribers are captive readers would seem to give magazine publishers such as Bayard a free hand to promote gender-equal content – no matter how unrevolutionary that seems – as would other key factors: the greater editorial intervention it defends, its proclaimed educational mission in socializing future citizens, and its pro-equality discourse. The haphazard use of inclusive language in Bayard's pages, especially in direct address to child readers, exemplifies the publisher's ambivalence regarding gender.

### *For Girls Only*

Most children's magazines in the 2020s are mixed-gender, having embraced and maintained the post-1968 mentality that *mixité* is modern, progressive, gender neutral, and gender equal. Nonetheless, several magazines for girls still exist. In the quarter-century since Milan launched *Julie* in 1998, the magazine has evolved to some degree: it has settled on the 10–14-year-old age tranche that coincides with the beginning of middle school and of puberty. Milan also publishes *Manon*, and Fleurus and Disney also offer a couple of titles just for girls.

Some scholars have analyzed girls' magazines to interpret the gender implications found therein. According to children's literature expert Pierre Bruno, representations in girls' magazines have evolved before and after *Julie*'s launch in 1998 but still remain traditionally gendered. Until as recently as 2005, girls' magazines promoted precocious sexualization, and despite occasional calls for female empowerment, demonstrated an overall acceptance of patriarchal structures and female inferiority vis-à-vis males. By comparing the content of the relatively bourgeois *Julie* with that of *Minnie Mag* (Disney Hachette) and *Journal de Barbie*, two magazines catering to socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, Bruno argues that the traditional gender status quo is even more rigidly inculcated in girls of lower economic status through an emphasis on femininity and desirability, a glass ceiling for academic and career ambitions, and an acceptance of an inferior spot in an immutable social order.<sup>96</sup> Scholar Martine Court compares *Julie* with *Witch Mag* (Disney Hachette, formerly *Minnie Mag*,



later *Disney Girl*) and finds that the messages for female readers regarding sports are distinct for the two targeted social classes: whereas the readers of *Witch Mag* are not exposed to any discussion at all about sports, *Julie's* more bourgeois readers are subjected to discourse that reinforces sexist stereotypes about physical strength and effort, for example, avoidance of competitiveness and apprehensiveness regarding inability.<sup>97</sup> Sylvie Cromer investigated five magazines by three publishers – Milan, Disney, Fleurus – marketed to preschool and elementary school girls from 2012 to 2013 to see whether a single-sex context would deconstruct the social order of gender for very young girls. She concludes that

Contrary to what one might have imagined or hoped, the multiplication of female main characters does not translate to a diversification of roles as is the case for male characters in mixed magazines. Even worse, a comparison with heroines in mixed magazines shows that the range of possibilities [in girls' magazines] is more restricted.<sup>98</sup>

In an interview in 2020, the editor-in-chief of *Julie*, Pascale Garès, explained that in fact the magazine had reinvented itself in January 2018 to focus on female empowerment but for the following 12 months, sales eroded. In response, the magazine commissioned two external reviews, many focus groups, and reader surveys to complement the feedback from letter-writers and concluded that it had to return its editorial focus to puberty, intimacy, and other issues related to girls' daily existence. Garès said that they realized that “girls have a real need to talk amongst themselves” and that the magazine “serves the public interest.”<sup>99</sup> Paradoxically, *Julie's* short-lived feminist experiment (which retained the fashion rubric) was abandoned just a few months before *Tchika* was launched. The two magazines' focus groups and crowdfunding – which found opposite results about the demand for feminist magazine content for girls – must not have been conducted within the same networks. Or perhaps the children's magazine market permits space for both types of girls' magazines in the 2020s. *Julie's* sales figures do testify to a demand: over 29,500 issues were sold monthly in 2023,<sup>100</sup> though readership is in decline overall (down from almost 400,000 readers in 2000). Unlike mixed-gender magazines such as *J'aime lire Max*, which I will examine in the following chapter, *Julie's* BDs feature only heroines, yet other sections focus on fashion and beauty. In her review of *Julie*, Lallouet suggests that the magazine offers mostly girly content and pays only occasional lip service to encouraging readers' ambition and autonomy.<sup>101</sup>

Milan's magazine *Manon* was originally like *Julie* in that it featured girly content for even younger girls. In 2016, however, the magazine for seven-to-ten-year-olds was revamped to become less “caricatural and gendered” and more generalist with a focus on reading. In this, it may not be

that different from Milan's mixed magazine *MordeLire*, whose target age group is "as of seven years old" and whose focus is also on reading. Editor-in-chief Delphine Huguet told me that the only requirement for short story authors in *Manon* is that the main character be "a girl who masters her own destiny, who acts, and who decides." All the BDs feature female main characters. The new masthead remains pink, but its title changed from curvy font to bold and blocked. In 2020 *Manon* counted close to 15,000 subscribers, not including newsstand sales.<sup>102</sup>

The editors of *Manon* and *Julie* that I interviewed inspired confidence that the content of these girls' magazines was in capable, gender-conscious hands. Yet, the magazines have not withstood strong criticism from scholars who examined their gender representations.

### *The False Promise of Mixité*

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the reign of formally mixed-gender magazines sparked the onset of a sentiment of self-satisfaction about gender sensitivity among many in publishing, librarianship, and education. Just as it is de rigueur for those who consider themselves progressives in the 21st century to disdain the pinking and blueing of children's books, toys, or other items of childhood culture, most contemporary players in the industry scorn magazines meant specifically for girls as embarrassingly conservative, if not retrograde.<sup>103</sup> Almost every scholar, librarian, and publisher I met considers the return to girls' magazines in the late 1990s a "backsliding" for gender equality, understood not as a laudable attempt of publishers to compensate for the enduring disparate gender representations that they produce in mixed magazines but as a commercial strategy that reinforces gender stereotypes.<sup>104</sup> Because *mixité* has become confused with equality, the same reflex, I believe, leads such progressives to regard feminist initiatives such as *Tchika* magazine with the same contempt as that directed toward standard girly magazines for girls.

A Bayard editor even used *mixité* to defend the principle of a magazine for girls:

A magazine like *Julie* can only exist because of *mixité*, that is why it was founded at the dawn of the 21st century. By giving girls and boys equal rights, *mixité* allowed girl readers of *Julie* to establish codes just amongst themselves without renouncing the world of boys.<sup>105</sup>

Note the speaker's slippage from *mixité* to equality as well as her use of "the world of boys" to describe the world.

Instead, I argue that in the children's press, the widespread reliance on *mixité* for egalitarian credibility is fallacious. Even though magazine

publishers are highly conscious that girls are more numerous and more active subscribers, a vast array of sexist stereotypes and inequalities will be made evident in the next chapter's sample of *J'aime lire Max*. Is it possible that publishers' awareness of subscribers' gender leads them to "pink and blue" their content even in mixed magazines, and in fact to especially "blue" it, in order to attract boy subscribers rather than cater to the girl readers they have already secured?

Not only do publishers know the gender of their subscribers, but due to letter writing and other tools that magazines use such as voting contests for favorite stories,<sup>106</sup> publishers also have data that seems to confirm the CNL/IPSOS surveys showing that girls and boys do not always prefer the same reading material. Lallouet, former editor of Bayard, for example, claims that girls tend to prefer stories about emotions and boys tend to prefer stories about action.<sup>107</sup> Tendencies such as these, even if backed by data, are socially constructed of course, and easily lead producers to make assumptions about demand, which in turn influences their supply. Lallouet acknowledges that these supposed preferences are indeed used to determine editorial content:

Of [*J'aime lire*'s] 36 issues in the last three years (2003–2005), we proposed 21 stories with a boy hero and 15 with a girl hero. Girl readers are more easily satisfied with stories about a male main character than the inverse.<sup>108</sup>

Even within the pages of mixed-gender educational magazines, therefore, we see processes of pinking and blueing. Despite their self-satisfaction of *mixité* as a badge of progressive egalitarianism, and their sense of superiority vis-à-vis girls' magazines, editors of mixed educational magazines are targeting particular content to subscribers of different sexes. What drives this stereotyped editorial line is the fear of losing a supposedly fragile boy readership. The counterpart assumption is that girl readers are not at stake, since they will gender jump: they will passively accept the interesting stories about boys and will be grateful for the pinkified stories about girls. In a captivating essay, writer Hélène Montandre unpacks the editor-author-reader dynamics behind the phenomenon of boy-heavy content made for girl-heavy markets, calling its irrationality "curious."<sup>109</sup> In our interview, Saulière lamented that the Bayard sales staff believe the myth that girls will gender jump but boys will not, implying that editors are pressured from sales staff to influence content in favor of supposed male interests. Even though Lallouet claims that it is editors' responsibility "not to caricaturize female and male figures, which are much subtler in children's real lives than in the magazines and books on their shelves," the evidence in Chapter 6 will show that this goal has not been attained.

### *Inclusive Language*

More than books, French children's magazines have experimented with *écriture inclusive*, a writing style that proactively rejects some or all of the French grammatical rules that erase females linguistically and symbolically. For instance, the rule summarized by the formula *le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin* (the primacy of masculinity) means that plural nouns and adjectives that include both sexes default to the masculine form (for example, "les enfants *joyeux*;" "les garçons et les filles *joyeux*"). Practitioners of *écriture inclusive* reject this formula and instead promote that an adjective describing two nouns should accord with the noun closest to it in the sentence (*la règle de proximité*), for example, "les garçons et les filles *joyeuses*." Inclusive language can be embraced to varying degrees. A stronger commitment, for example, expresses plural nouns to include both genders, for example, "les étudiant·e·s."

Boulet asserted that *Astrapi* purposefully did not use inclusive language because of the importance of teaching reading to its target age group. She recounted the barriers to inclusive language: the space that it requires on the printed page, the fact that very few children's books or magazines are using it, and the paradigm shift it would entail for the teaching of grammar.<sup>110</sup> At the same time in 2020, Saulière affirmed that Bayard's fiction magazines have long embraced the use of *écriture inclusive*.

A scan of *J'aime lire Max*, however, shows that inclusive language was used only intermittently in the 2013–14 subscription. The minimalist approach – which puts adjectives in both feminine and masculine form – is adopted in a handful of occasions when editorial copy addresses readers in direct dialogue using the informal second-person pronoun, "tu." For example, a blurb in the May 2014 issue is about a mood-sweater:

No one believes you when you say you're angry (*fâché(e)*)? This sweater should please you: its collar changes color according to your mood! Green or blue, you are calm and relaxed (*détendu(e)*). But if you're nervous or in love (*nerveux(se) ou amoureux(se)*), it turns red.<sup>111</sup>

At other times, direct dialogue with the reader is only in the masculine: "You are an extreme sportsman, a crazy adventurer." (August 2014). In "Dear Readers" notices from the magazine staff, both *lecteurs* and *lectrices* are used in a handful of instances, while in others only the masculine term is employed. Notably, in an important announcement of the magazine's name change from *DLire* to *J'aime lire Max* that was made in an insert in July 2014, the flier ignored girls: "Dear readers (*lecteurs*), this is a historic moment: you are holding the final issue of *DLire* in your hands!" In sum, no clear policy seems to exist. Chapter 6 will demonstrate that the

rejection of inclusiveness when describing jobs and professions – for example, using only *vendeur* (salesman) and excluding *vendeuse* – can lead to a mass accumulation of exclusionary messaging to girls about their career possibilities.

### *Editorial Intervention*

A key difference between French children’s magazines and children’s books is the attitudes toward editorial interventionism, which can have significant consequences on gender representations. For book publishers such as L’Ecole des loisirs, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, editorial intervention is taboo. In fact, almost all book editors that I met went to great lengths to affirm their respect for creators’ artistry, to insist that anything resembling a commissioned book is anathema, and to proclaim a hands-off policy toward their manuscript submissions. Magazine editors have no such qualms. They fully insert themselves in the process of bringing their authors’ and illustrators’ fiction stories and BDs to publication, ensuring that the content fits each magazine’s many constraints: a rather strict narrative format for the short stories (length, strong protagonist, a plot that has a certain rhythm, happy ending), and approval by specialists for reading comprehension as well as by sales staff for marketability.<sup>112</sup> One editor who worked across several Bayard magazines explained, “I push illustrators in the direction of the magazine, so that the drawing corresponds to the tone needed.”<sup>113</sup> Paule Battault, editor-in-chief of Milan’s *MordeLire*, noted that she is heavily engaged in editing, re-editing, and writing of content throughout the magazine. In small magazines such as hers, she and other members of the staff will occasionally author the short stories.<sup>114</sup> Saulière told me,

We are very interventionist, because [...] we work heavily on the text for reading accessibility. [...] In the 1980s, *J’aime lire* was criticized for its formulaic stories. Many authors did not want to work for us. But our circulation is colossal so authors are proud to be published by us. But our requirements were not well accepted in the beginning. Now authors are not surprised when we intervene and suggest changing a character’s sex,

which she says happens about once a year.<sup>115</sup>

Boulet explained that her *Astrapi* staff regularly intervenes on content to erase gender bias that might come from authors or illustrators or from its own staff. She offered several examples. One episode of the BD “Le Blog de Lulu,” which is written by the editorial staff, depicted a gym teacher reprimanding girls and calling them chatterboxes (*pipelettes*). Boulet removed the insult from the manuscript because, she argued, it reinforced

a stereotype of girls not liking sports. In another episode about Valentine's Day, the staff debated whether it was cliché for Lulu's father to come home from work with flowers for his wife; they ultimately decided to retain this scene. I suggested that since the mother is already home in the story, does that imply to readers that she does not work? Boulet replied that in other episodes the mother is portrayed working, as a nurse. I asked why the mother is not a doctor. She exclaimed, "I inherited her character!" Exasperated and delighted, Boulet encouraged my challenges and admitted that *Astrapi* surely contains some gender bias that she missed. She acknowledged that while the staff is highly gender conscious while in the throes of producing each issue, they have not analyzed the magazine's content over time or holistically.<sup>116</sup>

Huguet, editor-in-chief of the girls' magazine *Manon*, also recounted that she sometimes negotiated with authors over their manuscripts to improve gender representations. For example, she once received a submission for a story about a queen and a French *président* (masculine) and suggested instead a king and female *présidente*. The author readily agreed to the reversal, regretting that he had not thought of it himself. In another instance, a manuscript originally depicted a single mother cooking and laundering. Huguet suggested that the mother character perform more masculine domestic chores such as small repairs. In another case, she requested an illustrator to redraw a scene with a girl jumping rope and a boy playing with a soccer ball to the opposite. These simple inversions might not be enough to withstand feminist criticism of the girls' magazine. After all, Huguet reassured me that despite her efforts, such as to avoid sexualized clothing, *Manon* "does not consider itself activist or feminist."<sup>117</sup>

More than books, therefore, magazines project not only the point of view of authors and illustrators but the perspectives of the editorial staff as well, as these examples suggest. Indeed, press editors' insistence of their control on the content is a very different discourse than that of L'Ecole des loisirs' personnel, who resist awareness of gender disparities in the name of universalism and creators' autonomy.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, Chapter 6 will show that gender representations in one children's magazine are not more neutral or equal than those in the samples of books analyzed in Chapters 2 and 4.

### *Educational Mission*

Parts I and II of this book have shown that most librarians and independent book publishers favor "quality" literature for children. L'Ecole des loisirs in particular, for all its connections with schools, paradoxically defines quality first and foremost as antithetical to pedagogy. Part of the publisher's avant-garde mystique resides in its throwing off of the shackles of

morality and didacticism that characterized children's literature since its origins. Bayard, in contrast, does not view its educational mission as taboo; it promotes pedagogical uplift as its *raison d'être*. Bayard's three-fold mission is to teach children "to love reading, to understand the world, and to learn and create."<sup>119</sup> More specifically, plots follow predictable formats for children of particular ages to follow, text is reviewed by speech therapists to meet literacy objectives, and themes promote good citizenship. The embrace of an educational mission is common, in fact, to a majority of magazines today who explicitly market themselves as such to parents. It is surprising, therefore, that gender equality is not given as much attention as literacy, for example, in the creation, editing, and production of content that is supposed to educate and socialize future citizens.

### Conclusion

If progressive-minded book publishers accuse Bayard of conservatism, either for its commitment to educational goals or for its Catholic ownership, it is paradoxically Bayard that claims proudly to actively promote gender equality. Bayard and Milan editors that I have interviewed all claim to be highly gender conscious. Saulière told me, "Gender has been fundamental at Bayard from the beginning, because our magazines were created during the social movements of the 1970s." She asserted that alternating heroes and heroines in the monthly stories was a principle from the beginning of the educational magazine era in the 1970s.<sup>120</sup> Boulet of *Astrapi* claimed that gender equality was "one of our editorial policies."<sup>121</sup>

Bayard has in fact dedicated some of its issues across its magazines to the theme of "girl/boy equality," which, as Chapter 3 explained, has become a standard way of avoiding the words sexism or feminism. For example, the cover theme for the nonfiction magazine *Images Doc*'s March 2020 issue was "Long Live Equality Between Girls and Boys!" and *Phosphore* offered an issue on the theme "Girl/Boy Equality: Where Do Things Stand?" in March 2021. A booklet entitled "All Together for Girl/Boy Equality" was inserted into most Bayard magazines in 2021. Bayard publicizes its active efforts in favor of gender equality, its unwavering commitment to *mixité*, and its goal of teaching tolerance to child readers as such:

Equality between girls and boys is dealt with in the form of dossiers or thematic surveys, but it is also the subject of continuous attention in each published issue: giving a voice to girls and boys, proposing stories and characters that everyone can identify with from an early age, and helping readers to build their own personality, without being locked into stereotypes. All our magazines are aimed at both girls and boys, who make up the readership in equal parts.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to this positioning, Bayard and Milan editors were willing to be interviewed for this book and to subject their content to inspection. Milan's Paule Battault earnestly asked me to tell her my views of gender representations in *MordeLire*. So did *Julie's* editor-in-chief, Pascale Garès. And Bayard's Gwenaëlle Boulet piled a year's worth of the most recent issues of *Astrapi* in my arms at the conclusion of our interview, inviting me to return to the headquarters to report my findings to her team.

Since magazine editors make public claims of commitment to gender equality, our interviews took a direction that was not feasible with most editors of books, who were warier of an American academic: for example, after a constructive meeting in 2023, one book publisher jokingly confided, "I was afraid you were going to be a gender ayatollah."<sup>123</sup> At Bayard, on the contrary, when I pointed out to Saulière that the BDs in *J'aime lire* and *J'aime lire Max* are rather biased and marked by symbolic annihilation of females, she sighed in agreement, "Oh yes, in BDs we don't do as well. It bugs me, I admit. [...] We can't seem to find a crowd-pleasing bubbly girl." Though she noted that she never receives any criticism from readers or parents about the lack of heroines, she blamed the problem on the dominance of male BD authors who do not invent heroines: "Their girls are always foils and afterthoughts. [...] We kill ourselves to get a little variety, just to get a normal girl. [...] It's a real concern of mine." She also lamented Bayard's popular hit BD "Mortelle Adèle," starring a heroine "who is a smashing success but unbearable: mean, dark, [...] she doesn't like anyone, she tortures her cat. It depresses me that the one successful heroine we have is just plain mean."<sup>124</sup> With its strong-willed female protagonist who worries some adults as bad role modeling but who attracts boy readers<sup>125</sup> and who has received critical praise,<sup>126</sup> the Mortelle Adèle BD was incorporated into *J'aime lire Max* the month of our interview in March 2020, six years after the sample was taken for the following chapter.<sup>127</sup>

When I asked why Bayard did not simply publicize an open call for such a BD heroine as Saulière wanted, she explained that a launch of a BD series in a Bayard magazine is a long-term commitment, so it generally requires a character who has already proven successful in book format.<sup>128</sup> The cost of creating a new BD thus impedes editorial determination for gender balance. Although Saulière mused that Milan can be more adventurous than Bayard in launching new BDs because its circulation is smaller, one might assume instead that a heavyweight such as Bayard would be more able to take such financial risks. Especially because captive subscribers are locked in for at least a year and usually much longer given *chainage*, and because editors have to generate an enormous amount of content that is nearly guaranteed to be read, magazine publishers could confidently propose content that may be considered commercially "risky" for book publishers – such as



placing a minority character in a cover image or launching an untested BD that features a female protagonist. And yet Bayard emits an alternative discourse: because its magazines have such huge circulation, it claims that it cannot afford to take risks. Even Milan editors subscribe to this rhetoric: Battault of *MordeLire* told me that she can take more editorial risks than Bayard since Milan's subscriber base is much smaller.<sup>129</sup>

Producing one issue per year on girl power has become a normalized practice for some magazines. And while the conversations with editors, including Saulière and Boulet, reveal that a good deal of reflection about gender is happening in press rooms, the results described in the next chapter about gender representations in *J'aime lire Max* indicate that the ideas have not been landing on paper. Granted, the sample was taken in 2013–14 and the interviews were conducted in 2020 with new editorial staff. Nevertheless, Bayard's longstanding educational mission and pro-equality discourse were not enough to produce gender-equal and stereotype-free reading material for children in the 2010s, and more recent samples may prove the same. Although its editors genuinely welcomed my probing questions in 2020, Bayard denied permission in 2024 to reproduce *J'aime lire Max* images for this book. For this reason, Part III of this book is devoid of imagery from the primary sources, which would have included women in aprons and girls in sexualized poses, among other visuals, to support the arguments made in the following chapter. This denial testifies to an ambivalence and timorousness around gender representations inside the most dominant player of the French children's press.

Sylvie Cromer argues that the children's magazine is “a high-profile tool of socialization, comparable in influence to the school textbook and the picturebook. It infiltrates families, daycares, libraries, and school libraries as a familiar object, at the crossroads of education [...] and leisure.”<sup>130</sup> The next chapter will demonstrate glaring gender disparities in the second decade of the 21st century throughout the pages of one magazine subscription.

## Notes

- 1 La Presse Jeunesse, “La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2023,” 2–3.
- 2 Charon, *La presse des jeunes*, 86–87.
- 3 Charon, 117.
- 4 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 5 Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes*, Tome 2, 7.
- 6 Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*, 389.
- 7 This section relies on the following sources: Fourment, “Les publications périodiques”; Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*; Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*; Charon, *La presse des jeunes*. See also Bruel, *L'aventure politique*, 87–138.

- 8 On Britain, see Drotner, *English Children and Their Magazines*.
- 9 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 6.
- 10 Moruzi, "Magazines."
- 11 Heywood, *Catholicism and Children's Literature in France*, 8.
- 12 Heywood, 9.
- 13 Heywood, 91.
- 14 See Vicki Caron's forthcoming book on French Catholic anti-Semitism. Both magazines exist today and have shifted to a more liberal form of Catholicism.
- 15 Pieragastini, "The Catholic Press in France," 31.
- 16 Tintin was already being published in the Belgian *Le petit vingtième*.
- 17 See Béatrice Guillier's forthcoming doctoral thesis on girls' magazines and her article, "Les illustrés pour petites filles du XXe siècle."
- 18 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 98.
- 19 Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*, 405–6.
- 20 Lévêque, "Une liberté sous contrôle"; Heywood, "Pippi Longstocking, Juvenile Delinquent?"; Crépin and Crétois, "La presse et la loi de 1949."
- 21 Marion, "Tout ce que vous avez toujours eu envie de savoir."
- 22 See footnote 1 in Lévêque, "Une liberté sous contrôle."
- 23 La Presse Jeunesse, "Repères historiques."
- 24 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 155.
- 25 Boulaire, "Okapi, un journal fantastinouï," 2.
- 26 Fourment, "Les publications périodiques," 113.
- 27 Garnier, "Pomme d'Api, le grand journal des tout-petits," 95–98.
- 28 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 231.
- 29 Charon, *La presse des jeunes*, 48.
- 30 Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*, 339.
- 31 Piffault, "Tous les garçons et les filles au pays des bulles." Both quotes are on page 207.
- 32 Boulaire, "Okapi, un journal fantastinouï," 1.
- 33 Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood through the Periodical Press*, 12.
- 34 Lallouet, "Tom-Tom et Nana," 120.
- 35 Weis, *Les bibliothèques pour enfants entre 1945 et 1975*, 176.
- 36 Garnier, "Pomme d'Api, le grand journal des tout-petits," 98.
- 37 Hache-Bissette, "Bayard et Milan," 55.
- 38 Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, *La presse des jeunes*, 61.
- 39 Perrin, *Fictions et journaux pour la jeunesse*, 365–66.
- 40 Charon, *La presse des jeunes*, 48.
- 41 Cromer, "Les magazines pour petites filles," 142.
- 42 Lallouet, "La presse jeunesse," 131–32.
- 43 Hache-Bissette, "Bayard et Milan," 59–62.
- 44 Piquard, "Les presses enfantines chrétiennes," 50.
- 45 Palard, "La gouvernance de Bayard."
- 46 La Presse Jeunesse, "Quelques chiffres."
- 47 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 48 Jonveaux, "Les assumptionnistes au travail chez Bayard."
- 49 Bayard Jeunesse, "Nos coulisses."
- 50 Figures from L'Alliance pour les chiffres de la presse et des médias (ACPM), December 17, 2023.
- 51 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 52 Piquard, "Les presses enfantines chrétiennes," 52.
- 53 Figures from L'Alliance pour les chiffres de la presse et des médias (ACPM), December 17, 2023.

- 54 Patris, "Magazines pour enfants," 215.
- 55 Andrieux and Patris, Personal Interview.
- 56 Tapissier, "Georges, le magazine."
- 57 Maison Georges, "Magazine Georges."
- 58 Maison Georges, "Graou Magazine."
- 59 Biscoto, "Bisco-quoi?"
- 60 Roman, Personal Interview.
- 61 Elisabeth Roman, Email communication, 5 January 2024.
- 62 Histoires ordinaires, "Tchika, le premier magazine féministe."
- 63 La Presse Jeunesse, "La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2015," 22–25.
- 64 "Etude Ipsos Junior Connect' 2022."
- 65 La Presse Jeunesse, "Quelques chiffres."
- 66 Charon, *La presse des jeunes*, 53–54; Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*, 387.
- 67 Saulière, Personal Interview; See also Lallouet, "En quarante ans et quatre dates clefs," 67.
- 68 CNL, "Les jeunes Français et la lecture."
- 69 Détrez, "Adolescents et lecture," 7–9.
- 70 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 71 Boulet, Personal Interview.
- 72 Lallouet, "La mixité dans la presse jeunesse," 31; Lallouet, "Des livres pour les garçons et pour les filles," 178.
- 73 La Presse Jeunesse, "La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2015," 23, 34.
- 74 La Presse Jeunesse, 33–36.
- 75 Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, *La presse des jeunes*, 62.
- 76 Fourment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes*, 300.
- 77 Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, *La presse des jeunes*, 93.
- 78 Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, 96–97.
- 79 Lesage, "Cher Pif... ."
- 80 La Presse Jeunesse, "La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2015," 27.
- 81 Lallouet, "La presse jeunesse," 134.
- 82 My daughter subscribed to these Bayard magazines from age 7 to 13 in the 2010s: *J'aime lire*, *Astrapi*, *J'aime lire Max*, *Okapi*, and *Je bouquine*.
- 83 Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood Through the Periodical Press*, 206.
- 84 La Presse Jeunesse, "La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2023," 3.
- 85 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 86 Julie Buet, Email communication, 20 March 2020.
- 87 Lallouet, "La presse jeunesse," 135.
- 88 Julie Buet, Email communication, 20 March 2020.
- 89 Bayard Jeunesse, "Votre délégué."
- 90 Email communication, 17 December 2023.
- 91 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 92 La Presse Jeunesse, "La presse jeunesse: sa vitalité, ses engagements. 2015," 24.
- 93 La Presse Jeunesse, 7, 38–42.
- 94 Piquard, *L'édition pour la jeunesse*, 163–72.
- 95 On anglophone transmedia storytelling and franchising, see Hamer, "Marketing and Franchising."

- 96 Bruno, "Comment l'esprit ne vient pas aux filles."
- 97 Court, "Le corps prescrit."
- 98 Cromer, "Les magazines pour petites filles," 146–47.
- 99 Garès, Personal Interview.
- 100 La Presse Jeunesse, "Quelques chiffres."
- 101 Lallouet, "Julie, un journal pour empouvoirer les filles."
- 102 Huguët, Personal Interview.
- 103 There are no magazines for boys, a telling example of the masculine = neutral tenet.
- 104 Cromer, "Les magazines pour petites filles," 141, 153.
- 105 Stéphanie Saunier cited in Hache-Bissette, "Bayard et Milan," 58.
- 106 Lallouet, "La mixité dans la presse jeunesse," 32–33.
- 107 Lallouet, "Des livres pour les garçons et pour les filles," 178, 182.
- 108 Lallouet, "La mixité dans la presse jeunesse," 32.
- 109 Montardre, "Le personnage féminin dans la littérature de jeunesse," 28.
- 110 Boulet, Personal Interview.
- 111 Parentheses became disfavored by users of inclusive language for their implication that the feminine is ancillary, and have been replaced by other punctuation such as periods or median points.
- 112 Lecaplain, "'J'aime lire', 40 ans."
- 113 Quotes in Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, *La presse des jeunes*, 36.
- 114 Battault, Personal Interview.
- 115 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 116 Boulet, Personal Interview.
- 117 Huguët, Personal Interview.
- 118 On the evolution of editorial intervention in feminist book publishing houses, see Fette, "Gender and the Role of Talents Hauts"; Bigoni, "Faire du féminisme dans le texte."
- 119 Bayard Jeunesse, "Nos coulisses."
- 120 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 121 Boulet, Personal Interview.
- 122 Bayard Jeunesse, "Depuis plus de 50 ans."
- 123 Cussaguet, Personal Interview.
- 124 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 125 Lévêque, "La littérature française pour la jeunesse aujourd'hui."
- 126 Bruel, *L'aventure politique*, 294–97.
- 127 The BD last appeared in *J'aime lire Max* in November 2021 but Mortelle Adèle was reincarnated as the title character of her own Bayard magazine. Shortly after, author Mr Tan/Antoine Dole took back control of his successful heroine and began producing his own magazine, *Mortelle Adèle le Mag*'.
- 128 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 129 Battault, Personal Interview.
- 130 Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes*, Tome 1, 8.

## 6 Gender in *J'aime lire Max* (2013–14)

Chapter 5 made clear that the stakes are different for magazine publishers than for book publishers. With a built-in audience subscribed for a year of content delivery to their home address and with an established system of communication such as letters to the editor and a participatory website, Bayard, unlike book publishers, has clear knowledge of the demographics of its customers. In addition, the recurrent heroes and the segmentation and age gradation of subscriptions known as *chainage* both contribute to customer loyalty or *fidélisation* of the reader that is not possible for book publishers: even the creation of book series cannot match the comforting structure that enables magazine publishers to maintain captive readers over years. Furthermore, the editorial intervention in the creative process – which is proudly defended by magazines as opposed to book publishers' taboo – might be expected to lend itself to the erasure or correction of gender stereotypes that may be found in creators' short story and BD manuscripts. Finally, Bayard ascribes to a didactic mission of fostering good citizenship. In theory, therefore, Bayard's business model seems conducive to more equal gender representations than those found in picturebooks. Indeed, Bayard editors claim to prioritize gender equality in its content, in contrast to most book publishers who favor a universalistic approach to their editorial practices.

Yet, there are several factors that work against more progressive magazine content. Bayard is owned and influenced by the Catholic congregation of Assumptionists, who have never embraced liberal gender politics. Moreover, the publisher's commitment to fostering literacy serves as a justification for eschewing inclusive language in its pages. More importantly, though, in touting *mixité* or the mixed-gender approach and audience of their magazines as a sign of gender equality, editors have misguidedly rested on their laurels and avoided real introspection regarding the disparities in their content.

Indeed, with this in mind, the most salient factor thwarting equal gender representation in children's magazines in general, and in Bayard's *J'aime lire*

*Max* in particular, in my estimation, is the anxiety over retaining boy readers. Integral to this concern is a set of widely shared, but largely unexamined, beliefs about the kind of literary content that boys require. With the widespread post-1968 disdain for separate publications for girls, and amidst long-standing insistence on girls' willingness to gender jump, Bayard offers male-dominant and gender-stereotyped content in its mixed-gender educational magazines. In instrumentalizing stereotypes, moreover, Bayard may be reifying inequality under the guise of demand. These particularities about the children's press, combined with the industry's vitality within the French cultural economy – exceptional in the world, as Chapter 5 made clear – make an analysis of gender representations in magazines essential for a complete picture of the reading material that francophone children encounter.

In order to evaluate the representations of gender in children's magazines, this chapter draws on a sample from Bayard's fiction magazine collection, a 12-month subscription of *J'aime lire Max* from 2013 to 2014 (see Appendix 3). I have chosen *J'aime lire Max* as the sample magazine for this chapter because it is published by Bayard, the leading children's magazine publisher of the 21st-century market, and one that has proven adaptive to changing literary, educational, and social circumstances since the 1960s (See Figure 6.1.). *J'aime lire Max* is part of Bayard's fiction



Figure 6.1 Bayard's headquarters in Montrouge just outside of Paris in 2020.

(*lecture*) collection of magazines for children, which embodies its core mission focusing on literacy. *J'aime lire Max* for ages 9–13 falls squarely in the middle of Bayard's fiction product range: after *Mes premiers J'aime lire* for ages six to seven and *J'aime lire* for ages seven to ten, and before *Je bouquine* for ages 12–15. The target readers for *J'aime lire Max* are therefore just beyond the critical learn-to-read years, so Bayard is conscious of the importance of retaining subscribers at a developmental moment when parental motivation to spend money is generally waning. Indeed, during the 2013–14 subscription year under analysis, the magazine was revamped (including a name change from “*DLire*,” a wordplay combining the word *lire* for “to read” with *délire* meaning fun), demonstrating the publisher's renewed commitment to the magazine as well as its hopes for a profitable future.<sup>1</sup>

*J'aime lire Max* has a solid readership. It sold approximately 52,000 issues a month in 2008<sup>2</sup> and was holding strong at more than 44,000 copies a month in 2019, amounting to an annual total of 509,000.<sup>3</sup> Not only does this magazine for the 9–13 age group thus serve as an opportune primary source for analyzing gender representations because the stakes are relatively high for the publisher to attract readers, but *J'aime lire Max* also allows my study to broaden into literature for the upper reaches of childhood. While the library sample in Chapter 2 offered a range of picturebooks for all reading levels, the book club sample in Chapter 4 focused purposefully on subscriptions for the youngest readers, beginning with newborns. Although by no means should the short story in each *J'aime lire Max* issue be considered YA fiction or even a junior novel, the narratives are more developed than those found in magazines or books for younger children, and the recurring BDs and nonfiction rubrics provide additional rich material for examination.

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered for this chapter, culled from the 12 issues of *J'aime lire Max* from October 2013 to September 2014, shows that despite Bayard's claims of gender consciousness and a commitment to gender equality, the results are not substantially different from the representations found in the picturebook samples from libraries and book clubs in Chapters 2 and 4, respectively. In *J'aime lire Max*, males are numerically and symbolically dominant, girls are often portrayed as incapable, female appearance is gendered and occasionally sexualized, girls are depicted as valuing relationships over other endeavors, and beauty standards apply only to girls, not to boys. For adult characters, parenting roles are different for mothers and fathers, and professions remain the purview of men alone. Above all, boys are simply far more visible than girls in *J'aime lire Max* content, from its outsourced stories and comics to its nonfiction sections written by the editorial staff.

Furthermore, the effect on readers of gendered representations from magazines may be greater than those found in a single picturebook. Subscribers, who typically constitute 95% of Bayard magazines,<sup>4</sup> face cumulative exposure to stereotypes month after month. The stories and comics built around recurrent protagonists, because of their purposeful *fidélisation*, could be particularly influential on captive readers' perceptions of social conventions. Many children, furthermore, renew subscriptions and shift from magazine to magazine as they age, just as the system of *chainage* intends, thereby accumulating years of impressions about gender norms. As social scientists Carole Brugeilles, Isabelle Cromer, and Sylvie Cromer assert,

A choice agent of socialization, as the Union of Children's Press claims, magazines are, like other cultural objects for children, both a product and a vector of masculine and feminine representations. Accumulated over the course of six or seven years of subscriptions, such representations precede or accompany children's lived experience, thereby inflating their effects.<sup>5</sup>

### Profile of *J'aime lire Max*

*J'aime lire Max* is a monthly fiction magazine aimed at 9–13-year-olds. Each issue features an original short story plus seven recurrent comic strips (*bande dessinées*, or BDs) created by authors and illustrators on commission. The magazine also offers six sections of nonfiction content ranging from one to four pages each, written by the editorial staff or regular collaborators. Every issue also includes a page of letters to the editor and three to four advertisements. The magazine is 82 pages long, measures 17 by 22 centimeters, and is printed on glossy paper. Color drawings, photos, and graphic design are found on every page. The summer special issue takes advantage of the travel and homework-free season to appeal on newsstands: it is larger and longer at 114 pages.

The original short story in every issue is considered a principal draw for readers. The front cover of the magazine announces it, with the story's title in large font and an original drawing occupying 75% of the cover. The short story obeys a standard structure each month: 34 pages long, a two-page title spread with an enticing introductory blurb, and illustrations on at least every other page. The genre of each short story is announced on the front cover and repeated on the title page: comedy, fantasy, detective story, science fiction, or real life (*comme la vie*). The most common genre in 2013–14 is fantasy, comprising 5 of the 12 stories. The reading level is significantly more advanced than the predecessor magazine for seven-to-ten-year-olds, *J'aime lire*, but the illustrations are still significant.



The stories use first-person narration and feature a single main character. The age of the protagonist – always within the age range of the targeted readership – is revealed in the first two pages of every story, often long before his or her name is mentioned. Each story's initial situation is quickly upended; for example, a boy's new house is haunted or a girl's mother announces bad news at breakfast. All *J'aime lire Max* short stories end happily.

In contrast to the one-off protagonists of the short stories, the magazine's seven episodic comic strips or BDs stoke *fidélisation* by enticing young readers to follow their favorite characters from month to month. The first strip, "T.Taclack," graces the inside front cover; its title character is a male octopus who serves as *J'aime lire Max*'s mascot and appears in other editorial sections of the magazine. The other six BDs constitute the "BD Zone;" one after the other, they anchor the second half of the magazine. "Les aventures de Hic" ("Hic's Adventures") features a short gag centered on a male animal. "Zélie et compagnie" ("Zélie and Company") depicts the adventures of a girl and her school friends across ten pages. "Mon ami Grompf" ("My Friend Grompf") sticks close to the home of protagonist Arthur and his pet yeti. In "Les Enquêtes du Docteur Enigmus" ("The Investigations of Doctor Enigmus"), the eponymous doctor solves a mystery in an exotic locale in each episode. "Tralaland" is a place where supernatural events happen to Benoît while he awaits his way back to his world. Finally, "Mandarine & cow" mimics the Grompf premise of an outlandish family pet; this time the pet cow is the main character in the Mandarine household.

In addition to the short story and the BDs, five editorial sections are the third set of content integral to *J'aime lire Max*. "Les DLires du mois" ("The Monthly Sillies") is a page of jokes and word plays. "100% Vrai" ("100% True") is a two-page spread of fun facts, centered around a theme such as two-wheelers, ice, or the color red. "Les Zactus" – a word-play on the French term for "current events" – takes three or four pages to expound on a cultural topic such as a new edition of the dictionary *Le Petit Larousse illustré* or the latest Spiderman film. Another editorial section recommends recently published books, BDs, films, video games, and apps, by providing an image, a summary blurb, and detailed information for each. Finally, "Les Mini Jeux" ("Mini Games") follows a format of eight games in delimited rectangles on a two-page spread: word finds, word scrambles, fill-in-the-blanks, hangmans, and crosswords. Monthly game themes range from masquerade balls to outer space to the Middle Ages. All of the editorial sections of *J'aime lire Max* are copiously illustrated. These nonfiction sections, as Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer explain in their massive 2008 study of 505 children's magazine issues from four publishers, are not a light and entertaining moment of pause but an integral facet of magazines' pedagogical mission. In fact, these social scientists suggest that because

readers are called to be actively engaged and to draw upon capacities of reasoning in these parts of magazines, and because a good portion of the material represents the real world, the editorial sections of children's magazines may have even greater impact on socialization than fiction.<sup>6</sup>

In August 2014, Bayard Presse changed the title of *DLire* to *J'aime lire Max*, aligning it with the flagship *J'aime lire* title for younger readers in print since 1977 and with its literary product range to exploit the brand recognition. Some of the sections were tweaked or renamed, a photo contest and advice column were added, and the BD "Mandarine & cow" was withdrawn. The new look and title were timed to coincide with the back-to-school moment so as to attract new subscribers. Such revamping is common practice for children's magazines; further tweaks to *J'aime lire Max* have been undertaken since, though the overall structure and the three main sections (short story, BDs, and editorial sections) remain.

In contrast to book publishers, Bayard's magazine subscription model with delivery to children's homes affords an enviable amount of demographic data on its readership. In interviews, magazine editors from Bayard and Milan all shared their appreciation of the market intelligence that they have on their readers. Three widely accepted assumptions – that more girls than boys read, that girls read more than boys do, and that girls read longer into adolescence than boys – have already been raised in Chapter 5. Despite some evidence to the contrary, head Bayard editor Delphine Saulière assured me in 2020 that the readership of its fiction magazines is at or very close to gender parity.<sup>7</sup> Since magazine publishers know who their subscribers are, whether the demand – which is believed by many to be dictated by readers' gender – influences the supply (the magazine content) becomes a pertinent question. Furthermore, any understanding of the kind of content that appeals more to girls or to boys is, of course, heavily based on anecdote, presumption, and fragmentary intelligence. Indeed whether "girls" and "boys" have separate tastes in literature is a debate fraught with pitfalls, to say nothing of the social construction of gender. Master's student Amandine Berton-Schmitt goes further to suggest that the supply of literature, in fact, constructs demand by habituating girls and boys to distinct types of stories.<sup>8</sup>

All Bayard magazines typically have one page dedicated to readers' submissions, and readers can actively enter discussions with editors and even among themselves on magazines' websites. *J'aime lire Max* publishes letters or drawings from girl readers at a monthly rate that is three-to-four times higher than letters from boys: a typical page of letters might include six from girls and two from boys, identifiable by the first name. In the 2013–14 annual subscription, 73 out of 90 published reader submissions are from girls (81%). Similarly, letter writers to another of Bayard's magazine, *J'aime lire*, for seven-to-ten-year-olds, are also mostly female:

according to a study I undertook of that magazine's 2010–11 subscription, 80% of letters are from girls. Saulière assured me that the gender breakdown of published letters is generally proportionate to that of the letters received at Bayard, with the exception of the *Okapi* nonfiction magazine: because *Okapi* dedicates a page to letters from girls and another page to letters from boys, proportionately more of the boys' submissions are published in order to maintain parity in layout, since boys only submit 10%–15% of all letters to the editor. According to Saulière, the dominance of female letter writers begins at a young age. She conjectured that girls have a greater desire to communicate and are less self-conscious than boys. In sum, Saulière maintains that Bayard has parity in readership and attributes differences in letter authorship to girls' greater engagement, a hypothesis that a scholarly duo who worked in Bayard archives affirms.<sup>9</sup> While the hypothesis is plausible, there is no reliable way to confirm subscriber data by gender.

It is clear that Bayard's intention is to create content that its readers can easily relate to and characters with whom they can directly identify, judging by the age of the protagonists and the first-person narration in *J'aime lire Max*'s short stories, as well as by the fact that about half of the BDs feature human rather than animal characters that are plainly between the ages of 9 and 13. Indeed, a former chief editor of *Pomme d'Api* once said, "It is important that children can see themselves in heroes who in some way resemble them. That is why we propose 'mirror-heroes' to our readers."<sup>10</sup> Yet if relatability is key to reaching a target market, my analysis of 12 issues shows that the publisher does not consider gender as a factor in connecting with readers. The female presence is dramatically inferior to that of males in all *J'aime lire Max* content in 2013–14. Two-thirds of the short story protagonists are male, and five of the seven recurrent BDs feature male main characters. This imbalance is all the more surprising for a magazine with a female readership that Bayard claims is around 50% and that is considerably more engaged with the magazine's content than their male peers. One can only conclude that despite its rhetoric of female empowerment, Bayard subscribes to the universalist male = neutral tenet, just like L'Ecole des loisirs and most other children's publishers.

Featuring equal numbers of female and male characters in the magazine would not be sufficient, of course, to constitute gender equality. A systematic analysis of the 2013–14 subscription of *J'aime lire Max* content reveals that the magazine also communicates a number of stereotypical messages about gender, including the relative importance of girls and boys in society and of women and men in positions of authority, gender-appropriate hobbies and professions, appearance stereotypes, and gendered ways of dealing with romantic love. The following sections of this chapter will examine

numerical and symbolic male dominance; the double discrimination of sex and age; the role of genre, plot, and setting in stereotyping; sexist differences in visual imagery; the trope that the masculine is a neutral gender or a universal status; different approaches to romance for female and male characters; the ways that the two sexes are embedded in familial and social entourages; discrepant parenting roles for mothers and fathers; and the place of women and men in the working world.

### Where Are the Girls?

This section examines the distribution of characters and roles in the short stories, BDs, and editorial sections of *J'aime lire Max* across the 2013–14 subscription, and explores the qualitative differences of representations of females and males.

There are twice as many male protagonists as female (8:4) in *J'aime lire Max* short stories in 2013–14. As such, girl readers of the magazine can only directly identify with a protagonist of the same sex four months out of the year, while boy readers can see themselves in two-thirds of the protagonists in this annual subscription. Many *J'aime lire Max* short stories have two or three secondary characters. On this measure too, males outnumber females by nearly two to one: 19 secondary males compared to ten secondary females across the 12 stories. In addition, all four stories with female protagonists feature leading secondary characters who are male. In three of the four cases, those males are older than the protagonist, leading to a double discrimination (age and sex) that will be examined in detail in the next section. The message being communicated in this sample is that female main characters cannot sustain a story without a male secondary character by their side. The same is not true for the eight male protagonists, half of whom have other males as their number two. (These four male secondary characters are also all older than the male protagonists). Two of the male protagonists are seconded by a female peer. Another male protagonist is seconded by an equal duo of friends, one of each sex. Finally, as readers know from the recurrent BD, Docteur Enigmus, who also stars in one issue's short story, is seconded by his female assistant. In addition, in four of the eight stories with male main characters (October, May, June, September), there are no female secondary characters of any degree of importance.

Such numbers demonstrate what readers of all sexes may infer about gender from *J'aime lire Max*'s short stories, but the narratives' literary qualities and social messages also project qualitative gender biases to child readers. Two examples of symbolic male dominance that reinforce male numerical ascendancy suffice here. In the first short story in the 2013–14 subscription, a science fiction tale called “Esclave des Mihobês” (“The

Slave of the Mihobês”), a ten-year-old boy named *Chose* (“Thing”) was kidnapped as an infant by the Mihobês, a half dog-half human species created by an experiment gone awry. A slave to a Mihobê couple, Chose is going to be replaced by a newborn girl: “They are more docile and more considerate” than boys, says the slave salesman. Chose is soon abandoned in a forest – Hansel and Gretel style – only to be rescued by six humans, all male. Together the men and boy, led by the paternal figure Liam, rescue the newborn girl and unravel the enslavement scheme. Chose conquers his fears and is determined to reclaim his freedom and human dignity. He and his rescued baby sister are sent to live at home with Liam’s wife, while Liam and his male partners continue to liberate other kidnapped children.

The November short story, “Archinulle en sorcellerie,” (“Worst Ever in Witchcraft”), demonstrates that a girl protagonist and gender parity of characters do not guarantee a gender-equal story. On the magazine cover, Floriane is drawn shrugging, with a facial expression that seems to say “I can’t help being *nulle*” (worthless). Floriane introduces herself to readers as “me, a level one sorcerer’s apprentice, the worst that you could ever imagine.” The first chapter is titled “Miss Catastrophe.” The story develops around Floriane’s lack of skills, but a significant side plot involves her crush on a boy. Her conversations with her boy-obsessed friend Marine would not pass the Bechdel test.<sup>11</sup> The members of Floriane’s family are stereotypically gendered; unlike her, her older brother is talented at witchery and so is her father: “Dad, he is The Big Boss, the grand head of the Coven of Mystics.” When Floriane comes home from school, “Mom is gardening, dad is at work.” To solve the potion fiasco she created, Floriane gets much better advice from the ghost of her serious grandfather than from the ghost of her flirtatious grandmother: he appears to Floriane in a library surrounded by books and formulas, while she is awash in high heels, jewelry, and pink. Although Floriane herself is drawn androgynously wearing a purple shirt, yellow pants, and red sneakers in every illustration – the only feature that marks her gender is her blond ponytail – the same cannot be said for the illustrations of her grandmother, aunt, and mother. As the family tries to remediate the plumbing disaster that Floriane’s potion instigated, the author uses the rare masculine form of witch (*sorcier*) when describing a high level of mastery: “Only a level four male witch can create such a phenomenon.”<sup>12</sup> In the end, Floriane fixes the problem herself, but not before her older brother physically rescues her from a giant glob of magic potion. Floriane’s resolution is quickly overshadowed by the romance subplot that surges to the narrative forefront, and her professional achievement is rendered subordinate to a potential relationship. In her own words: “The most important part of this story is that Charles and I have become really close and that is worth all the magic in the world.”

Table 6.1 Protagonists in the Comic Strips in the Magazine Sample

	Female	Male
T. Taclack	0	1
Les Aventures de Hic	0	1
Zélie et compagnie	1	0
Mon ami Grompf	0	1
Les Enquêtes du Docteur Enigmus	0	1
Tralaland	0	1
Mandarine & cow	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>

Like the short stories, *J'aime lire Max*'s seven recurrent comic strips or BDs in 2013–14, written and illustrated by commissioned creators, reveal quantitative gender imbalance of characters (see Table 6.1). Five of the seven BDs have male main characters. Of the two female mains, one is a human family's pet cow, whose salient feature is her vanity about her physical appearance. Only Zélie, a spirited adolescent with a lot of good ideas, a close-knit gang of friends, and an engaged relationship with her single dad, offers *J'aime lire Max* readers – girls and boys – a realistic and positive role model of the female sex. Among the BDs, the eight male secondary characters also outnumber the five female secondaries.

Unlike the short stories where the protagonists are always human, the BDs offer several anthropomorphized animal characters in main and secondary roles. Two BDs have only animal characters ("T. Taclack" and "Les Aventures de Hic"). Three of the BDs have a mix of anthropomorphized animals living among humans ("Mon ami Grompf," "Tralaland," and "Mandarine & cow"). And two BDs feature only human characters ("Les Enquêtes du Docteur Enigmus" and "Zélie et compagnie"). Chapters 2 and 4 have provided evidence that the use of anthropomorphized characters does not allow authors and illustrators to escape gender. Furthermore, several studies of children's literature samples have shown that animal characters are actually more male dominant than humans,<sup>13</sup> and one anglophone study showed that even when animals are presented neutrally, readers interpret them as males.<sup>14</sup> In *J'aime lire Max* BDs, the animal characters are most often male.

In addition to the predominance of male characters, the storylines in *J'aime lire Max*'s recurrent BDs also offer stereotyped understandings of the sexes. Three examples will be elaborated. "Tralaland" is a supernatural world in which the male main character Benoît lands. Until he finds his way home, he experiences surreal events with a cast of secondary characters introduced in this order: Bob, a male headless human; Bisou, a male wolf; and Madeleine, a female who appears to be human like Benoît. Their

escapades range from escaping a walled town where time is slowed to a snail's pace, to rescuing Bisou who walks through a museum painting into another dimension. Bob is a mad scientist who creates some of the problems and fixes others. Madeleine overcomes her numerical inferiority – facing three male characters – to emerge quite often as the ideas person. In several episodes, though, she is not given a speaking role until midway through, when she finally cuts through the nonsense and resolves the group's quandary. In addition, the episodic characters in “Tralaland” are systematically male.<sup>15</sup>

A female cow, who is not named but referred to as “the cow,” is the main character and anti-heroine of the BD “Mandarine & cow.” Multiple episodes focus on her obsession over her physical appearance, and the narration mocks her. One episode is dedicated to her losing weight, another to her exercise regime in preparation for beach season, another to her tattoo collection, and another to her selfie habit. The comic strip pokes fun at the pet cow, thereby guiding readers to avoid similar vanity.

Even in the BD “Zélie et compagnie,” which features a girl facing adolescence with spunk, gender stereotypes intrude. Zélie is a leader in action and words, but she is occasionally chided by her friends for being immodest: would that accusation be leveled at a boy protagonist? In one episode, she interrupts an older boy and takes over the storytelling: “You're the hero, okay, but I'm the one telling the story.” An entire episode is about classmates' fat-shaming Zélie (she is not fat): while this may mirror what happens in a real schoolyard, the plot serves to reinforce that beauty standards are only for girls, not boys. In fact, Zélie, surrounded as she is by a gang of friends, exemplifies a trope found in Sylvie Cromer's studies of the children's press wherein the rare female heroines generally have to “pay the price of an ‘entrapment’ – in a literal sense – in ties with family or masculine peers.”<sup>16</sup>

The five editorial sections present some of the most significant quantitative gender inequalities in the magazine. Given Bayard editors' claim of gender awareness, this finding is particularly surprising since *J'aime lire Max* staffers create these sections. Females are strikingly outnumbered in every one of these sections. The editorial team's creative inventions for the joke and game sections are just as biased as its choices – of people in “100% Vrai,” of theme in “Les Zactus,” and of media recommendations – in the three sections that are based in reality.

In the joke section, “Les DLires du mois,” textual references to females and males demonstrate a telling bias. Not only are girls and women underrepresented, often they do not even exist. The magazine's 12 joke sections throughout the year present 77 characters; only 17 of these are female (22%). What's more, in five monthly issues – nearly half of a year's subscription – there are no girls or women represented in the joke section.

If humor, more than other modes of communication, is gendered, could it be that the *J'aime lire Max* joke section is purposefully written for boys without saying so?

Male characters outnumber females by more than three to one in both textual references and visual depictions in the game section, “Les Mini Jeux.” Only 13 out of 54 characters (24%) are female in textual references, and only 33 out of 137 (24%) characters are female in the section’s visual depictions.

The section of thematic fun facts, “100% Vrai,” mentions females and males in proportions that are almost as lopsided as in the joke section: 21 females for 59 males, that is, again, essentially 1:3, or 26%. Unlike the invented characters in the joke and game sections, in “100% Vrai,” the people are real; they have not been invented by Bayard staff but have been selected from actual life. The gender discrepancy then results from a selection – unconscious or conscious – of stories that feature male subjects. In terms of symbolic annihilation, two monthly issues of this section are completely devoid of women.<sup>17</sup>

The news section, “Les Zactus,” consists of themes that are longer and more developed than the joke, game, or fun facts sections, so the gender composition varies widely from month to month. In fact, the editorial choice of the monthly theme has a strong effect on gender bias and inequity: most themes chosen are male-centric. January’s theme is Pixar movies, with a dozen mentions of male Pixar characters and two of female characters. April is dedicated to two bestselling book series with male protagonists: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and the *Tom Gates* series. May’s theme is Spiderman. June’s theme, however, is “The Battle of the Princesses,” and predictably features nearly 100% females. For this, the magazine invented a tongue-in-cheek competition that pits different Disney princesses against each other, rated on their family situations, their adversaries, and their physical appearance. While a “female themed” month is a relief from the overrepresentation of males in other months of “Les Zactus,” the choice to feature Disney princesses, placed in competition with each other, with beauty as one criterion, offers a parade of sexist stereotypes for *J'aime lire Max* readers.

The recommendations section, a monthly section of seven to ten media recommendations ultimately titled “Les coups de coeur” (“Favorites”), is also significantly one-sided in terms of gender. The synopses of each cultural product – mostly fiction, including books, BDs, films, video games – describe the main character and the basic plotline. In 2013–14, male protagonists star in 50 of the 91 recommendations, compared to 22 that feature a female main character (the remaining 19 products feature either no main character, a group, or a mixed-gender duo as main characters).<sup>18</sup> The recommended media with female protagonists therefore



number fewer than half of those with male protagonists. We know that this female-male ratio of main characters is proportionate to the actual gender ratios in the productions still made by media companies in the first two decades of the 21st century. For example, in the 2010s, only 29% of lead actors in American theatrical films were women,<sup>19</sup> and only 17% of the highest grossing films of 2015 had a female lead, according to the Geena Davis Institute.<sup>20</sup> The gender imbalance in the magazine's "Favorites" section thus mirrors the existing cultural landscape wherein media producers fail to invent heroines. The *J'aime lire Max* staff evidently do not consider this situation problematic since their reproduction of gender bias found in the mass media translates to four months of recommendations for children where heroines are completely absent.

We might ask ourselves whether a children's magazine has a duty to shape culture. Whereas many books for children in the 9–13 age range could be considered as works of art with some obligation to convey virtues, values, concepts, or even aesthetics that a society wishes to elevate, magazines like *J'aime lire Max* cater to a captive subscription-based readership. They are published on a regular schedule, adhere to a consistent structure and length, and present a familiar cast of character types to a large audience of young readers. Yet, as I document, *J'aime lire Max*'s large circulation, availability, and familiarity make it an insidious vehicle for sexism. As simple as its stories seem at first glance, *J'aime lire Max* normalizes and propagates gender stereotypes and inequality.

### The Double Discrimination

It is not anodyne when female characters are younger than males. In children's literature, the relative ages of protagonists is a factor that – combined with sex assignment – further emphasizes hierarchical relations between female and male characters. Sylvie Cromer calls creators' tendency to invent younger female characters and older male characters in a story "a double dominance," which she argues is "a pillar of the system of gender."<sup>21</sup> My analyses of children's literature demonstrate that among siblings or friends, a younger female/older male duo is common. Since the short stories and BDs in *J'aime lire Max* present friend groups that are typically of the same age, age discrepancies only arise among siblings or between children and adult characters who interact closely. In these scenarios, all *J'aime lire Max* short stories and BDs in my sample feature older males and younger females.

In the short stories, two of the four female protagonists have an older brother; none have a younger brother. In fact, these two older brothers serve as the protagonists' leading secondary character. The other two female protagonists are seconded by older paternal figures, an uncle and a grandfather. None of the four female protagonists is seconded by an

older female. Two of the eight male protagonists (May, August) have a younger sister; none has an older sister. None of the eight male protagonists is seconded by an older female. One of the male main characters is an adult, a popular figure from one of the monthly BDs, Docteur Enigma: he too is seconded by a female who, though she is also an adult, not only appears younger in the illustrations – though this is not made explicit in the text – but is also hierarchically inferior; she is his assistant.

In *J'aime lire Max*'s only BD with siblings, “Mandarine & cow,” the older brother/younger sister trope occurs here too. Not only is Lulu younger than Chico, but she is also introduced at the beginning of each episode as Chico's sister: “Lulu, the monomaniac little sister,” in other words, she exists only in relation to her brother. Chico is introduced as himself, “Chico.” In this way, the point of view is unconsciously enforced for readers as belonging to the male older brother. Any doubt that author/illustrator Jacques Azam considers little sister Lulu to be a mere accessory to her big brother is put to rest by his spinoff comic book series *Chico Mandarine*, in which Lulu is replaced by a new sister named Nina, who is obsessed with housecleaning.

### Genre, Plot, and Setting

Genre, and its intersections with plot and setting, also contributes to constructing gender norms in *J'aime lire Max*. In the short stories, protagonists are constrained to particular genres based on their sexes (see Table 6.2). Girls do not often star in detective, fantasy, or science fiction short stories, the three genres that englobe all of the boy-protagonist stories. Only one of the five fantasies stars a girl, Anne, who solves a mystery for a group of pirate ghosts she befriends. The other three stories with girl protagonists confine their main characters to comedy or “real life” genres. In the two comedies, the principal source of humor lays in the incapacities and errors of the main girls, both of whom are prone to self-deprecation, as we saw above with “Archinulle en sorcellerie.”

**Table 6.2** Protagonists in the Short Stories in the Magazine Sample by Genre

<i>Genre of Short Story</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Comedy	2	0
Fantasy	1	4
Detective	0	3
Science fiction	0	1
Real life (“ <i>Comme la vie</i> ”)	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>

Certain genres and storylines in the recurrent comic strips also align with specific genders of characters. The BDs that rely on gag humor feature male protagonists (T. Taclack and Hic), as do those based in science fiction (Benoît in “Tralaland”) and the detective genre (Docteur Enigma). When a female protagonist is at the center of a humoristic BD (the cow in “Mandarine & cow”), the humor is denigrating, just like the self-deprecating girl main characters in the short stories. Also, like several of the girls in the short stories, Zélie’s adventures are not of the science fiction, fantasy, or detective kind: they generally take place in the mundane home or schoolyard. Arthur, in “Mon ami Grompf,” is the only example of a BD male protagonist in a real-life story that does not go far beyond the confines of home and school, though his pet, a yeti, exoticizes the domestic setting.

Plot and setting are additional avenues through which young readers can absorb gender norms in both the short stories and the BDs of *J’aime lire Max*. Five of the 12 short stories and three of the seven recurrent BDs in the sample take place in the home, in the neighborhood, and around school. These proportions confirm what Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer have found in studies of French children’s literature: that about 40% of all picturebooks focus on domestic life.<sup>22</sup> Research has shown that stories about girls take place more in and around the home than stories about boys,<sup>23</sup> a discrepancy that is evident in *J’aime lire Max*: half of the short stories with girls (November and March) and both of the BDs with girls (“Mandarine & cow” and “Zélie et compagnie”) do so. In stories with boy protagonists, only three of the eight short stories (February, June, August) and one of the five BDs (“Mon ami Grompf”) are set in the home neighborhood and focus on domestic life.

In addition, more stories with girls focus on close relationships as opposed to the grander themes – epistemologies of the future, the impact of time, socioeconomic disparities, and retribution – that are granted to male protagonists, even if some of these latter themes take place at home or around town. For example, all of the boy protagonists explore new places, embark on exciting adventures, or overcome dangerous threats.<sup>24</sup> Only one of the eight male-protagonist stories involves the main character in a realistic plot dealing with neighborhood bullies. Four others also keep their male protagonists near home, but these boys have the freedom to roam around town; meet and befriend strangers; visit shops, offices, and public places; land in emergency rooms; explore abandoned factories; and donate their discoveries to public archives. Three of these four protagonists face the excitement of supernatural phenomena (ghosts and time travel), while the fourth confronts a threat of serious violence. Two other short stories with boy main characters offer otherworldly perils to overcome. Finally, the adult male Docteur Enigma is offered a mystery to be solved

in a faraway locale. My findings confirm Sylvie Cromer's conclusions from her study of magazines:

[T]he same lesson about the future is given to girl readers: that girls do not have their *own* place in society. [...] Girls do have a rightful place in society – a restrained place – in magazines, but it is not a full and complete citizenship because unlike boys, they are not granted all possible roles to play. [...] In all cases, the heroines are marginal and cannot make a claim to universality.<sup>25</sup>

The September short story, “Roland et le chevalier Perce-Muraille,” (“Roland and the Knight Wall-Piercer”), exemplifies how authors' genre, plot, and setting choices can accumulate stereotypical gender representations for child readers. The cover image depicts the two male title characters in a scene from the Middle Ages, a setting where women are largely invisible in the public sphere. Indeed, all of the exciting action is performed by a large cast of all-male knights, soldiers, sentinels, and sires interacting violently. Protecting a woman is at the heart of this good-versus-evil fantasy: the beautiful and vulnerable Hélène de Granville is introduced as such: “Her features are delicate, her blond hair is carefully combed... but her face is marked by a deep sadness.” The evil lord Thomas de St. Jean has kidnapped the widow's six-year-old son in order to force her to marry him. The title characters, Knight Wall-Piercer and adolescent knight-in-training Roland, ultimately rescue the child and agree to serve permanently as Hélène's guardians. Roland thus comes of age through stereotypically masculine virtues of bravery and the protection of women and children. This example also demonstrates how the genre, plot, and setting of a *J'aime lire Max* short story correlate strongly with the sex of the main character.

### Visual Imagery

Perry Nodelman has shown the crucial role that images play in communicating information to child readers.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, illustrations' messages about gender norms can be as impactful as dialogue and narration. Studies have documented a staggering visual underrepresentation of girls in various samples of children's literature as well as discrepant ways that females and males are depicted in imagery. For example, Anne Dafflon Novelle found that girl protagonists – who already constitute just half the number of boy protagonists in her sample of children's magazines – are visually illustrated even less often proportionately than their male equivalents, but that they are depicted more often than boys in their bedrooms.<sup>27</sup> Jerome Tognoli and his team found that male characters are more often portrayed outdoors

and female characters indoors.<sup>28</sup> The interior portrait of a female character looking out a window, conveying messages of confinement and passivity, is so commonplace that it is a cliché.<sup>29</sup> In *J'aime lire Max*, the number of illustrations for female and male protagonists in the short stories is relatively equal, though slightly in favor of males: 75% of a story's images on average feature the male protagonist, whereas 71% feature the female protagonist. The short stories demonstrate some interior-exterior differences between the sexes, with male main characters drawn slightly more often than females in outdoor scenes, and female main characters slightly more often than males in indoor scenes.<sup>30</sup> Like any single factor, image counts cannot be analyzed alone to understand gender stereotyping: *J'aime lire Max*'s August short story depicts its boy protagonist in few images compared to other stories, yet it is the most gender-stereotyped story of the annual subscription.

That most of the plots with boy characters take them out of the home is relevant to discrepant visual representation. For example, in September, the boy protagonist is a marauding knight in training. In the January issue, the boy protagonist explores an abandoned factory in town, only to be thrust into a time travel machine. In the August short story, which takes place in the male protagonist's *cité* or underprivileged neighborhood,<sup>31</sup> only two images of the inside of his home are drawn, and Mathieu does not appear in either of them. Instead, the females in his entourage – sister, friend, mother – are there.

### **The Masculine = Neutral Trope**

Previous chapters have shown that whereas male characters are often depicted in gender-neutral clothing, females are typically identifiable by their feminine accessories in illustrations. Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer analyze the tendency in children's magazines to accessorize female characters with feminine accoutrements, part of the masculine = neutral trope. They note that "in the absence of any gendered marker, characters are considered masculine," and since females are exclusively subject to gender marking, "the masculine sex is not one of two sexes in humanity, but the model of what is human."<sup>32</sup> This trope holds that the masculine is normative, neutral, and taken for granted, whereas femaleness is a deviation from this norm, which is why only deviations are depicted. *J'aime lire Max* short stories, BDs, and editorial sections tend to perpetuate this trope in their illustrations. Male characters are often drawn without highly distinguishing masculine features such as neckties or facial hair. Female characters, in contrast, are often drawn with distinguishing attributes such as hair ties, jewelry, makeup, high heels, skirts, and dresses.

The masculine = neutral tendency plays strongly in the illustrations of a fictional *J'aime lire Max* creation that is both a one-time short story and a recurrent BD, the Docteur Enigmus detective tales. The premise of each episode invites the detective and his assistant Tatiana to an exotic locale to solve a mystery. The illustrator decorates Tatiana in multiple feminine ways, usually all at once: a ponytail, pink dresses or dresses with a flower motif, neck scarves, impractical feminine shoes, rosy lips, and a well-defined bust line. In seven out of ten BDs in the annual subscription, she is wearing heels, and in another seven, she is wearing a dress or miniskirt, during investigations that require her to traverse the Amazon canopy or traipse across Manhattan. Docteur Enigmus, for his part, generally wears non-descript pants or shorts and buttoned shirts, though he sports a tie in three episodes of the BDs, a suit without a tie in another, and a three-piece suit in his by-line portrait. In these moments, the masculine attributes of his apparel are not gender neutral but lend him a bearing of command and control, which is decidedly not the case with Tatiana's garb.

In addition, the Docteur Enigmus BD in the August issue portrays other female characters in sexualized ways. In this episode, Enigmus is called to a tropical island to identify a cheating contestant in a reality TV production. Here, the female contestants are dressed in bikini tops while the males are fully dressed. Although the BD mocks the male reality show stars for their vanity, the mockery goes much further with the females: one with prodigious breasts is named "Jessy Liconée" ("je suis siliconée," or "Ima Plastic") and wears pink stilettos with her pink bikini. The other female contestant – who, it so happens, is the cheater – has only one speaking part: she says, "If I lose, at least I might marry the winner." In sum, the women contestants are lascivious, cheating gold diggers.

The masculine = neutral trope is evident in other *J'aime lire Max* content. Intriguingly, the female secondary characters are more feminized and sexualized than female mains. For the short stories' four heroines, pigtailed and skirts are common, but purses and bikinis are only occasional. Zélie always wears pants or overalls, and her only feminine accessory is her barrettes. But secondary female characters are not treated as neutrally. In the cover image and several interior images of the January short story "Le tunnel" ("The Tunnel"), Colin's friend Melissa is wearing a cropped tee-shirt drawn at an angle that invites the readers' eye to look underneath. Furthermore, *J'aime lire Max* illustrators seem to believe that drawing adult women can be achieved primarily via pronounced breasts. The images in the editorial sections of the magazine identify females primarily through their accessories: jewelry, hair clips, skirts, or bikini tops inform readers that a particular character is female. Images of males are presented as neutral humans, with rare specific masculine characteristics such as facial hair.

As Sylvie Cromer noted, “These markers that ‘alter’ or ‘de-universalize’ prevent the feminine from accessing a status of neutrality and instead of making the feminine one of two sexes in its own right, they weaken it into a subcategory of the masculine.”<sup>33</sup>

### Romance

The plot lines of *J'aime lire Max* short stories generally involve platonic relationships. While the magazine is aimed at 9–13-year-olds, the publisher probably recognizes that seven- and eight-year-olds are also reading it. Nevertheless, there is some romance in *J'aime lire Max*, and when it exists, it is always heterosexual, and the examples confirm the trope that female protagonists more often than male protagonists are placed in a love scenario. This trope is an extension of another gender trope explored earlier that puts female protagonists more often than males in real-life genres with plots centered on interpersonal relationships. Three of the four stories with girl main characters contain a love-interest plot or subplot, or at least hint at one, whereas only one of the eight stories involving a boy main character does so. The love theme is an integral part of the plot of only one of *J'aime lire Max*'s short stories; it happens to be led by a female protagonist. Let's investigate more closely.

The plot of the March short story is entirely about romance and features a girl protagonist. MéliSSa's claim to have kissed a boy – a lie – spills across the schoolyard. When Paul, the boy in question, suddenly transfers to her middle school, MéliSSa must face the consequences of her fib being revealed. The story's cover design has a definite girly feel – pinker and more whimsical than usual. MéliSSa herself is not easy to find in the busyness of the cover drawing, until the gaze locates her at the bottom of the page, literally crushed by the words of the story's title: “Mon super gros méga bobard” (“My Big Fat Lie”). As in Floriane's story, this comedy's humor depends on the heroine's faults. Like Floriane, MéliSSa makes more than a few denigrating remarks about her own shortcomings. Other similarities exist between these rare girl-protagonist short stories: both characters have an older brother who helps them fix the messy situations they brought upon themselves. And both have a friend who cares a lot about boys.

MéliSSa's boyfriend dilemma drives the plot; along the way the short story covers rare territory for *J'aime lire Max*: adolescent sexual awareness. When she discovers that Paul has turned from gawky to gorgeous, MéliSSa is suddenly body-conscious. She remarks to herself, “Of course he noticed: I'm still as small as ever and... I can't help glancing sornily at my flat chest under my tee-shirt.” Focused squarely on one sex, this sole reference to pubescent bodily change in the 2013–14 subscription seems unlikely to promote healthy self-esteem for *J'aime lire Max*'s girl

readers. Further, might boy readers be led to agree with Mélissa about her sexual inadequacy? Nothing in the narrative undoes this stereotyped self-objectification of the female body, and no male character in a Bayard story expresses similar self-consciousness about his body parts. Only on page 17 of the story are readers exposed to a common-sense reality check: that never having kissed someone at 13 years old “is not a defect, it’s completely normal.” Other problematic moments pepper this story, including gendered activities for Mélissa’s mother and father (baking and home-repair, respectively) and Paul’s rescuing of Mélissa from her own lie while he simultaneously derides girls for being “complicated.”

*J'aime lire Max* gives its boys crushes too. The August short story with a boy protagonist and a romantic subplot treats the matter, however, in a very different manner. It begins with Mathieu’s love-at-first-sight moment and quickly accelerates to a sexualization of Lili that is atypical for *J'aime lire Max* content. This detective story contains the most gender stereotypes or sexist instances of any other short story in the annual subscription. The cover image for the story, “Danger...trésor!” (“Danger... Treasure!”), speaks volumes: both the boy protagonist and his female second are depicted in equal size and with equally fearful facial expressions, but she is cowering behind him. She is illustrated with extreme femininity: Lili’s long blond braids float and envelope Mathieu, her eyes are piercingly blue while his are unremarkably brown, and her lips are thick and pink, while his are barely distinct from his complexion.<sup>34</sup>

Mathieu lives in a suburb; his close friend leaves town for the summer, and Mathieu anticipates months of boredom. He is quickly surprised to meet Lili, visiting her grandmother. In the first five minutes of their meeting, he saves her in two damsel-in-distress scenes by lending her money and helping her escape a gang of male bullies. He describes his instant attraction to her physicality: “Two blond braids twitch around her ravishing face.” When she cannot afford her purchase, he says to himself, “I feel her powerlessness perspiring through her white linen dress.” Readers thus are told that Mathieu’s attraction is explicitly heightened by the girl’s vulnerability. In the illustration Lili looks like a Disney princess: her sleeveless dress reveals a curvy bust and a tiny waist; her wide blue eyes top her wide-open mouth. In another scene, the same flimsy white dress she wears is soaking wet from a rainstorm.<sup>35</sup>

Despite all this sexual innuendo, their relationship never goes beyond platonic, and as the story progresses Lili teaches Mathieu a thing or two about gardening and civic responsibility. The male protagonist evolves from insulting old ladies to seconding Lili in her park restoration project. By her actions, Lili ultimately overcomes the author and illustrator’s rendering of her as submissive and sexualized to emerge as a strong secondary character. But the portrayal of Mathieu’s family includes plenty of



additional gender tropes: a requisite younger sister, a mother at home and cooking, both of them concerned largely with beauty (hair appointments, manicures, jewelry), and an absent father whose job is more important and higher-paid than the mother's.

### Entourage

Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer have carefully examined the implications of entourages on female and male characters in children's magazines. They argue that networks of social interactions are critical to the construction of gender and that such networks are unequally permitted to females and males in children's fiction, thereby contributing to a dynamic of male domination. I quote, "The cartography of a network of exchange ratifies the enthronement of the boy as a central actor in society. Children's fiction multiplies all types and natures of relationships in his favor."<sup>36</sup> Dafflon Novelle's study of fiction in French magazines also found that boy characters benefit from more non-family relationships than girls.<sup>37</sup> In *J'aime lire Max* short stories, male main characters often interact with strangers: this is the case in seven of the eight stories in which they star. In fact, boy protagonists develop and benefit from deep relationships with people who are initially strangers in four stories: October, May, June, and September. An equivalent opportunity is only available to one female protagonist in the April story.

An example of the wide variety of relationships in public life permitted to boy protagonists is the May short story, which is about knowing the future before it happens. The boy's image is the largest of all the magazine covers in the sample, featuring a boy wearing eyeglasses and reading a newspaper. Victor is a model 13-year-old who takes a part-time job cleaning a newspaper office in order to buy his mother a birthday gift. As a male hero, Victor roams freely around town alone and develops work relationships with adults. He ultimately saves his family and townsfolk from disaster. The fantasy story titled "C'est arrivé demain" ("It Happened Tomorrow") also contains several instances of unexamined sexism, which deserve an examination here. Newspaper owner Maurice introduces his female – and Black – photojournalist employee to Victor as such: "The silent beauty over there is Pistachio! [...] Her real name is Pistil Potlatsch. But that is unpronounceable [...] And anyway, Pistachio is more appetizing, right?" This conversation between and man and a boy – which comments on the physical attractiveness of an adult woman, nicknames her, and encourages the boy to follow suit – takes place in her presence. The author insistently refers to the journalist as Pistachio throughout the short story. Her "real" name, furthermore, is no less sexualized than her nickname, and sexism and racism intersect in the term "appetizing."

June's fantasy, "Le visiteur du passé" ("The Visitor from the Past"), also provides the boy protagonist with many social experiences outside the home, and yet the boy meets not a single female character. Apart from this symbolic annihilation, the mother appears episodically, performing domestic activities. A ghost haunts his home, so the boy masters his fears and investigates. He befriends a local antique dealer who had previously lived in his house; in fact, the elderly male is related to the man whose ghost is haunting the house. Ultimately, the ghost leads the boy to a secret attic bedroom, where unsent love letters dating from the Second World War were hidden. As they read the letters, the boy and the antique dealer commiserate over the lost chances of the ghost's past. The experience teaches the boy life lessons about courage: "Sometimes it means going to war; sometimes it means joining the Resistance. Sometimes it means losing a loved one. Sometimes, it means facing the night. And sometimes it means finding the right words." Not only does the boy benefit from friendship with adult males in this short story, but he also experiences spiritual transcendence, two experiences that are not offered to females in *J'aime lire Max*.

### Parenting Roles

Chapters 2 and 4 have shown that adult characters in picturebooks often constitute a nexus of gendered stereotypes. Whether they present as parents or as other kinds of adults in children's literature, their domestic and professional roles offer young readers a good deal of normative modeling about their own futures. We have also observed that parent characters are the one role in children's literature that tends to be predominantly filled by females, and that the "passerby father" often serves merely to assure the heteronormativity of the family, especially in books for very young children.<sup>38</sup> Picturebooks and magazines for older independent readers typically do not offer big roles for parents since their content favors more autonomy for child protagonists. Similar trends are found in *J'aime lire Max* magazines: five short stories are entirely devoid of parents, and in some other stories, they are only episodic characters. Some *J'aime lire Max* fathers are disengaged from family life, and those who are involved do not suffer professional consequences or lose authority. Very rarely does a mother have a paid occupation.

In the three short stories in which a parent's role is germane to the plot, the father plays the leading parent. In "Archinulle en sorcellerie," Floriane's father must fix the plumbing disaster she created with her magic potion. Since he is "The Big Boss" magician, he takes charge and calls in reinforcement from another male magician, while her mother plays nothing more than a supporting role. In "L'été qui a tout changé"

(“The Summer that Changed Everything”), the plot centers on the years-long dispute between Zoé’s father and grandfather: Zoé succeeds in reconciling these two imposing paternal figures, while her mother plays a peripheral role. In “Qui veut ma peau?” (“Who Wants Me Dead?”), Julien tries to prevent his single dad from being accused of murder, and in so doing, he brings only more trouble on their family. Although these three fathers occupy a domestic role, their engagement in parenting is not at the expense of their status. Their public role as chief magician, store manager, and restaurant chef in fact serves as an important element to each story. A study by Cromer, Bruegilles, and Cromer asserts that, furthermore, subtle distinctions between fathers’ and mothers’ roles in children’s magazines “reconstruct and camouflage gendered social relations by promoting fathers, who remain the ones to drive the car and take the photographs.” In addition, humorous portrayals of fathers’ failings at mundane tasks typically performed by mothers serve to legitimize their strategic incompetence in the domestic sphere.<sup>39</sup>

The BD “Mon ami Grompf” also gives a father a more important parenting role than a mother. Arthur’s father does not engage in laundry or food preparation but in more stereotypically masculine and public-facing domestic activities. For example, Dad changes a lightbulb, clears snow from a car, and deals with telemarketers. Most significantly, the paternal presence at home is not at the expense of the father’s professional occupation. The March episode begins with him arriving home from work in a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase. No such professional implications for Arthur’s mother are offered in any episodes – the presumption is that she does not have a job. On the contrary, in the July issue, the mother is drawn wearing an apron six times.

While fathers can have it all,<sup>40</sup> mothers in *J’aime lire Max* fiction who want something beyond domestic life typically find themselves implicated in the bad mom trope. For example, in “Qui veut ma peau?” Julien’s mother has abandoned him: “My mother left when I was just a baby, without leaving an address,” he explains to readers. In the BD “Zélie et compagnie,” Zélie’s parent’s divorce is squarely blamed on her mother. In the August episode Zélie explains why she lives full-time with her dad, accusing her mother of being “always obsessed (*accaparée*) with her work, her travel, her projects!” Interestingly, the images on the next page tell a very different story. They flash back to Zélie’s mother before the divorce: from Zélie’s hygiene and childcare, to grocery shopping and errands, to organizing the couple’s social life, she singlehandedly manages the household. In contrast to her multitasking, her husband is portrayed wearing a tie while enjoying a cup of coffee and later sleeping on the couch. The mental load weighs solely on Zélie’s mother in married life: nothing in the images justifies the accusation of selfishness that Zélie imputes to her.

If the illustrator deliberately aimed to demonstrate a child's inaccurate perception of divorce, the message was likely lost on readers whose sympathy lies with Zélie.

The Mandarine children's father is explicitly labeled in the BD's by-line as "the absent father" (*le père absent*). Indeed, he plays virtually no role in the episodes. A 2013–14 subscriber would not know why, but according to reviews of the comic strip, the father is constantly on business trips. Not only is his absence shrugged at by the other characters, the parental vacuum does not make room for the mother to emerge in any professional way. She is introduced as "the learned stay-at-home mother" (*la mère savante au foyer*), but she is a barely developed character, and the "savant" description remains a mystery. In the 12-month content under analysis, the extent of her public life is limited to attending a "Nobel Prize" ceremony for best cassoulet recipe.

In a notable reversal of a domestic-space trope in children's literature more broadly, therefore, *J'aime lire Max* offers lots of fictional content about fathers playing roles in family life. At the same time, mothers are not liberated from the grunt work of parenting, and if they do escape, they are condemned for dodging domestic duties.<sup>41</sup> It is also noteworthy that mothers – and women more generally – are simply not consequential characters in the short stories or BDs.

### Adults at Work

*J'aime lire Max* short stories, BDs, and editorial sections foster a number of stereotypes about the ways gender operates in the working world. Across the magazine's content, working women are conspicuously absent, and a wide variety of professions is available to male characters compared to a much more limited range of jobs for females.<sup>42</sup> In the 2013–14 sample, not only do female characters have a derisory number of choices, but those professions are also less varied, less skilled, and less prestigious than those open to men. Further, female characters face domination, sexual innuendo, and other forms of harassment at work; such incidents are portrayed without any critique.

### Numbers

If female characters overall are significantly fewer in number compared to males in *J'aime lire Max*, the paltry counts for female *professional* characters constitute real symbolic annihilation. In the 12 *J'aime lire Max* short stories, only 13 women characters are granted a profession, whereas men are portrayed in no less than 40 distinct professions. Furthermore, two or more males often have the same occupation, bringing the count of male

professionals closer to 70 characters. This disparity symbolically reinforces for child readers the legitimacy and variety of labor possibilities for men and the illegitimacy of women in the workplace.

Short stories, whose plots and settings could accommodate greater *mixité* in realistic ways, decline opportunities to depict women and men working side by side. In the April story, Anne, the protagonist chasing pirate treasure in Venice, is surrounded by an all-male supporting cast: not only pirates but hotel personnel, historians, gondoliers, waiters, and museum guards. Not a single female character accompanies Anne in the story. The February story, “Qui veut ma peau?,” also exemplifies the symbolic annihilation of women in the workplace: 100% of the characters working in medicine, construction, journalism, public safety, and the restaurant industry are male.

The BDs in *J'aime lire Max* confirm a strong tendency to place males in professional roles and to neglect working women. In “Tralaland,” only Bob has a profession, as a scientist. In “Zélie et compagnie,” the father is a doctor and the mother has no discernable job. In “Mon ami Grompf,” the father appears in one episode returning home from work with a briefcase; the mother is never depicted in an occupation. In “Mandarine & cow,” the absent father is on a constant business trip while the mother is explicitly described as a stay-at-home mom. Tatiana works, but she is Docteur Enigmus’s assistant.

The editorial content of the magazine confirms the same unequal representations of females and males in the workplace. In the joke section, “Les DLires du mois,” not only are females outnumbered by males as noted above (22% of a total of 77 characters in the annual subscription), but they are rarely identified by their profession, which is the most common identifier for the males. Two females are identified by profession, compared to 16 professional males (see Table 6.3).

Similarly, in “100% Vrai” females constitute only 26% of total people featured. Moreover, not a single woman is identified by her profession in these 24 pages of the annual subscription. In contrast, nine males have

**Table 6.3** Character Identification in the Joke Section in the Magazine Sample

<i>Character Identification</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Identified by profession	2	16
Identified by full name	0	3
Identified by first name only	3	0
Identified by relationship	5	9
Identified by <i>état civil</i>	4	9
Identified by activity	0	4
Fictional character	3	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>60</b>

professions. And yet one news item in the annual subscription explicitly promotes gender equality: the December issue applauds a new video game that makes a heroine save a boy rather than the standard opposite. The text proclaims, "A victory against sexism!"

As in the other editorial sections, female characters in "Les Mini Jeux" that are identified by profession are practically nonexistent: there are a total of two in textual references and seven in the pictures, across 26 pages of the annual subscription. For male characters, their profession is the most common means of identification in both text and image. Close to half of all males in textual references (17 out of 41) as well as in visual depictions (42 out of 104) are identified by their professional activity.<sup>43</sup> In percentage terms, out of 54 textual references to characters, 3% were women with professions; 31% were men with professions. Out of 137 visual references to characters, 5% were women with professions; 30% were men with professions. My findings confirm those of Cromer's team in their study of representations of working people in children's magazines' editorial sections, who summarize: "Differences between the sexes are flagrant."<sup>44</sup>

It is clear from this quick accounting that strict obedience to the gendered nature of the French language combines with bias to limit Bayard's ability to offer its readers gender-equal pages of jokes and games. Notwithstanding the grammatical rule of "le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin" – which erases females from collective nouns – Bayard writers and editors voluntarily employ the singular masculine, for example, "un médecin" (a male doctor), "un coiffeur" (a male hairstylist), or "le marchand" (the male shopkeeper), to a high degree, losing an opportunity each time to show child readers that women work. Sociologist Dominique Epiphane ironizes that children's authors are timorous about feminizing professional titles because of their assumption that the masculine is a neutral gender, but that they have no compunction about feminizing certain jobs such as schoolteacher and nurse.<sup>45</sup>

In sum, *J'aime lire Max*'s fiction and nonfiction offer child readers next to no examples of a paid occupation in girls' futures. It so happens that the target readership of this Bayard publication – 9–13-year-olds – coincides with the middle-school years that definitively determine French students' academic tracks, which have been the focus of several inter-ministerial conventions described in Chapter 3 urgently calling for better results in gender equity.

### *Hierarchies and Duos*

Not only are female characters rarely portrayed as working professionals, when they do exist they consistently hold subaltern positions. For the 13 women professionals across the 12 short stories, only one occupies a position of authority – a town mayor – whereas well over a dozen male adult

characters hold positions of leadership, power, and prestige. The editorial sections of the magazine display similar hierarchical inequities between female and male workers. In the joke section, the two females identified by profession occupy the same job: teacher. In contrast, the 16 males referred to by their profession range from doctor and photographer to taxi driver and bartender. In the game section, the large number and variety of professional activities for male characters compares to an extremely dull and restricted set of possibilities for the female characters. The exclusion of female characters from prestigious and competitive occupations is particularly egregious in November's game section with an astronomy theme, where all of the astronauts are male.

The glass ceiling for women is particularly evident when stories place female and male duos together, confirming what other studies of gender in French children's literature have found.<sup>46</sup> Almost all work relationships among *J'aime lire Max* characters reinforce disparate gender hierarchies by presenting the following duos together: a male head magician and a female magician; a male detective and a female assistant detective; a male school director and a female assistant school director; a male newspaper owner and a female photo-journalist employee. While a female mayor in one story is seconded by a male assistant mayor – for once putting a woman in charge of a man – she plays an episodic character who appears in only one scene and is drawn in the background of a single illustration. In contrast, in the other duos, the roles played by the male leaders are much more central to the plot. In addition, the mayor is unlikeable: she is introduced pejoratively as “a woman with heavy makeup” and plays the contemptible role of approving the demolition of the boy protagonist's apartment complex.

The Enigma BD is led by a male-female duo that is structurally embedded in a gender hierarchy. As I observed in Chapter 2, the picturebook *Petite Plume* contrasted the spouses as “le Professeur Plume” and “Madeleine,” and another, *Un baiser à la figue*, offered readers “Monsieur Cyril” and “Roxanne.” Similarly in *J'aime lire Max*, the references to “Docteur Enigma” and “Tatiana” indicate their relative status in no uncertain terms. He is a titled professional; she is first-name familiar. In the plots, her contributions to the investigations are minimal; only infrequently does she find an important clue. When they arrive at the location of their investigation on the first page of each episode, the host systematically greets only Docteur Enigma, ignoring Tatiana.

There is a deviation, however: Enigma is Black, making him the only recurring hero in *J'aime lire Max* who is a minority. This effort at diversification is contrasted with a depiction of a non-white woman in an episodic role. In the December short story, which finds the investigative duo on a mission to a fictitious Caribbean island to find two high schoolers who disappeared from their boarding school. The white male boarding school director is seconded by a female assistant director named Susan

Wong, a rare Asian character in Bayard fiction. When Wong attempts to control the investigation, she is quickly overruled by Docteur Enigmus. Moreover, when the mystery is ultimately solved, Docteur Enigmus suggests that Tatiana use the extra flour they discover in the school kitchen as part of the crime solving to make crepes for everyone. Her diplomatic retort: "Really? You think that I'm going to cook for 12 people? Go get an apron, doctor. I'll agree to set the table." Like Pistil Potlatsch, Tatiana brushes off the offense, demonstrating for readers one way to respond to sexual harassment at work. But the incident signals to readers that this behavior is to be expected in the workplace. Though the authors allow Tatiana to object to her boss's sexist comment in this episode, the hierarchical male-female work relationship permeates the Enigmus tales.

### *Women Eschew Work*

Not only do *J'aime lire Max* short stories portray women not working, two of them depict women explicitly wishing not to work. In the August story, both of Mathieu's parents work, but his mother is in a part-time and gender-prescribed job in the beauty industry. At one point she tells her son that she cannot wait to stop working once her husband's promotion comes through. In the May story, another working mother has a subaltern and underpaid job. Her son, the boy protagonist, plans to save her from having to work by winning the lottery. In the June story, the boy protagonist's family has to move because his unemployed father can no longer afford the cost of their home. No mention is made of the earnings the mother could be contributing to the family expenses. Such silences normalize the stay-at-home mother trope for child readers.

My sample confirms the findings of many previous studies of representations of gender and profession in children's literature. Dafflon Novelle demonstrates in her analysis of a sample of francophone magazine fiction that the professions of adult characters are highly gender-stereotyped.<sup>47</sup> In a corpus of 91 picturebooks portraying over 2,500 workers, Epiphane finds that 78% are male and 22% are female. She also calculates that men hold more prestigious jobs than women, that they occupy more management positions compared to women, and that men and women work in sex-segregated spheres to serious degrees in these picturebooks.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the short stories and BDs, my study of *J'aime lire Max*'s nonfiction editorial content – jokes, news items, cultural themes, media recommendations, and games – demonstrates that not only do males outnumber females in every section by a ratio of approximately three to one, but the variety and prestige of occupations that males engage in are simply not allowed for females. Although *J'aime lire Max* readers have ample occasion to observe working women in their real lives, they see almost none in the magazine's pages.



## Conclusion

The evidence is overwhelming: female characters – when they exist – are represented in *J'aime lire Max* in 2013–14 in stereotypically “feminine” and pejorative ways. The short stories and BDs often contain a double discrimination of age and gender, and female and male protagonists are cast discrepantly in particular literary genres. Since genre, plot, and setting are so intertwined, these factors often multiply reproductions of gender stereotypes. Even though there is numerical parity in illustrations in the short stories, girls are depicted slightly more often indoors and boys are pictured slightly more often outdoors. In the short stories and BDs, the masculine = neutral trope is evident: whereas illustrations generally do not distinguish males by any stereotypically masculine physical features (they are neutral, or the universal standard), females are decorated with stereotypical accessories (they are exceptional, or the particular). In fact, females are often defined by their appearance in both the text and the images of short stories and BDs. Short stories featuring girl protagonists involve romance or a suggested love interest more often than stories with boy protagonists. When a boy does have a love interest, the object of his affection is sexualized, something that does not happen when girls are the subject and boys are the object. Male protagonists benefit from larger and more varied entourages than females in the short stories. In both the short stories and BDs, fathers are atypically dominant in parenting roles, though their participation in domestic life does not detract from their professional status and also does not liberate mothers in any particular way. In the short stories, BDs, and nonfiction editorial sections, the professions attributed to adult females and males differ significantly in both quantity and quality. In the short stories and BDs, the elevated number of male characters at least allows for some more varied representations of masculinity than are usually attributed to boys and men in children’s fiction. The same cannot be said of the female characters.

Because they are written by staff members – and in fact by a team of editors, writers, illustrators, and designers working together – *J'aime lire Max*’s editorial sections, even more than the short stories or BDs from outside authors and illustrators, indicate Bayard’s biases – unconscious or not – about gender. In these sections (jokes, fun facts, news, media, games) when parents are present, they are more than likely mothers. When girls are represented, they are often “little girls” rather than just girls. When a teacher is mentioned it is often a woman, unless it is a math teacher, in which case it is a man. When a male makes superhero designs in his capuccino, he gets full-name credit (“Christian Morris”), but when a female makes superhero designs on fingernails, she remains anonymous (“a student in communications”).<sup>49</sup> When a book or film is recommended with a female protagonist – a rare exception – that female is sometimes a princess or a

sexy spy. Some jokey asides in the *J'aime lire Max* editorial section can be considered plainly sexist, for example, this piece of advice given to child readers in August on how to take good vacation photos:

Take care of your camera, it's yours. Do not lend it out. And especially not to your little little [sic] sister. Otherwise, beware of photos of Dora and Hello Kitty stuffed animals. But maybe you like that kind of thing, we are not judging, ok?

By attempting to appeal to (boy) readers' sense of humor, Bayard staff writers denigrate girliness. In a section featuring all the BD characters competing together in Olympic-style games, all five male protagonists and the personified female cow shine in individual sports, but not Zélie. When cavaliers are drawn, a male character rides a large horse and a female rides a small pony. The males are always fully clothed in the images, but when a woman is drawn, she may be dressed in a bikini or a bra. All of these examples come from *J'aime lire Max*'s editorial sections in 2013–14.

Lest an observer wonder if the *J'aime lire Max* sample used for this chapter is exceptional, I found similar results in my study of *J'aime lire*, the flagship magazine in Bayard's reading series in its 2010–11 subscription. There, nine of the 12 protagonists in the short stories are male, as are all the main characters of the four BDs. Of the three female protagonists in the short stories, one is a poor girl living in Egypt in 1400 B.C., and another is a kidnapped human girl rescued by a male earthworm. Girl characters have fewer speaking roles than boys, and men are depicted as regularly holding down jobs while women often wear aprons in the illustrations (there are countless instances in the BD "Ariol").<sup>50</sup> And while it is possible that Bayard practices have evolved and that a more recent subscription of *J'aime lire Max* may offer more gender-balanced content than in 2013–14, such a hypothesis would require a thorough data-based study. At first glance at the time of this writing in 2024, all four BDs in *J'aime lire Max* are led by male characters, without the slightest mention of even a secondary female character on Bayard's webpage.<sup>51</sup> With Zélie's and Mortelle Adèle's cancellation from the magazine, the 2024 version of *J'aime lire Max* seems to be, on the surface, a step backward from 2014.

More broadly, the massive study done by three social scientists on over 500 children's magazine issues from four publishers (including Bayard) over the course of the first five years of the 21st century concludes,

In their hammering home of their will to help children grow up, magazine publishers contribute to constructing the masculine and the feminine, and they allow girl and boy readers to become cognizant of gendered relationships, which can seem all the more acceptable, and

thereby appropriate, because magazines for the youngest readers are anchored in the everyday life of the here and now. [...] The variations among magazine publishers and among magazines never overthrow gender inequalities: the message delivered is the same, that of the legitimacy of the boy as major actor in society.<sup>52</sup>

In *J'aime lire Max*, gender representations are no more nor less stereotyped than those found in the samples of picturebooks found in libraries and book clubs examined in Chapters 2 and 4, respectively. What is different is that Bayard editors assert that they labor carefully to produce gender-equitable and even feminist content. Contrary to what I encountered with other actors mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, they do not use universalist arguments to resist feminist goals. How can one understand this paradox: that even publishers who claim to embrace gender equality in interviews, on their websites, and elsewhere still proffer gender-stereotyped reading material to children in the third decade of the 21st century? Brugeilles and her team articulated the same conundrum in their survey of gender representations in children's magazines:

The children's press, whose self-claimed remit is creativity and whose self-claimed ambition is citizenship, demonstrates unthinkingness (*l'impensé*) about gender equality. Is it force of habit, lack of perspicacity, or an absence of conviction? Unwillingly, or not, via the unequal gender relations trafficked in its representations, the children's press shuts down children's imaginary.<sup>53</sup>

The bromide that girls are willing to read material with male protagonists but boys are less likely to show interest in content with female protagonists is regularly used to justify sexist children's literature, even in the 21st century. It is a facile evasion that is embraced by publishers who benefit from making little effort to attend to gender equality and who must think that they stand to profit from the continuous reproduction of imbalanced gender norms in their pages. Girls' willingness and boys' unwillingness to gender jump is a misconception that is also reiterated uncritically by other actors in children's literature such as librarians, teachers, and literary critics. More scholarly research is needed to unpack the implications of the assertion that boys need fictional boys more than girls need fictional girls. (See Figure 6.2) Moreover, if it were even possible to demonstrate through data, this widely shared platitude fails to account for the qualitative sexism found in children's literature that pins down female characters in subordinate roles, that assigns them lamentable personality traits, or that objectifies them as accessories for male needs. It is one thing to justify an overwhelming number of male characters with a need to attract boy



Figure 6.2 A girl reading the February 2011 issue of *J'aime lire*.

readers, but what about the stereotypical and pejorative representations of girls when girls are finally on the page?

Driven to increase readership, Bayard may be making an explicit marketplace decision to appeal to boy readers, all while assuming that male-centric content will not risk loss of female readers. In fact, Bayard editors verbalized exactly these presumptions in 2000 in a parental supplement in response to a parent letter protesting the sexist representations in Bayard's magazine *Popi*:<sup>54</sup> "It is easier for a little girl to identify with a masculine hero (Leo, Little Brown Bear) than for a little boy to identify with a feminine hero... yes indeed!"<sup>55</sup> If the view that girls will gender jump but boys will not remains widespread and operational in Bayard's management, such a sales strategy has serious effects. In other words, systemic sexism governs the marketplace, and the marketplace responds by reifying the sexist views of the surrounding society. The publisher's acknowledgment, on the record, contradicts several Bayard editors' claims in interviews and correspondence with me.

It may be that Bayard editors see little incentive to change what they view as a successful formula. However, considering the steady readership that characterizes their subscription model, how much risk would the publisher incur by featuring more thoughtfully egalitarian content? Dafflon Novelle's 2003 study shows that girl readers prefer stories with heroines.<sup>56</sup> But given the evidence from this chapter's sample and the

publisher's public comment on the subject, we are left to wonder if Bayard purposefully rejects gender-balanced content as unprofitable because of a presumption – never proven with data – that an equal and stereotype-free female presence in its magazines' pages would cause the supposedly fragile boy readership to withdraw.

## Notes

- 1 The magazine and its sisters still exist in the same chain configuration at the time of this writing in 2024.
- 2 Court, "Le corps prescrit," 120.
- 3 ACPM/OJD, "Déclaration sur l'honneur 2018–2019: J'aime lire Max." These are the most recent figures I could obtain.
- 4 Julie Buet, Email communication regarding *Astrapi*, 23 March 2020.
- 5 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "La fiction des magazines jeunesse," 42.
- 6 Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, "La presse éducative, un outil," 5.
- 7 Saulière, Personal Interview.
- 8 Berton-Schmitt. "Les représentations des deux sexes dans la littérature jeunesse contemporaine," 26, 81, 115.
- 9 Raux and Eugène, "Le courrier des lecteurs de J'aime lire."
- 10 Quoted in Agnès, Landa, and Serrÿn, *La presse des jeunes*, 18.
- 11 "Bechdel Test - Wikipedia."
- 12 See the numerical discrepancies between female "sorcières" and male "magiciens" in first-grade textbooks in "Manuels de lecture du CP: Et si on apprenait l'égalité?," 31–32.
- 13 Dafflon Novelle, "Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles"; Dafflon Novelle, "La littérature enfantine francophone publiée en 1997"; Cromer and Turin, "Que racontent les albums illustrés aux enfants?"; Grauerholz and Pescosolido, "Gender Representation in Children's Literature"; Weitzman et al., "Sex-Role Socialization."
- 14 DeLoache, Cassidy, and Carpenter, "The Three Bears Are All Boys."
- 15 See "The Smurfette Principle."
- 16 Cromer, "Le masculin n'est pas un sexe," 107.
- 17 I adhered to the following quantifying principles for the textual examples: animals referred to simply by their linguistic gender designation, for example "la vache," are not counted as either gender; plural nouns guided by the grammatical rule of "le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin," for example, "nos ancêtres" or "deux amis," are not counted as either gender unless clearly identifiable from other information as being all of a single sex; iterations are counted by blurb, regardless of whether they may be plural or singular, as long as they are explicitly gendered female or male, for example, "deux garçons" is counted as one male iteration, "les filles" is counted as one female iteration, but "sa maman" appears in two separate blurbs, so it is counted as two female iterations. Identifications with both a profession and a full name, for example, "le photographe Carl Warner," are counted only as a full name. Identification by profession includes "chevalier," "roi," "cow-boy." Identification by relationship includes "un ami." Identification by *état civil* includes "une Suisse," "un monsieur," "un Eskimo," "un bègue." Identification by activity includes "client," "patient," "visiteur." Fictional characters include "un vampire" (when clearly masculine from other information), "Santa."

- 18 Single-sex duos of either gender are counted as one protagonist; in this section this concerns mostly male duos.
- 19 Women's Media Center, "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2017," 74.
- 20 Geena Davis Institute, "The Reel Truth: Women Aren't Seen or Heard."
- 21 Cromer, "La littérature de jeunesse mise à l'épreuve du genre," 59–60.
- 22 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "La fiction des magazines jeunesse," 47.
- 23 Weitzman et al., "Sex-Role Socialization"; Hamilton et al., "Gender Stereotyping and Under-Representation of Female Characters."
- 24 See Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*.
- 25 Cromer, "Le masculin n'est pas un sexe," 108.
- 26 Nodelman, *Words about Pictures*.
- 27 Dafflon Nouvelle, "Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles," 93–94, 97.
- 28 Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place."
- 29 See for example Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 2*, 54.
- 30 Female protagonists are depicted in four indoor images compared to males in three indoor images on average per short story; female protagonists are depicted in 11 outdoor images compared to males in 12.25 outdoor images on average per short story. I define the "indoors" restrictively, that is, as the protagonist's home or alternate domestic space such as a hotel room. Many stories depict characters in museums, secret hideouts, hospitals, abandoned factories, offices, shops, and other people's homes, places that – while officially indoors – indicate protagonists' active participation in social life as opposed to family life.
- 31 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "La fiction des magazines jeunesse," 47.
- 32 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, 45–46.
- 33 Cromer, "Le masculin n'est pas un sexe," 109.
- 34 Brown eyes as the masculine universal and blue eyes as the feminine particular are also found in Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 2*, 52.
- 35 For a discussion of artists' sexualization of girl characters, see Nodelman, *Words about Pictures*, 119–24.
- 36 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "La fiction des magazines jeunesse," 52.
- 37 Dafflon Nouvelle, "Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles," 98.
- 38 Regarding gendered parenting norms proposed in parent supplements to children's magazines, see Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 1*.
- 39 Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 2*, 55, 78.
- 40 See also Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, "La fiction des magazines jeunesse," 48–49.
- 41 For a condemnation of the absence of women in picturebooks who are not mothers or wives, see Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 136.
- 42 For a breakdown of females and males in various sphere of labor in a study of children's magazines, see Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, "La presse éducative, un outil," 12–14.
- 43 The following quantification principles apply: Identification by profession includes, for example, "chevalier," "chanteur," a robot that is a nurse, ice skaters who are not dilettantes, a court jester, "Léo le limier," and "l'inspecteur Leflair." Identification by full name includes some characters with one name only, when that single name suffices, such as Lancelot, R2D2 of *Star Wars*, Grompf, or Zélie. Identification by activity includes "passager," "voleur," "rameurs," and

robots that are students. No personage is counted twice even if more than one textual phrase may refer to them. I identify illustrated personages with a designation such as “doctor” when they are not labeled in the text but are visibly recognizable as such. Animals or robots or figures in crowd scenes are counted only if they are decipherable and obviously gendered.

- 44 Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, “La presse éducative, un outil,” 13.
- 45 Epiphane, “My tailor is a man,” 70–71.
- 46 For example, Epiphane, 68, 71.
- 47 Dafflon Nouvelle, “Les représentations multi-dimensionnelles,” 94.
- 48 Epiphane, “My tailor is a man,” 67–71.
- 49 See Bouvier, “‘Une femme’ a désormais sa page Wikipédia.”
- 50 Fette, “Gender in 21st-Century French Magazines for Children.”
- 51 “Les BD 9, 10, 11, 12 et 13 ans de *J’aime lire Max*.”
- 52 Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 2*, 101.
- 53 Brugeilles, Cromer, and Cromer, “La fiction des magazines jeunesse,” 54.
- 54 Cromer, “Le masculin n’est pas un sexe,” 107.
- 55 Quoted in Cromer, Brugeilles, and Cromer, *Comment la presse pour les plus jeunes, Tome 2*, 51.
- 56 Dafflon Nouvelle, “Histoires inventées.”

## Conclusion.

# Feminist Children's Literature

The evidence presented in this book makes clear that gender stereotypes in French children's literature persist well into the 21st century. Representations that prevail in the stories available on library shelves, distributed in schools through book clubs, and included in subscription magazines are out of sync with the ideals of a society that claims to be democratic and egalitarian. In addition to a predominant patriarchal worldview in the literature, the comparative absence of females obliges girl readers to identify with male protagonists, and characters play stereotypically gendered roles in almost every story.

In recent years, nearly all children's publishing houses have produced at least one nonfiction book about gender equality or girl power. Founding editor of *Les fourmis rouges* Valérie Cussaguet exclaims, "It's more than a wave. It's a tsunami."<sup>1</sup> The trend is often attributed to the #metoo movement and criticized by some as a fleeting pretense of solidarity for commercial purposes. In terms of fiction, most editors I interviewed were also keen to highlight a recent picturebook of theirs that upends gender norms, for example, *Buffalo Belle* at Rouergue (2016) or *A quoi tu joues?* at Sarbacane (2018).<sup>2</sup> Many told me, in answer to my questions, that they occasionally receive manuscripts from authors containing gender stereotypes, and that as editors they intervene to eliminate blatant stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> However, what the primary sources under investigation in this book demonstrate is that, to the contrary, few publishers interrogate or manage the gender representations in their publications. Moreover, children's magazines – whose editorial staff claims to actively participate in manuscript revisions and promotes gender equality as a value – also deliver substantially biased content.

### Why So Slow?<sup>4</sup>

As this book has shown, several factors contribute to gender bias in the creation and dissemination of French children's literature. Publishers perceive demand from adult consumers as predominantly nostalgic,



resulting in the reissue of classic texts and even new books that reproduce conventional social norms in their stories. The drive to retain the supposedly elusive boy reader – a concern that is both commercial and cultural – has also led to a literary corpus that reifies male dominance and entitlement. In addition, editors are loath to respond to pressure from political correctness, and instead affirm the French value of republican universalism as a bulwark against identity politics. Most publishers recoil from any form of activism in stories and consider feminism antagonistic to literary creativity.<sup>5</sup> Distrust of any kind of social agenda in stories for children – what Anne Morey calls “unimaginative uplift”<sup>6</sup> – stems not only from the historical division between reading for literacy and reading for pleasure but also from a defense of creative purity against ideology. Editor of *Sarbacane*, Emmanuelle Beulque, verbalized a common automatism: “The main criteria is that it is a good book. Editors make choices because they are responsible for their publication catalog, but they must let authors do their job.”<sup>7</sup> The cult of the author takes on more urgency for children’s literature because, as a field, it is still striving for cultural legitimacy. By opposing a conscious editorial policy with artistic freedom, editors instrumentalize literary quality to justify inaction, as if quality and equality are mutually exclusive.

“But why shouldn’t equality [...] be universalist?” asks Eric Fassin, sociologist of gender and race.<sup>8</sup> And Nelly Chabrol Gagne wonders, “Are there any picturebooks that take on the double dare of formal innovation and innovation in their representation of a girl character?”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, another formulation of these questions that this book has tried to answer is why an effort to diversify the literary representations for children is more objectionable than the existence of the inequalities themselves.

Having interviewed many editors, I can attest to a customary affirmation of support for the principle of equality followed by a rebuff of any suggestion, for example, to collect data on representations in their backlists. Among even progressive actors in children’s literature, the grievous gender inequality in books – not to mention the lack of minority characters – is rarely denounced, or is schematically imputed to only mass-market publishers. This ethnographic research revealed to me a reflexive resistance to gender consciousness and multiculturalism, especially of the performative variety, considered to be American-style.

If not publishers and authors, do other actors in the children’s literature world ensure that children read gender-equal stories? Faced with commercial demands, retailers are not well placed to render the supply more egalitarian than it is, nor are librarians or teachers who are disempowered by inadequate professional training in children’s literature, among other institutional impediments they face. For its part, the State’s lack of commitment is evident in the fact that gender equality is not a criterion in

the Ministry of Education's Eduscol reference list selections, nor does the 1949 law regulating children's publications consider gender discrimination as one of its criteria for sanction. The thesis of this book is that, in addition to cultural reflexes around universalism and artistic freedom, a landscape of institutional dynamics that structure libraries, book clubs, and magazine subscriptions serves to maintain a gendered status quo in literature for French children. It is essential to add, moreover, that for all the particular Frenchness that I elucidate throughout this book, there is nothing exclusively French about gender stereotyping in children's literature, which remains a reality around the world in the 21st century.

### Scholarly Advocacy

Some researchers have been sounding the alarm on gender inequality in French children's literature for years now. Chabrol Gagne challenges the veil of artistic freedom:

Even aesthetically successful, surprising, or lighthearted picturebooks do not completely elude sexism, or gender stereotypes, even if they are barely perceptible. [...] I can always be told that artists have better things to work on than the outfits or postures of their characters, or that literary research should not pay attention to gender, nor should it suggest, if not *ratios* in the name of parity, at least a healthy balance of he's and she's. I will not abide these retorts for two reasons. If creators of children's literature are really creators, why should they limit their talent only to seduction and not to the deconstruction of common pre-conceptions and clichés?<sup>10</sup>

Chabrol Gagne also objects to the claim that supposedly neutral children's stories are ever free of ideology:

Let's not fool ourselves: books that end up in the hands of children come from the hands of adults who judge them, evaluate them, censor them, accept or reject them in the name of 'values' and preconceived notions about what can (or can't) or must (or mustn't) a growing child read.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of publishers' inertia, some scholars have recommended courses of action, generally centered on the most elemental: awareness campaigns. Eliane Ferrez and Anne Dafflon Novelle propose that "[A]uthors, illustrators and publishers of both sexes must be made aware of the consequences of the asymmetries that persist in the books they offer to children."<sup>12</sup> "At the very least," asks Chabrol Gagne, "wouldn't it be conceivable to train professionals in literature, early childhood, cultural mediation, and

teaching in awareness of the sexist and misogynistic risks at stake?"<sup>13</sup> Beyond the French context, Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber suggest,

It is unrealistic for parents and educators to rely primarily on authors and publishers to alter texts significantly in order to achieve a non-sexist literature. Parents, librarians, and teachers must also have more knowledge about and exercise more control over book offerings and selections for children in order to address these issues.<sup>14</sup>

Librarians have, in fact, launched initiatives to foster careful acquisition and showcasing practices, as Chapter 2 highlighted, and educational specialists and associations continue to compose recommended lists of non-sexist picturebooks, a chore that attests to the persistent dearth of such literature.

Guillaume Nail, children's author and former president of La Charte, the union representing children's authors and illustrators, joined in the chorus seeking change. In 2019, the renegade Charte leader launched his Equality Action Plan that urged libraries, schools, book fair reading committees, Ministry of Culture officials, and editors to start counting the number of female and male authors, illustrators, and main characters in children's books.<sup>15</sup> Such a call to quantitatively measure disparity in the profession as well as in the representations found in stories – something only a handful of academics have been doing – met widespread resistance from publishers and even from Nail's constituents, over 70% of whom are women who would benefit from increased gender awareness in their profession.<sup>16</sup> Nail forged ahead in a number of directions: to change the name of the Charte to include feminized versions of "authors" and "illustrators," but the members voted it down; to lobby book fairs to pay attention to gender parity in their author invitations and prizes; to pressure the national publishers' union (SNE) to report statistics on salaries and contracts by gender; and to persuade the Ministry of Culture to gather statistics on gender in the cultural industry of children's literature. Although he also tried to diversify the Charte's writing competition by including a prompt with the first name "Fatou," and to favor heroines in his own books, Nail ultimately decided to channel his equality initiatives toward professional concerns, he explained to me, because the resistance to his challenges over representations in literary content was much more formidable.<sup>17</sup>

A group of European scholars has taken matters into their own hands by establishing G-BOOK in 2017, launched from the University of Bologna, with children's literature specialist Mathilde Lévêque managing the collaboration for France at the University of Paris 13 (Université Sorbonne Paris Nord). Funded by the European Union with branches in a half-dozen countries, G-BOOK is a multi-prong, multi-year project, including the

creation of a gender-positive European bibliography, a traveling collection, and a writing competition, among other activities meant to provoke change in children's literature.<sup>18</sup>

### Feminist Publishing Initiatives

There is, of course, a history of feminist children's publishing in France. The history began in the 1970s with the establishment of two pioneering publishing houses. The publisher Des femmes started a collection called "Du côté des petites filles" that offered a handful of feminist stories in that decade, including a French translation of Adela Turin's *Rose bombonne* as well as Agnès Rosenstiehl's *Les filles*.<sup>19</sup> A third picturebook that became a feminist icon, *Histoire de Julie qui avait une ombre de garçon*, by Christian Bruel, Anne Bozellec, and Anne Galland, was published in 1976 by a collective of artists and authors who founded the publishing house *Le sourire qui mord*.<sup>20</sup> The publishing of feminist children's literature – whether from activist (*militant* or *engagé*) or mainstream publishers – continued throughout the end of the 20th century, the history of which, though deserving of scholarly inquiry, is beyond the scope of this book.<sup>21</sup>

In the 21st century, five examples of activist feminist publishing can be briefly described here, and also merit more thorough scholarly attention. In 2005, the publishing house Talents hauts established a specialty in what it labeled "anti-sexist" children's books.<sup>22</sup> Though it has been dismissed by universalist-minded members of the children's literature world and criticized by some feminist scholars,<sup>23</sup> Talents hauts has matured and is still evolving two decades later with a backlist of over 400 titles from picturebooks to YA novels. *La ville brûle*, whose primary adult editorial orientation is in the social sciences with an anti-capitalist bent, has published several picturebooks promoting gender equality that have attracted positive critical reception, not an insignificant feat.<sup>24</sup> Since 2021, the editorial line of another publisher, *On ne compte pas pour du beurre*, includes creating stories featuring same-sex parents and LGBTQ child characters, prioritizing authors and illustrators from underrepresented social categories, and using inclusive language.<sup>25</sup> The magazine *Tchika* was founded in 2019 as a feminist alternative to the mixed-audience and girls' press. After five years, the quarterly continues to be published by a one-woman operation.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the publisher Cambourakis has managed to produce picturebooks that mainstream gender equality with visual and narrative subtlety and that also receive appreciative literary criticism. Its books are very often translations from Scandinavian literature, indicating that for the time being, French creatives have not yet mastered the genre of engaging stories that banalize gender equality. Nevertheless, Cambourakis's solid niche and esteemed reputation in children's publishing demonstrate that an egalitarian mission can obtain not just critical praise but also a commercial market in France.<sup>27</sup>

These examples are all small endeavors operating on the margins of an industry dominated by Hachette, Gallimard, and L'Ecole des loisirs. These niche publishers often depend on the State subsidies described in this book's Introduction. Their publications are typically not for sale in supermarkets, relying instead on other modes of distribution including independent bookshops and school visits.<sup>28</sup> Distribution is key, for a fabulous and feminist picturebook will not have much impact if it is not widely circulated.<sup>29</sup> Despite these limitations, the very existence of these startups represents a significant rallying of determination in the competitive world of publishing. Incidentally, with its 400-plus backlist and 20-year survival rate, Talents hauts has no peer in the United States.

It is a commonplace that a more easygoing willingness to think about gender characterizes the U.S. compared to France. A multiculturalist disposition might seem to be a prerequisite for gender-equal children's literature. But France, in fact, has more potential because its children's literature market fulfills other conditions. It is both robust and nimble, competitive and State-subsidized. It has attained a great deal of recognition as a cultural industry, yet remains driven to achieve the legitimacy that other cultural forms possess in France. Although a segment of the industry is characterized by bestselling "supermarket" literature, publishers with strong convictions about quality dominate the field in other ways, notably by the reputation they enjoy among librarians, teachers, bookshop owners, recommended book list makers, prize committees, and critics. Such favorable conditions permit French publishers and creators to present an egalitarian world of imaginative possibility for all child readers.

Whether they will choose to do so remains to be seen. My research suggests that such a choice will involve relinquishing two key assumptions that have been leading to the stereotyped representations evident in the corpora under investigation in this book: first, that boys will only read stories about boys or else they will not read; and second, that gender-equal stories automatically suffer in literary quality.

This book shows the need for greater scholarly attention to representations of other forms of diversity in children's reading materials, such as race, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and non-binary gender identity.<sup>30</sup> It was a conscious choice of mine, not an intersectional oversight, to cover so much ground regarding the binary female and male gender representations that predominate in children's literature. The reality is that if 21st-century picturebooks and magazines for young children can often be described as sites of symbolic annihilation for the female gender, other kinds of differences are even more glaringly absent, resulting in a body of literary representations that remains almost entirely cisgender, heteronormative, able, and white. It is toward these topics, similarly impacted by the broad – though challenged – embrace of universalism, and their intersections, that I encourage future researchers.

## Notes

- 1 Cussagnet, Personal Interview.
- 2 Douzou, Personal Interview; Beulque, Personal Interview.
- 3 For example, Baker, Beulque, Douzou, Faron (2019), Savier, Personal Interviews.
- 4 See Valian, *Why So Slow?*
- 5 Berton-Schmitt recounts similar attitudes in "Les représentations des deux sexes dans la littérature jeunesse contemporaine," 116-121.
- 6 Morey, "The Junior Literary Guild and the Child Reader as Citizen," 291.
- 7 Quoted in Combet, "Comment parler aux petites filles," 10.
- 8 Quoted in Bherer, "Débat: la gauche s'occupe-t-elle trop des minorités?"
- 9 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 39.
- 10 Chabrol Gagne, 223.
- 11 Chabrol Gagne, 224.
- 12 Ferrez and Dafflon Novelle, "Sexisme dans la littérature enfantine: Analyse des albums avec animaux anthropomorphiques," 37.
- 13 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 225.
- 14 Tognoli, Pullen, and Lieber, "The Privilege of Place," 279.
- 15 Nail, "Les filles veulent zigouiller des dragons."
- 16 Lallouet, "Des nouvelles des auteurs: entretien avec Guillaume Nail," 201.
- 17 Nail, Personal Interview.
- 18 Baccolini, Pederzoli, and Spallaccia, "Gender, Literature and Education," 9-10.
- 19 See Heywood, "Fighting 'On the Side of Little Girls'"; Heywood, "Power to Children's Imaginations," 27-31; Pavard, *Les éditions des femmes*, 88-91; Sweatman, *The Risky Business*, 71-85, 153-62; Bruel, *L'aventure politique*, 271-74.
- 20 Boulaire, *Lire et choisir ses albums*, 65-67.
- 21 See for example Séguret and Touchard, "S'indigner, réfléchir et s'engager"; Croce, *Où sont les albums jeunesse antisexistes?*
- 22 Faron, Personal Interview, June 26, 2013; Faron, Personal Interview, December 2, 2019.
- 23 Chabrol Gagne, *Filles d'albums*, 29, 99-100, 196-97, 217-19; Costes and Houadec, "La construction du genre à travers les images des couvertures"; Ferrière and Morin-Messabel, "Contre-stéréotypes et développement de l'identité de genre"; Fette, "Gender and the Role of Talents Hauts"; Albouze et al., "Talents Hauts, une maison d'édition."
- 24 Zuzula, Personal Interview.
- 25 Kedadouche, Personal Interview.
- 26 Roman, Personal Interview.
- 27 Chognard, Personal Interview.
- 28 Faron, Personal Interview, June 26, 2013; Faron, Personal Interview, December 2, 2019.
- 29 On feminist publishers' recent strategies to circulate their books to larger audiences, see Bigoni, "Faire du féminisme dans le texte," 120-24.
- 30 Ghelam and Robinson, *Où sont les personnages LGBTQI+?*; Ghelam, *Où sont les personnages d'enfants non blancs?*



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# Appendix 1

## Primary Sources for Chapter 2

Lower School Library, Awty International School, Houston, Texas

### *June 2011 Sample*

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180	décembre 2013
181	janvier 2014
182	février 2014
183	mars 2014
184	avril 2014
185	mai 2014
186	juin 2014
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