‘Books to Build Boys and Girls’

a story of gender through the lens of 80 years of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Children’s Book Awards.

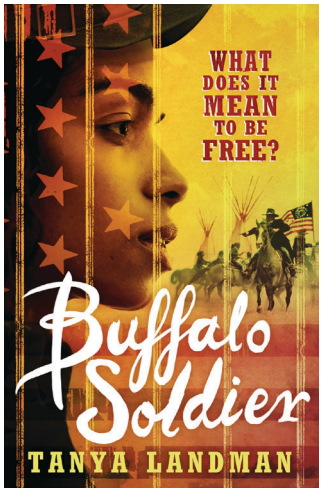
By Michele Gill

The list of novels and picture books which have won the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medals spans almost a century of British history. This expanse of time gives an insight into the works that adults, specifically librarians, have viewed as the ‘best’ books to be published for young people. While ‘best’ as a concept can undoubtedly be contested, the winning titles nevertheless provide an understanding of how gender has been portrayed throughout the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Focusing on the titles in more detail, a key consideration has to be the extent to which they adhere to the dominant gender expectations of the time they were published. Do they reflect majority adult beliefs about what children should aspire to or do they potentially contest the status quo? In fact, there are examples of both: books that support the dominant gender ideologies of time they were published and books which question and challenge, offering the reader diverse portrayals of being male and female.

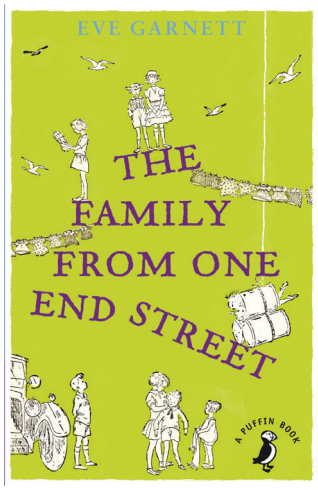
Not just gender: the impact of race and class

The 2015 CILIP Carnegie Medal winner, Tanya Landman’s *Buffalo Soldier*, revisits the American Civil War and its aftermath, raising a number of thought-provoking questions around gender. The story is told from the perspective of Charlotte, a young African American girl who is freed from slavery as the war ends, and the reader follows her struggles as she tries to make her way in a world where prejudice is rife. Gender makes her position more tenuous in a world where women of colour have no value as people to their white, male rulers. Unsure of what to do, Charlotte joins the US Army, turning herself into Charley, a teenage boy, although her experiences are far from the glorious heroism of an army whose victory led to emancipation, at least in law. Through her portrayal of Charlotte, Landman not only highlights the peril of being female, she also illustrates how other factors, in this case, race, impact on the way gender is experienced.

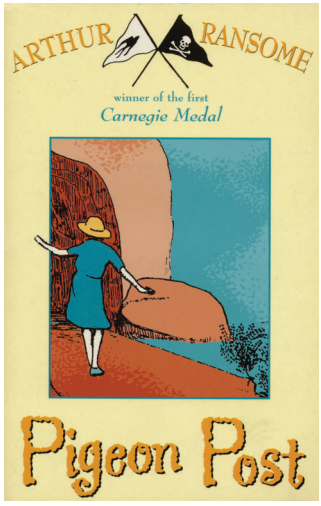
It is important, therefore, to recognise that ‘being a girl’ or ‘being a boy’ is not a uniform experience, even for those living in the same society at any given time. This is illustrated in relation to the subject of class by two novels published within four years of each other in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eve Garnett’s *The Family from One End Street* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1937) recounts tales of the working class Ruggles family, focusing on each of the seven children in turn, while also portraying a warm, supportive family



Tanya Landman (author), *Buffalo Soldier*, Walker Books, 2014 (first edition); currently published by Walker Books

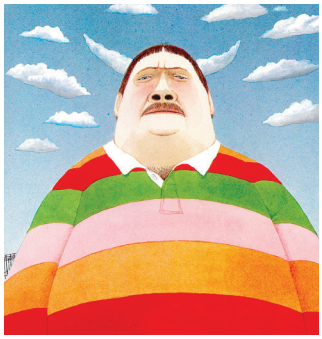


Eve Garnett (author and illustrator), *The Family from One End Street*, Frederick Muller, London, 1937; (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.



Arthur Ransome (author and illustrator), *Pigeon Post*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1936; (first edition); currently published by Red Fox, Penguin Random House.

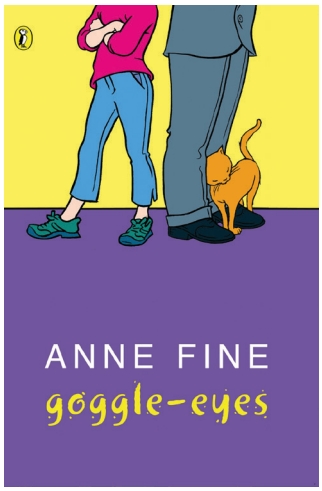
environment in which mother and father take on traditional gendered roles, a washerwoman and dustman respectively, with the expectation that the children will follow in their footsteps. Kate, however, is different, as she passes the eleven-plus and wins a scholarship to a secondary school which will take her out of the working class environment in which her family lives; as a working class girl she is an exception. Until the 1970s, children's literature was essentially middle class, written by middle class authors and reflecting middle class life and attitudes, which makes *The Family from One End Street*, with its positive focus on a working class family, rather unique, although their world and possibilities are narrow, restricted by a lack of money. Mary Treadgold's *We Couldn't Leave Dinah* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1941) returns to the more familiar territory of the middle class world, featuring two children, Caroline and Mick, who attend private boarding schools. Published during WWII, the focus of the story is an island adventure as the children frustrate the efforts of the German enemy to take over Clerinel, the French island where they spend their summer holidays. However, this is immediately a bigger world, one with more opportunities for both girls and boys, something which is assumed because of their class prerogative. Like the Walker and Blackett children in Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1936), there is an equity between the adventures of the children, both male and female, which would be unlikely in society in general during this period. There are indications of a gendered society around them in the form of nuclear families made up of working fathers and stay-at-home mothers, although the adults are conveniently removed to make room for adventure, an imperative of children's literature.



Anthony Browne, *Zoo*, Julia MacRea Books, Random Century Ltd., London, 1992; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Red Fox Picture Books, Penguin-Random House.

Intergenerational relationships

Nevertheless, the idea of home and family remains central to much children's literature, although the gendered nuclear family, as suggested in the novels of the 1930s and 1940s, does begin to change as the century progresses. In Anne Fine's *Goggle-Eyes* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1989), Kitty Killen learns to come to terms with her mother's new boyfriend Gerald, aka Goggle-Eyes. Kitty is an intelligent, confident girl, on the cusp of becoming a young woman, encouraged by her mother, who takes on the world in her role as an activist. However, Kitty has to negotiate 'otherness' in the form of Gerald, an older man with a very different world view. The adult-child relationship has changed from a time when parents were to be obeyed without question – especially the father figure, who had ultimate authority in the nineteenth century home – so Kitty challenges Gerald before both compromise and she begins to appreciate many of Gerald's qualities. Although the relationship is acrimonious at times, Fine's use of humour means that it never becomes damaging in the way that adults, both male and female, are portrayed in Melvin Burgess's *Junk* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1996). Burgess gives young protagonist Tar two alcoholic parents: his mother is completely ineffective, while his father is an angry, abusive man who beats both his wife and son. Troubled and troubling masculinities are a feature of many texts in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Anthony Browne's *Zoo* (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1992) portrays a nuclear family making a day trip to the zoo, which Browne uses as an opportunity to comment on boorish human behaviour, particularly focusing on the father of the



Anne Fine (author), *Goggle Eyes*, Hamilton, 1989; (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.

Anthony Browne, *Gorilla*, Julia McRea Books, Random Century Ltd., London, 1983; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Walker Books, London.

family, portraying him at one point as having horns, albeit in the form of clouds, while the mother patiently endures the bad behaviour of both her husband and her sons. His earlier picture book *Gorilla* (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1983) also focuses on father figures: a cold, distant father and a friendly, anthropomorphised gorilla which takes the place of Hannah's father in her dreams until her own father begins to appreciate her. Here, any mother figure is totally absent.

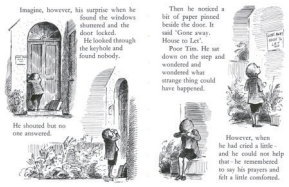
Grahame Baker-Smith, *FaRTHER*, Templar Publishing, 2010; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Templar Publishing.

Ambivalent portrayals of fathers can be related to the growing moral panic about the lives of men and boys which became more vocal towards the end of the twentieth century and into the new millennium, with narratives about 'deadbeat' dads particularly in evidence. Berlie Doherty, however, challenges this in her novel *Dear Nobody* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1991), portraying teenage parenthood sensitively and giving voice to a teenage father, something new in literature for young people at this time. Graham Baker-Smith's emotionally engaging *FArTHER* (CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 2011) portrays the relationship between an unnamed boy and his somewhat distracted father as a passion for flight is passed on to the next generation. A similarly emotionally engaged relationship is portrayed in anthropomorphic form in *Can't You Sleep Little Bear?* illustrated by Barbara Firth (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1988). Illustrations in both picture books focus on the bond between adult and child by emphasising how physical closeness and comfort creates an emotional connection. In a similar fashion to Browne's *Zoo*, the mother is in the background in *FArTHER*, supporting both her husband and son, and she is missing entirely in *Can't You Sleep Little Bear*. This does raise issues about the way women are portrayed in a number of the books; while fathers are good or bad, on the whole mothers are in the background or missing.

Martin Wadell and Barbara Firth, *Can't You Sleep Little Bear?*, Walker Books, London, 1988; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Walker Books.

Boyhoods: challenging the stereotypes, feeling out loud

The majority of the child protagonists in these books are male, and across both lists of winning titles there appears to be an imbalance, with a bias towards boys, especially in relation to the CILIP Carnegie Medal since the 1990s, possibly a consequence of the concerns about boys discussed earlier. Perhaps the most evident example of this is Patrick Ness's 2011 CILIP Carnegie Medal winning novel, *Monsters of Men*, the final book in the dystopian *Chaos Walking* trilogy. The book follows Todd's journey as he tries to come to terms with what it means to be a man in New World, struggling to be something different, not brutalised by his experiences. The novel and its predecessors portray a damning picture of colonial masculinity, far removed from the heroics of the nineteenth century boys' adventure story and more closely related to the world inhabited by Charlotte/Charley in *Buffalo Soldier*.



Edward Ardizzone, *Tim All Alone*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1956; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Frances Lincoln Publishers, London.

Patrick Ness followed *Monsters of Men* with *A Monster Calls*, winner of both the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medals in 2012, with Jim Kay taking the honours for the striking black and white images which enhance the written narrative, encapsulating raw emotions. The novel, based on an idea by Siobhan Dowd, explores the feelings of a young boy, Conor, as he tries to come to terms with his mother's imminent death from cancer. Anger, fear and despair come

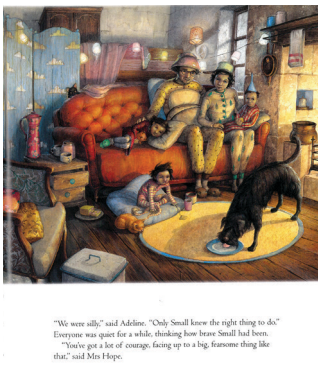
to him in the form of a monster, a yew tree, which speaks to him, ultimately forcing him to articulate his emotions. While this could potentially be viewed as another example of a disaffected boy, in fact Ness successfully portrays the very natural emotions which surface when one is faced with loss. Philippa Pearce's earlier novel, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1958), also explores the emotions of a young boy separated from his family, albeit temporarily, as he learns to come to terms with his anger and develops a sense of empathy for those around him. Although Edward Ardizzone's *Tim All Alone* (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1956) draws on traditional gender roles, with Tim going to sea as a cabin boy in the footsteps of boy heroes such as Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883), it also portrays an increasingly distressed Tim as he returns home unable to find his parents, who have moved house, and is eventually reduced to tears. These books highlight that throughout the twentieth century books for young people have addressed boys' emotional engagement in opposition to traditional masculinities. Taken together, medal-winning books offer a range of ways of being male, not one unified narrative.

Amy West, *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*, illustrated by J.P. Lynch, Walker Books, London, Boston, Sidney, 1997; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Walker Books.

Girlhoods: finding a voice, feeling empowered

The lists highlight some notable girls, although they are fewer in number. *The Whales' Song*, which won the Kate Greenaway Medal for Gary Blythe in 1990, highlights the empathetic and intuitive relationship between Lilly and her grandmother, illustrated symbolically through their shared belief in seeing and hearing the song of the whales. Another inter-generational relationship between granddaughter and grandmother is found in the 1997 Kate Greenaway Medal-winning *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*, illustrated by P. J. Lynch and set in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Defying her own fear, Jessie must leave behind her much loved grandmother when the village rabbi chooses her to travel to America to work with his sister. She gradually embraces her new life, drawing on skills taught to her by her grandmother and learning new ones as she grows into a strong young woman, eventually able to pay for her grandmother to join her in America. Another young girl facing the fear of immigration and being separated from her family is Sade, the feisty protagonist in Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* (Carnegie Medal winner in 2000). After her mother is shot dead in the driveway of their middle class home in Nigeria as a warning to her father, a journalist bent on exposing government corruption, Sade and her younger brother Femi are smuggled illegally into the UK. Sade's strength, resilience and initiative are tested by the time she spends in foster homes, bullying at school and her struggle to resolve the dilemma of whether telling the truth is always the right option, as her mother taught her. The voice of the asylum seeker, especially a young girl, remains unique in literature for young people, making Sade's story more remarkable and urgent.

While the sense of undertaking a journey, going on an adventure, is traditionally associated with male characters, it can also be found in books featuring a female protagonist, most notably Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1995), the first book of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Lyra sets out on a journey to find her friend Roger, who has disappeared mysteriously. Ostensibly an orphan, she later finds out that her two greatest foes, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, are actually her parents. In thwarting the plans of the Oblation



"We were silly," said Adeline. "Only Small knew the right thing to do."
Everyone was quiet for a while, thinking how brave Small had been.
"You've got a lot of courage, facing up to a big, fearsome thing like that," said Mrs Hope.

Levi Pinfold, *Black Dog*, Templar Publishing, 2011; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Templar Publishing.

But from their little iron balcony Charlotte could look down and see the market-stalls of Paradise Street. But she never once saw Charley. She felt very lonely, missing her friend.

Charles Keeping, *Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967; unpaginated; inner spread; currently out of print.

Board to separate children from their daemons, Lyra shows all the resilience, courage and bravery of the boy heroes in bygone eras, but Pullman also portrays her fears and emotions, creating a more rounded and plausible character. Facing fear is also a central theme in Levi Pinfold's *Black Dog* (CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 2013), a humorous story in which the youngest member of the Hope family, daughter Small, tames the 'black dog'. Both Small's mother and father fear the dog, as do her older siblings, which is reflected in its size, initially disproportionally large. However, as Small faces it outside, it becomes smaller, eventually being reduced to the size of a family pet. A small girl can take on fear and prevail.

Charles Keeping, *Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967; unpaginated; inner spread; currently out of print.

Inevitably there are also examples of books which position girls as passive, waiting to be 'freed'. Charles Keeping's *Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary* (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1967) portrays the changing circumstances of two children as high-rise flats are introduced into their London neighbourhood. However, while Charley continues to roam the changing landscape, Charlotte and her mother are moved to a flat in a high-rise building where Charlotte appears trapped, which Keeping conveys through bold illustrations with prominent cross-hatching that literally fence Charlotte in. She has to wait for Charley to find her before they can resume their friendship, although both are eventually trapped in the high-rise tower, suggesting a commentary on a changing social landscape and community breakdown.

Shirley Hughes, *Ella's Big Chance – A Fairy Tale Retold*, Bodley Head, London, 2003; unpaginated; last page; currently published by Red Fox Picture Books, Penguin-Random House.

The fairy tale revisited

The concept of a girl waiting to be freed by a hero is a central proposition of the fairy tale genre. While there have been multiple revisions of many tales, intended to reflect changing narratives around gender, and specifically the impact of second wave feminism, the outcomes have not necessarily been as radical as might have been hoped. Examples of this can be seen in a number of CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal-winning works which are innovative in relation to illustration but not necessarily in terms of shifting gender relations. The final scenes of Fiona French's *Snow White in New York* (Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 1986) and Shirley Hughes' *Ella's Big Chance* (CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal winner in 2003) both end with the girl together with her 'prince', albeit a reporter and shop worker respectively, heading for 'happy ever after'. Both girls have more agency than in earlier versions of the tales, but they ultimately end in a similar way. A more radical revision is seen in Neil Gaiman's *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, which was awarded the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal in 2016 for Chris Riddell's remarkable illustrations. Here, the young queen decides not to marry her prince, instead going on a quest to wake a sleeping princess. Rather than returning home at the end of the adventure to go through with her wedding, she turns her back on her former life, setting off with three dwarfs, looking for more adventure. The final image here is very different to the works of Fiona French and Shirley Hughes, as the queen, replete with armour and sword, strides into the unknown.

Neil Gaiman, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* illustrated by Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney, 2014.

Gender fluidity

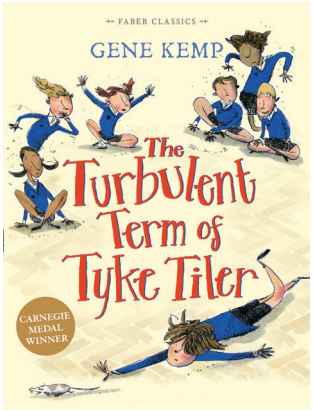
Although the queen doesn't disguise herself as a man in the way Charlotte

does in *Buffalo Soldier*, she does don armour, traditionally associated with the male knight of the middle ages. Her actions in undertaking an adventure quest also replicate the form of tales of masculine chivalry. When a female character takes on this role, it highlights the performative nature of gender, a theory developed by Judith Butler in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble* (1990). As analysis of CILIP Carnegie and Greenaway medal-winning works illustrates, views of gender change and shift, highlighting its nature as a social construction rather than a fixed biological state. Butler takes this further, suggesting that the individual performs gender, taking on both masculine and feminine features, with more fluidity at an individual level. A small number of texts have questioned assumptions about gender *per se*. Gene Kemp's *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1977) challenges readers' assumptions about what is considered male and female behaviour, while Aiden Chambers' *Postcards from No Man's Land* (Carnegie Medal winner in 1999) raises the subject of the transgender body in the character of Ton.

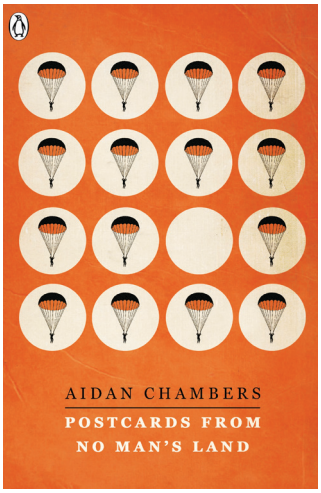
Fiona French, *Snow White* in New York, Oxford University Press, London, 1986; unpaginated; inner spread; currently published by Oxford University Press.

Building for the future

The sharp increase in the number of young people identifying as transgender suggests that this is a subject that children's and young adult literature should address further. Other issues also arise when looking at the two collections overall. While the books are undoubtedly individually subject to the cultural context in which they were written, as a whole they do not reflect the ethnic diversity of multicultural Britain, while the pre-1970s winners, with a few notable exceptions, portray a middle class world view. While gender is influenced by its social context in general, it is also subject to specific ethnic identities and inflected by class, so the portrayal of ethnically diverse characters is sparse and leaves many unanswered questions about gender in diverse cultures. The nature of award-winning books also means that they are considered notable in some way, meaning that they may be distinctive in comparison to other works published in the same timeframe. This is illustrated by the resurrection of gender specific publishing in popular fiction in the twenty first century, with books being marketed as 'for girls' or 'for boys', something which isn't evident from analysis of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medal collections. This potentially has an impact on any conclusions which can be drawn about the representation of gender in books for young people. However, despite these reservations, the winning titles of the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway medals collectively offer the potential to reflect on the ways that shifting constructions of gender have impacted on children's and young adult (YA) literature across much of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Going forward, the young people who still need to be represented and given a voice offer new opportunities for authors and publishers which they must address if they are ultimately to produce an inclusive and diverse picture of gender, constantly changing, asking questions, demanding and deserving answers.



Gene Kemp (author) *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, Faber 1977; (first edition); currently published by Faber.



Aidan Chambers (author) *Postcards from No Man's Land*, Bodley Head, 1999; (first edition); currently published by Definitions Paperback, Penguin Random House.

Secondary Reading
Alston, A. (2008) *The Family in English Children's Literature*.
New York and London: Routledge.

Bratton, J. S. (1981) *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*.
London and Sydney: Croom Helm.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.
New York and London: Routledge.

Kimmel, M. S. (2004) *The Gendered Society*.
New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mallan, K. (2009) *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*.
New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nayak, A. and Kehily, M. J. (2008)
Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities.
New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pinsent, P. (1997) *Children's Literature and the Politics of Equality*.
London: David Fulton Publishers.

Michele Gill works for The Open University as a lecturer in Children's Literature and Childhood Studies. She began her professional career in librarianship, working with young people in public library services in London and completed her PhD at Newcastle University.

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND