Adventure, aggression, and nurturing:
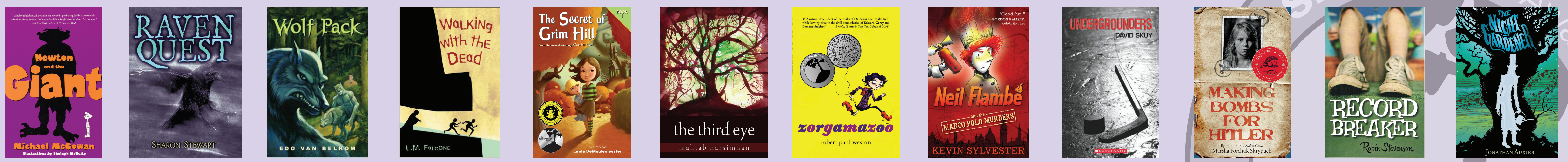## Gender stereotyping in Canadian award-winning children's books

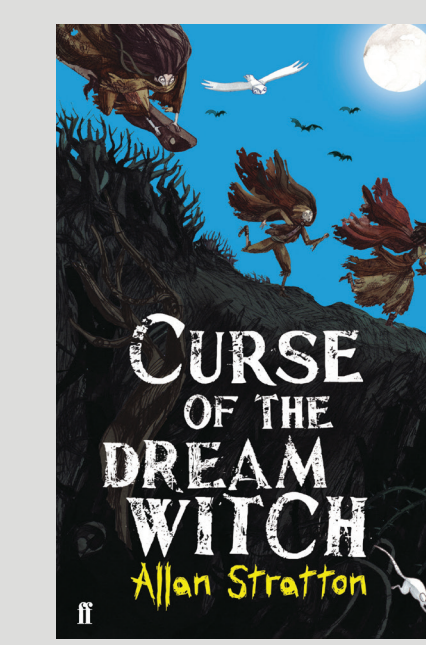Emma Kristensen, MLIS, Western University

Introduction

Books can teach children many things, including how they see gender. Dating back forty years, researchers have found that children's books can teach children that one gender matters more. Because of the important role books play, this study examines the extent to which 23 recent 'Silver Birch Award' and 'Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children Award'- winning books contain gender stereotyping. Critics' choice award winners and children's choice award winners were examined to ensure both popular and award-winning titles are included in the sample.

Sick, absent, and dead parents

"My dad's leg gets broken and wham! So much for my dream. Every day for five months I've been working down in the mine. Life looks different down there. You can't imagine."

Parents in the sample are stereotyped in their depictions in weakened states (sick, absent, or dead). The books were analyzed for depictions of parents of major characters. The trend from historical to modern says that a large proportion of mothers are sick in the historical setting, and it reverses so that there are far more fathers sick in the modern setting. Parents are more often absent in modern books. All absent parents are fathers in historical books, but in modern books, there is an equal number of absent mothers and fathers. This is stereotyping, because in historical settings, only the father is absent, and only the mother is sick.

"Tara lay on the ground, breathing deeply. The relief of having crossed that for a moment her limbs seemed to have turned to jelly. She thanked every god she could think of… Tara was desperate. *Mother, where are you? If you had not disappeared, none of this would have happened.*"

In historical books, the genders are stereotyped, as fathers' absences from their children are presented as a choice, and mothers' absences as necessitated by illness or death. This means absence from their child's life is an active decision for males, but passive for females, and also reinforces a stereotype of nurturing mothers. This may also reflect the idea that historically and traditionally mothers were in charge of childcare. In both time periods, female protagonists are forced to nurture because of weakened parents, and this trend is not found in males.

Dead mothers, absent fathers in both time periods

Type of weakened state	Historical	Modern
Sick Father	0	29
Sick Mother	27	7
Absent Father	36	36
Absent Mother	0	36
Dead Father	18	7
Dead Mother	27	21

Percentage of parents in each book category depicted as sick, absent, or dead, with tallies calculated based on an assumed norm of a two-parent family.

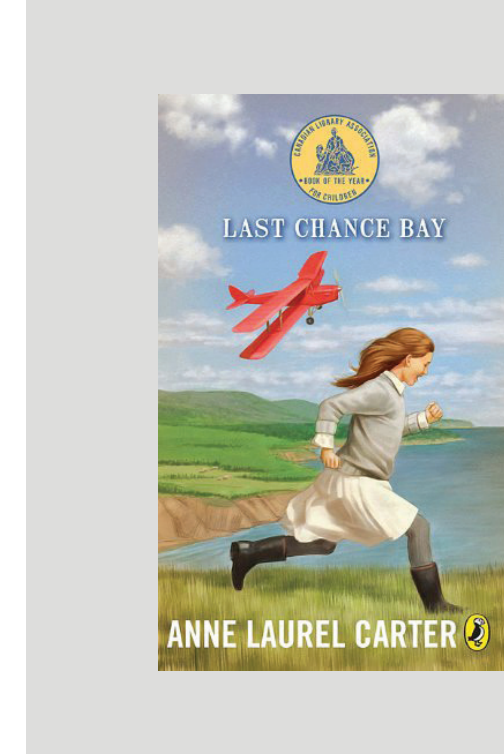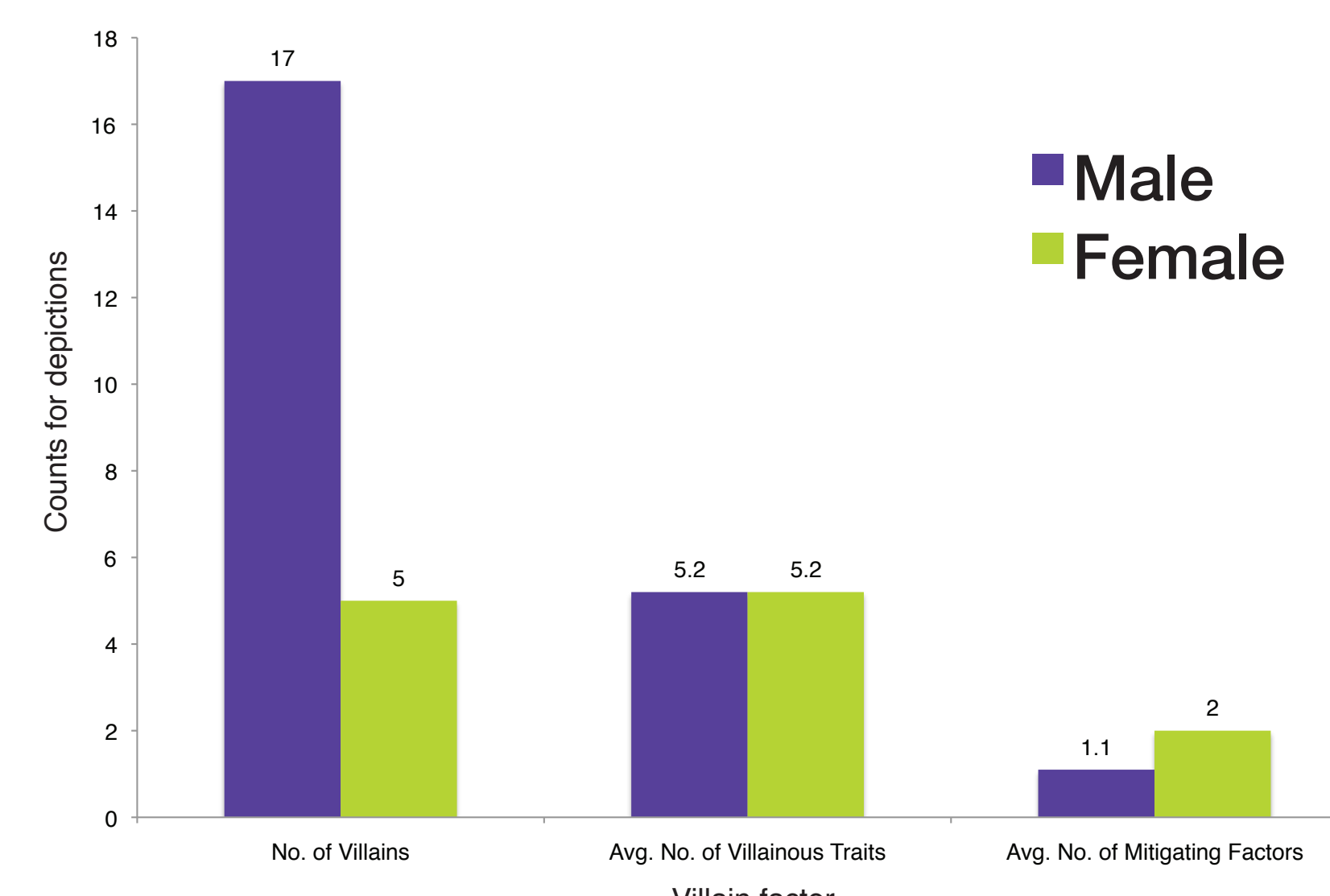## The villain stereotype: Making a hero

Antagonists help protagonists gain agency, which allows them to be heroic. That there is a purpose common to many villains shows there is a villain stereotype in children's books, but analysis shows that it is not gender stereotyped, as it is used for antagonists of both genders. However, it suggests a trend of simplified character portrayals, as it relies on common traits, which loses the opportunity for the story and reader to explore the complex range of emotions and reasons for villainy that can be found in villains.

"I was so scared, but I thought of you and prayed I wouldn't let you down. Oh, Mother, Father, I promise you, I never will. My fear will never overcome my love. Not ever."

Few female villains, female aggression excused

Villain factor	Male	Female
No. of Villains	17	5
Avg. No. of Villainous Traits	5.2	5.2
Avg. No. of Mitigating Factors	1.1	2

Total counts of male and female villains in each book category, and average number of villainous traits and mitigating factors. There are far fewer female villains, and although males and females average the same number of villainous traits, female villainy is excused through mitigating factors.

Female villainy excused

Women are underrepresented as villains, and when women are depicted, they are more stereotyped than men, because they are given reasons for their villainy. Female villains have more mitigating factors (an external circumstance that lessens the culpability of the villain), which suggests that female villains may be more progressive than males. The villain in The Third Eye, Kali, is cruel to the protagonist, but has a mitigating factor because she nurtures her daughter. This indicates that the reason for a woman's villainy, and their character aside from villainy, is explored more than in male villains. The low number of female villains and high number of mitigating factors they have suggests that women are not thought to be innately evil, which is a gender stereotype.

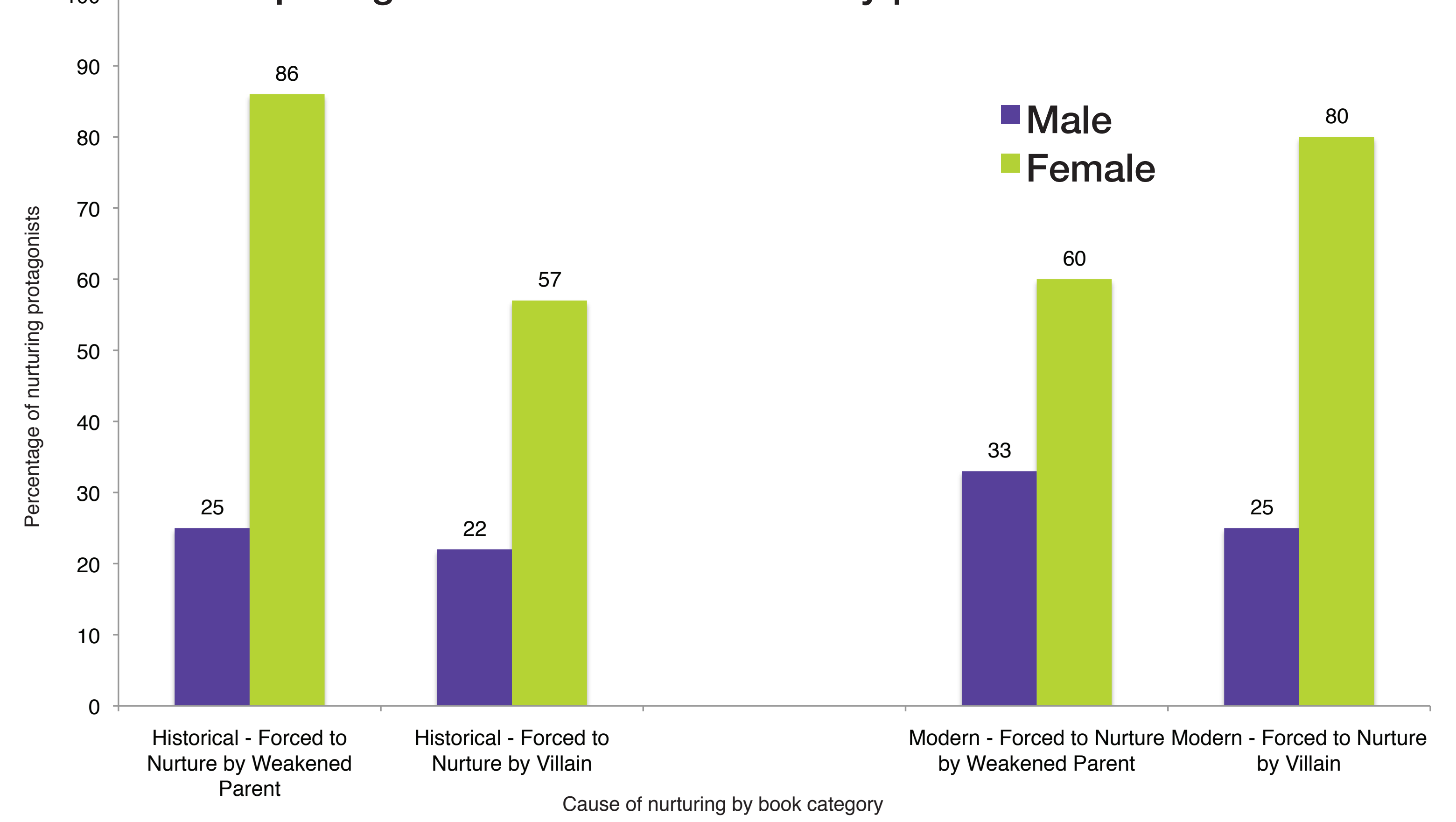### Physically abusive males, emotionally abusive females

Although female villains cause female protagonists to act progressively by bringing about action, in modern books, all female villains also cause the female protagonist to nurture. This trend was also found in female protagonists with a male villain. In Curse of the Dream Witch, the Dream Witch's villainy gives the protagonist the opportunity to save her kingdom, but by antagonizing Olivia's family, the Dream Witch also causes Olivia to nurture by worrying and caring. This is a concerning depiction how women in positions of power affect children, and the gendered expectations of female heroes.
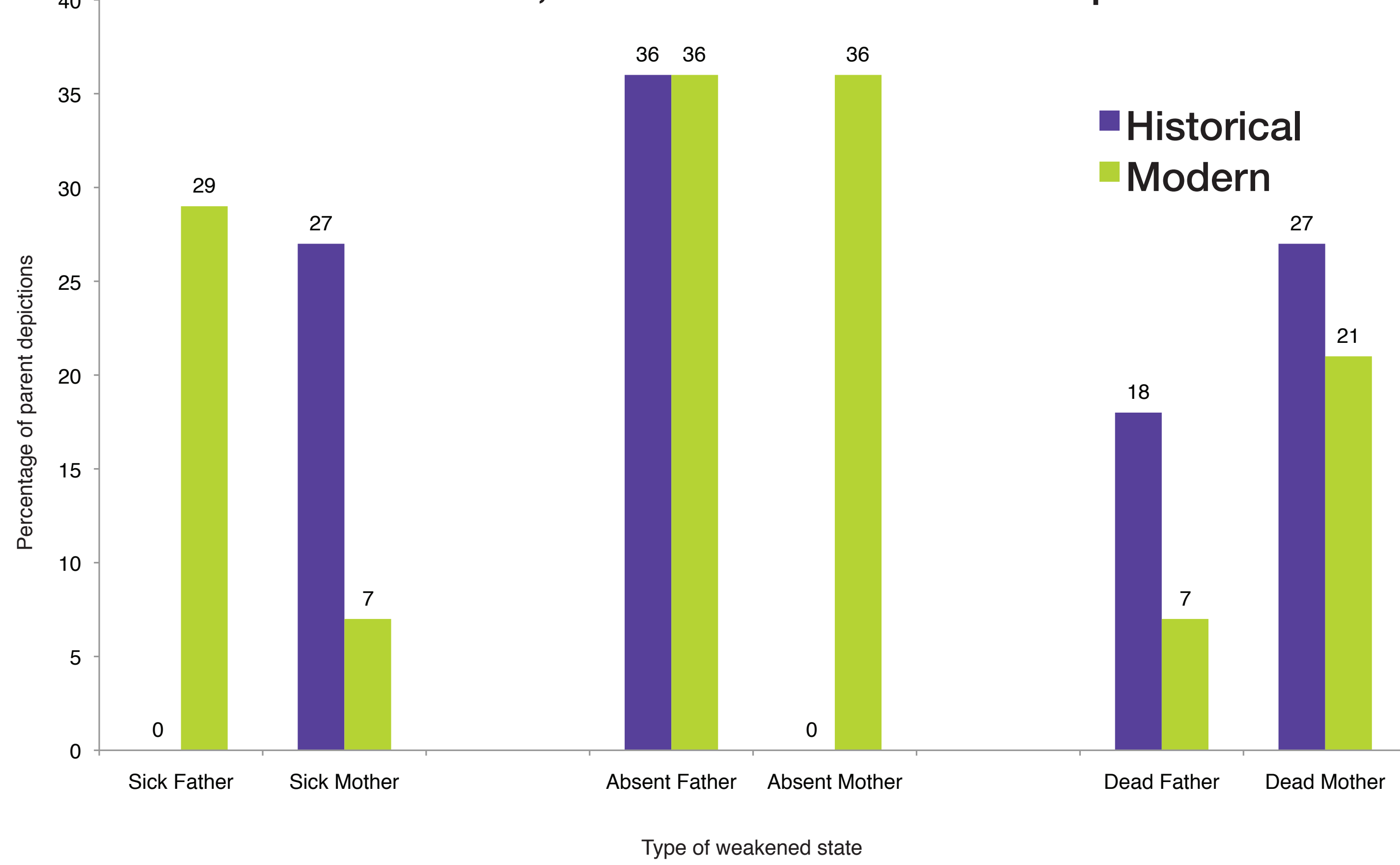
Girl protagonists forced to nurture by parents and villains

Cause of nurturing by book category	Male	Female
Historical - Forced to Nurture by Weakened Parent	25	86
Historical - Forced to Nurture by Villain	22	57
Modern - Forced to Nurture by Weakened Parent	33	60
Modern - Forced to Nurture by Villain	25	80

Percentage of protagonists of each gender in each book category forced to nurture by weakened parents and villains. Villains and parents both force girls to nurture far more than boys, by causing them to care for others.
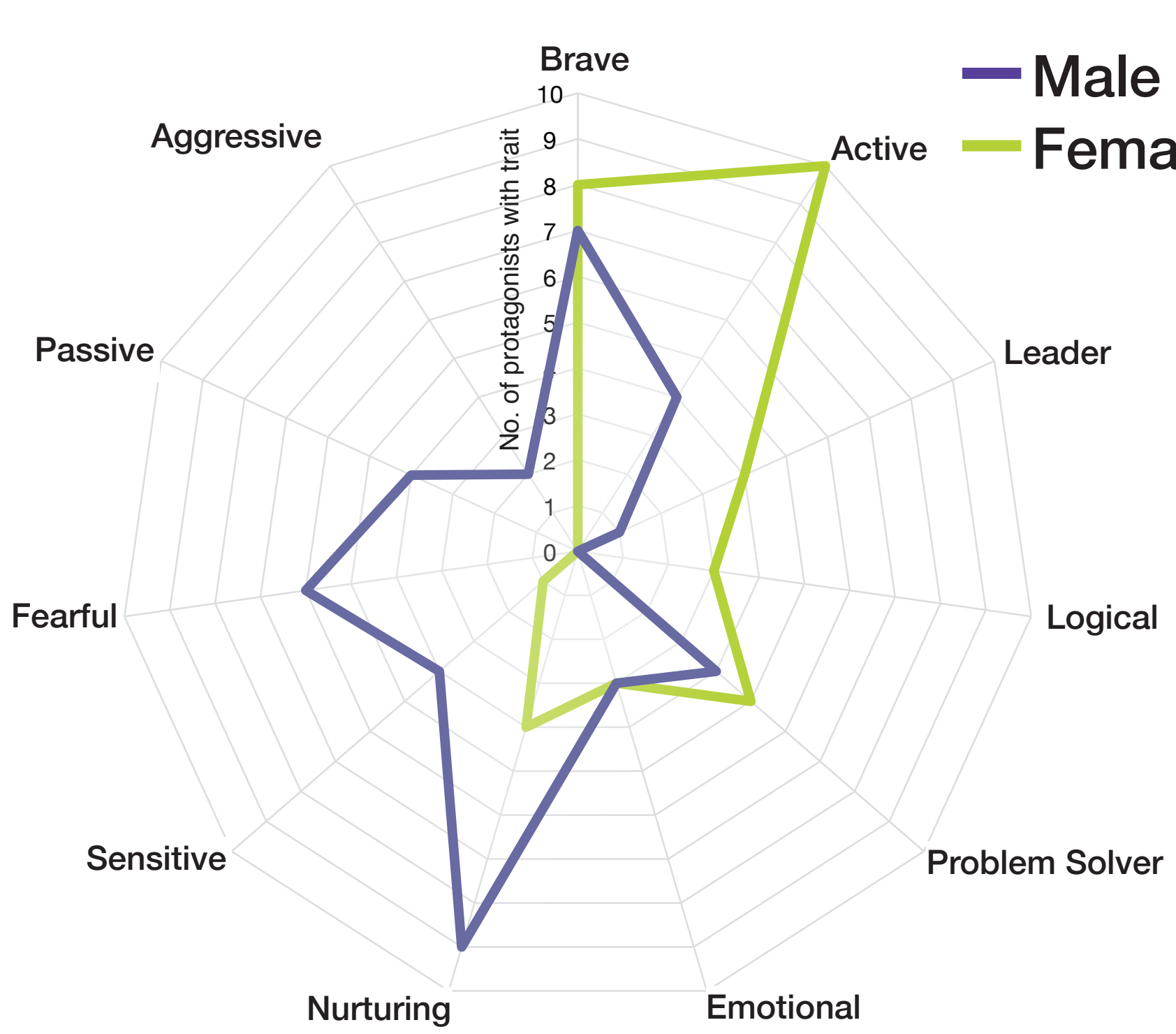
Brave girls and nurturing boys explore social issues

Protagonists are stereotyped because they are depicted progressively for their gender most of the time. All historical books use progressive traits in traditional main characters to explore social issues. A combination of action and emotional traits give protagonists the agency they need to explore a social issue, and the emotional intelligence to understand the issue. In Elijah of Buxton, the male hero uses sensitivity to understand slavery in 1860's United States.
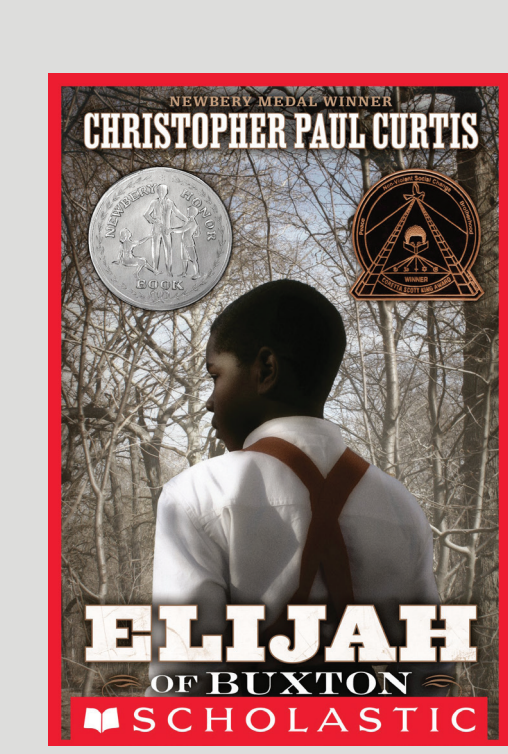
"I could see how it was a whole lot harder when things were real and you had to worry 'bout shotguns and chains and coughing little babies and crying folks without no clothes. Folks that were the same as me and Ma and Pa, … 'Cepting they were chained in a way that I ain't never seen even the wildest, worstest animal chained."

Most common protagonist traits

Radar chart with axes: Brave, Active, Leader, Logical, Problem Solver, Emotional, Nurturing, Sensitive, Fearful, Passive, Aggressive. Series: Male, Female.

Modern books are progressive in their depictions of heroes, but they do not explore a social issue. Depicting social issues in a historical setting shows children the injustices faced by each gender in the past. Understanding this allows children to extrapolate how the depictions are still active today, furthering their understanding of gender and society. In both time periods, villains create the hero by opposing them and allowing them to escape a passive situation, and gain agency. This allows the hero to be heroic. However, modern villains do not force heroes into traditional gender roles, like their historical counterparts. This accounts for the high percentage of progressive traits in characters in books with modern settings, compared to historical settings.

The traits most common in all male and female protagonists are progressive. Girls are often brave, active problem solvers, who are also nurturing and emotional. Boys are often nurturing and sensitive, starting the story as fearful, but becoming brave.

What next? Conclusions and professional insights

Strong Canadian role models
Boys and girls have strong gender role models in Canadian children's books, especially in historical protagonists.

Villains and parents stereotyped
Stereotyping of parents and antagonists shows a need to discuss gender roles with children.

Villains stereotyped in role and by gender
Antagonists show that strong characters can be stereotyped in role and by gender.

Assess gender depictions
Librarians, parents, and teachers can assess books for balanced depictions of boys and girls.

Recommend gender balanced books
Librarians can recommend books with a balanced depiction of gender roles and traits.

Discuss varying Canadian families
Parent depictions provide the chance to discuss the varying nature of Canadian families and to examine family members roles.
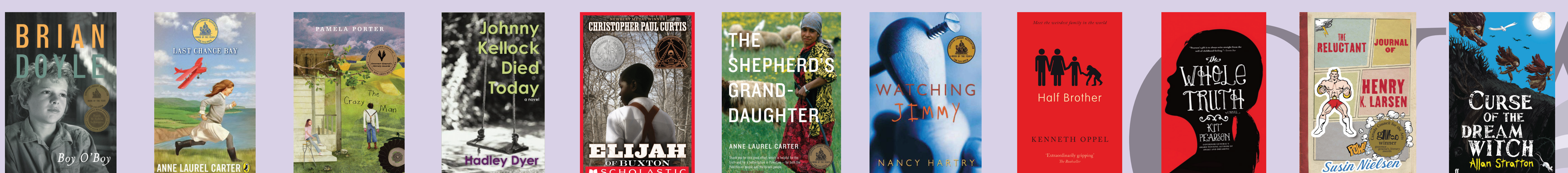
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