

Old Maid, Old Maid, How Librarians are Portrayed

An Arts-Informed Approach

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Introduction

One of the most enduring stereotypes of the librarian is the “Old Maid”: a stern older woman in conservative and unfashionable clothing and glasses, who wears her hair up in a bun and is constantly shush-ing patrons.

Inspired by this representation, we asked: Is this stereotype still prevalent today? What are her main characteristics? How is it related to the portrayal of librarians in children’s literature?



LIB056 - I300B



Miss Moore Thought Otherwise, Jan Pinborough

Why Arts-Informed Research?

- Visual methods provide a different perspective
- Can begin a dialogue, transcend the academic sphere, and be recognized by the general public
- Supports many values of librarianship
- Allows us to remedy misconceptions and pull from common symbols to make connections



LIB077 - I300B



LIB073 - I300B



LIB149 - I300A

Methods

288 iSquares with drawings of librarians by friends and family of students in the GTA were compared with depictions of librarians in 32 children’s picture books from the Hamilton and Toronto public libraries.

- Only female depictions were chosen
- Images must have at least 2 of: bun, glasses, unfashionable clothing
 - If only 1 of those 3 characteristics were present, they must also be: shushing, stern, or old



The Library, Sarah Stewart

“I picture librarians as very studious looking, no nonsense style, subdued, very bookish and not standing out too much”

LIB084 - I300B



LIB043 - I300A



Library Lion, Michelle Knudsen

iSquares

An iSquare is a 4.25”x4.25” piece of paper that is blank on one side. The reverse side states “Draw a Librarian” with space for the participant to describe their drawing.

Results

71.88% of books vs. 31.25% of iSquares contained Old Maids

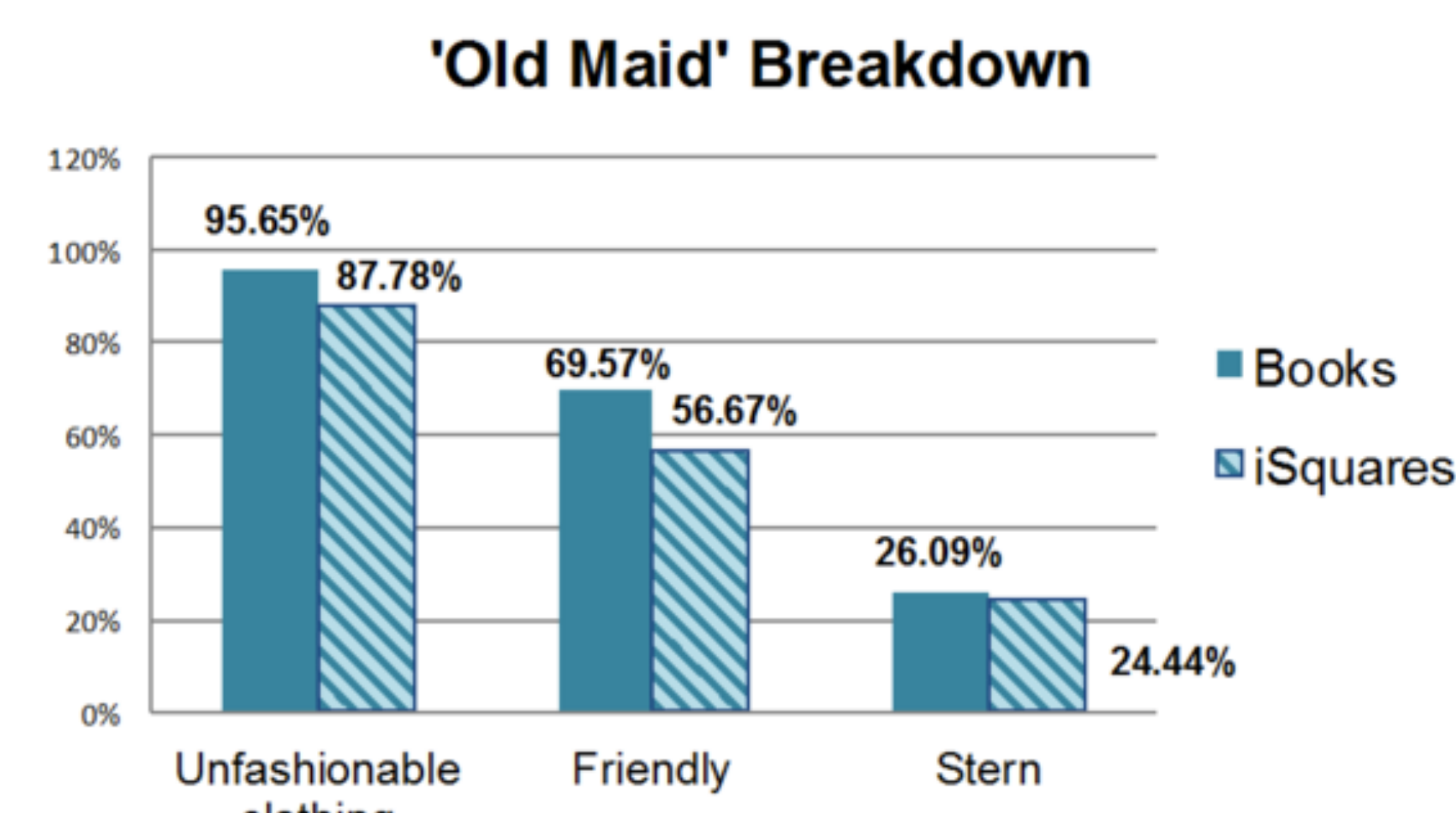
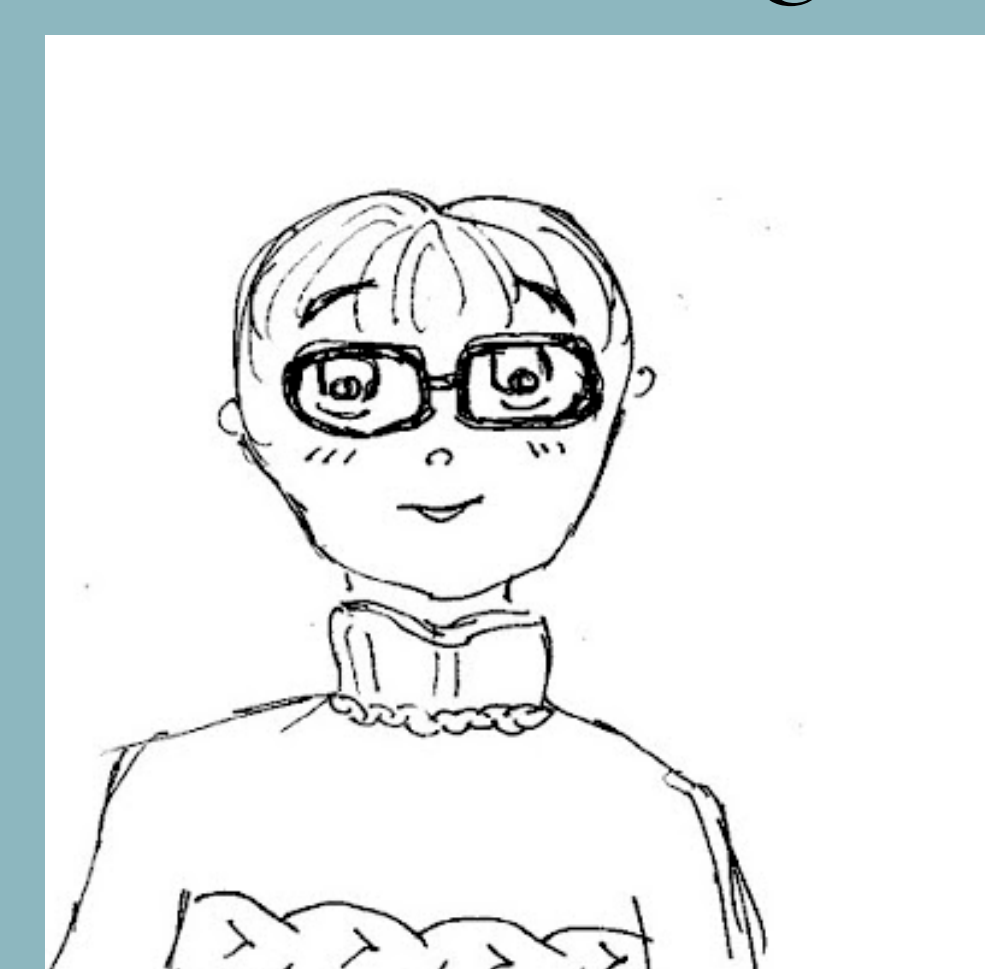
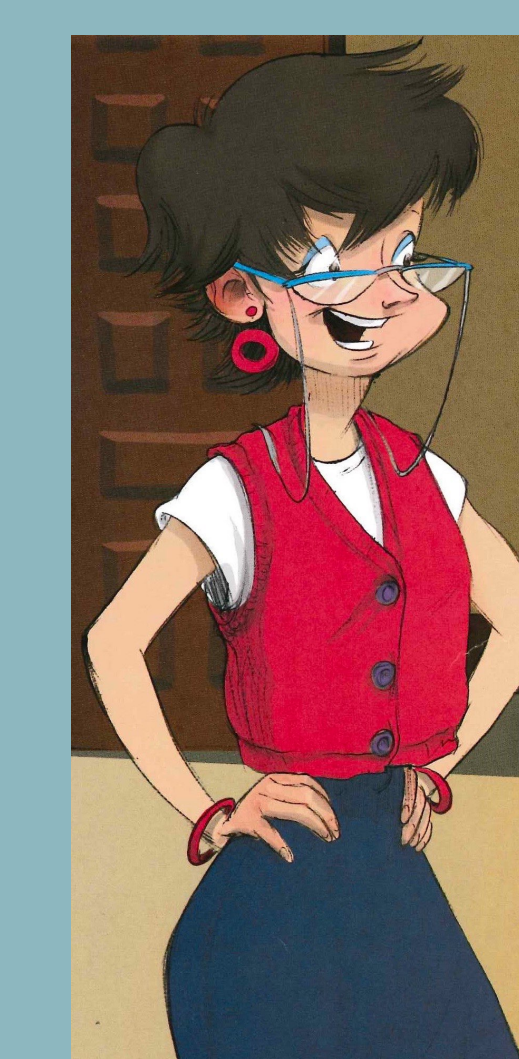


Fig. 1: Percentage breakdown of unfashionable clothing, and friendly and stern demeanour among Old Maid depictions in children’s books and iSquares

The Average Old Maid:



iSquare LIB028 - I300B



Librarian on the Roof, M.G. King

Conclusions

- The Old Maid stereotype still exists in pictorial depictions of librarians
- Frumpy clothing and glasses are the most common attributes
- Representations are friendlier than expected

Limitations

- Can art be objectively analyzed through a scientific approach?
- Do pictorial representations capture the artist’s own thoughts or societal views of what librarians are like?

“Even though I worked in a library and know librarians my first thought was a frumpy older white woman who got mad at everyone who spoke. Also she has out of date glasses.”

LIB199 - I300A



No Pirates Allowed! Said Library Lou, Rhonda Gowler Greene

Implications

- Images may be informed by people’s perceptions of librarians and vice versa
- If so, this may explain why librarians have to constantly advocate for the profession

What can we do about it?

- Embody professionalism and be ourselves
- Strive to be adaptive within our communities

Further Reading

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