Aggressive but loyal: modification and gender roles in British children’s adventure books

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Abstract

Language powerfully impacts the construction of our gender identities. In the mid-twentieth century gender stereotypes were strong, but at the same time feminism was giving rise to new ideas and becoming increasingly mainstream. What gender-related discourse prosodies did children encounter in popular literature? Did these merely reinforce the conventional stereotypes or did they contain the seeds of change? This study of British children’s fiction published in the 1940s-60s seeks to answer these questions through an analysis of personality descriptors collocated with female and male character eight books by four prolific children’s writers. Although gender stereotypes (as represented by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory) are to some extent reinforced in these books, there are also considerable discrepancies. Children were meeting a range of positive models which did not always match ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ stereotypes.

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References


