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How Do Authors Negotiate Contemporary Notions of Gender and Historical Accuracy When Creating Female Characters in Middle Grade Historical Fiction?

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Abstract
Historical fiction provides an accessible and engaging means for children to understand the wider abstract notion of history. However, this capacity to influence children's understanding of history means that authors have a particular responsibility to their young audience. There is an obligation to accuracy as well as the challenge of balancing potentially conflicting ideologies from the past and present. This essay considers specifically how notions of gender have been interpreted in children's historical fiction. I examine various approaches to portraying female characters in historical settings, with reference to four recent Middle Grade historical fiction texts: *Frost Hollow Hall* by Emma Carroll; *Wishing for Tomorrow* by Hilary McKay; *The Skylarks' War* by Hilary McKay and *The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown* by Elizabeth Laird. In my analysis, I identify how successful I believe these strategies have been and how they might influence my own future writing.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people*, *historical fiction*, *gender*, *accuracy*, *female*

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Female characters in Middle Grade (MG) historical fiction find themselves in a distinctly complex role. Depending on their historical setting, they experience different expectations and perceptions of what it means to be female. Their stories are further complicated by the fact that they are being written about and read retrospectively through a contemporary lens. As Collins and Graham explain, 'Whatever the source, the writer's task is always to understand and balance the ideology of the time as far as women's roles in society were concerned and the view of women in the time which he or she is writing' (2001, p.18).

In this article I seek to learn from female characters and their authors and to identify how their stories might inform my own writing. I begin by addressing definitions of gender and how these have been reflected, rejected and reinterpreted by female characters in children's historical fiction. This leads me to also consider how authors choose to interpret or resist the traditional heroic narrative when writing about female protagonists. From there, I address the concept of female historical agency and how this intersects with notions of historical accuracy. I conclude by reflecting on my own practice.

I have chosen to focus on four specific primary texts: *Frost Hollow Hall* (Carroll, 2021), *Wishing for Tomorrow* (McKay, 2010), *The Skylarks' War* (McKay, 2018), and *The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown* (Laird, 2022). As recently published works, they are relevant to me and other writers working in the current market. They are all books which, I believe, successfully navigate the complicated intersection of gender and history, whilst also delivering a compelling story and meeting the demands of the publishing industry. They reveal the lives of people from different social backgrounds and from various points in history. What they all have in common is their female characters who challenge gender stereotypes without sacrificing complexity of character.

My focus throughout is on writing craft: the insights I gained from studying the primary texts and how this knowledge might be of value in my own writing practice. It is not within the scope of this essay to consider the wider context of gender history in any detail. However, it is useful to consider briefly the contemporary ideological context within which children's historical fiction writers are working today. It is widely understood that 'gender is a social creation' and that 'children's literature, is a key source in reproducing and legitimating gender systems and gender inequality' (McCabe *et al*, 2011, p.218). We know that in literature up until the late twentieth century, females in children's books were 'typically portrayed as passive, dependent and generally incapable, and that males were typically portrayed as active, independent and generally competent' (1990, cited in Poynter, 2020, p.177). Since then, women and girls have enjoyed greater, if not equal, opportunities in children's

literature and the wider world. How then, do authors acknowledge the gender inequalities of the past, whilst also creating female characters who appeal to contemporary notions of girlhood?

McKay successfully balances these two potentially conflicting concepts in the character of Clarry in *The Skylarks War.* Clarry grows up during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Secretly, she would like to learn to swim and get an education like her brother. However, McKay does not shy away from letting Clarry initially have opinions on gender that children today would find unfair. When her grandmother tells her that she is not allowed to have swimming lessons, Clarry accepts this response unquestioningly. 'Clarry had nodded, disappointed but accepting. There were lots of things to accept, she found, about the differences between girls and boys' (2018, pp.44-45).

McKay trusts her readers to understand that Clarry has opinions which are problematic by today's standards. Over the course of the book, Clarry matures. Her love of learning and her growing awareness of gender inequalities propel her to resist expectations and, despite many challenges, she manages to secure an education for herself. Nevertheless, despite Clarry's quest towards self-realisation, McKay acknowledges the complexity of her identity as a girl growing up at a particular time in history. Throughout the book Clarry maintains her role as a carer for her father and brother. She cooks for them, cares for Peter when he is ill and manages the housekeeping. She does not question these roles. McKay, as a contemporary writer, is not condoning these gender roles of the past, but nor is she willing to appease the contemporary readers' sense of injustice by sacrificing Clarry's complexity of character.

McKay's complexity of characterisation can be seen as a response to late twentieth-century interpretations of girlhood which were influenced by liberal feminism. This, Marshall suggests, paradoxically led to limited roles for girls in children's books with a focus on 'how girls' attributes are similar to or different from those of boys' (Marshall, 2004, p.259). From the liberal feminist perspective, the problem of gender inequality in children's books is apparently solved by 'replacing or supplementing representations of weak girls with assertive ones' (p.260). This overly simplified approach fails to acknowledge both the complexity of individual girls as well as the complexity of gender as a mutable and socially constructed concept. 'The focus on positive and strong role models [...] which is also found in feminist scholarship on children's and adolescent literature, results in a severely limited analysis of and remedy for sexism' (p.260).

The importance of creating complex female characters is supported by poststructuralist feminist theory which promotes a non-binary interpretation of gender. Trombetta states that, while she would never argue that strong females do not exist, nor that strength is a negative character trait, 'there is an infinite number of things girls and women can be […] so much more than "strong," whatever that means' (2016). Marshall also acknowledges that 'the strong girl provides a role model for some

girls' (2004, p.268). One need only look at the success of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and similar titles, but she proposes 'a more dynamic theorization of the "girl"' (2004, pp.268-269). Anecdotally, I have tired of reading blurbs for children's books that describe female protagonists as 'feisty'. To this day, I have never read of a male protagonist described as feisty. It appears that if a female character asserts herself, she is given a limiting label that identifies her as 'feisty', whereas a male character acting in a similar manner is not subject to the same classification.

In the context of historical fiction, a reliance on 'strong' female characters also risks oversimplifying the problem of gender inequality throughout history, making the female characters responsible for rectifying society's injustices. Leveen refers to the 'plucky protagonist'. 'It's no crime, of course, to create a protagonist who is exceptional. But the exceptionality of a plucky protagonist can imply that it's pluck — rather than systemic factors of race, class, and gender — that determines one's narrative trajectory' (Leveen, 2021).

Moreover, when society demands that female characters be 'strong', it is often imposing a patriarchal hero's journey narrative upon them. This is a template that has endured since the publication of Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949 (Campbell, 1949). I would not argue that female characters should never be cast in these stories. However, they also deserve to live beyond 'the 'heroic tradition' with its inevitable male narrative viewpoint' (Collins and Graham, 2001, p.18). As Barron suggests, women and girls 'need not simply mimic the male hero's journey. They may reject the established patterns, cast aside old rules, and prevail on their own terms' (Barron, 2001, p.31).

There are multiple examples in the primary texts of female characters who resist this heroic narrative and follow their own original and interesting stories. From the first line of Emma Carroll's *Frost Hollow Hall*, the protagonist Tilly appears as a characterful yet plausible 19th century girl: 'I was proper fed up with waiting' (2021, p.5). She is impatient waiting for her father to return home, a relatable scenario for child readers. The story that unfolds is one in the tradition of Gothic ghost stories. In a near-death experience, Tilly is confronted by a ghost boy, Kit, and is sent on a quest to put this troubled spirit to rest. And yet, despite the surface-level high drama, this is a personal tale, not a heroic one. Tilly does succeed in solving the mystery of Frost Hollow Hall and in helping Kit. However, her overwhelming realisation is a personal one:

> I wondered at my own grief, so strange and strong. Only now I realised what was hurting. And it wasn't all about Kit. I was hurting for my ma, who'd lost a daughter, and for Pa who'd chosen his dream over me. (Carroll, 2021, p.332)

Carroll subtly weaves the story of Tilly's internal journey through what appears to be a traditionally Gothic tale. As Cron explains, '*internal change* […] is what the story is actually about: how your protagonist's external dilemma – aka the plot – changes her

world view' (Cron, 2020, p.17). Tilly's attitude towards her mother and sister change as a result of what happens in the plot. Carroll handles these relationships with great sensitivity so that we, like Tilly, learn something of the external pressures and expectations that have been put on these relationships. These are female characters living in poverty in late Victorian England. Tilly's father has fled to America and she and her sister and mother are left with few resources and the very real prospect of being made homeless. At the beginning of the story, Tilly finds herself stuck in a frustrating and unfulfilling dynamic with her mother and sister: 'Here we were then, just like always: Eliza and Ma on one side, me on the other' (Carroll, 2021, p.35). Later, Tilly's relationship with her mother starts to shift: '"You look ..." Her lip began to tremble. "Very respectable indeed … .Why, you're as pretty as a rose!" And she sounded surprised, like she'd never really noticed before' (p.107). At the end of the book, Tilly and Ma find a resolution of sorts: 'For not far beneath the surface, I reckoned we were both still sad. But then, it would take time, wouldn't it … .Ma and me, we'd made a start at least' (p.351).

In a similar manner, Laird tells the personal story of a thirteen-year-old girl, Charity, within the wider context of postwar Britain in *The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown*. Readers can relate to Charity's everyday life as she begins to question the adult world around her, whilst also learning something of the social upheaval that ordinary people experienced at this time. At the start of the book, Charity feels restricted by her caring but highly religious family. In the aftermath of the war, a Jewish Austrian family, the Sterns, move into the house next-door and her own family welcome people in need into their home. Charity encounters a range of people and grapples with weighty issues of the time: prejudice; displacement; poverty. She bravely confronts Dr Sturgess and his abhorrent views: '"The Sterns next door are Jewish!" I burst out. "And the Nazis murdered their family and put Mr Fischer in prison [...] You're just – just cruel!"' (p.107). All this while experiencing the usual preoccupations of a child on the cusp of adolescence: making friends; growing up; first love. She says, 'One good thing about not being in love is that you can concentrate on other things. I had a lot of schoolwork to catch up on, and that afternoon I ploughed straight through it.' (p.263). Charity is not a traditional 'strong' heroine, but she is a very real character, who is both relatable and admirable.

Hilary McKay also counters the traditional hero's narrative by introducing multiple female protagonists in *Wishing for Tomorrow* (2009), a sequel to Frances Hodgson Burnett's tale *A Little Princess* (1905). Burnett's book is a classic that has remained popular since it was first published in 1905. Perceptions of gender and childhood may have changed since then, but the protagonist, Sarah Crewe still has something to offer contemporary young readers. Gruner describes her as 'a dynamically adaptable heroine' (Gruner, 1998, p.180). She 'plays an active role in her redemption […] through imaginative invention and sympathy' (1998, p.168). However, she will always remain 'an idealized image' (1998, p.164) of late Victorian girlhood.

By contrast, in *Wishing for Tomorrow*, McKay chooses not to focus on one single idealised protagonist. Instead, she turns to the supporting characters of *A Little Princess* and gives them each room to breathe. Between them, they share the qualities needed to drive the story along, but no one character is more heroic than another. As a result, they are more real and nuanced. Lavinia, who in the original text seemed only to have been included to fill the two-dimensional role of 'school bully', is an altogether more interesting person in McKay's book. She has both positive and negative character traits. We learn part of the reason for her irritable manner: she feels trapped and frustrated by her lack of education as a girl. By applying ingenuity and perseverance, she seeks to acquire a university education. She also demonstrates leadership and maturity when she saves all the girls and their schoolmistress, Miss Minchin, from the fire (2009, p.276). She helps Sara's best friend, Ermengarde, learn fractions, despite it being an arduous process (p.182) and shows empathy to the seemingly cold-hearted Miss Minchin (p.309). And yet, McKay is careful to balance Lavinia's strengths with her weaknesses. She can be sharp-tongued, sarcastic and quick to anger: '"I don't know what on earth you are talking about," snapped Lavinia, impatiently' (p.232). Importantly, Lavinia is all the more likeable and relatable for having these faults.

Each of the many characters in McKay's sequel has a variety of personality traits which help to engage the reader and also serve to highlight how different women and girls of that time might have dealt with their given circumstances. Readers learn something of the complicated concept of historical agency which Damico, Baildon and Greenstone describe as 'the relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence, shape, and are affected by these events' (2010, p.2). All of McKay's female characters are self-determining individuals who are 'reasoning, making choices, and exercising their will' (2010, p.1), but they do so within the particular constraints of their society and era. The inclusion of these complex characters and their equally complex circumstances helps to make the abstract notion of historical agency more 'coherent and intelligible' to MG audiences (2010, p.1).

We learn, for example, the backstory of the Minchin sisters and how, denied an education themselves, they became the mistresses of a girls' school. Although this was not something they did enthusiastically, it did at least guarantee them financial independence, something that married women of the time could not claim.

Ermengarde's formerly distant Aunt Eliza appears later in the book as a surrogate mother figure to Ermengarde. Aunt Eliza experienced a similar childhood to Ermengarde in that she was mocked for her apparent lack of intelligence. Later, she lived in an unhappy marriage and withdrew from the world. But, in widowhood, she is able to offer Ermengarde a home and a different, more promising start in life.

Alice the maid opens the girls' eyes to the life of women from a different social background to their own, but without being reduced to an object of pity or condescension. McKay does not pretend that Alice's financial or social prospects are likely to change, nor that her working life is anything less than arduous, but she does

paint Alice as an assertive character who refuses to sleep in the attic, like Becky the previous maid did, and who finds ingenious and amusing ways of lessening her workload.

The strategy of weaving multiple complex female characters throughout the story is also applied in *Frost Hollow Hall*, when Tilly secures a role in domestic service. Carroll introduces her to a range of other female characters of differing ages and backgrounds. Tilly encounters Cook who adopts a maternal attitude towards her, and Mrs Jessop the housekeeper, a mysterious character whose identity evolves through the course of the story. Tilly also meets the head housemaid, Dorcas, who challenges Tilly's perceptions of what a girl's ambitions might be in life: Tilly is surprised to learn that Dorcas has plans to become a housekeeper rather than get married (p.179). Details like these are scattered throughout the story, rather than being instrumental to the main plot. In this way, Carroll has achieved a subtle complexity of both character and narrative. This approach lends itself well to the task of writing historical fiction given that, although it is a fictional genre, it should to some degree reflect the ambiguity of history. As Damico, Baildon and Greenstone (2010) explain, 'By situating sympathetic protagonists in complex historical situations, quality historical fiction can help students recognize that history seldom offers straightforward choices or easy answers' (p.1).

McKay also acknowledges the nuanced nature of history in *The Skylarks' War* which covers the course of the First World War. She delivers an ultimately hopeful story, despite the weighty subject matter, but she does not patronise her readers by offering a simplistic victorious ending. A poignant scene between Clarry and Vanessa at the end of the book perfectly reflects this sense of ambiguity: 'Vanessa and Clarry leaned wearily on each other and said, "I suppose we should feel wonderful," but mostly they felt empty' (p.311). Similarly, Tilly is left with conflicted feelings at the end of *Frost Hollow Hall*. There is the hint of romance between her and Will and her relationship with her mother is improved. But she is confronted by the fact that she will probably never see her sister and father again: 'Eliza was right; it was too late. Things were different now. It hurt, though. Deeply' (p.354). Carroll does not attempt to resolve this matter; she trusts young readers to be able to tolerate this complexity.

In *The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown*, Laird acknowledges the fact that Charity is a relatable teenage girl by giving her a wonderfully understated but warm ending. At a celebratory meal, surrounded by many of the people she has encountered throughout the story, Charity is overcome by emotion and makes a heartfelt declaration about love and the meaning of life. '"Good for you, Charity,"' (p.331) is the encouraging reply from her sister, and '"Marvellous, darling!"' (p.331) from her bohemian Auntie Vi. The responses from her mother and other sister are more muted though: '"Stating the obvious, though, isn't it?" said Faith' (p.331). And, just like that, the moment is passed and for Charity, 'What had seemed blindingly simple a moment ago was suddenly tangled up' (p.331). But, despite the sense of confused anticlimax, Charity is content: 'My best friend understood me. For now, at least, that was all that

mattered' (p.331). Ultimately, despite all the wider historical narratives unfolding around her, Charity's world is a more intimate, everyday one that young contemporary readers will be able to relate to across the divide of time.

Wishing for Tomorrow perhaps has a less satisfying ending. On a superficial level, all the plotlines are quickly resolved; after the school burns down, everyone settles happily into new lives elsewhere. How likely is this ending, given the gender inequality that existed at that time? Dudhnath says of the ending that 'the neat package feels a little convenient' (2009). It is perhaps less like the ending of a piece of historical fiction and more like that of a fairy tale. This discrepancy highlights a specific challenge for writers of historical fiction: balancing an engaging story with historical accuracy.

This issue is particularly relevant for children's authors given the responsibility they have for their readers. As Hickman explains:

> With stories of the past, readers often have little or no prior knowledge about a particular setting; they are at the mercy of the author. Thus, historical fiction in particular demands truth [...] In fact, there is such wide agreement among scholars and critics and writers about the need for truth, or accuracy, or authenticity, that the point is beyond argument. The problem comes not in naming the truth but in attempting to define it in practice. (Hickman, 2001, p.92)

The concept of historical accuracy is a contentious one and there is not the scope here to explore it fully. Of most relevance to this essay is the interaction between historical accuracy and gender. As Hickman points out, 'Gender is only one of the aspects of truth in fictional lives, but it creates more than its share of complexities' (p.93). She draws attention to the lack of historical records of women's and children's lives by comparison with those of men. Gregory states the blunt reality that, 'What we read as a history of our nation is a history of men, as viewed by men, as recorded by men' (2023, p.1). However, she highlights the fact that from the 1950s onwards, 'Women historians began the process of rereading the historical records to find out what the women were doing in their dark and silent past' (p.3). The evidence is there, but as writers we might have to look beneath the dominant narrative to find it as well as turning to less formal, male-oriented sources: 'The voices and images of women and children aren't really missing from history, they are less obvious' (Hickman, 2001, p.93). These alternative sources, with their particular focus on the everyday lives of regular women and children, are 'just the kind of detail a novel needs' (p.93). Moreover, they have inherent value in that they allow readers to identify and empathise with ordinary children like themselves in the past.

However, Wilson urges caution and highlights the contradictory nature of writing historical fiction: the balance that must be struck between 'female empowerment, expected by modern readership, and disempowerment, necessary for historical veracity' (2018, p.66). The tendency towards presentism, 'to position readers to interpret and judge the past using modern criteria' (p.100) is especially prevalent in

children's literature because of its 'didactic function' (p.64). It might be argued that Tilly, as a working-class girl in nineteenth century Britain, would have had little freedom or choice. It could even be argued that as a child of her time, she would have had 'considerably less independence of mind' (p.63) and so would perhaps not have felt compelled to force herself into life at Frost Hollow Hall and to solve the mystery of Kit's death.

Nevertheless, although I am mindful of Wilson's caution, I agree with Power's argument that 'presentism is to a large degree inevitable as writers and readers cannot completely identify and control their own cultural and social conditioning' (2003, p.425). Cross reminds us that all history is a construction. We should be aware of 'the impossibility of objectively and transparently representing the past' (2015). At best, writers can attempt to be conscious of their own subjectivity, but I think they would do female characters and their readers a great disservice not to allow them agency for fear of presentism.

Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that female empowerment in historical fiction necessarily precludes historical accuracy. It is precisely because history has been written largely by men that we are not aware of women's histories. Who is to say that if Tilly had existed, she would not have been the type of person to make things happen, despite her circumstances? Or that Lavinia, despite the odds against her, might not have gone to university? These girls can be compared to Birdy in Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy* (1994): they are 'unusual […] but not impossible' (Power, p.447). Power argues that 'accusations of [...] presentism function to legitimize a narrow, one-dimensional view of the past and to reify a selective tradition that marginalizes the contributions of women and minorities across the ages' (p.425). Therefore, not only is female agency in historical fiction possible, it can also provide an opportunity to 'challenge the nature of history by rewriting silenced histories […] such as those of women' (Angelaki, 2023, p.39). Angelaki champions the works of contemporary children's authors that 'challenge readers' conceptions of history and the world, and resist the dominant discourse of patriarchal history, while trying to deconstruct the gendered identity that is constructed by patriarchy' (p.40).

Ultimately, I believe authors should have faith in their readers' ability to understand the nuanced nature of history and historical fiction. In a recent keynote speech, Melvin Burgess advocated for a 'less patronising and moralising' approach to writing for children which involved 'trusting kids more and letting them make up their own minds about situations' (Burgess, 2023). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of the increasingly polarised society in which young people find themselves today. Children should be allowed to encounter some degree of 'ambiguity or ambivalence' (2023) and in doing so, learn how to reconcile conflicting thoughts or feelings. There are numerous positive examples in the primary texts where the authors balance historical accuracy with female agency and, as a result, show the subtle ambivalence of their female characters. Tilly feels able to solve the mystery of Kit's death, but conversely, she does not question the corporal punishment she receives

from her parents. Charity's sense of agency is most clearly demonstrated in her independence of mind. Laird's use of a first-person perspective allows the reader to witness this throughout the book. However, by the end of the book, although Charity's world has expanded and she has encountered people of different backgrounds and beliefs, her life remains relatively sheltered, like that of most girls in 1950s England. Laird was clearly aware of the challenge of balancing historical accuracy with the needs and viewpoints of her contemporary readers. In her acknowledgements, she makes reference to the help her editor gave her in understanding 'how the attitudes and customs of the 1950s may seem distant and strange to young readers today' (2022, p.339). She also demonstrates her sense of responsibility towards her readers by including an author's note and glossary (pp.335-337, 340-345). These additions remind the reader of the distinction that can be made between historical fact and fiction within the story. They also make me mindful of how I might approach my responsibility to young readers in my future writing.

In this article, I have considered how authors challenge limiting gender stereotypes by creating complex female characters who are of their era, but who each follow their own unique journey through history. I have learned that a character does not necessarily have to follow the conventional hero's journey narrative to produce a compelling story. In my own writing, I will seek to give my female characters complexity and to make them the impetus of the story. I intend to explore alternative plotlines that do not necessarily follow the traditional hero's journey narrative.

Through my research, I have developed an appreciation for 'the plausible past' and 'the possibility that women and minorities exercised agency' (Power, 2003, p.458). Moreover, I have learned of the specific potential that children's historical fiction has to 'give voice to those who might have been silenced or adversely affected by a particular event' (Damico, Baildon and Greenstone, p.3) and that, by reading these stories, children might be encouraged 'to question why some groups had less power, influence, or privilege than others (p.3).

I have learned that in researching for my manuscript, I might have to 'rely mostly on alternative sources to discern what girls of the past were like' (Hickman, 2001, p.93). I look forward to exploring histories beyond the traditional canons. Moreover, I now understand that diligent research is even more important given that 'historical fiction in particular demands truth' for child readers (Hickman, 2001, p.92).

Beyond the creative writing process, it is necessary to consider the demands of the publishing industry. Given the range of published primary texts I have considered for this essay, I remain hopeful that there is continued scope in the market for children's historical fiction that puts complex female characters at its heart. Ultimately, I cannot control how the characters I write will be received, but I can follow Hickman's advice and let those female characters guide me: 'When I am writing, it is uniqueness of character that becomes my goal. I know that a girl from the past will not be memorable if she is only generic, if she fits too neatly into her context without a distinct personality of her own' (Hickman, 2001, p.98).

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