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A Study of Gender Representation in Silver Birch Award Nominees from 2009 and 2019: A Queer Theory Perspective

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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Abstract

Gender-based ideologies permeate everyday spaces and materials, including children's literature. This study explores and compares gender representation in Canadian authored fiction nominees for the prestigious *Silver Birch* award from 2009 and 2019 (OLA, 2019). Using methodological tools from critical discourse study (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) and ethnographic content analysis (ECA; Altheide, 1987; 2004) with queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) as a theoretical lens, this study analyzed ten *Silver Birch* (OLA, 2019) fiction nominee novels from 2009 and ten from 2019. Depictions of gender within the books are assessed through character descriptions, contexts the characters are in, and language used by and between characters. Findings determine a shift to more equal representations in terms of the number of girls and boys as lead or title characters in the 2019 texts. Additionally, the 2019 texts demonstrate a change as girl characters are more active and involved in stories and boys crossing the gender line. Despite positive shifts, heteronormative gender roles remain prevalent and plentiful.

Keywords: gender, children's literature, Silver Birch, Queer Theory

Lay Summary

This study explores representations of gender in children's literature, with a specific focus on the Silver Birch nominated books from 2009 and 2019. The Silver Birch books are early novels marketed for children between grades 3 and 6. This study uses a document analysis approach and pays particular attention to the language used by the authors and character situations to assess gender representations within the selected Silver Birch books. Findings suggest some changes between the 2009 and 2019 texts with girls growing in representation as a lead or title character, and they are also more active and involved in stories in the 2019 books. Additionally, depictions of boys show them crossing the gender line more often and practicing more stereotypically feminine behaviours such as expressing emotions openly. Despite shifts, conventional western gender roles and norms do remain prevalent.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Lay Summary	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 History of Gender in Children’s Literature	1
1.2 Contextualizing Current Study	4
1.3 Overview of Current Study	4
1.4 Statement of the Problem	5
1.5 Research Questions	6
1.6 Theoretical Framework	6
1.7 Structure of Thesis	6
2.1 Children’s Picture Books	8
2.2 Gender as a Cultural Value and Belief	11
2.3 LGBTQ+ Representation	13
2.4 Parental Representation	15
2.5 Children’s Literature as a Cultural Reflection	16
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods	18
3.1 Opportunities for Knowledge Contribution in Literature and Justification	18
3.2 Theoretical Framework	19
3.2.1 Background and Operational Definitions	19
3.2.2 Queer Theory	20
3.3 Methodology	21

3.3.1 Ethnographic Content Analysis.....	22
3.4 Study Texts.....	23
3.5 Trustworthiness and Transferability.....	26
3.6 Contribution to the Field.....	26
3.7 Importance of the Study.....	27
Chapter 4: Findings.....	28
4.1 2009 Silver Birch Nominees.....	28
4.1.1 Representation of Boy Characters.....	29
4.1.1.1 Boy descriptions.....	29
4.1.1.2 Boys as leaders.....	30
4.1.1.3 Boys as adventurous.....	30
4.1.1.4 Boys as brave.....	30
4.1.1.5 Boys as both risk-takers and saviours.....	31
4.1.1.6 Boys and emotions.....	31
4.1.2 Representation of Girl Characters.....	32
4.1.2.1 Girl descriptions.....	33
4.1.2.2 Girls as innocent.....	34
4.1.2.3 Girls as nurturers.....	34
4.1.2.4 Girls and relationships.....	35
4.1.2.5 Girls and emotions.....	35
4.1.2.6 Girls and obedience.....	37
4.1.3 Adult and Parental Representation.....	37
4.1.3.1 Representation of Men.....	38
4.1.3.1.1 Men as comedic relief.....	38
4.1.3.1.2 Men as controlling and evil nemesis.....	38

4.1.3.1.3 Men as uninvolved or absentee fathers.....	39
4.1.3.2 Representation of Women.....	40
4.1.3.2.1 Women as caregivers.....	40
4.1.3.2.2 Women as uninvolved or deceased.....	40
4.2 2019 Silver Birch Nominees.....	41
4.2.1 Representation of Boy Characters.....	42
4.2.1.1 Boys as Adventurers.....	42
4.2.1.2 Boys and Emotions.....	43
4.2.1.3 Boys as Saviours and Fixers.....	43
4.2.1.4 Boys as Problem-Solvers	44
4.2.2 Representation of Girl Characters.....	45
4.2.2.1 Girls as Problem-Solvers.....	45
4.2.2.2 Girls as Adventurers.....	46
4.2.2.3 Girls as Saviours.....	46
4.2.2.4 Girls and Emotions.....	47
4.2.2.5 Girls and Relationships	48
4.2.3 Non-Binary Representation.....	48
4.2.4 Adult and Parental Representation.....	49
4.2.4.1 Representation of Men	49
4.2.4.2 Representation of Women	50
Chapter 5: Discussion	52
5.1 Comparing Gender Representation in 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch Nominees ...	52
5.1.1 Boy Character Representation	54
5.1.2 Girl Character Representation.....	55
5.1.3 Adult and Parental Representation.....	57

5.2 Context and Gender Representation	58
5.3 Language and Gender Representation	60
5.4 Implications and Suggestion for Future Research	62
Conclusion.....	63
References	65
List of Books	70

List of Tables

Table 1 2009 Silver Birch Nominees	24
Table 2 2019 Silver Birch Nominees	25
Table 3 2009 Silver Birch Nominee Themes	28
Table 4 2019 Silver Birch Nominee Themes	41
Table 5 Comparison of Themes: 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch Nominees	53

Chapter 1: Introduction

Children's literature has long been a space that allows exploration, adventure, and opportunities to experience new people, places, cultures, and practices. Stories can foster shared experiences and allow people to create community; however, children's books are also vehicles for the expression of cultural values, beliefs, and norms (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, 2011). This chapter provides a brief history of children's literature and underlines how children's stories are utilized throughout history to teach children societal and social expectations. This chapter will also provide a brief overview and introduction of a study, frameworks used, and background of the texts used for analysis.

For clarity and understanding, when used without a specification, the term *children's literature* will refer to any text meant "for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children of those ages, through prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction" (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2007, p. 3).

1.1 History of Gender in Children's Literature

Understanding the history of children's literature is essential to situate the study of Silver Birch nominees from 2009 and 2019 (Ontario Library Association [OLA], 2019). A brief history of children's literature is discussed below, with a particular focus on gender. To frame the study, it is essential to understand the initial purpose of children's stories, how these stories became gendered, and the impact on gender roles and expectations (Marshall, 2004). It is also vital to understand why gender remains an issue in more recent publications (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014).

The research literature indicates that throughout the history of children's literature, there has been a sense of purpose and guidance embedded into the stories that children read. Children's literature has a long history of "disciplining young readers into normative heterosexual masculinity and femininity" (Marshall, 2004, p. 261). As children's literature has been used for centuries to instill values and beliefs in readers, it is important

to understand how the genre has formed throughout history and how it reinforces religious and moral—that is, cultural—perspectives.

Tatar (1992) explains that fairy tales, though not initially meant for children, came to be cautionary tales to “persuade children to obey the laws set down by parental authority” (p. 30) and encouraged docile behaviours and conformity. Marshall (2004), a professor at Simon Fraser University who has extensive research concerning literature marketed for and consumed by youth, suggests that in fairy tales, child characters who fail to follow the rules and instead demonstrate curiosity experience brutal punishment. However, child readers ultimately enjoyed the gory stories and missed the message of control and obedience (Marshall, 2004). As the fairy tale readership shifted to children, the ideologies and discourse within also shifted, particularly concerning sexuality and gender (Marshall, 2004). Authors such as the Brothers Grimm began to remove sexual content from their stories that they feared may be unfit for children (Marshall, 2004). However, these stories still contain portrayals of significant abuse and punishment (Tatar, 1987). Furthermore, fairy tales such as those by the Brothers Grimm were revised to foster specific views of femininity wherein heroines underwent severe punishment for pursuing their curiosity (Bottigheimer, 1987 as cited in Marshall, 2004).

Literature for children begins to gain popularity, thanks to growing accessibility and printing abilities, and it is around the mid-18th century that literature specifically focused on children emerges (Conforti, 2015; Marshall, 2004). Gendered children’s literature first appears around the mid-1740s, with texts marketed explicitly towards boys or girls, where despite the version of the story not being different, the book geared for boys is accompanied by a ball and a pincushion for girls (Marshall, 2004). Further into the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly for people considered middle- and upper-class, children’s literature becomes a means to shape religious and moral perspectives (Conforti, 2015; Marshall, 2004). These first stories sought to “develop obedience, industry and good temper” (Segel, 1986, p. 168 as cited in Marshall, 2004) especially as there is a “prevailing idea that the child [is] born sinful and need[s] catechiz[ing] into repentance and piety” (Conforti, 2015, p. 74). By the mid-19th century, children’s literature shifts from containing messages strictly about children to perspectives that a child’s sex

synonymously connects to gendered behaviours (Conforti, 2015; Marshall, 2004). Part of the shift in focus from religiosity and morality to books as entertainment is due to the growing popularity of children's literature at the time (Conforti, 2015). Conforti explains that very rapid growth in children's literature emerges in the late 1800s. It becomes evident in this period that stories geared towards children as the reader, not just vessels in need of direction, are a genre in itself, and in that genre, there becomes a separation of books for boys and girls (Conforti, 2015).

Moving into more recent perspectives, Mattix and Sobolak (2014) suggest that gender representations in children's literature are reflective of cultural norms and beliefs. Research indicates disparities in gender representation between men and women in children's literature; specifically, women are under-represented and depicted in stereotypical ways such as mothers or performing tasks in the home (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton, Anderson, Boaddus & Young, 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada & Ross, 1972). Mattix and Sobolak (2014) claim that, due to this repeated stereotypical representation and lack of visibility of women and girls in children's texts, a call to action emerged for a more equal, and varied representation of gender in children's literature. One of the most significant shifts in gender representation occurred in the 1960s after the Women's Movement (Sunderland, 2011 as cited in Mattix & Sobolak, 2014). The post-Women's Movement shift, which noted the stark disparities in representation of men and women, acted as an impetus to focus research on gender in children's literature (Mattix & Sobolak, 2014). This shift reflects the cultural changes happening at the time as women sought more visibility, autonomy, and independence. Cultural reflection was, and still is, an important piece, particularly as children's literature has a history of instilling beliefs and values of current society. Singh (1998) explains that it is crucial to understand how gender is depicted in children's literature as it "contributes to the image children develop of their role and that of their gender in society" (p. 2). Thus, I conduct the current study with an interest in understanding the *how* of gender representations in children's literature.

1.2 Contextualizing Current Study

My research focuses on comparing representations of gender in the Silver Birch nominees from both 2009 and 2019 (OLA, 2019). The Silver Birch Award is a competition featuring a shortlist of ten Canadian authored middle-grade novels geared for children between grades 3 and 6 that children across Ontario, Canada vote on to determine a winner. Voting takes place in school and community libraries. Schools participate by signing up for and running the *Forest of Reading* program (OLA, 2019) as a means of encouraging children to engage in reading. During the run of the program, shortlisted titles, selected by committee members comprised of library professionals (Canadian Children's Book Centre, 2018), are advertised and supported by the school. Students are then encouraged to read the titles and subsequently place a vote for their favourite. Ultimately, the title with the most votes across the province wins the Silver Birch award for that year.

The present study uncovers representations of gender embedded in stories for young children. The subtle language of and between characters, the depictions put forth by the authors (be it verbal or pictorial), and the actions and behaviour of the characters all represent gendered expectations and norms. While perhaps not explicitly stated, gender norms become embedded in the stories and can influence children's perceptions of gender roles in their world. The purpose of comparing texts nominated in 2009 and 2019 is to understand the changing depictions of gender over a recent decade.

1.3 Overview of Current Study

Children's literature can play an essential role in children's education. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2008) suggest that "fictional representations affect everyday experience, including how we think about ourselves and the world" (p. 342). As a professional, I have seen how books are written for children to teach a lesson, such as friendship, sharing, or the importance of perseverance. However, other values and beliefs can perhaps inadvertently find their way into children's literature, thus becoming a source of what is known as the hidden curriculum (Cotton, Winter, & Bailey, 2013; Edwards,

2015). Gender and gender-based practices comprise one such system of values and beliefs that can find their way into children's literature.

Students access and engage with literature in their daily school lives in a multitude of ways. Standard practices with texts in education include, but are not limited to: circle time reading activities with educators, library visits, independent reading time, independent assignments (e.g., book reports, research), and through reading initiatives such as the *Forest of Reading*, which Ontario schools involve over 270,000 readers in yearly (OLA, n.d.-a). Understanding the content and representations depicted in literature is therefore essential for educators and education professionals to determine the potential impact that texts advertised and featured in schools through the Silver Birch program can inadvertently have on student perceptions of gender and self as students interpret them.

Much of the research concerning children's literature and gender representation focuses on picture books for preschool-aged children (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972); however, there exists an impetus to explore books meant for children beyond preschool age. The research literature's focus on picture books becomes problematic when considering the development of children's gender identities and ongoing pressures to conform to gender stereotypes (Brinkman et al., 2012) beyond preschool ages. Gender-based values and beliefs remain evident in many everyday spaces, with children's literature being one such space; and, as suggested by Stephens and Watson (1994), "no text is innocent" (p. 14); every text expresses various ideologies, desirable or otherwise (Bainbridge, Oberg, & Carbonaro, 2005).

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Children's literature is a contact zone through which readers can travel to new destinations (Tatar 2009), create new understandings, and explore concepts that they would otherwise not encounter in a safe space. Safe space, here, refers the absence of physical harm. Tatar (2009) suggests books are a safe space because children confront evil, fight off monsters, or solve crimes without putting themselves in physical danger.

However, while children's literature is a safe zone for exploration, there is reason to be concerned about the embedded ideologies within the stories and how children internalize the sub-textual messages within a story as they create their new understanding of the world around them. I acknowledge that literature can be anything but safe when considering the impact of risky texts and challenges to a sense of self when children fail to see themselves represented in stories. Therein, lies the problem, as books allow for exploration, new experiences, and continued understanding; yet, stories also create challenges as children witness lack of representation or see their gender represented in specific roles.

1.5 Research Questions

In this current study I examine the selected texts to answer the following questions:

- 1) How is gender represented in Silver Birch nominees from 2009 and 2019 (OLA, 2019), be it male, female, or non-binary?
- 2) How does a situation's context impact gender representations of characters?
- 3) How does the language authors use influence perceived gender roles and norms?
- 4) How does the language and interactions of, and between, characters speak to heteronormative gender roles?
- 5) How do gender representations differ when comparing Silver Birch award nominees from 2009 and 2019?

1.6 Theoretical Framework

In this study, I examine the Silver Birch (OLA, 2019) texts using a queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012) lens and draw on ECA (Altheide 1987; 2004) within a critical discourse study (CDS) framework (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

1.7 Structure of Thesis

The structure of this thesis will be as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction

- Chapter 2: Literature Review
- Chapter 3: Methodology
- Chapter 4: Findings
- Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Future Research

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I summarize past research in the field of gender and children's literature. I examine common representational areas such as children's picture books, parental depictions, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other forms of non-cisgender or heterosexual gender and sexual identity) representation, and gender as a cultural value and belief.

Children access books and stories throughout their time in education, whether in childcare or more formalized settings, and these texts often involve characters in more socially acceptable gender roles (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972). These storied texts can also become influential to, and internalized by, children as they explore their sense of self and navigate who they are (Pinar et al., 2008). Adams, Walker, and O'Connell (2011) suggest "children's literature demands our attention because it is another site where gender stereotypes are encountered and learned" (p. 260). This chapter provides a background of the current literature surrounding gender representation in children's stories; specifically, it will discuss gender representation overall, as well as delve into some of the more specific images of gender as a cultural value, LGBTQ+, and parental roles. While the majority of the current research pertains to children's picture books rather than middle-grade texts, it still provides an excellent base from which to begin the discussion as it demonstrates the need for exploring gender representation in texts beyond the picture book format.

2.1 Children's Picture Books

Researchers have conducted large-scale, seminal, studies (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe, et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972) covering the proliferation of gender discourses in children's literature. The consensus of this research is that there has been minimal change over time in the representations of male and female characters; that is, females are mostly under-represented, and both males and females are continually

represented concerning gender stereotypes (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Filipovic, 2018; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972). The gender stereotyping of characters continues to hold when considering parental figures in storied texts (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005) as well as when the character identifies as transgender or gender-nonconforming (Crawley, 2017; Earles, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016).

Multiple studies have examined gender representation in children's picture books published from the early 1900s until the end of the 20th century (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011). However, it is the pioneering work of Weitzman et al. (1972) that opened doors for discussing and examining gender in children's literature as the authors focused on gender disparities in picture books for preschool children. Their study is the first to discover that women are significantly under-represented in children's books and that when they depict women, it is in stereotypical gender roles (Weitzman et al., 1972). Weitzman et al. also suggest that children's books act as role models demonstrating for children what they can achieve, depicting gender role expectations for themselves as children and for when they become adults with an important caveat, that "women are simply invisible" (p. 1128). Women, in the books which Weitzman et al. (1972) examine, occupy only two categories, namely wife or mother, while depictions of men show them attending post-secondary education and working as professionals with prestigious careers. In terms of child characters, the authors discover that boys were depicted as active, leaders, and rescuers, while girls were passive, followers, and served others (Weitzman et al., 1972). These findings are, for the most part, continually supported through other research conducted over the years following the 1972 study. While there are some minimal changes to note, such as more women in production activities outside the home, the consensus continues to be that women occupy domestic or leisure activities and care for children, while men remain as labourers (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Filipovic,

2018; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011).

In addition to work and domestic representations, research focuses on the frequency in which males and females, be it adult, child, or animal, appeared in titles of books or as title characters (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Filipovic, 2018; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011). Regardless of whether or not the authors were looking at books from the early 1900s (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2011) or more present-day published texts (Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Filipovic, 2018; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Lynch, 2016), females continuously appeared less often than male characters, sometimes as much as two times less than male characters. McCabe et al., (2011) refer to the under-representation of females as *symbolic annihilation* in that it “denies existence to women and girls by ignoring or under-representing them” (p. 198). McCabe et al. (2011) thus provide support for Weitzman et al. ’s (1972) idea of females as invisible and represented as less important than males. The invisibility of females is a crucial element to explore, especially considering many of these studies focus on picture books written for young children. The continued consumption of texts lacking female representation could lead to children accepting the invisible female as an expected gender role in their own lives.

Studies also found that disparities in gender representation are not limited to human characters, as McCabe et al. (2011), while analyzing over 5000 children’s picture books published between 1900–2000, discovered that gender disparities varied depending on the manifestation of characters. That is, gender equality was closer among child characters, but animals showed the greatest inequities (McCabe et al., 2011). Grauerholz and Pescosolido (1989) had similar results demonstrating that male animals had a ratio of 6:1 for every female, whereas adult males were 4:1, and boys were 2.8:1. The significant disparity speaks to potential societal perceptions of children and perceived gender differences at a young age. Parlevliet (2011) discusses the notion that literature is a means

of expressing culture in so much that “it absorbs social values and contexts; explicit and implicit norms, patterns of behaviour, expectations, assumptions, opinions, and prejudices” (p. 468). If literature is expressing gender differences, then it acts as a reflection of society and the perceptions therein of the relative importance and visibility of men over women, or boys over girls. The prevalence of unequal gender ratios in picture books begs the question of how prevalent these gender differences are in texts meant for older children, such as Silver Birch nominees (OLA, 2019). In addition, are the noted differences in gender representation in children’s picture books the same as what may appear in the Silver Birch books, or do the possible variances manifest differently?

2.2 Gender as a Cultural Value and Belief

Children’s books often help to facilitate lessons in school settings, where cultural beliefs and values are communicated (Bainbridge et al., 2005). Educators need to understand how cultural values and beliefs concerning gender roles pass on through children’s literature. Educators also need to be aware of the potential impact on children as they internalize and make meaning of the embedded messages within storied texts (Bainbridge et al., 2005). When conversing with preschool educators in Dublin, Ireland, Filipovic (2018) notes problematic educator ignorance towards messages in children’s literature; that is, there is a lack of awareness regarding gender representations in children’s books and that educators ultimately deemed it of little importance. Filipovic (2018), while examining picture books in a preschool setting, found similar gender disparities evident in other studies; boys represented more title characters and are perceived as the default gender of a character if there is no gender-based description.

A prerequisite to critically examining children’s literature is that educators view children as beings capable of understanding various concepts. For example, some of the educators in Filipovic’s (2018) study, while surprised at the gender disparities in the books they read with the children, believe that children are innocent and do not notice the gender of characters in the books they read. The educators view the social construction of gender as irrelevant, given perceived child innocence. They do not see the value of discussing

gender and gender roles with young children (Filipovic, 2018). McCabe et al. (2011) speak about the responsibilities of adults as they are the ones choosing books for children to engage with and thus need to be aware of the messages contained in the pages. The educators that Filipovic (2018) spoke with need to be aware of the ideologies books can contain and how it can influence the sharing of cultural values and beliefs.

A final general finding in the analysis of children's books is about cultural connections, mainly that they act as a means of transmission of values, beliefs, and perceived gender roles (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011). Content, however, does not always match current cultural values. Lynch (2016), for example, in exploring picture books in a preschool classroom in Sweden states that "despite Sweden being hailed as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world and gender equality being one of the core values of the Swedish preschool curriculum, stories about the lives of girls are significantly under-represented" (p. 422). McCabe et al. (2011) found that equality in gender representation was closer in the early 1900s, had more significant disparity in the 1930s–1960s, and then reduces again at the end of the century. Findings from both Lynch (2016) and McCabe et al. (2011) suggest that cultural values and beliefs about gender roles at the time of publishing do not necessarily translate over to children's books and that there may be a type of cultural lag at play in that picture books may not match the present cultural landscape. Despite any cultural lag, educational professionals need to understand, as Bainbridge and colleagues (2005) suggest, that there is always an ideology present. Furthermore, the ongoing under-representation of females in any form and representation in primarily domestic or motherly roles is problematic, particularly in light of the women's rights movements from the 1960s and those ongoing. As such, educational professionals need to be aware of the gender-based messages that students are encountering, engaging with, and internalizing as they read, especially as young readers move beyond the age of picture books into novels such as the Silver Birch nominees (OLA, 2019).

2.3 LGBTQ+ Representation

There is a growing field of research about the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in children's literature (Crawley, 2017; Earles, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016). Despite the increase in publications featuring LGBTQ+, or gender non-conforming characters, research suggests that LGBTQ+ characters continue to reflect stereotypical, heteronormative behaviours and interests even when the character is transgender or gender non-conforming (Crawley, 2017; Earles, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016). Crawley (2017), for instance, finds that transgender characters in children's books are still represented in stereotypical ways based on their gender expression. That is, if the character identifies as a girl, then the character is seen as wearing dresses or liking the color pink. Likewise, if the character identifies a boy, he is thus seen playing with trucks or mud as boys stereotypically do. The author also notes how the color of text on the page changes based on the child character's identity, so if a girl-identifying character was still identifying as boy in certain situations, then the written text may be blue. In contrast, if the character was identifying as a girl in a more secure context, then the color of the text on the page may be in softer tones such as pastels (Crawley, 2017). According to Crawley (2017), "color not only alludes to gender but fortifies gender dichotomies and stereotypes" (p. 33). So even though the character identifies as transgender and is, in essence, pushing back on gender discourses that exist concerning what it means to be a boy or a girl, they are ultimately still represented in heteronormative and stereotypical means. The continued heteronormative representation is damaging as it perpetuates conformity to gender roles associated with a binary gender system. Children who identify as LGBTQ+ may feel pressure to maintain binary gender roles and children who are cisgender may internalize ideologies that support LGBTQ+ individuals having to fit into heteronormative identities.

Earles (2017) examines the relationship between gendered characters and children's responses to gendered behaviours of characters during preschool storytimes in Florida, US. Earles (2017) suggests that when representing gender non-conforming characters, the

fluidity between gendered practices seems only to flow one way, meaning that it is generally more acceptable for a girl to perform typically boy activities or behaviours while boys cannot so readily perform female activities. The results from Crawley's (2017) study also speak to gender performativity as the transgender characters in the books are primarily characters who identify as girls. The prevalence of girl -identifying characters not only gives the appearance that the majority of transgender individuals identify as girls, but also that transitioning to, and identifying as a girl, is more acceptable (Crawley, 2017) than the reverse. This disparity could be a potential issue with cultural values and beliefs; as Crawley (2017) suggests, it fails to recognize that LGBTQ+ people are as varied as cisgender people, and that gender expression happens in a multitude of ways.

An additional concern among texts with LGBTQ+ characters is depictions which show the characters experiencing great emotional struggles and isolation (Crawley, 2017; Earles, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016). Crawley suggests representation which focuses on challenges and isolation rather than triumphs and community, is a risk as it may convey that identifying as a trans-person or non-cisgender means inevitable sadness and loneliness. However, the author also acknowledges that it can reflect the potential real-life struggle that goes along with identifying as LGBTQ+ and the internal transition that goes with it (Crawley, 2017). The perception that gender transition implies sadness and loneliness is further problematic as it may discourage children who questioning or who feel they do not identify as their sex from seeking guidance or help from people around them for fear of rejection. Children that identify as anything other than cisgender may internalize that they are not worthy and will always have a life of hardship. Uninclusive messages such as these speak to a growing need for educational professionals to understand what children are reading and engaging with on more than a mere surface or storyboard level. Professionals in school-based institutions need to understand what kind of gender-based ideologies they are pushing when choosing to support and advertise initiatives such as the Silver Birch program. Without this critical understanding, educational professionals may unknowingly be supporting texts which purport a life of trauma and hardship if a student identifies as non-binary.

2.4 Parental Representation

A final category that I identified in the literature regarding gender role representation is that of parental figures (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Gender role stereotyping of parents is a less common focus in research of children's literature (Adams et al., 2011). However, there is an intriguing shift of representation of gender disparities as the under-representation in parenthood moves to men instead of women. Regarding parental roles, fathers are the ones who are under-represented, but when they do appear they are less likely to show affection towards children and typically avoid childcare (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). A significant issue with the representation of fathers is the lack of representation at all; that is, they often do not exist (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Adams et al. (2011) suggest that the lack of representation may be reflective of a perceived hands-off approach in paternal care or a cultural perspective that supports a more distant parenting style from fathers. In terms of the representation of women as mothers, they are still depicted as being the ones responsible for domestic tasks and caring for the children (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Although, perhaps surprisingly, mothers were also the ones who were depicted as the disciplinarians and expressing anger, possibly suggesting that home is a type of 'safe zone' where women are allowed to display anger (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). The evident imbalance of parental gender roles links with the previous discussion about overall gender representations and LGBTQ+ characters; disparities remain which send a message to children that there are expectations for gender-based behaviour regardless of one's role in society or identity.

All of the aforementioned research has examined children's picture books primarily used in preschool-aged classrooms (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011). However, this research relies on more quantifiable representations, i.e. counting how many times a male or female is depicted in each book. While it is important to understand the frequency of gender-based depictions, it is also

important to understand the contexts and behaviours of characters and how this relates to gender representation. The current body of research concerning gender in children's literature is an important base for understanding representation. However, it is just that, a base. The focus on children's picture books demonstrates that issues with gender representation exist in children's literature; as such, it provides support through which research can move beyond picture books and into middle-grade texts. Given the plethora of research with children's picture books and the lack of research surrounding early novels for children, the current study examines gender representation in novels published for children in grades 3 to 6. More specifically, this study explores and compares gender representation in Silver Birch-nominated novels from the 2009 and 2019 fiction category.

2.5 Children's Literature as a Cultural Reflection

Children's literature is often a source for sharing cultural values, beliefs, and as a means of representing the current cultural climate (Conforti, 2015; Flannery-Quinn, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Mattix & Sobolak, 2014; Parlevliet, 2011). Flannery-Quinn (2006) suggests that children's stories act as a cultural artifact that communicates what is considered valuable, and how members of the said culture create meaning. For example, when considering the representation of fathers in children's literature, Flannery-Quinn (2006) suggests that the time of publication reflects practices at the time. The author explains that fathers are less interactive and more distant or removed in children's literature published before 1960. Post-1960, fathers involve themselves more in their children's lives but also provide less physical affection than mothers (Flannery-Quinn, 2006). The shift in depictions of father figures in children's literature suggests a cultural change in the involvement of fathers within the lives of children. Yet, it still reflects the idea that physical affection is more acceptable from mothers. This shift in representation also supports the idea that literature is a means through which "expected behaviours and patterns of life [pass] on from generation to generation" (Parlevliet, 2011, p. 464).

As a researcher, early childhood educator (ECE), and an avid reader, I understand that the relationship between the reader and content within texts is more complicated than children as mere empty vessels waiting to be filled with cultural beliefs and values.

However, I also understand that children learn from books they consume and use these learnings to make meaning of the world they experience. Parlevliet (2011) suggests that literature inherently absorbs elements of the culture in which it is created, from values and contexts to opinion and prejudices, that not only reflect the author but the context in which the author was raised or currently finds themselves in. Thus, it is essential to understand how cultural perspectives can shape a story that children read, and specifically in this work, how gendered culture appears in the Silver Birch (OLA, 2019) texts children are reading.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods

This chapter discusses where more knowledge could be useful relative to the literature of gender representations in children's literature, as well as establish a theoretical framework that shapes the current study. In it, I also explain the specific methodology and methods used to analyze the selected texts.

3.1 Opportunities for Knowledge Contribution in Literature and Justification

As mentioned in chapter two, the majority of research concerned with gender representations in children's literature has focused on depictions in picture books meant for preschool-aged children (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Filipovic, 2018; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972). The less prevalent nature of research concerning novels for young readers creates an opportunity for analysis regarding gender representations in early novels for primary or junior-aged children. The present study builds on knowledge regarding middle-grade stories by researchers such as Diekman and Murnen (2004) who examine novels for elementary-aged children recommended to educators for being "sexist" or "non-sexist," and Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016), who explore LGBTQ+ representations suitable for children in grades 3–6.

My study will contribute contextual information to current knowledge. Many studies in this literature review use a content analysis approach, focusing on numerical tallies based on the pictures in the texts. Often these studies examine how many times males or females appear in the images and what they are doing or items they are holding. To complement this work, a focus is now needed on the language, interactions, and contexts

in which these gender representations are happening. By focusing on the language used and the contexts characters experience, there exists an opportunity to extend the current research and to reach a deeper understanding of gender representation in children's literature. For example, understanding motives for actions can help discern whether the woman being nurturing because someone was hurt, or because she is a mom at home caring for her child?

This study explores possible changes in gender representation in the Silver Birch nominees; I examine texts from 2009 and the most recent pool of nominees from 2019. I will explore the following questions:

- 1) How is gender represented in Silver Birch nominees from 2009 and 2019, be it male, female, or non-binary?
- 2) How does context impact gender representations of characters?
- 3) How does the language used by the authors influence perceived gender roles and norms?
- 4) How does the language and interactions of and between characters speak to perceived gender roles and norms?
- 5) How do gender representations differ when comparing Silver Birch award nominees from 2009 and 2019?

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The following section addresses queer theory, the primary theoretical framework which will inform my proposed research.

3.2.1 Background and Operational Definitions

I begin to ground the study by forwarding an understanding of the term *gender*. Gender, as described by de Lauretis (1987, p. 3 as cited in Sanford, 2005), is not a biological

force; rather, it is the byproduct and process of being that combines various discourses, ways of knowing, and experiences in daily life. Through this process people learn what is acceptable and expected of them in terms of gender behaviour and expression (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Based on my reading of Sanford (2005), Blaise and Taylor (2012), and Sumara (2001), I acknowledge gender as fluid, complex, multilayered, and more than merely a stop on a spectrum of maleness or femaleness.

As critical readers, it is vital to question and consider the discourses that educators are supporting in educational settings and encouraging children to engage with. I understand discourses, similarly to gender, as being complex and multifaceted. Foucault (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013) explains that discourses encompass power relations and as such, dominant groups determine what the greater public discusses. Blaise and Taylor (2012) suggest gender discourses are a means to regulate gender practices through the establishment of normalized and acceptable behaviours, that is, heteronormative practices. Queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012), as a research lens, facilitates in deconstructing normalized gender discourses present in the Silver Birch books and fosters a deeper understanding of potential heteronormative behaviours expressed. Thus, based on the mentioned readings (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013), I acknowledge that discourse can take multiple forms and include both oral and written aspects involved in everyday life (Weedon, 1997 as in Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). It is also through these readings that I understand that gender discourses demonstrate power and control through the inclusion and exclusion of characteristics, behaviours, contexts, and practices that authors portrayed through their chosen characters.

3.2.2 Queer Theory

Blaise & Taylor (2012) state that “queer theory is a framework that offers insights into how seemingly ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ gender, as constructed by dominant gender discourses, is regulated by being linked to seemingly ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ discourse of sexuality” (p. 91). That is, queer theory allows for the gendered behaviour, descriptions, and interactions between characters to be examined in terms of how they feed into

dominant gender discourses, namely heteronormativity, as ‘natural’ and ‘normal,’ or how to subvert gender discourses. Blaise & Taylor (2012) claim that heterosexual discourses are rampant in children’s contexts, and gender discourses are almost inevitably heteronormative. Heteronormative discourses are prevalent in texts with LGBTQ+ characters (Crawley, 2017; Earles, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016), with heteronormative representation as common despite characters identifying as non-cisgender. Queer theory further allows me to call into question common-sense understanding of gender and gender roles and will be valuable to understand how heteronormativity can impact teaching and learning (Sumara, 2001), particularly regarding the Silver Birch texts.

3.3 Methodology

This qualitative study of children’s literature nominated for the Silver Birch award compares gender representations in both 2009 and 2019 (OLA, 2019) nominees. I conduct the study through a critical discourse analysis/study framework (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Wodak and Meyer (2016) explain that the term ‘critical discourse analysis’ has changed to ‘critical discourse studies’ in recent years. Wodak and Meyer (2016) elaborate that there has been repeated confusion with the term ‘critical discourse analysis’ due to the assumption that it means a set method of analysis. To reduce confusion the approach is now termed critical discourse studies (CDS), and it encompasses “analyzing, understanding, and explaining social phenomenon that is necessarily complex and thus requires a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (van Dijk, 2013 as cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Wodak, 2012c). CDS connects with queer theory (Blaise & Taylor, 2012), as its purpose is to question, analyze, and explain social and gendered practices that are assumed to be normal and natural in western society. Furthermore, “one of the most significant principles of CDS is the important observation that use of language is a ‘social practice’ that is both determined by the social structure and contributes to stabilizing and changing that structure

simultaneously” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, n.p.). Thus, CDS is an appropriate framework for analyzing the gendered discourses in children’s literature.

This study draws on specific elements from ECA as “[its] emphasis is on discovery and description, including search for contexts, underlying meanings, patterns, and processes, rather than mere quantity or numerical relationships between two or more variables” (Altheide, 1996 as cited in Altheide, 2004, n.p.). As the purpose of this study is to understand the context and to discover trends or patterns in representation within Silver Birch nominees, I read and assessed the texts paying particular attention to the language used to describe characters, the behaviours or activities the characters engaged in, and the context in which depictions occur. From here, I break down broadly categorized notes into common patterns of representation.

3.3.1 Ethnographic Content Analysis

Previous research concerning gender representation in children’s literature has often focused on quantifiable depictions of gender and behaviours. While numerical data helps understand the frequency of depictions, a more qualitative analysis provides a more in-depth insight into context and language used to supports the depictions. An ethnographic content analysis (ECA), according to Altheide (1987), is concerned with understanding the construction and sharing of meaning and is “embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison” (p. 68). Additionally, ECA supports the use of numerical and narrative data, and similar to grounded theory, ECA attempts to form a new theory rather than prove current theories (Altheide, 1987). The outcome of ECA tends to create robust descriptive information as the data used is frequently coded conceptually, allowing items to be useful in multiple ways (Altheide, 1987). In this study, ECA helped to contextualize the language of gender representation within the Silver Birch nominated texts (OLA, 2019) and identify how it promotes particular understandings of gender roles and norms (Altheide, 1987). Additionally, the ECA elements of the analysis, supported me to identify themes within the books related to scenes, characters, and other story elements as well as to notice patterns of gender representation.

The data for this study come from the published list of nominees in the fiction category of the Silver Birch Award (OLA, 2019) for 2009 and 2019, of which there are ten nominated titles each year, for a total sample size of 20 novels. I selected the fiction category as it covers a broader range of characters and perspectives. The non-fiction selection ranges in topics from animals to people, robotics, and technology. As the non-fiction category does not encompass texts related to only people and their stories, I eliminated it from the analysis.

Following the methods as proposed by Fairclough (2013), I will analyze the texts for representations of gender through aspects such as character language, preferences, behaviour, and physical/character descriptions in connection to gender stereotypes, heteronormative gender roles, and gender expectations. I explore the context, meanings, and patterns of gender representations, drawing on ECA (Altheide, 2004), which fits within the CDS framework (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) and is suitable to implement through a queer theory lens.

3.4 Study Texts

The study included Silver Birch nominated texts from 2009 and 2019 (see Tables 1 and 2). These two cohorts allowed the study to inquire into the most current winners and to see what progress, if any, had been made to gender representations in a decade.

The 2009 and 2019 lists comprise the ten shortlisted titles per year, which children then voted on, with the text with the most votes winning the Silver Birch award for that year. The winning texts appear with an asterisk. The OLA (n.d. -b) lists, for author and publishers, the current eligibility criteria used for works submitted to the Forest of Reading awards. The current criteria, listed in order of importance, are as follows:

1. Literary quality in the case of fiction, including but not limited to:
 - structure, richness of language, acceptance of authentic voices that are not limited by British or Canadian grammar (such as Patois), craft of the writer, pace, clarity;
2. Quality of presentation for non-fiction, including but not limited to:

- appeal and appropriateness of the presentation, clarity, layout, format, diversity of people in illustrations/photographs (including, but not limited to: age, gender, body types, mental or physical abilities, skin colours, etc.);
- 3. Audience appeal
 - appropriateness to the age group (school-aged, adult literacy, etc.), a range of readability, inclusiveness and diversity, the themes and content;
- 4. Accuracy, relevance, and authenticity of voice:
 - the author writes a story and/or creates characters from their own culture (#OwnVoices), has experience with the culture (i.e., LGBTQIA2S, deaf/hard of hearing community, religion or faith, culture or ethnicity, etc.) being portrayed and/or has consulted with or sought the approval of people of that culture (i.e., Elders, community group, co-authored, etc.);
- 5. Balance in the final list:
 - characters (including protagonists) represent diverse backgrounds, including gender and gender expression, racial and ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQIA2S characters, etc
 - variety of subjects and genres [that are] appealing to different audiences.
 - Authors and illustrators represent diverse backgrounds, including gender and gender expression, racial and ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQIA2S, etc.
 - Geographical settings, e.g., rural, urban, alternate realities, etc.;
- 6. Curriculum connection is outside the purposes of the reading programs for the school-aged programs. (OLA, n.d. -b)

Table 1

2009 Silver Birch Nominees.

Title	Author	Published
<i>Chocolate River Rescue</i>	Jennifer McGrath Kent	2007
<i>Eye of the Crow: The Boy Sherlock Holmes, His First Case</i>	Shane Peacock	2007
<i>The Moon Children</i>	Beverley Brenna	2007
<i>Newton and the Time Machine</i>	Michael McGowan	2008
<i>Peril at Pier Nine</i>	Penny Draper	2007
<i>Reading the Bones</i>	Gina McMurchy-Barber	2008
<i>The Royal Woods</i>	Matt Duggan	2007

<i>Sacred Leaf</i>	Deborah Ellis	2007
<i>Swindle</i>	Gordon Korman	2008
<i>The Third Eye*</i>	Mahtab Narismhan	2007

Source: Ontario Library Association. (2019). *Silver birch award winners and nominees 1994–2019* [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://www.accessola.org/web/Documents/OLA/Forest/Archives/2019/02-Silver-Birch-Archive-2019.pdf>

Table 2

2019 Silver Birch Nominees

Title	Author	Published
<i>The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem</i>	Kevin Sylvester and Britt Wilson	2018
<i>Chase*</i>	Linwood Barclay	2017
<i>Ebb and Flow</i>	Heather Smith	2018
<i>Elephant Secret</i>	Eric Walters	2018
<i>Falcon Wild</i>	Terry Lynn Johnson	2017
<i>Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy</i>	Gareth Wronski	2017
<i>Mine!</i>	Natalie Hyde	2017
<i>Missing Mike</i>	Shari Green	2018
<i>Sit</i>	Deborah Ellis	2017
<i>The Train of Lost Things</i>	Ammi-Joan Paquette	2018

Source: Ontario Library Association. (2019). *Silver birch award winners and nominees 1994 – 2019* [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://www.accessola.org/web/Documents/OLA/Forest/Archives/2019/02-Silver-Birch-Archive-2019.pdf>

3.5 Trustworthiness and Transferability

To establish trustworthiness, I will use a method of triangulation achieved through gender representations in the 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch nominees noted in this research, my analysis, and previous results from past literature. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I will further establish trustworthiness through creating deep and rich descriptions of the events within storied texts throughout the analysis to help foster a better understanding of them and the contexts, language, or descriptions brought up therein. I also establish trustworthiness by acknowledging my own biases as a woman who is white, cisgender, a feminist, an ECE, an avid reader, and a person of privilege who has had the luxury of being able to pursue post-secondary and graduate education. I understand that I bring my understanding and interpretations of gender and gender roles into my analysis and that my knowledge will impact it.

By comparing gender representations in texts from 2009 and 2019, any changes in representations of gender roles and norms are evident and documented. Furthermore, as the Silver Birch are texts which are supported by and advertised in education settings, the findings may apply to other books used in classrooms or purchased for libraries; that is, similar gender-based messages may appear in books used for teaching and assessments of students.

3.6 Contribution to the Field

My study hopes to contribute to the studies of gender and children's literature, and to the overall field of curriculum studies, by exploring the contexts and ways in which representations of gender appear in materials educational institutions support. With much of the previous research in gender and children's literature focusing on picture books for young children, my research can create an opening for examining gender in Canadian authored novels for children. My research will provide helpful information to educators and other professionals in education in terms of how gender can be represented in texts

and why it is important for educators to be critical readers before using texts with children. It also promotes the need to examine texts which are being used, supported, or advertised in school-based settings.

3.7 Importance of the Study

This research study helps to create a focus on gender representations and gender-based messages that young children are interacting with and internalizing as they read storied texts. Furthermore, this research can help educators to better understand the messages that their students may be interpreting and provide a starting point for the conversation around gender, gender roles, and gender stereotypes. My study also provides insight into gender representation in texts by Canadian authors that reflect current and recent gender-based discourses taking place within Canadian publishing. It can be challenging to find more Canadian focused research; as such, this study allows for an additional perspective within the research field, and will hopefully foster a deeper understanding of Canadian perspectives on gender and gender representations.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the current study. Within this chapter, I will address common representations of gender within each of the Silver Birch cohorts. Additionally, I discuss any outliers in terms of representation.

4.1 2009 Silver Birch Nominees

Representations of gender in the 2009 cohort were relatively static and in line with depictions and findings from previous studies. That is, gender stereotypes are common, as are gender-based tropes commonly found in children's literature. The following findings section discusses gender representation for depictions of characters, particularly concerning the situations they experience, interactions with other characters, and language used to describe them. Additionally, this chapter also discusses the representation of parental figures. Table 3 summarizes the themes I identified for character representation based on their gender and the contexts they experience.

Analysis of the 2009 Silver Birch nominees reveals a binary representation of gender. Thus, gender refers to boy or girl for child characters, and as man or woman for adult and parental figures. Stereotypical gender roles are primarily adhered to, as were gender-based behaviours. Parental roles are also binary and primarily reflect gender roles of the stereotypical nuclear family, wherein the mother acts as a homemaker and caretaker and the father supports the family.

Table 3

2009 Silver Birch Nominee Themes

Boy Representation	Girl Representation	Adult/Parental Representation	Non-Binary Representation
Leaders	Nurturers	Men/Fathers:	None
Adventurous	Build	- uninvolved/absentee	
Brave	Relationships	- disciplinarian	

Risk-takers and saviours	Emotionally available and involved	- comic relief
Emotions as a weakness	Innocent Obedient	Women/Mothers: - nurturers - cooks - emotional supporters

4.1.1 Representation of Boy Characters

Boy characters are more often in lead or title roles, with boys as a lead in seven out of ten of the 2009 texts. Boy characters are adventurous, brave, risk-takers, and saviours. They are often quick to act and reckless in their decisions and yet are lauded as heroes at the end because they perform a great feat necessary to save others.

4.1.1.1 Boy descriptions.

The initial introduction to a boy character focuses on their interests or abilities. For example, across the books, boy lead characters are initially described as having an interest in robots and technology (McGrath, 2007), is a meticulous planner (Korman, 2008), and an inventor (McGowan, 2008). There is a focus on the capabilities of boy characters, and these capabilities ultimately support the plotline of the story. For example, being interested in robots and technology helps Shawn from *Chocolate River Rescue* (McGrath, 2007) keep himself and his friends safe while waiting to be rescued. Similarly, being a meticulous planner helps Griffin from *Swindle* (Korman, 2008) and his friends to get justice when a pawn shop owner scams him. Finally, being an inventor aids Newton from *Newton and The Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008) in saving an entire civilization. Additionally, for non-lead characters and particularly when the role is an antagonist, the first description format shifts and describes the character in terms of looks. However, this description fails to be flattering; that is, the language demonstrates that this character is evil, an enemy, or just someone who cannot be trusted (Narsimhan, 2007; Korman, 2008; Peacock, 2007).

4.1.1.2 Boys as leaders.

Boy characters are often the leader of their peer groups and are the ones in control. In texts that had a boy as the lead character, they were more often in a leadership role despite there being other side characters who were participating in the events along with them. Jack, the lead character in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007), participates in sailboat racing alongside his peers. Still, he is referred to as the captain and the best sailor by peers and adults alike and is the one who the other children check in with when embarking on an adventure or going to play. He becomes the focal point for leadership in the group. When boys are in groups that contain girls, boys are more often the leader, or if it is not evident that there is a designated leader, the boy character attempts to prove that they are capable of that role. For example, in *Chocolate River Rescue* (McGrath, 2007), brothers Shawn and Craig, alongside their friend Tony, become trapped on a patch of ice that breaks away. When Petra, a girl who ends up coming to save them, tries to demonstrate her knowledge and ability to rescue them, there is conflict, and Shawn attempts to take the leadership role by showing he can think of solutions too and can keep the four of them safe.

4.1.1.3 Boys as adventurous.

Lead boy characters are adventurous and thrill-seekers. They often seek out activities that allow them to participate in ways that are fun, engaging, and involved new experiences. For example, in *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008), *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007), and *Swindle* (Korman, 2008), the lead characters seek adventure through activities such as time travel, racing sailboats, and sleeping over in an abandoned house respectively. These characters are also all excited to boast about their adventures to their peer groups.

4.1.1.4 Boys as brave.

Boy characters regularly experience challenging situations, be it facing fierce guard dogs (Korman, 2008), a murderer (Peacock, 2007), a raging fire (Draper, 2007), or leprechauns (McGowan, 2008). It becomes increasingly necessary to be brave and overcome danger.

They can put emotions such as fear aside and demonstrate that they cannot be stopped even in times of apparent imminent peril. Bravery presents subtly, in that the boy characters are not boasting about their actions to the other peers. Instead, bravery tends to come from a necessity to save others or to right a wrong. Thus, in their attempt, the boy character finds himself up against a situation where they morally have no choice but to confront the danger they face and must do the right thing.

4.1.1.5 Boys as both risk-takers and saviours.

Boy characters commonly engage in risk-taking and saving others within the 2009 cohort of texts. For example, in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007) Jack is often getting into trouble for not thinking through his actions, which results in property damage. However, upon seeing the Nuronic cruise ship on fire in the harbour, he steals a boat. He starts to try and rescue passengers who have fled the blaze and jumped into the water (Draper, 2007); thus, Jack is a saviour despite his risk-taking behaviour. This duality is seen again in *Swindle* (Korman, 2008) and *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008) as both lead characters, Griffin and Newton respectively, willingly take risks and enter dangerous, potentially life-threatening situations. Once again, they end up saving the day and others in their world see them as heroes.

4.1.1.6 Boys and emotions.

Representation of boy characters includes a fear of expressing emotions and a loss of masculinity when they do share feelings. Emotions threaten boys' sense of masculinity and are not to be expressed, for boys must remain steadfast in tough times (Ellis, 2007; McGowan, 2008; Narsimhan, 2007). For example, in *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008), side characters comment on a perceived lack of masculinity when a boy character shows emotions. It is common to feminize a boy character if there is a perceived hesitation or weakness in him. Commander Joe, a toy soldier from *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008), exemplifies this when referring to Max as a "negative Nancy" (p. 99) and states that they need to be "going down as men" (p. 99) should their mission fail. Emotions are considered weak, and boys are insulted by questioning their masculinity.

When boy characters do show emotions, they are reduced and belittled. The language used to describe crying includes “blubbering,” “bawling like a baby” (McGowan, 2008, p. 99), and “sobbing little boy” (Narsimhan, 2007, p. 118). Despite facing a traumatic experience and witnessing people die in front of him, Jack cries only one time when he is alone with his mother. Otherwise, he does not express emotions more complex than happy when he wins a race or anger when he gets into trouble (Draper, 2007). The character of Sherlock in *Eye of the Crow* (Peacock, 2007) says that emotions are a weakness and are merely something that holds him back. He vows to seek justice and turn feelings aside, that he “needs to be ice cold” (Peacock, 2007, p. 305) as he seeks vengeance and justice for the death of his mother. The author describes Sherlock as stopping his tears, pushing aside his anger, and using it as motivation for justice (Peacock, 2007). Representation of boys shows them consistently shunning emotion and hiding the fact that they can hurt and express more than happiness or anger.

The emotional experience of boys also appears in descriptions of external phenomena as well, such as the weather. In *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007), Jack is upset after his rescue attempts at the fire in the harbour; his emotional state matches the weather and ship horn sound, grey and gloomy, respectively. While the pathetic fallacy of reflecting Jack’s emotions in the weather perhaps aids in the severity of what he is feeling, it also removes the emotional experience from Jack as the one having to process his trauma. Thus, highlighting how boys continue to avoid processing complex emotions.

4.1.2 Representation of Girl Characters

Similar to boy characters, girl characters appear in mostly stereotypical roles. Girls are the lead or title character in three of the ten novels in this cohort. The scenarios they experience are more girl-centered, in that, they generally take on caretaker roles. The problems girls face are more relationship-based rather than adventure-oriented, and emotions are more acceptable.

4.1.2.1 Girl descriptions.

Girl characters' initial descriptions focus on either appearance, relationship to a male character, or performing tasks at home. Introducing girl characters, unlike their boy counterparts, often dictates that they are described in terms of their looks first rather than ability or interests. For example, Mary, a tertiary character in *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008), is introduced to readers as a “huge woman who could barely fit through the doorway” (p. 73). Additionally, after the less than flattering introduction, Mary is identified as the daughter of a male farmer, who the reader never actually meets. Her name appears for the first time 17 pages from her first introduction. Petra, a secondary character in *Chocolate River Rescue* (McGrath, 2007), is also introduced in terms of appearance and relation to a man—her uncle Daryl—despite Petra having a more significant role and being the heroine in the story. It is only after the reader learns what Petra looks like, that she has a male relative who works for fire and rescue, that Petra is known to have an interest in skiing and wants to be a firefighter herself. Even when a secondary female character is a professional, her looks are the dominant focus in their description. Dr. Eddy, a woman archaeologist in *Reading the Bones* (McMurchy-Barber, 2008), is expected by lead character Peggy to resemble Indiana Jones, yet, Dr. Eddy is described as a “chubby gnome” and wearing “a khaki safari shirt and pants, and a fishing hat covered in pins” (p. 16).

In terms of lead or title girl characters, initial descriptions varied slightly. Narsimhan initially describes Tara from *The Third Eye* (2007) in terms of her relation to others, as she is hugging her brother while “dressed in their best to celebrate the joyous occasion of Diwali” (p. 11). In *The Royal Woods* (Duggan, 2007), the girl lead is first introduced as “the red-haired Sydney” (p. 8) and Peggy, the lead character from *Reading the Bones* (McMurchy-Barber, 2008), first appears in an opening scene helping her aunt weed a garden. Peggy is not described until the second chapter, where she is dressed in her “favourite ketchup-stained Vancouver Canucks shirt and shorts off of the floor” (McMurchy-Barber, 2008, p. 16). Note the difference with Peggy's description. Her description is perhaps a more masculine representation and demonstrates a lack of care concerning her appearance and more of an interest in other activities.

4.1.2.2 Girls as innocent.

The language used with girl characters often projects innocence, which sets them up as childlike, as evident in instances where girls were referred to by other characters terms such as “young missy” (Draper, 2007, p. 62) and descriptions of their voice as “like birdsong” (Brenna, 2007, p. 101). Additionally, the language used to describe girls as having child-like features, for example, Natasha from *Moon Children* (Brenna, 2007), has “large, round eyes, [a] small heart-shaped face, [and] hair smooth as the feathers of a bird’s wing” (p. 66). The imagery associated with these descriptions creates an image of innocence as it compares the girl to a small, perhaps helpless animal.

4.1.2.3 Girls as nurturers.

Girl characters often take on a nurturer role, whether they are parental figures or not. Tara, in *The Third Eye* (Narsimhan, 2007), looks after her younger brother as per her mother’s instruction after her mother flees in fear. Tara becomes the proxy parent and attempts to keep her brother fed and cared for while under the eye of her stepmother, and then again when she convinces her brother to run away after evil enters their village. Unfortunately, Tara is left with immense guilt after her brother goes missing and is presumed dead after they spend a night in the forest. Similarly, Sydney acts as a proxy parent for her younger brother Turk when she convinces Turk that they should run away from home, specifically to their aunt and uncle’s farm out West, after their mother dies. Sydney feels their father does not care for them anymore (Duggan, 2007). Sydney cares for her younger brother and is protective in a parental way, wanting to ensure that he is safe, which she accomplishes by standing up to other boys who are picking on her brother, by seeking shelter, and finding ways for them to make money. At the same time, they travel across the country so they can be fed and clean. Girls are also depicted as nurturers of non-humans, as is evident with Savannah in *Swindle* (Korman, 2008) as she becomes concerned for a guard dog and does what she can to protect those without a voice.

4.1.2.4 Girls and relationships.

Depictions of girls and their relationships center on the aspect of caring for others. Girls are often the ones who are concerned about their relationships and attend to the emotional needs of other characters. In *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007) Lucy-Mae offers support to Jack after witnessing the fire at the pier and listens to him when he is upset afterward. Lucy-Mae was also the one who consoles Mrs. Addison after the fire on the Nuronc, offering comfort in a time of great tragedy (Draper, 2007). Lucy-Mae also demonstrates that, as a girl, she needs to be careful about how she interacts with the other children, particularly the boys. She is selective with what and how she says things not to upset her peers (Draper, 2007). Bonita from *Sacred Leaf* (Ellis, 2007), however, is very guarded in her relationships and makes it hard for others to get close to her. She is sarcastic, defensive, and very protective of her family. For Lucy-Mae (Draper, 2007) and Bonita (Ellis, 2007), an underlying current of concern appears to guide their relationships with others. Specifically, a current of fear focuses them on the well-being of others. Focus on others becomes a significant component of girl character decision-making, seen again and again through the characters of Tara (Narsimhan, 2007), Peggy (McMurchy-Barber, 2008), Sydney (Duggan, 2007), Petra (McGrath, 2007), and Savannah (Korman, 2008). Girl characters make specific decisions because they are concerned that they may hurt someone else's feelings or that they will endanger lives, ultimately leading to a sense of responsibility and guilt. For example, Peggy (McMurchy-Barber, 2008), while interested in the history of the bones found in her aunt and uncle's back yard, is also concerned with the well-being of said bones. She finds herself torn between trying to protect the bones and to support her mother, who is on the other side of the country. Out of her concern for her mother and her financial situation, Peggy sells an ancient amulet that she finds with the bones to a local collector's shop.

4.1.2.5 Girls and emotions.

Depictions of emotions for girls fell into two categories: negative and soft. While girls display more varied emotions and express feelings more openly when compared to the boy characters, girls are also represented in more negative ways when they are expressing

emotions. For example, while there are few girl or women characters in *Newton and the Time Machine* (McGowan, 2008), they are presented as being hot and cold with their emotions; that is, they are quick to anger or to get upset. Mary is often responding to Newton and his friends by yelling and is described as being loud and angry (McGowan, 2008). Bonita (Ellis, 2007) responds negatively to Diego, a child her family has taken in. Her communications are pointed and blunt as she is unwelcoming to him staying with her family. Her style of responses appears to stem from a need to protect her family.

Girl characters are also depicted as using emotions in negative ways and as a means of getting someone back for perceived wrongdoing. For example, Sydney (Duggan, 2007) uses her anger at her father to justify running away with her brother. Sydney and Turk's mother recently died, and their father is stricken with grief and becomes depressed; he is unable to care for his two children during that time. Sydney becomes angry and decides that she and her brother should run away because their dad simply does not care. While acknowledging her anger, she believes that "leaving him alone would be doing him the biggest favor she could think of [...] what she was truly trying to do by running away was to teach him a lesson" (Duggan, 2007, p. 34).

In softness, the second category of girl emotions, girls display more empathy for other beings and are more subtle in their expression of sadness, pain, or sorrow. Savannah (Korman, 2008) is soft-spoken and more empathetic, particularly with animals. Natasha from *The Moon Children* (Brenna, 2007) is a child who is non-verbal for most of the story as a result of trauma prior to her adoption from an orphanage in Romania. Natasha bonds with a neighbor boy named Billy; she listens to him talk and draws pictures of the moon. However, Natasha's (Brenna, 2007) range of emotions is still soft and gentle like Savannah's (Korman, 2008) in that the description of Natasha's sadness when reflecting on missing her birth mother presents as "glistening eyes" (p. 66). The idea of knowing her birth mother is still out there, and perhaps looking at the same moon as she is, is a sad thought for Natasha, and yet her more complex feelings are simplified and reduced to a glister in the eye.

While girls' emotions are often depicted in negative tones or with an element of softness, girl characters do also experience happiness and joy. Still, these experiences are also simplified, and in some cases, linked back to their appearance. For example, Billy, when interacting with Natasha, is described as thinking that "she looked nice, laughing. Being happy suited her" (Brenna, 2007, p. 67). The connection here is that girls should be happy and cheerful, and that ultimately, it makes them look better or appear more appealing to the male eye.

4.1.2.6 Girls and obedience.

A final emerging theme for girl characters was that of obedience, particularly girls following orders provided by boy characters. Rather than asking for the assistance of a girl character, the boy character demands action or compliance from the girl. In *The Third Eye* (Narsimhan, 2007) Tara must follow her father's orders as well as those of the adult man antagonist. Lucy-Mae (Draper, 2007) also obeys the commands of Jack and listens when he tells her that "it's bad luck to have a woman onboard a boat. Everybody knows that" (p. 27). Instead of being able to seek out adventure as she wishes, Lucy-Mae has relegated to the "girl" tasks of knitting and preparing food. Bonita (Ellis, 2007) is another example, for as much as she is strong-willed and determined to accomplish great things, she must follow the orders of her father, help with housework, and the care of her siblings. While there are potential cultural elements involved with each of these characters, the idea that girls are to remain obedient and put aside their wants is still evident.

4.1.3 Adult and Parental Representation

Adult and parental representation across the 2009 cohort is significantly less when compared to girl and boy characters; however, adults and parents still play integral roles in the plots despite their reduced appearance. This section will discuss the roles that adult men and women take on within these stories.

4.1.3.1 Representation of Men

Representation of men in the 2009 cohort of texts has some variation, with common depictions being the comical relief, the absentee or uninvolved father, the source of moral guidance, and the controlling or evil nemesis. Except for the evil nemesis, men are mostly uninvolved in much of the stories and generally appear only when necessary, given their assigned role in the text. The involvement of adult men characters is relatively minimal when compared to boy or girl characters, and the representation of the adult man is primarily as the evil nemesis.

4.1.3.1.1 Men as comedic relief.

Men as comedic relief presents sparingly, and these characters can, at times, also step in for the absentee or uninvolved father. For example, Uncle Stuart plays the role of comical relief in *Reading the Bones* (McMurphy-Barber, 2008). Uncle Stuart is mainly absent from the story, only appearing near the beginning to make jokes and make light of the situation when he and Peggy discover the bones in the garden, and then reappears at the end to offer more of the supportive role after Peggy experiences the loss of Mrs. Hubbs. In *The Royal Woods* (Duggan, 2007), Shep plays the role of comic relief; he is homeless, has some potential mental health challenges, and is perceived by the characters as being odd. He is “tall and lanky, with a long orange beard and a head of mad scraggly hair” (Duggan, 2007, p.25), and wearing a variety of clothes including a “canary yellow jacket” (p.25) and different coloured cowboy boots.

4.1.3.1.2 Men as controlling and evil nemesis.

The man as a controlling figure or evil nemesis is a typical depiction and can sometimes lead to the nemesis having a small change of heart by the end. Still, more often than not, the nemesis is merely handed his comeuppance by the main characters. In *Reading the Bones* (McMurphy-Barber, 2008), Mr. Grimbald acts as the nemesis. He lacks empathy for the dead, is only concerned with making money from the ancient amulet that Peggy discovers, and manipulates Peggy into selling him the talisman so that he benefits. By the end, Mr. Grimbald has a slight change of heart as he returns the amulet, but ultimately, he

is still an untrustworthy character who is motivated by greed. As the nemesis, men are vengeful, manipulative, command or seek control, and lack empathy and concern for others (Narsimhan, 2007; Korman, 2008; Peacock, 2007). As the antagonists of the stories, men give orders to their minions and remain focused on their end goal or their evil plan. Zarku, the antagonist in *The Third Eye* (Narsimhan, 2007), uses his magic to control the men of the village, to harm others such as the lead heroine Tara and displays a complete lack of empathy for the lives he has taken along his quest for power.

4.1.3.1.3 Men as uninvolved or absentee fathers

The second most common representation of men was that of being uninvolved or absent, particularly as fathers. As fathers, men primarily are uninvolved and are present in limited capacities. Repeatedly, men as fathers remain out of focus from the lead character. They preoccupy themselves with elements outside of the care of their children. For example, in *Swindle* (Korman, 2008), Griffin's father is unaware of his son's plan to break into a storefront and later a house with his peers. His father is preoccupied with his 'fruit picker' invention, and while the picker helps solve a problem in the story, he is not involved in his son's life. Wilber (Peacock, 2007), despite being an intelligent professor, also remains mostly absent from his son Sherlock's life and gives into his son's whims on the rare occasion he makes an appearance. Newton's father (McGowan, 2008) preoccupies himself with Newton's quadruplet brothers, who are the next soccer stars. If the father is not preoccupied in the text, then he is absent due to either addiction or mental illness. This absentee representation is evident with Billy's father (Brenna, 2008), who is an alcoholic, and Sydney and Turk's father (Duggan, 2007), who is suffering depression and grief after the death of their mother.

Note that men as fathers are not always absentee or uninvolved, as a few fathers are active in their children's lives; however, these depictions are far fewer than the absentee representations. Fathers were more involved in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007) and *Sacred Leaf* (Ellis, 2007). As involved fathers, these characters provide support and guidance, often trying to impart wisdom and steer behaviour and actions in a more moral or ethical direction. As involved fathers, these characters are also the ones who provide

punishment for wrongdoing as the method for moral and ethical behavioural guidance. For example, Jack's father in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007) attempts to guide Jack's behaviour in a more morally acceptable direction. He doles out punishment by taking away his boat as a means of doing so.

4.1.3.2 Representation of Women

Representation of women is relatively stereotypical and, as such, tends to place women in roles as caregivers for the family. These characters often worry about the safety or well-being of their spouses and children. Depictions of women performing household tasks such as cooking a meal for their family members or cleaning the house are common. Outside of caring for their families, women are either uninvolved in their child's lives, or they are deceased.

4.1.3.2.1 *Women as caregivers.*

First depictions of women, either as the mother or mother-like figure, is as a caregiver for their family. More often than not, the representations of women characters have them in the kitchen preparing and serving a meal for the spouse or children (Draper, 2007; Ellis, 2007; McGrath, 2007; McMurchy-Barber, 2008). The stereotypical caregiver role is prevalent in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007), wherein women are often in the kitchen preparing food for events, for the children, and the men. The aforementioned role of women as caregivers starts early in this work as the girl characters are also relegated to knitting classes to help prepare and serve food at different racing events. Women are the characters responsible for the emotional regulation of other characters. That is, women provide emotional support and guidance for other characters when it is needed. The idea of women as emotional support is strongly evident with the women in the community, particularly Missy Clapp in *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007) when Henry and his mother are taken to the Clapp household to stay and receive emotional support from Missy and other community 'moms' who are called upon to do their duty.

4.1.3.2.2 *Women as uninvolved or deceased.*

Women, like the men, were also represented as being uninvolved in the lives of children. However, rather than there being an influence from addiction or mental health, if a

woman is not involved in the child's life, it was usually the result of work commitments. Billy's mother (Brenna, 2007), for instance, is a single mother, pregnant with her second child, and is working many hours to try and improve their lives. Griffin's mother (Korman, 2008) is uninvolved in his life due to stress and anger at the current family financial situation due to his father's invention. As such, she preoccupies herself with trying to keep the family afloat and works a lot outside of the home to accomplish this. Finally, Peggy's mother (McMurchy-Barber, 2008) remains back home after sending Peggy to live with her aunt to be able to work more and ultimately earn money before moving out west herself. While women are uninvolved as well, the reason or context appears to be more out of trying to create a better life or situation for the family. The other reason that women are absent from the lives of the children is due to death, as in the case of Sydney and Turk (Duggan, 2007) and Sherlock (Peacock, 2007). However, maternal mortality is often used as a plot point that aids in either motivation, as seen with Sherlock or as a means of reflection and character growth, as seen with Sydney and Turk.

4.2 2019 Silver Birch Nominees

The 2019 Silver Birch nominees contain a notable shift in the depictions of various characters. In ten years, there has been a shift in how girls present, demonstrating the ability for girls to partake in similar adventures and activities as boys. Additionally, the balance of lead or title characters has shifted as well, with five of the ten nominees now containing a girl character as the lead, nearly doubling the representation from the 2009 cohort of texts. The 2019 cohort also sees an emerging representation of non-binary characters in one of the texts. Table 4 summarizes the themes of representation that emerged throughout the analysis of texts.

Table 4

2019 Silver Birch Nominee Themes

Boy Representation	Girl Representation	Adult/Parental Representation	Non-Binary Representation
Adventurers	Problem-solvers	Men/Fathers: - comic relief	Alien

Emotionally Reserved Saviours	Adventurers	- supportive
Problem-solvers	Saviours	- uninvolved/absentee
Fixers	Emotionally available	Women/Mothers:
	Seeking connection	- caretakers
		- uninvolved/absentee
		- supportive

4.2.1 Representation of Boy Characters

Boy characters in the 2019 cohort appear in similar ways to those in the 2009 group. A notable exception in the shift of representation of boy characters is within the depiction of emotions, in so much that, in the 2019 cohort, while emotions are still not beneficial for boys to express, it is not as negative of an element for boy life. Boys continue to be represented as adventurers, saviours, and fixers, while also gaining representation as effective problem-solvers. Another notable change is the balance of boy lead characters has also shifted, as boys now comprise 40% of the lead character roles compared to 70% within the 2009 cohort. Boys are still described initially in terms of their abilities, practices, and interests rather than looks.

4.2.1.1 Boys as Adventurers

Boys as adventurers remain a theme of representation within the 2019 cohort of texts. Boys in these texts may not actively seek out the adventures they find themselves on. However, they do find themselves repeatedly in situations that force them to overcome challenges that often threaten their survival and help to save others. Marty from *The Train of Lost Things* (Paquette, 2018) and Chris from *Mine!* (Hyde, 2017) embark on their adventures to fix their fathers' situations. Still, they face different challenges along the way that allows them to understand their capabilities and to grow as characters. While not trying to find a solution for his father, Jeff from *Chase* (Barclay, 2017) is unwillingly engaged in an adventure that has him running from dangerous men to save a hybrid cyborg/dog. Whether the experiences are to save someone or to better their own lives, these three boys face situations that force them to make rapid decisions that can mean life

or death. Unlike the boys from the 2009 cohort, these boys are not boastful about their experiences on their adventures. Instead, they accept that these experiences have helped them to get to where they are and that their adventures were just that: an adventure. A memory. A change in luck.

4.2.1.2 Boys and Emotions

Within the 2019 cohort, boys remain hesitant to display softer emotions, particularly those which involve crying openly; however, these more delicate emotions do not present as a weakness as in the 2009 cohort. Instead, tears are often pushed aside or held back as there are other elements to focus on or other things that need to accomplish. For example, in *The Train of Lost Things* (Paquette, 2018), Marty tries to avoid his feelings about his ailing father when talking to Dina. Instead of the emotions being a weakness, Marty understands his feelings and why he has made decisions to pull away from friends. Additionally, he is also exceedingly focused on the search for his jean jacket. He understands that he has a limited time to search, and as such, he does not have time to deal with his emotions in this situation. Jett in *Ebb & Flow* (Smith, 2018) is another example of a boy who is confronted with his feelings as “they came like a downpour of rain. Fast, hard, and out of the blue. If only they came like mist. Mist can’t soak you to the bones” (Smith, 2018, p. 19). He is faced with many emotions as he works through the outcome of an unpleasant event that he experienced. He is overwhelmed and consumed by his feelings at times, and yet he comes through the other side and can begin to make amends. The 2019 cohort demonstrates that emotions, while painful, are not something to be feared. This cohort also indicates that sometimes emotions appear at inopportune times, and that is ok.

4.2.1.3 Boys as Saviours and Fixers.

Boy characters again appear as saviours within the 2019 cohort; however, they are now also represented as fixers rather than risk-takers. Boys are still trying to save other people or other creatures. They remain concerned with protecting essential parts of their world. Boys are also concerned with trying to fix either their situation, the situation of a loved one (especially fathers), or righting mistakes they have made. Cooper from *Falcon Wild*

(Johnson, 2017) feels guilty for potentially causing the accident that Karma, Karma's father, and brother Gavin experience, and so Cooper goes searching for Karma after she has gone off in search of help. He rescues her from a fault line crack that she falls in, and in the end, uses his refueled dirt bike to seek out help and first responders. Cooper states that he has a "do-over" (Johnson, 2017, p.153) and is determined to fix his mistake and the harm he has done to Karma's family. Marty (Paquette, 2018), Chris (Hyde, 2017), and Jeff (Barclay, 2017) are all acting as saviours in their ways as they embark on their journeys and try to reach a solution which will improve the situations of others. Marty and Chris are determined to save their fathers, the former from death, and the latter from poverty and jail. Marty (Paquette, 2018) believes that if he can find and return with his jacket from the train of lost things that his dad will magically recover and be well again. Bringing home the jacket means saving his father's life. Chris (Hyde, 2017) seeks out the gold claim to provide a new life for himself, but also for his troubled father, who has been out of work for some time and had turned to alcohol to cope. Jafar, one of the characters featured in *Sit* (Ellis, 2017), is similar to Chris in that he is working hard to get his family out of debt and to have a better life, to no longer be poor, and to be able to have a full stomach. Claiming the land with the gold will mean that his father will no longer have to worry about money, and both their lives will be vastly improved. Jeff (Barclay, 2017) seeks to save the life of Chipper, the dog who has specifically sought out Jeff as a safe haven.

4.2.1.4 Boys as Problem-Solvers

A final theme that emerged was that of boys as problem-solvers. Many of the boys in the 2019 cohort face situations where they have to think quickly and respond in ways that would aid in an inevitable solution. Jeff from *Chase* (Barclay, 2017) has workers pursuing him from a scientific institute who are also trying to recapture Chipper, the hybrid cyborg/dog. The workers are dangerous individuals and attempt to cause harm to Jeff and Chipper many times. Jeff has to think quickly, alongside his friend Emily, to find ways to avoid and escape from the workers. One of his quick decisions includes stealing the car belonging to the workers so that he can get away as their vehicle was blocking his aunt's motel truck that he usually drove. Marty (Paquette, 2018) helps Star to find a

solution to the missing train driver and conductor so that the train can be more efficient and to run effectively. The representation of boys as problem-solvers demonstrates that they can think logically and to process the information around them to be able to arrive at solutions to the problems they are facing.

4.2.2 Representation of Girl Characters

The representation of girl characters in the 2019 cohort shifts, with girls seen as more capable and actively-involved. While there are still elements of taking care of others as is seen in the 2009 cohort, the texts focus more on girls solving problems and embarking on adventures themselves, rather than being the sidekick to the lead boys. Additionally, there is a shift in the number of lead girl characters with lead girls now comprising 50% of lead roles, compared to 30% from 2009. The 2019 cohort continues to portray emotions as more acceptable for girls to display and focuses more on girls building relationships. However, girls are now also doing the saving of others as well.

4.2.2.1 Girls as Problem-Solvers

Similar to the boy characters from this cohort of texts, girls find themselves in situations where they need to problem-solve and respond quickly and appropriately. Holly Farb (Wronski, 2017), Samantha (Walters, 2018), and Karma (Johnson, 2017) are all examples of girls practicing quick-thinking and practical problem-solving skills in life-threatening situations. The titular character from *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017), is in space, trying to avoid the danger of the Pirate Lord and get home to safety. When trying to get onto a star cruise ship, Holly uses logic and cunning to fool the Blue Bloods so that she and her comrades can get by. For example, one of the Blue Bloods, who does not know much about humans, asks why Holly and her comrades do not have any luggage, and she quickly responds, “humans do not need luggage. We carry things inside ourselves” (Wronski, 2017, p. 98). Samantha from *Elephant Secret* (Walters, 2018) uses her problem-solving abilities when she is in a dangerous situation between the fence and wall of the enclosure with an elephant who has a history of harm to humans. The elephant charges at her, and she stands her ground. Scared, Samantha

decides to use the apples she has in her pocket as a way to guide the elephant away from her, the other elephants, and back into its enclosure. Finally, Karma, from *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017) faces many situations where she needs to problem-solve, her survival depending on it. After being in a car accident with her father and her brother, Karma goes off in search of help and for the highway, which should be just a few miles ahead. Unfortunately, the highway never appears, and she becomes lost in the forest, falls into a fault line crack, falls into a rapid river, gets chased by a bear, and has limited water and food supplies with her along the way. She has to find shelter to stay safe at night and to avoid a storm. Karma uses her knowledge of nature and animals to help her survive.

4.2.2.2 Girls as Adventurers

Representation of girls includes girls as adventurers who embark on new experiences and face challenging situations they need to overcome. Holly Farb (Wronski, 2017) discovers that there is an entire universe that exists beyond earth and that it contains a variety of living creatures who possess different abilities and skills from her. She flies in a spaceship and on a star cruise ship, fights off an alien Pirate Lord, and helps to save the princess of the galaxy. While Karma's (Johnson, 2017) adventure is centered more on the idea of rescue, she has to find food and water during her travels trying to find help for her father and brother. She uses the help of her falcon Stark to catch food and learns to overcome her lack of confidence in her skills begins to trust in her abilities to survive and be a falconer. In the 2019 cohort, girls face new challenges, gain new understandings of their capabilities, build new levels of self-confidence, and a develop a sense of pride.

4.2.2.3 Girls as Saviours

Similar to boys, girls face situations in which they are trying to save other beings. The majority of the story in *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017) is about Karma trying to find help to save the life of her father, who remains trapped in the van after it has a tire blow out and flips off of the road. Through outdoor education classes that her father has put on in their homeschool classes, Karma understands the need to find help and that she has a small window of time before the situation can become fatal. She knows that her brother

and father can go just three days without water and that they only had a water bottle each to last until she returned. When she becomes lost in the forest for three nights, the need to find help becomes dire. Jess has to use her new booger-controlling superpowers in *The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem* (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018) to help take down the nemesis and save the town of Dimly. Girl characters become capable of saving the day and on using their skillset to keep everyone safe. Unlike boy characters, girls are often laden with guilt about leaving others behind or about the potential consequences of their actions, but they remain steadfast and understand that it is up to them to save the day.

4.2.2.4 Girls and Emotions

Girl characters are caring and compassionate. They are passionate about their interests, and they display that passion openly. The girls push aside their feelings in moments where they want to cry, feel sad, and feel the bubbling up of emotions so they can attempt to focus on the situation at hand. Samantha (Walters, 2018) is extremely passionate about the elephants she and her father care for in their sanctuary. Jess (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018) loves playing her video game and is continually striving to get better. Karma (Johnson, 2017), loves falconry and large birds with every fiber of her being to the point that it is all she can talk about. Cara from *Missing Mike* (Green, 2018) is passionate about her dog Mike who goes missing during a forest fire. The idea of finding him and ensuring his safety is all she can focus on while she and her family evacuate their home. However, girl characters also push aside those moments when they can feel tears bubbling up, and often see tears as getting in the way of what needs their attention. Cara (Green, 2018), overwhelmed with emotions as she is at an evacuation center, she sees a man who is man visibly upset. Thinking about her concern for her dog Cara thinks to herself, “I’m brave and hopeful and confident that everything will be okay. But inside, I’m like the man doubled over on the bench” (p. 149). She is experiencing a variety of emotions and feels she needs to put on a brave face when internally, she feels she is crumbling. Karma (Johnson, 2017) demonstrates the idea of putting on a brave face as well when just after the accident with her father and brother, she raises her chin and says to herself, “cry later. Things need to get done!” (p. 37) Girl characters are experiencing more complex

emotions than the boy characters and are more openly displaying said feelings. However, girls also appear to hold in feelings that can give the impression of weakness.

4.2.2.5 Girls and Relationships

Similar to the girl characters from the 2009 cohort, girls from the 2019 texts are concerned with building and maintaining relationships. Perhaps the most significant focus on relationships comes from Karma (Johnson, 2017), who longs to feel normal, to attend a regular school, and to have “a normal sleepover with real friends” (p. 12). Holly Farb (Wronski, 2017) feels as though she is an outsider and is made fun of by her peers; however, she does whatever she can to keep the few friends she does have and creates throughout her space-traveling adventure, and helps them succeed. Sloane (Green, 2018) is distant, quiet, and often cold towards her sister Cara, but she understands that there is a time to show support, even if only in subtle ways, and that these little gestures help to maintain challenging relationships. Girl characters appreciate the people they have in their lives and value the relationships they have with them. Girl characters also demonstrate an understanding that relationships can be beneficial in trying times. This understanding is evident when Jess (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018) relies on the help from her friend Cliff to help her figure out how to use her superpower to defeat the enemy and to protect the people of Dimly.

4.2.3 Non-Binary Representation

Representation of non-binary characters was minimal in the 2019 texts, appearing in only one. Specifically, non-binary characters appear in *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017), and are depicted as aliens and as a disguise. For much of the story, the Princess of the Galaxy disguised herself as a boy character named Chester, representing a transgender role. The Princess manifests herself as Chester and seeks safety on earth while trying to escape the Pirate Lord. The alien characters, known as Blue Bloods, are referred to primarily as “it,” though the Pirate Lord refers to them as “he” periodically, therefore the gendered term is inconsistent. The alien characters are othered and seen as different in terms of their descriptions, the language they use, and their view of humans. For example, one of the aliens, when interrogating Holly and being

told by Holly that it speaks English well, says, “it nodded enthusiastically. ‘Even though humans are a subspecies three levels below me, I will take that as a compliment’” (Wronski, 2017, p. 97). The aliens, instead of speaking English, are referred to as “clicking to each other” (Wronski, 2017, p. 97) to communicate. Both the communication methods and character views of other species creates an othering effect and puts non-binary characters on a different level from other humans.

4.2.4 Adult and Parental Representation

Similar to the adult and parental representation in the 2009 texts, depictions of adults in the 2019 cohort is not a primary focus. However, the 2019 group of texts allows adults and parental figures to have a more active role in the lives of the leading child characters. Men were primarily fathers or antagonists, while women appear more as mothers and as leaders of the enemy groups.

4.2.4.1 Representation of Men

As fathers, men demonstrate a more supportive relationship and are more involved in their children’s lives. They show a more caring nature and take a more active role in the raising of the child characters. Karma’s (Johnson, 2017) and Samantha’s (Walters, 2018) fathers are heavily involved in the care and education of their children. Karma’s father is the homeschool teacher for her and her brother and has helped Karma learn about and participate in falconry. Similarly, Samantha’s father has helped to educate her about the care and well-being of elephants. Both fathers are beside their children throughout the day and take a more active role in their upbringing. While not all fathers were as active in the care of their respective children, they were more visible in the story and had a more significant influence. For example, it is Chris’ father’s financial situation (Hyde, 2017) that motivates Chris to seek out the gold claim to help create a better life for his father and ultimately himself.

Men as the antagonist are less common but still a relevant representation of these figures. For example, Randy from *Mine!* (Hyde, 2017) and Daggart in *Chase* (Barclay, 2017) are both depictions of men as enemies to be avoided or defeated. Both of these characters are

cold, cunning, and willing to harm the respective protagonists. These adult males are driven to succeed for their benefit, be it gaining access to a plot of land that contains a windfall of gold or impressing the heartless boss, and they will not let anything or anyone stand in their way. Men as the nemesis are less prevalent in the 2019 cohort; however, these characters were more willing to use violence to achieve their end goals.

4.2.4.2 Representation of Women

The depiction of women in the 2019 cohort is a mix of women as mothers or mother-figures, villains, and helpers. As helpers, women put their needs aside to help the child reach their desired end goal. Fiona (Hyde, 2017) is fierce, a former member of a motorcycle club, and a seedy bar owner; yet when she is asked by Chris to give him a ride to the Yukon, she makes up a story about having to spread the ashes of a relative and agrees. She poses as Chris' father, Francis, and registers the gold claim in his name, ultimately completing the last step needed for Chris's plan to succeed. Unbeknownst to Chris, Fiona is actually a member of the family who stole the claim from his grandfather. She puts aside the running of her bar and her own needs and helps out a child who is reaching for a new life.

As mothers or mother-figures, the 2019 texts depict women as supportive, caring, and nurturing. As mothers, women are often in the kitchen preparing meals for their children. They offer words of wisdom when needed and provide support and encouragement to help the child characters understand their capabilities. Unlike the characters who are fathers, mother characters are not as involved in their child's life and generally appear at the beginning and the end of the story. Jett's grandmother Joanna (Smith, 2018) is an exception to the lack of involvement mother-figure representation as she is involved throughout the story, guiding him through his regret and remorse over his actions and the incident that occurred back home. Other mothers, including those from *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017), *The Train of Lost Things* (Paquette, 2018), and *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017), are more stereotypical in their representation and match the representation from the 2009 cohort of the nurturing and caring mother.

Women as villains was a new depiction in the 2019 cohort of texts. Both *Chase* (Barclay, 2017) and *The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem* (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018) have villains who are women, and in both of these stories, she is a nemesis that is cold and lacks remorse. Women as villains are ruthless and willing to harm anyone who gets in the way of their end goal. In *Chase* (Barclay, 2017), Madam Director is described as being ruthless and is compared to an animal, when it says that “her voice sounded like teeth tearing into flesh” (p. 37). Greep and Nurse Nussbaum from *The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem* (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018) are described as insane and deceitful as they are attempting to create an army of people by exposing them to reidium, the chemical element that gives Jess her superpower. Women as villains are intimidating and powerful, but they use their power for harm and control.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding of gender representation in middle-grade texts, specifically Silver Birch nominees from both 2009 and 2019. The present study aims to understand how these depictions potentially shifted and changed between the two cohorts. Past research places importance on the visual representation of gender and gender roles (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972). The present study is concerned more with the context in which these representations are occurring. The present study also seeks to understand the role that language chosen and used by authors plays in creating and shaping gendered representations. The following section will discuss the discovered similarities and differences between both of the 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch nominated texts, how the findings answer the research questions, and opportunities for future research.

5.1 Comparing Gender Representation in 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch Nominees

The texts included in this study are published approximately ten years apart. Given the results from previous research, I anticipated that there would be some shifts in the representation of gender during this time. Previous research suggests that changes in gender representation are occurring, but that it takes time for shifts in societal perspectives to make their way into literature (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; McCabe et al., 2011). My analysis suggests some similarities between the cohorts noted within the categories of boys, girls, and adult/parental characters; however, there have also been intriguing shifts in representation. Notably, some of the findings of this study also map on to previous research findings. Table 5 summarizes the similarities and differences between both cohorts and identifies the commonalities with previous literature.

Table 5

Comparison of Themes: 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch nominees

Category	Similarities	Differences	Past Literature
Boy Characters	Adventurous, saviours, emotions a challenge	2009—leaders, brave, risk-takers 2019—problem-solvers, fixers	More prevalent as lead characters, performing masculine behaviours, active, less acceptable to cross gender lines
Girl Characters	Relationship focused, emotionally available	2009—nurturers, involved, innocent, obedient 2019—problem-solvers, adventurous, saviours	Under-represented, positioned as the other, nurturing, submissive, child-like, physical traits important, lonely, longing for relationships, self-sacrificing
Adult and Parental Characters	Men—uninvolved or absentee, comic relief Women—emotionally supportive, nurturers and caregivers	Men—supportive Women—uninvolved or absentee	Men—absentee, uninvolved Women—caretakers
Non-Binary Characters	None	Alien	Struggle with acceptance, emotional hardship,

othered, less
acceptable for boys
to cross the gender
line

5.1.1 Boy Character Representation

Previous research suggests that boys are more commonly the title or lead character (Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011). The 2009 Silver Birch texts support this finding as 70% of the texts in this cohort had a lead or title character that is a boy. The 2019 cohort sees a shift towards equal representation, with 40% of the texts having a boy lead or title character. Boys appear as title characters in two of the texts from 2009, one of which is as a subtitle, and none from the 2019 cohort. *Sit* (Ellis, 2017), one of the texts from the 2019 cohort, has a different format from the other books as it does not have a designated lead character. *Sit* (Ellis, 2017) features a collection of brief tales about different chairs and what they mean to those individuals. Within this text, there are seven stories about different places people sit, and boys feature as the lead character of three of the tales. It again supports the push for more representation of girls in texts.

Findings from the present study also support previous results that boys are more active in their stories, tend to be the saviour or hero, and rarely display more feminine behaviours such as expressing softer emotions (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Filipovic, 2018). In both the 2009 and 2019 texts, boys embark on adventures and face new challenges, often in the name of saving someone or something that they care about. That is, the adventure is part of what it means to be a hero, and to be a hero, the boys need to overcome challenges and learn to problem-solve along the way.

However, the present study findings also suggest a shift in gender representation and an attempt to provide more equal opportunities. The representation of boys in 2019 Silver

Birch texts suggest that crossing gendered behaviour boundaries is growing. Particularly when handling emotions, boys are processing feelings in more productive ways, despite the need to push feelings away and hide how they feel from the people around them. Instead of emotions being a weakness and feminine as expressed in the 2009 Silver Birch texts, in the 2019 books, both boys and girls come to acknowledge that they have feelings, but that the current moment may not be the appropriate time to deal with them. Earles (2017) suggests that crossing the gender line of appropriate behaviour is often more acceptable for girls to perform masculine tasks. Still, that grace is not given as freely to boys to display typically feminine traits. While it is an improvement to see boys more readily accepting more complex emotions, I believe there also remains a need to have boys displaying more feminine behaviours. Boys need to be caring and nurturing, as well as attempting to foster relationships through more than bargains.

Despite some of the shifts in the representation of boy characters, boys continue to be depicted in more active roles and are more involved in the events of stories. Past literature suggests that boys are often in the foreground of the story (Hamilton et al., 2006), are active, leaders, and rescuers, (Weitzman et al., 1972) and do ‘boy things’ such as playing with trucks or mechanical type toys (Crawley, 2017). Across the Silver Birch texts from 2009 and 2019, boys continued to be more active in not only their stories but also those with a girl lead character. Boys also held more power and control of situations. For example, in *The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem* (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018), the lead character is a girl named Jess, and yet it is her friend Cliff who is primarily the one in charge; it is Cliff that is directing Jess as to what she needs to do to figure out her powers and is the one leading the mission, as Jess is more concerned with winning a video game tournament.

5.1.2 Girl Character Representation

Representation of girls in the Silver Birch depicts more significant changes between the 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch cohorts. The shifts that have occurred speak to a growing push for girls to be more prevalent in children’s literature and to address the need to depict girls as more than princesses in need of rescuing. Previous research continually

notes that girls are significantly under-represented, with boys as the lead or title characters in approximately twice as many books than girls (Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; Lynch, 2016; McCabe et al., 2011; Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001;). Findings of the current study, particularly the 2009 cohort, supports past research results of the under-representation girls. In the 2009 Silver Birch texts, girls were the main character in three of the texts, but the title character in only one, where her name is a subtitle in *Reading the Bones: A Peggy Henderson Adventure* (McMurphy-Barber, 2008). The 2019 Silver Birch texts, however, offer a social shift and an attempt at balance in gender representation, with girls being the lead character in five of the nominated texts and depicted in varied ways. However, girls remain to appear as a title character in only one text, *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017).

The findings of the present study also support those from past research of representation of girls in nurturing or caretaker roles (Filipovic, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2006) or presented as innocent and child-like, and there is a greater emphasis on their physical appearance (Berry & Wilkins, 2017). These depictions of girls continue to support heteronormative gender roles. They can lead to readers thinking that for a girl, being nurturing, acting innocent, and putting a great emphasis on their looks is what is most important. The 2019 Silver Birch texts move beyond the stereotypical gender role for girls and create new avenues for girl characters to explore. They demonstrate their abilities through survival techniques as Karma did in *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017), through an adventure in *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017), and through general use of their strength and thinking abilities as in *The Almost Epic Squad: Mucus Mayhem* (Sylvester & Wilson, 2018). The shift in representation of girls from being caretakers and child-like in the 2009 texts to being characters with strength, power, and grit in the 2019 books demonstrates the growing need for a narrative of girls as capable and competent. The 2019 Silver Birch reveal a positive shift for girl characters that moves beyond gender stereotypes and allows them to be thrown into the fray, to be involved, and to demonstrate their abilities as they effectively manage situations they confront.

There is an emphasis on relationships across both of the Silver Birch cohorts, particularly concerning maintaining friendships and or building new ones. Girl characters display more guilt and worry when it comes to their actions or decisions and how they may impact their relationships with others. Looking at characters such as Karma from *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017), Samantha from *Elephant Secret* (Walters, 2018), and Lucy-Mae from *Peril at Pier Nine* (Draper, 2007), girls, when compared to boy characters, are more concerned with relationships and maintaining their bonds with others. The guilt these girl characters express over what they see as not interacting enough or appropriately with peers shines a light on girls' perceptions of relationships and how they place importance on ensuring that their actions and decisions should please others (Berry & Wilkins, 2017). The focus on relationships rather than accomplishments also continues to support stereotypical heteronormative gender roles, as it fails to acknowledge the capabilities of girls and consistently relegates them to the position of passive participants (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Weitzman et al., 1972). That is not to say that relationships are not meaningful and relevant to change; however, there needs to be consideration given to the presentation of relationships and whether characters appear competent outside of connections to other people.

5.1.3 Adult and Parental Representation

Adult and parental representation across both the 2009 and 2019 Silver Birch texts remains relatively stable and maintains heteronormative gender roles as unveiled by previous research (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Crawley, 2017; Gooden & Gooden, 2001). When compared to mothers, fathers are depicted as being less involved, appearing less often, are less supportive, provide less care, and demonstrate less nurturing behaviour towards their children (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Crawley, 2017; Gooden & Gooden, 2001). The results of the current study support these previous findings, as fathers are less involved or absentee, less supportive, and less nurturing than mothers.

Representation of women across the Silver Birch texts, particularly in roles as mothers or mother figures, consistently supports findings from previous literature (Adams et al.,

2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Filipovic, 2018). That is, across these texts, mothers are, when compared to fathers, more often depicted in the kitchen, doing housework such as cleaning, involved in discipline, and providing care for child characters. Mothers, or mother figures such as Aunt Margaret from *Reading the Bones: A Peggy Henderson Adventure* (McMurchy-Barber, 2008), are often in the kitchen preparing meals for the family and are the ones who are providing punishment or having conversations with the child characters about their wrongdoings. Continually positioning mothers in this caretaker role signifies that it is only up to mothers to provide meals and to discipline a child. It demonstrates that a father's role is outside of the realm of primary care, if not outside of the house completely.

A significant shift was evident in the 2019 Silver Birch texts regarding the representation of men, in particular as fathers. The 2019 cohort saw fathers become more present and supportive, and this is evident with the fathers from *Falcon Wild* (Johnson, 2017), and *Elephant Secret* (Walters, 2018). Both fathers demonstrate involvement in their children's lives, as seen through their engagement with the education of their daughters, particularly concerning animal care and training. Both fathers were supportive of their respective daughters' decisions and her involvement in the family business. Both fathers also believed in her capabilities and celebrated her accomplishments. Presenting fathers in a more active role in both child-rearing and their children's lives suggests that fathers are important and can impact their children in positive ways. It also suggests that fathers are capable of more than providing for families and can be active participants within the family dynamic. The shift to a more engaged father is thus a positive one and, hopefully, a movement that will continue to grow.

5.2 Context and Gender Representation

As discussed, previous research often overlooks the element of context and instead focuses on the quantifiable nature of representation, often centered on the purpose of the objects characters are holding (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001). Additionally, past research examines the presentation of girls and boys performing gendered behaviours (Blaise &

Taylor, 2012) through a quantifiable means. Crawley (2017), for example, has examined picture books portraying children who are transgender and suggested that representations still reflect a heteronormative perspective and continue to perpetuate a gender dichotomy. While it is, of course, crucial to understand the volume that stereotypical gender representations are occurring in texts that children are engaging with, the current study begins to fill a void that allows for a deeper understanding of where, why, and how these representations are taking place. Furthermore, if researchers ignore the context of these findings, they may miss a key element in understanding gender representation.

The present study supports past research in that there remain many stereotypical and heteronormative gender role representations of characters. Boys are active, involved, heroes, leaders, and generally shy away from any kind of ‘soft’ emotion. Girls are gentle, more emotionally in tune, relationship-focused, calm, and logical in their approach to problem-solving. Men are comic relief, distant, and largely uninvolved, while adult women are nurturing, caretakers, and supportive. All of these depictions represent western heteronormative gender roles wherein genders divide, and work and interactions become elements put into categories that are deemed more appropriate for one gender over another.

Considering context is vital as it helps to situate the character and their experiences within their relative world. For example, think of Savannah, from *Swindle* (Korman, 2008), who is soft-spoken, gentle, and able to connect with animals. She is depicted as kind and nurturing as she demonstrates concern for the well-being of Palamino’s guard dog. Her caring and gentle nature help the dog to feel safe and to ultimately rescue him from an abusive home. If only examining Savannah and her interactions at the surface level, then yes, there exists stereotypical girl behaviour. However, when considering her actions alongside it, a new picture develops, and the reader comes to see her as more than merely a caring girl but also a girl who saves animals and helps them to have a better life.

The present study’s findings suggest there continues to be room for consideration and growth with how authors are choosing to develop and involve their characters. For example, the findings indicate that girls and women are in more caring and nurturing

roles, display more behaviour that is reflective of a need for companionship, and desire to make others happy. Additionally, current findings suggest that boys and men are emotionally unavailable, leaders, active problem-solvers, adventure-seekers, and heroes in children's literature. The situations characters experience dictate their responses, and as such, authors must consider how to gender flip these scenarios. That is, opportunities must develop that create space for girls to become a leader or boys to be concerned with forming and maintaining relationships. The findings of the current study demonstrate a need for varied opportunities and characters to experience new challenges not based on preconceived gender roles.

5.3 Language and Gender Representation

The separation of gender through the use of language is evident within the Silver Birch texts. Language choice demonstrates how authors choose to shape their characters, and the worlds they are in can also influence the reader's perceptions of gender roles. The language used around characters signifies how others perceive them and the value and worth ascribed to them based on their gender. Berry and Wilkins (2017) discuss ways in which language is used to support inequality, perhaps in subtle ways, and this is evident across the Silver Birch texts.

When looking at descriptions of characters across the Silver Birch books, the portrayal of boys and men is often related to interests, abilities, or career first. In contrast, the introduction of girls and women typically refers to their appearance. Consider the adult woman character of Madame Director from *Chase* (Barclay, 2017). She is repeatedly described in terms of what she is wearing, her physical attributes, and is not given an actual name outside of her title. Concerning her appearance, the director's initial description reads "a slim, striking woman with red hair, oversized, black-framed glasses and deep, penetrating eyes" (Barclay, 2017, p. 37). This description of her appearance and multiple further mentions of the clothes she wears is unnecessary as it ultimately has no bearing on the outcome of the story. Furthermore, comparing her physical attributes and facial expressions to an animal and not giving her a name prevents her from being humanized. While the Director is the villain in the story, the focus on her appearance is

distracting and prevents readers from forming a connection with the character and seeing her as more than a pile of clothes on a body. Whereas, when considering brothers Shawn and Craig from *Chocolate River Rescue* (McGrath, 2007), their introduction focuses on Shawn's interest in robots and technology, and Craig's ambition for a future career as a firefighter. The introduction of the brothers helps to make them more human and allows the reader to sympathize with them when they become trapped on the ice. Additionally, the knowledge of Shawn's interests becomes relevant as he helps to build a shelter on the ice to keep them warm while waiting for the rescue teams. The use of language in both cases is relevant as it demonstrates separation of perception and worth across genders. Drawing attention to the interests and abilities of a character creates a space to see them as relatable. While descriptions of appearance help the reader to form a picture of the character, the character struggles to take shape without other elements of their identity. This distinction is further evident when examining the only instance of non-binary gender representation of a character in *Holly Farb and the Princess of the Galaxy* (Wronski, 2017) wherein, the alien, robotic-like characters are identified with the pronoun *it*. Although the alien is on the side of the bad guy, the lack of pronoun signifies a lack of worth and value for individuals who identify as non-binary more generally. Additionally, representing a character as transgender for the means of a disguise, as seen through Chester/The Princess of the Galaxy (Wronski, 2017), proves problematic and diminishes the validity of transgender identities and again signifies a lack of worth as a living being.

Blaise and Taylor (2012) suggest that "gender discourses are more than ideas and beliefs about what it means to be female or male" (p. 90). The authors also suggest that these discourses reinforce gendered behaviour and help to determine what is appropriate and celebrate that which is tolerable within the larger society (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). When considering the language used across the Silver Birch texts, the reinforcement of gendered behaviour is clear. Girls as innocent and child-like is a theme present particularly throughout the 2009 texts; however, the presentation of girls in this demeanor is still apparent within the 2019 books as well. The representation of girls as innocent reinforces the idea that girls are to be soft, complacent, and are not to show their strength and abilities. Furthermore, boys continually presented as strong and skilled heroes

suggests that boys are more worthy. When girls are compared to helpless animals (Brenna, 2007) while their boy counterparts receive thanks for their bravery (Draper, 2007), it sets a tone of acceptable behaviour and appearance. It reinforces the separation of appropriate gender-based practices.

The language used within the Silver Birch texts can be an authoritative source through which young readers gain insight into the world around them and begin to shape their understanding of how they fit into it. Literature is a unique space that allows children to explore new ideas, surroundings, and experiences, but it is also where children can find and learn about themselves. Authors hold a strange amount of power as they can craft entirely new worlds, and the language they use to do so is so essential to how children see themselves represented and how they reflect those representations into their world. Because of this, texts must allow young readers to reflect the best versions of themselves, not just heteronormative gender identities.

5.4 Implications and Suggestion for Future Research

The current study provides an opportunity to explore texts geared toward older children. As the Silver Birch texts are advertised and supported in schools through the Forest of Reading program (OLA, 2019), the findings for this study suggest that there is room for educational institutions to assess the books they wish to support. While schools are a place of learning, they are also a space that reinforces gendered norms and behaviours, and the Silver Birch texts are one way in which this occurs. As such, this study reaffirms that it is vital for educational professionals to evaluate the texts they support in their institutions so that young minds can engage with a varied representation of gender roles, norms, and capabilities.

The current study recognizes a need for further research on gender representation in middle-grade texts. Young minds are still developing, and as such there needs to be attention paid to the sources with which they interact and engage. The present study highlights the opportunity for continued research into other middle-grade texts beyond

the Forest of Reading (OLA, 2019) sources, as well as a need to explore texts with characters that identify as non-binary or LGBTQ+.

Conclusion

The present study explores and compares gender representation across Silver Birch nominees from 2009 and 2019. Through an examination of these texts, it becomes clear that heteronormative and stereotypical gender roles remain common and prevalent in literature for children. Changes in representation are evident, primarily concerning girl characters appearing more evenly and actively when compared to boy characters, and men as fathers begin to be more supportive and present in their children's lives in the 2019 text. However, language and terminology used across the Silver Birch texts supports heteronormative perspectives and continue to foster the idea that worth and value occur in different ways. Being mindful and critical of the language used within texts is especially important when supporting the development of self-worth. I am not suggesting censorship—rather, educators and educational professionals need to be aware of messages that are present concerning gender representation in texts and that these can be a talking point for larger conversation around topics like abilities, inclusion, and stereotypes.

While heteronormative roles remain prevalent in the Silver Birch texts from 2009 and 2019, it is crucial to consider the context the characters are in and to understand better what is leading to these depictions. Previous research often overlooks the context of a gender-based representation, but it is an essential element to fully understanding how and why heteronormative roles continue to repeat. As critical readers and educators, it is vital to understand the representation and inherent messages that present to young minds. It is important to understand the gender-based beliefs and values about strength and abilities that common in middle-grade texts. There needs to be a push towards gender-flipping of roles and responsibilities; wherein, it is acceptable to perform tasks regardless of any predefined gender-based categorization to reflect better the more inclusive learning and understanding that the education system in Ontario is trying to support. Thus, educators

and educational professionals must review texts that they are providing children to ensure that there are varied contexts and situations that characters experience.

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- Wodak, R., Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Methods of critical discourse studies (3rd ed.)*. London, UK: SAGE.

List of Books

2009 Cohort

- Brenna, B. (2007). *The moon children*. Toronto, ON: Red Deer Press.
- Ellis, D. (2007). *Sacred leaf*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.
- Draper, P. (2007). *Peril at pier nine*. Regina, SK: Coteau Books.
- Duggan, M. (2007). *The royal woods*. Toronto, ON: Key Porter Books.
- Korman, G. (2008). *Swindle*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.
- McGowan, M. (2008). *Newton and the time machine*. Toronto, ON: Harper Trophy
Canada.
- McGrath, J. (2007). *Chocolate river rescue*. Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing Limited.
- McMurphy-Barber, G. (2008). *Reading the bones: A Peggy Henderson adventure*.
Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press.
- Narsimhan, M. (2007). *The third eye*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press.
- Peacock, S. (2007). *Eye of the crow: The boy Sherlock Holmes, his first case*. Toronto,
ON: Tundra Books.

2019 Cohort

- Barclay, L. (2017). *Chase*. Toronto, ON: Puffin Books
- Ellis, D. (2017). *Sit*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.
- Green, S. (2018). *Missing Mike*. Toronto, ON: Pajama Press.
- Hyde, N. (2017). *Mine!*. Toronto, ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.
- Johnson, T. L. (2017). *Falcon wild*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.
- Paquette, A. (2018). *The train of lost things*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.
- Smith, H. (2018). *Ebb & flow*. Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press Ltd.
- Sylvester, K., & Wilson, B. (2018). *The almost epic squad: Mucus mayhem*. Toronto,
ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.
- Walters, E. (2018). *Elephant secret*. Toronto, ON: Puffin Canada.
- Wronksi, G. (2017). *Holly Farb and the princess of the galaxy*. New York, NY: Simon &
Schuster.

SARA DIMARCO

R.ECE

EDUCATION

Western University

Master of Arts in Education **2020**

Thesis: A Study of Gender Representation in Silver Birch Award Nominees From 2009 and 2019: A Queer Theory Perspective

Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology

Honours Bachelor of Early Childhood Leadership **2017**

Capstone: How Do Educators Perceive, Understand, and Foster Inclusion in the Classroom?

AWARDS

Dean's Honour Roll **2013-2017**

President's Honour Roll **2017**

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology

Curriculum and Pedagogy **2019/2020**

Supported students in the learning process as they explore curriculum and pedagogy for children 0-3

Learning Facilitator **2019/2020**

Support students with disabilities through tutoring, modifying assignments, and note-taking

Graduate Teaching Assistant **2018**

Facilitated wet labs in first-year undergraduate microbiology courses

RELATED EXPERIENCE

Journal of Language & Literacy

Peer Reviewer **2019**

Reviewed and provided feedback for researchers seeking publication with the journal on an as needed basis

Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology

Research Assistant **May 2016 – June 2017**

Researched and summarized current information regarding student leadership and inclusion

Developed a pilot program fostering inclusive attitudes and leadership abilities in students.

Collected data from participants using multiple techniques while following ethical research guidelines

CONFERENCES

DiMarco, S. (2020, June 15-18). *A study of gender representation in Silver Birch award nominees from 2009 and 2019: A queer theory perspective* [Conference session]. Gender and education conference, Calgary, AB, Canada. (Conference canceled).

DiMarco, S. & Ruthes Coelho, C. (2020, May 31- June 5). *Exploring gender and identity in Ontario's early years curriculum documents* [Conference session]. CSSE conference, London, ON, Canada. (Conference canceled).

MEMBERSHIPS

College of Early Childhood Educators

Since 2017