

Women and Gendered Writing

Gender makes the difference you want it to... and we can dismiss it at that. Yet there are patterns of visibility in writing. How to account for those? Is it just market demand? Men like to read men and women like to read men?

4 years ago I did a spot check of [gender represented in my CDs](#). 12% of my music was by female artists and 15% a mix of genders. People who commented found my numbers out of line with their library.

To do a head count of gender of 3 of my poetry shelves today, I get 103 male-written titles, 50 female-written titles and 9 mixed gender collections.

I suppose if females produce less, I could be disproportionately selecting female authors compared to what's on the market. (That was my push for a while for music and poetry to correct my own gender bias.)

Admittedly, owning isn't the same as being happy to read after the purchase fact. 35/103 (a third), 21/50 (just under half) and 5/9 (just over half) I look at and say I enjoyed. What to make of that? Enjoying is a different measure than learning from or being able to access and resonate.

It could be unrelated to anything gender. We ascribe meaning to random patterns and then act to make things real. It could be sampling effect.

Over at [Huffington Post](#) Amelia Gray writes,

Publishers Weekly Reviews Director Louisa Ermelino noted that the editors ignored gender and genre, and that "it disturbed us when we were done that our list was all male."

Is Ermelino disturbed in the same way that she would be disturbed at a penny landing on heads ten times in a row?

Is she disturbed because, unlike a penny, the likelihood that a book written by a man will register a higher acclaim than a book by a woman is not a 50/50 chance?

Sometimes the skew is there but the [Canada reads list](#) of recommended literature is 2 females and 3 males, which isn't remarkable and noticeable on account of gender. [hat tip: [CanCult](#)] This [list](#) is close to half female.

Gray also related what Kamy Wicoff pointed out, "Here's another one for you: 65% of books sold in the U.S. are purchased by women; women wrote 0% of the Best Books of 2009. Really?"

Is this randomness? Randomness + something systemic?

I appreciate Gray in the article looking at what could be informing the numbers,

J.A. Tyler, of *mud luscious/mlp* reported that the last 100 general submissions broke down into 59 male and 41 female, but the chapbook submissions were 41 male and 14 female.

Adam Robinson's *Publishing Genius* saw 80 male and 20 female submissions.

From Roxane Gay's *PANK*, a journal some speculated would be more female-sub heavy, 65 submissions were from men and 35 were from women.

Are women publishing less overall or is that something particular to who submits and making the cut skews in different ratios?

What does that reflect from society's shape or from individuals? Is it how females spend their time, or how gratification is?

What behavior underlies? Do more women write for friends and in circles where

the material does not leave to go to print? Or are women disproportionately creating online journals, being earlier innovators to use the internet and its lower cost structure than paper-routes? Since women still, on average, are 20 cents behind per dollar in wage gap, and are more likely to be raising kids at home, access might be better positioned to go digital routes?

Or is it a matter of material not being produced at the same rate in gender aggregate?

Is it a matter of not material means, or material produced, but some cultural effect of gender construction? What could that be? Males are to chase down opportunities? We all have the same number of hours per day and make choices of how to apply the time. Are males networking more to promote one another whereas females, if networking, don't on aggregate, have the mindset of promotion and marketing and CV?

Females or males can write in a voice of the other gender, or to a different point in gender continuum than the author is in. For example, a female femme, writing machismo or visa versa. A neutral gendered male writing close to neutral gendered female. In the [Guardian article](#), [Sheenagh Pugh](#) points out the case of Caroline Carver, a middle-aged white woman appropriating the voice of a black male fisherman in [horse underwater](#) so well that no one suspected it wasn't a male. If a female writes a male point of view, is it still female writing? If a male writes from a female point of view, is he still consigned to "male writing"? Do the categories even make sense? We all are the tellers of stories, whatever stories we can tell, whatever ones we listen to.

The insecurity that seems at the base of males winning more contests, awards, jury panel positions, presidencies is the fear that males are intrinsically more capable. Or, if awards reward mediocrity by decision committee cancelling out the most polarizing items, females not winning could be a sign of being more divisively interesting?? If one is biologically the underdog, what to do to reconcile that potential reality with dignity?

The national myth (of America and Canada) is about rising above your station of poverty or loss. People with any disability or disadvantage can be fulfilled and play a role in society. What if females are capped? What if females were given equal wage and fulfillment of job and security of roof, parity in housework, birth control pills to stabilize any mood discrepancies, equal literacy and access to information, and still generation after next, with old girl clubs in place to leverage ladies up in parallel systems for literature, still failed to produce as much work, and as much value, and as much quality of creativity? What if it's not a matter of difference of skills but absolute inferiority? That's feeding my virulence of wanting parity and equity.

I grew up chanting girls are better than boys (tongue stuck out) but I've never been fundamentally convinced of it. Nor do I want to be.

I always aim to keep one foot in skepticism as a matter of course. I disprefer to be convinced of anything 100% because all the data is never in and all the filters are never off. I want to avoid the pitfalls of [confirmation bias](#).

There are too many billions of people to parse, too many cultures, too many variable, flux over time, individual fluidity, subjectivity in measure. People we presume to be one gender, could be the other. ([Billy Tipton](#) comes to mind.)

I'm sold the story that females for millennia have been subjected to second class citizenship. It seems too tidy to be credible. There are too many individuals and changes involved for even systemic patterns to hold. Who tells that story and who chimes in and what impact does that have?

The idea of women in their own league, sporting events only open females leaves me uncertain. In a way it feels like a tiering of excellence. Normal, i.e. male, female, and then special Olympics. Schools where people are streamed by gender gives better academic results for males and females. So long as males and females do different things, hold different domains, what rises as relevant and resonant will vary.

[Do women write female poetry?](#) was a question raised at The Guardian on the heels of the Aldeburgh poetry festival and a discussion panel on "the female poem". [\[via\]](#)

The discussion in comments included Degus saying,

We are never not experiencing our age, gender, etcetera. Are you saying that poetry comes from - or ought to come from - somewhere that has nothing to do with our actual, everyday, breathing experiences? That the origins of poetry lie, somehow, in some way, outside us? That to allow our age, gender, etc, to show in our poetry is to contaminate something that ought not have anything to do with such ordinary - even vulgar - things? [...]

Is it the best use of poetry to use it to conceal this side of who and what we are [?...] why should we so wish to transcend ourselves? Is there something insufficient about ourselves when we are only that which we are, day in day out?

The notion of gender is said to not make any difference. Yet counting gender distribution anywhere (book store, awards list, members of parliament, number of managers, people who choose to teach, or any number of careers) show a pattern. It is an artifact. It's changing, I'm told.

My first formative bias comes from a gender-split community where menfolk socialize in a different room from womenfolk, whether euchre nights, or church, or family gatherings. There is an unquestioning of men wearing the pants in the family that has only started to shift to the model of partnerships rather than female obedience. I am dating myself. As I talked about a couple years ago, [each generation has its own notion of gender](#) and embraces a wave of feminism from its own starting point and context.

In my workplaces in life have been 7:1 female to male bosses. Bias is hard to shape once formed. If a matriarchal culture arose around me, would I be able to refresh my eyes to see the alternate shape of data?

Does one slice of female discourse exclude males? Does one part of male discourse not overlap with female? Anything domestic a male can engage in. Anything that is verbally roughhousing a female can engage in. It depends on personality and family culture more than gender. Even if something is not intrinsically gendered, if functions as if it is is if labelled as such. What is ascribed to gender presentation or derivation still has an impact. What unconsciously is complicit with gendered domains is a social grease so we can move on to issues that matter that aren't gender. Gender is an incidental conveyance, like "race" or size or hobby, more than a cargo.

Gender isn't a binary but a continuum. Some people are not cisgendered, lining up with the current roles assigned to sex. Gender doesn't apply to most things, even if there are marketing attempts to make everything from yogurt to shoelaces to vocabulary something intrinsically gender niched.

As Sheenagh Pugh said [at her blog](#) recently "I'm still less convinced by gender-based anthologies. I don't feel I necessarily have anything in common with X and Y just because we share the same reproductive equipment; I don't write with that."

It's a sentiment I frequently hear. What of expression can we attribute to piping and to the minority of times when we are shunted down a chute of one gender?

Women have ownership of birth and menses. Is there anything that males have exclusivity on? Either can child rear, pee standing up and have comparable orgasms even if structures vary a tad. There are no structural absolutes on who dominates or penetrates which gender. Females can vote and own property rather than be property in most places. Males and females can be property in some areas still. Males are likely to have more muscle strength and a higher starting point even if they haven't exercised. Is any of that have a bearing on writing or reading appeal?

If we are writing about things that pertain to embracing femaleness, yoni and self-breast love and childbirth, is that the full reach of a woman writing? Would that

not reduce female into being piping? What position does that put the rest of the person, male or female?

If writing outside that envelop, are we writing as women but not doing women's writing, as when someone writes cowboy novels, the author doesn't seek to be a cowboy story writer when putting on the vampire-fiction hat.

Is the male experience substantially different, with national and class culture held constant in Canada? Do males and females confer more respect to males still, or are females less likely to get respect or need to do more to earn it? Are defaults different?

For those who self-identify as female for their story of self and opt in to self-teach themselves a history of gender as a story of tribe may enculturate themselves to be more reactive to gender-domains, gender-patterns of thought. It's not really arguable that there is no systemic sexism, or that some individuals don't match or try to match type. It's a leap to say that because gender is at play, it is at play as a causal factor in a particular case of an award.

Yet at the same time we have aggregate behavior, trends of habit. Or we have ghost blips in statistics. Intuitively and by number it seems more males, at least as figurehead, lead. And lead in economic gain and in literary gains. What account for it?

Without understanding the roots, can we correct for it? At the level of root or limbs? If we top-down, force equity by the numbers, does that fix anything? Or having the ignored people in the room being ignored only create more contentiousness than having ignored people outside the room?

As females, we learn to identify with the pop culture characters, common points of reference who are male heroes or female heroes. We learn to extend ourselves into these roles but it is not level. To ask a male to identify with a female hero is more of a marked form. A girl would be superman may be patronized. A boy who would be supergirl would be snickered at or treated more harshly. [Sociological](#)

[Images](#) talks about how female role can encompass the male but so far gender is too tangled with weights to permit males to do female roles in an equally weighted way.

[Amy King](#) thinks about the patterns we complicitly accept for stories of culture, of literature, of gender. As writers she argues we are to critically examine cultural assumptions and bring inequities to light. She says,

Helene Cixous echoes in L'Arc, "writing is the possibility of change itself...the movement which precedes the transformation of social and cultural structures." The same old rehashed male adventures and conquests are why in the waking world we generally think in terms of vying for power; the fist is an easier remedy than talk, and people unlike ourselves seem intolerable and need our dominance and taming. It takes real work to write less glamorized accounts of lives restricted by traditional women's—and men's—roles, and it's even harder to imagine new and alternative trajectories characters of any gender could take.

We often find the familiar stories we're raised on comforting and enjoyable. That's one type of pleasure, one that often goes unexamined and is sought out for comfort and affirmation of what one knows. Another type of pleasure, according to Roland Barthes, is that which discomforts and surprises.

Standing inside the time and place, it's hard to get the big picture. I tend to be skeptical of the position that males are responsible for the story of war and its corollary if women we just not banned from ruling class, be their true unsullied feminine selves, a new era of peace would dawn. Each human descends from male and female and are influenced by both. It reduces too far to say biology, hormones account for decisions and actions to the level of story. There are too many counter examples of males telling stories of reconciliation and females living lives of making violence. Christine Jackman talks critically about just what we are saying when we talk of gender in terms of inherent natures, [an evolutionary biology](#). It's not uncommon for some to characterize writing by the gender who

wrote it, even if one might as accurately categorize it by the Chinese or western zodiac sign. The human monkey mind makes patterns. Wants them. Insists on them.

Contextually we are still impacted by common understandings that prefilter what we perceive. In some circles in Canada, we are leaving, or have left, an era where culturally being male or female was a primary indicators of what options you had in life. Women nurture, or are victims or are rebelling from those roles. The paradigm is still applied, applicable or not. We are living with the residual effects of a century ago where eugenics and fate under god wasn't questioned. The same argument might have been made in soirees 2 centuries ago. How do we parse the systems at work and how do we relate to them?

Do we need a new story for all, or separate leagues? At The Poetry Foundation, there's [Women of the Avant Garde, 2](#) and [part 1](#). In it the host said females weren't represented before that worldwide revolution of feminism in the 1960s.

The most salient part of the segments is the sadness that a sound piece was derived from a woman and her friends acting like crazy people to drive off men from attacking her, and that women systemically believe and believed it so and that a mechanism like that would need to be developed.

To develop it further into names and birdsong and performance art is interesting. More interesting is what it says about the construction of threat and deterrent and response. Many females do literary work. What about this marks it as feminist?

The podcasts were a route to a link to [Tender Buttons](#) by Gertrude Stein which I feel I could "get".

GLAZED GLITTER.

Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover.

The change in that is that red weakens an hour. The change has come.
There is no search. But there is, there is that hope and that interpretation

and sometime, surely any is unwelcome, sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing.

It seems timeless. Hard to believe it is century old.

Our narrative of what gender is tends to be stuck inside the lifetimes experiences of the speaker, the living memories of those around and that which is stored in text.

[Sarojini Sahoo wrote an article on 4 leading feminist writers](#) of India of the last century: Kuntal Kumari Sabat, Maitreyi Devi, Amrta Pritam, and Kamla Das.

I found Maitreyi Devi's story particularly interesting. As a young woman she had a romance with someone who would go on to become a well-known Romanian author, Mircea Eliade. After they each moved on to other places and people, he wrote their story, but in Romanian. The word eventually got back to her. Feeling unfairly represented by it, she wrote her version of truth in a novel as a rebuttal. The English translation of his Romanian novel is entitled *The Bengal Nights* while the English translation of her Indian novel is entitled *It Does Not Die*.

I wonder what the overlap was in the narrative? What parts don't relate to each other at all?

What would the alternate story be for the future practice of Her version of success and thriving? Is it happening already but the pieces haven't be strung into a popular dominant myth of How Things Are?

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