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Gender in Children's Birthday Stories

The Birthday Child

*Everything's been different
All the day long,
Lovely things have happened,
Nothing has gone wrong.*

*Nobody has scolded me,
Everyone has smiled.
Isn't it delicious
To be a birthday child?*

Rose Fyleman, in Hopkins (1991)

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A highly popular genre of children's books is the birthday story. Children's books function to codify the proper birthday celebration ritual, including gender roles, to emphasize individuation, reinforce the importance of social and familial relationships, and work out what growing older involves. We examine the messages, morals, and symbolic implications of 89 children's birthday stories, and find an overall decrease in stereotypical sex roles over time. Birthdays are a time when both girls and boys fear being forgotten, pass through rites of passage, and seek wish fulfillment through magical transformations. Female characters adopt caring roles through baking and food preparation, altruistic gift giving, and romantic pursuits. Male characters, on the other hand, may be miraculous gift-providers, seek adventure, or learn acceptable social behaviors.

BIRTHDAYS

A birthday is an exciting day for a child, and a popular genre in American children's stories involves depictions of birthdays and their celebration. Most of these stories focus on others celebrating the birthday of a child, but occasionally these roles are reversed and the story focuses on a child celebrating others' birthdays. Besides gift-giving and gift-receiving roles, a number of gender roles are played out in these stories, making them a useful medium for analyzing messages about gender practices in staging and participating in these yearly rituals. These gender role depictions involve both children and adults (generally family members), thus potentially depicting differences in such roles due to age and family position. In addition, by examining children's birthday stories over the past several decades, we may learn how gender role ideology is or is not changing over time

and about an important, if often overlooked, vehicle for such potential change.

Children's birthday stories are a rich source of verbal and visual information about birthdays. They are significant cultural artifacts that reveal the dominant beliefs, such as gender role ideologies, of a culture. More importantly, these stories are significant vehicles for child socialization toward such things as gender roles, morals, social values, and adult behaviors (Crabb and Bielawski 1994; Goldstone 1986; Gooderham 1993; Stott 1994). Stories help us to order and understand life more fully, and children often use characters in stories as symbolic models when they themselves face complex life situations (Stott 1994; Tetenbaum and Pearson 1989).

Functions of Birthdays: A Rite of Passage

While this analysis does not focus on the general meanings of birthdays in our lives, it is important to note several of their apparent functions. For the birthday person, these functions appear to differ by age and perhaps by social class, more than by gender. First and foremost, birthdays are a key rite of passage in American society, and the birthday celebration is accompanied by rituals that assist in dealing with change, providing a sense of continuity and minimizing the accompanying sense of disruption (Rosenthal and Marshall 1988). Birthdays are a celebration of life (Humphrey 1988), and birthday rituals help encode and teach us what it means to be a certain age. A part of age-change involves biological and sexual maturation. However, the deeper and more significant messages of the birthday celebration are those that help culturally interpret what it should mean for the celebrant's self concept and behavior.

There may be significant watershed or milestone age-grades in American society, such as entering school or becoming a teenager, but each year the birthday gifts and messages change according to what is seen as appropriate for the person's age and gender. Especially for children, birthdays help them appreciate that they have changed and that they may be expected to behave differently than in the past. Such messages are conveyed by the selection of those who attend the celebration, the gifts they bring, the ritual activities they help stage and enact, the cards they select, the photographs they take, and the things they say, sing, and do at the birthday celebration. For example, in one story, 6-year-old Daisy greeted her party guests and then, "They told her what a big girl she was getting to be. They took pictures of the birthday girl" (Sipherd 1988).

Functions of Birthdays: Individuation

A second apparent function of the American birthday for the birthday person is individuation. This also appears to be important in Israel (Shangar-Handelman and Handelman 1991), but may well differ in less individualistic cultures. More than any other American ritual occasion during childhood, birthday celebrations singularize the individual and mark him or her as special, unique, valued, and worthy of attention, deference, and freedom (e.g., the food indulgences, "magical wishes," and other efforts to make this child feel like a king or queen for this one day a year). This is best represented by an excerpt from Dr. Seuss called, "*Happy Birthday to You!*"

*Today you are you!
That is truer than true!
There is no one alive who is
you-er than you!*

*Shout loud, "I am lucky to
be what I am!
Thank goodness I'm not just
a clam or a ham
Or a dusty old jar of sour
gooseberry jam!
I am what I am!
That's a great thing to be!
If I say so myself,
HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!"*
(Hopkins, collection of poetry, 1991)

Functions of Birthdays: Group Membership

A third function of the birthday celebration for the birthday person is a nearly opposite one of stressing that the individual, while unique, free, and singular, is connected to significant others rather than being alone. A common dread in the stories we analyzed is that no one will remember the child's birthday, or that they will do so in only a perfunctory way. This is seen as equivalent to learning that one is unloved and that no one cares enough to help make the day special. Thus, family and communal recognition during birthdays can either anchor us in a loving network of support, or make us feel adrift and isolated. The birthday is the day each year when this connection is most critically demonstrated or tested. Despite fears that a birthday will be forgotten, a 1988 study of over 100 adults showed that seventy-four percent of respondents listed birthdays as the second most-widely celebrated family-ritual occasion (second only behind Christmas) (Rosenthal and Marshall 1988).

Functions of Birthdays: Gifts

Finally, for the person celebrating a birthday, a contemporary function of this celebration involves receiving gifts, both durable and more fleeting.

Besides the gift's ability to bring pleasure or fulfill needs, wants, and wishes, there are a number of material lessons that seem to be worked out through such desire and fulfillment. These include issues of egoism and altruism, selfishness and generosity, gratitude or ingratitude, delay or non-delay of gratification, delight and disappointment, earned and unearned rewards, and issues of anticipation, surprise, expectations, and satisfaction. Issues like these are likely to be especially critical in child development and may well set life-long patterns. Birthday gifts and the processes that surround their exchange offer a key vehicle for socialization of children as consumers. While adults routinely provide goods and services to children, the birthday is a key time of the year in which the child's wishes and fantasies are given serious adult recognition. The way in which these wishes are attended is likely to be an important mediator of the child's view of the material world.

Functions of Birthdays: For Those Out of the Spotlight

For those family members and friends who help stage birthday celebrations, one of the functions shared with the birthday person is the celebration of "connection" noted above. This differs according to the relationship to the birthday person, but it may be a chief occasion to signal or demonstrate that "I am a loving parent/sibling/other relative/friend/neighbor." For family members the opportunity for such expression is unquestioned and takes on the character of an obligation, even if it is often a welcome obligation. For close friends, the opportunity to participate in this small community of birthday celebrants may also be obligatory or a contingent aspect of continuing friendship. But for more casual childhood friends, an invitation to another child's birthday party may be

a milder form of the message delivered to the birthday person that "I am loved." To not be invited is to be left out of the circle of friends.

A second function of helping to celebrate another's birthday by means of ritual participation, gifts, and well wishes, is to demonstrate apparent or actual altruism. Unlike the recipient of these prestations who is allowed on this one day to be a regal recipient of others' largess and to indulge personal wishes with little moral inhibition, givers are expected to put aside their own selfish interests in favor of those of the birthday person. We must learn to assume the perspective of the other in order to select appropriate gifts and behave in appropriate ways. For children, demonstrating such altruism, even if insincerely, is positively socially reinforced by adults, just as these adults negatively reinforce "inappropriate" selfishness.

A third function of the birthday celebration for those other than the current birthday person, is the implicit invitation or claim to reciprocal benefits when roles change and the gift-giver, party-goer, or well-wisher has a birthday. The rule that we should invite Mary or Bobby to our birthday party because they invited us to theirs is common, and sometimes results in greater inclusiveness than would otherwise have been enacted. This reciprocity is less expected of children toward adults, due to the age and status inequality. Nevertheless, eventually in his or her life, the child is also expected to participate in celebrating the birthdays of close adult family members. There are other roles for birthday celebrations, but a more detailed explication is the subject of another paper. Those purposes outlined above are sufficient to frame the present study of gender in children's birthday stories.

GENDER AND THE CHILD'S BIRTHDAY

There is a small literature on birthday celebrations, and even fewer references on gender in birthday celebrations and children's birthdays. Linton and Linton (1952) present an historical and cross-cultural analysis, noting that in ancient Greece only the male heads of important families celebrated their birthdays, with feasts which might continue on their birthdays after they died. Children and women were not regarded as sufficiently important for such recognition. Thus, class, age, and gender biases were all evident in these celebrations. While class and gender biases may remain to some degree, age biases seem to have come full circle to the point where it is the child whose birthday celebration is now the most significant in Western cultures.

Aries (1962) suggests that the emergence of childhood as a unique developmental period in which the child must be given special attention in order to become a good adult, began in the Sixteenth Century and was fully achieved by the Nineteenth. Lewis (1976) demonstrates that in Victorian America and Great Britain, an excessive focus on children was thought to make them selfish and unlikely to be generous toward others. It is during the early Twentieth Century, however, that specialized birthday cards for children emerged (Chase 1927). This time was also the beginning of the "Golden Age of Childhood/Children's Literature" which lasted until 1950. During this time, children were considered carefree and devoid of responsibility. With the introduction of Winnie the Pooh, Alice in Wonderland, and Babar, childhood was seen as a place of fairy power, hope, and innocence where adults, stodgy and musty, could be found when needed for protection and care (Goldstone 1986). By examining attentions given to children in such

arenas as schooling, medical care, advertising, and mass media, Chudacoff (1989) builds a case that childhood did not fully emerge as a key developmental state in America until the Twentieth Century and that the post-World War II baby boom was the key event focusing attention on children.

In the 1960's, things changed dramatically and the world of children and adults began to emerge. Children's literature no longer emphasized sheltering children in a world of fantasy, but began to teach them about reality (Goldstone 1986). This time period coincides with the emergence of the large body of children's birthday stories that are the focus of our analysis. From the point of view of consumption, it is also significant that the baby boom years, with the guidance of Doctor Benjamin Spock and others, are generally regarded as a period of parental permissiveness. It is a time when there is less demarcation in adult-versus child-appropriate subjects. Mid-Twentieth Century American parents seem to have scoffed at Victorian parents' fears of overindulging their children at birthdays. The child's birthday celebration can perhaps be regarded as the key festival of pleasure, indulgence, and delight. Even for the adult, Lewis (1976:11) suggests, birthdays may be a time when grown people are "tempted to regress" to childhood.

The question remains how birthdays and birthday celebrations may differ for boys versus girls. Feminist critiques of the infantilization of women suggest that the treatment of same age children at birthdays may differ for the two sexes. Such patterns of treating women more like children have also been detected in birthday cards intended for adult women (Brabant and Mooney 1989; Mooney, Brabant, and Moran 1993). At the same time, cards intended for women are more likely

than those intended for men to simultaneously involve expressions of love (Dodson and Belk 1995; Mooney and Brabant 1987) as well as to ridicule loss of youth and beauty (Schrift 1994). Thus a number of issues of gendered self-concepts seem intimately tied to birthday celebrations.

The material lessons of birthdays (e.g., delay of gratifications, egoism versus altruism, desire and fulfillment) may also differ by gender. Based on observations of birthday parties and interviews with three- to five-year-old children, Otnes and McGrath (1994) found that girls were more aware of being able to eat anything they wanted on their birthdays, and these researchers attribute this to the more ordinary taboo among girls against eating and gaining weight. They also found that girls of this age seem more able to anticipate the pleasure provided to someone else on their birthdays and to appreciate the communal aspects of the birthday party. Boys, on the other hand, spoke more about instrumental birthday party games and their own pleasure in receiving gifts. A greater focus by women in being the primary family members responsible for selecting birthday gifts and staging birthday celebrations is also to be expected based on prior work on gift-giving and holiday celebrations (e.g., Cheal 1988; Fischer and Arnould 1990; Otnes and Lowrey 1994; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Analyses of general children's literature have found it to be a clear source of material culture and gender representation. Crabb and Bielawski (1994) analyzed the content of pictures in children's stories and compared current stories to those representing the past 53 years. They found that female characters continue to be generally under-represented in children's books, artifacts used in household labor continue to be represented as primarily for use by females, and artifacts used

in nondomestic production labor are for the exclusive use of males (this could be a cultural lag which doesn't represent the increased participation of women in the workforce). Interestingly, even though female characters have not started using production artifacts, male characters are increasingly portrayed using household artifacts. They conclude that young children, through stories, have been exposed to a relatively stable representation of females and material culture, but the representation of males in the household appears to be changing.

Similarly, a study of children's stories by Tetenbaum and Pearson (1989) reports that when there is a boy protagonist, logic, winning, and losing are the major themes of the story. He seeks what is right and looks for solutions, while emphasizing justice, obligations, duty, standards, rules, and principles. When the protagonist is a girl, the theme concentrates on the arena of emotions and relationships. She emphasizes care and questions who needs more and how to give it. She tries to invent unique, contextually-based answers to situations. Williams et al. (1987) found similar results, however they believe that the role of females in stories is changing because there is really no consistent behavior shared among female characters. In contrast, male characters are portrayed as independent, persistent, and active.

While there is good reason to expect that gender, consumption, and birthdays combine into consistent and influential aspects of the child socialization process, there has thus far been little research into such issues. Through our text-based focus on children's birthday stories we hope to offer further insight into the gender-related aspects of birthday celebrations.

METHODS

We assembled all of the American children's birthday stories we could locate, but our set is not exhaustive of all published material. After excluding stories intended for adults, non-fiction books, and non-American material, we were left with 89 stories for analysis. Our analysis involved a close reading of both written material and illustrations (present in over 95 percent of the stories). Most of these stories are targeted to preschool and elementary school age children. These analyses involved a series of discussions between the two of us, interspersed with independent work. The collaborative results of this iterative process follow. We present these results in three parts: (1) findings unaffected by gender, (2) findings specific to females; and (3) findings specific to males.

The gender references are to the stories' characters, although we considered, and generally dismissed, effects due to author gender. This is consistent with Tetenbaum and Pearson (1989). Of the 89 stories analyzed, 62 were written by women. The age-pattern findings also relate to the age of the focal characters in these stories, although these appear to closely match the age of the target reader. Where appropriate, we also note changes according to the decade in which the story was written (altogether two were from the 1930s, one from the 1950s, eleven from the 1960s, eight from the 1970's, 44 from the 1980's, and 23 from the 1990s). For the stories analyzed, the total number of female focal characters was 37, and the total number of male focal characters was 57 (in the case of some animal characters gender was not evident and some stories involve more than one main character).

Although the specific plot varied from story to story, the setting of each

birthday was relatively consistent. Birthday artifacts, such as a birthday cake, party decorations, and gifts were used to describe the birthday scene, either explicitly in the text or through the illustrations. Most rituals experienced in childhood occur within the context of the family (Rosenthal and Marshall 1988) and with only a few exceptions (generally when the story involved non-human animals in the wild), the birthday celebrations presented in our sample of children's books supported this. Even if friends were invited to a party, the party was set in a home and was attended by available family members. Those family members who were unable to attend generally "remembered" the birthday person by making a phone call or sending a card or gift in the mail.

RESULTS

Findings Unaffected by Gender

This analysis is primarily concerned with gender differences, but these differences are best contextualized by noting potentially gendered patterns that we did not find to differ by the genders of the focal characters. One general finding is that reliance on stereotypical sex roles declined across the six decades studied, and this is most obviously portrayed through changes in appropriate clothing. Female characters are consistently shown wearing party dresses and aprons, and it is only in the most recent books that this has started to change. The shifting emphasis on traditional gender roles is also evident in the types of toys presented at the parties. However, with toys, girls are shown to receive more "male" and "neutral" gendered toys such as toy trucks and balls, but boys are not shown to receive traditionally "female" gendered toys such as dolls or cooking supplies (Miller, 1987).

Behaviors represented in a (stereotypically) cross-gendered way also increased during this period. In one book, the gifts and activities seem blatantly cross-gendered in nature when a little girl receives robot and train cakes, has a dinosaur-themed party, and helps her father bake her birthday cake. There are also an increasing number of single-parent households in more recent stories (where the mother or father had to fulfill the role of the missing gender) and at least one story with apparently lesbian parents. There is a general bias in the stories toward middle-class suburban white children, but later stories are more likely to depict working-class children and ethnic minorities.

In terms of the children depicted celebrating birthdays, there is a concern common among both boys and girls that their birthday would be forgotten by family or friends. This could represent a fear of being unloved, or lacking importance. Beverly Bigler is afraid her family forgot her seventh birthday because she shared the day with her older sister's wedding. Snyder Spider runs away from home when he fears everyone forgot, and Hippo goes through his day in a general "funk" because no one seems to remember "his" day. Many characters in the stories wish to receive a pet as a gift. The desire for a pet often accompanies loneliness, and in some instances, the pet provides a means of teaching a child how to be responsible, deserving, and keep promises. In one instance, a 100-year-old woman longs for a kitten on her birthday so that it can keep her company, and in another, a 10-year-old boy asks his parents for a puppy after he and his best friend have a fight.

In more recent stories, especially, both boys and girls are often shown overcoming fears and thereby growing more independent and "grown-up" as a result of some event involving

birthdays. For example, in a 1993 story, Annie gets her dream bicycle for her birthday and in learning to ride it, falls and scrapes her knees and elbow. But she is happy to have conquered her fears. In another story, Alfie, who is five-years-old, must decide between letting-go of his blanket and helping an upset friend at a party. He opts to put the blanket down, and in so doing, gains confidence and learns that he doesn't need his blanket anymore. Both genders are also depicted as becoming more responsible, more caring, and less selfish through birthday rites of passage. This is consistent with the findings of Tetenbaum and Pearson (1989) who report that the resolution to a dilemma in a story is often accompanied by a shifting in orientation from a morality of justice toward a morality of care (supporting that males and females both view care as the best solution to a moral dilemma). To illustrate this, in a 1966 story, Lyle the crocodile learns that doing things for others is the best way to overcome his jealousy of his human "brother's" birthday party and presents.

A third growth theme common for both boys and girls involves a magical transformation or wish fulfillment. Although there were a small number of stories in which children had to learn to scale back their expectations, in most stories, wishes are fulfilled, no matter how improbable they are. In one instance, a 7-year-old boy makes a wish and his brontosaurus cake becomes a real baby dinosaur. Even where there is disappointment, there is generally a happy resolution or compensation of some kind. For both boys and girls, birthdays are thus seen as happy times, and growing older is almost uniformly presented as being good: things become better due to the birthday events.

The magic associated with the birthday often provides an "escape" for the child

and separates the child from the adult world. Sometimes it's as if the adults are unable to even "see" the magical outcomes. In one example, Treehorn's fear that his birthday is forgotten is replaced with excitement when he finds a genie. He makes three wishes for a birthday cake, candles, and his name on the cake. Although his parents cannot account for the appearance of the cake, they do not listen to his repeated attempts to talk about the genie, and Treehorn ultimately celebrates his birthday by himself with his personalized birthday cake.

Findings Specific to Females

Almost unanimously in these stories, the adult who buys birthday gifts for the child, prepares birthday foods, and stages birthday celebrations is the child's mother. It is not unusual that there are no adult males present at all, implying a single-parent household or else the irrelevance of the father to the child's birthday celebration. If the father is present, his role is usually supportive and might involve decorating the house or providing (or being unable to provide) the money for desired birthday gifts. In divorced and single-parent households, the mother generally assumes the financial role. Similar to the findings of Crabb and Bielawski (1994), female characters in the story are represented with home artifacts and male characters with production artifacts. Consequently, it is most often the male characters who decorate the house and who exclusively fulfill the role of photographer and videographer. In at least three stories, the male/father figure is shown to have collapsed in a chair, exhausted, at the conclusion of the party, whereas the physical stamina of the mother is never questioned. Those adults who make gifts by hand for the child are also uniformly female, with handmade gifts ranging from embroidered tennis shoes

to a robot. In only two cases was there an absence of adult women.

The birthday cake plays a central role in all of the stories, and with just a few exceptions, preparation of the cake is left entirely to the mother or daughter. It is the mother who is always shown carrying the cake to the table. Three partial exceptions to female food-making involved male cake-baking or male-as-savior endeavors gone awry. In one instance, the dog eats the birthday cake Benny's mother has prepared for him and his father must bring home a new one to stop his crying; and in the second, a little fox bakes a cake and the mother re-makes the cake so it will be perfect. In the third instance, two friends, Marvin and Milton, decide to throw themselves a party, and to save money they try to make a cake and ice cream. Both pursuits are culinary disasters, but the baker and the ice cream maker bring the real thing to the party as gifts for the boys. Ordering a cake from a bakery is often an exception to the female cake-baking role, and "professional" bakers are presented as men. The task of ordering the cake, however, is most often fulfilled by women.

While both genders of children are shown altruistically giving gifts to others, girls are generally shown to naturally possess this tendency while boys must be taught, often with difficulty. One Hispanic girl, Cecelia, goes to great efforts to select her grandmother's favorite objects for her 90th birthday. Most of these objects are symbolic of the good times she has had with her grandmother, showing both female nurturance and efforts to preserve and celebrate personal relationships. In a second example, young Martha gives her blind grandfather a handmade birthday card with raised letters reading "Happy Birthday Grampie." Finally, a third example of this shows how a girl digs a

hole to China in order to bring back something for an older neighbor celebrating a birthday and wishing she had gone there when she was younger. While both boys and girls display sibling rivalry when it is a brother's or sister's birthday, girls are the only ones shown unselfishly remembering their siblings on their own birthday, as when Trixy Reynard (fox) brings pieces of her birthday cake to her sisters who are sick with "fox pox," or when Daisy brings her new toy truck to her brother Elmo as he pouts in the corner during her party.

For older girls, but not boys, birthdays are also a time of concern about romance. Girls are depicted practicing kissing, being jealous of more attractive and popular girls, and scheming to attract boys with party games like spin-the-bottle and truth-or-dare. Older boys are sometimes seen as sharing similar concerns about dating, but they play a supporting role whereas girls are the main character in romantic birthday stories. This is even true when the romantic male "other" is an animal, as with the gorilla that takes Hannah to the zoo because her father is too busy and the ceramic horse that comes alive to fulfill Jennifer's dream of owning and riding a live horse. These animals appear as father stand-ins, with or without a Freudian reading. It is also female twins (or in one case triplets) who are most jealous of one another and who are the ones most worried about individuating themselves as unique (and desirable) people rather than duplicates of their look-a-like. Just as nourishing relationships are stressed for girls, so are such more problematic relationships.

Findings Specific to Males

Besides the economic role most often assigned to the father of a birthday

child, there is a role of miraculous provider of delightful gifts that is assigned to adult men. This is more often an uncle than a father, apparently providing increased removal from the realm of ordinary life in favor of a fantastic world with greater, often magical, possibilities (perhaps paralleling Horatio Alger's stories of long-lost wealthy fathers who surprise their sons by bestowing them with their birthright). Thus, 7-year-old Thomas receives from his uncle a magical miniature circus troupe in a package that unwraps itself, performs, and then repackages itself. Similarly, Joe receives from his Uncle Joe the Magnificent (a magician in a traveling circus) a magical book that transports him and two male friends at his party to King Arthur's court. Here they defeat the evil black knight, dispatch a fire-breathing dragon, eliminate a vile-smelling giant, and receive knighthood. And James receives a special lunchbox from his Uncle Wesley which magically transforms his usual "healthy" lunch into decadent foods his mother prohibits him from eating. Unlike the "uncle" figure, the father sometimes reduces the child's fantasy. In one story the father tells his son to "think" of practical dreams (the son wonders whether such dreams are really dreams at all) and in another, the father tells his son that work is more important than dreaming when he says, "If something is worth wishing for, it's worth working for" (Heide 1984).

It is also boys who are most likely to have active adventures on their birthdays. There are, however, several exceptions in more recent stories, as when two twin girls outsmart the police in solving a birthday burglary (although "Nancy Drew" and "Murder She Wrote" stories are a precedent here), and a story noted earlier in which a girl is depicted overcoming her fears of learning to ride a bicycle down a hill.

A common theme found only among boys in these stories is that of an awkward blundering child who is oblivious to or contemptuous of others, but who learns with some difficulty to behave more acceptably. Thus, Charles, the young alligator, is given an invisible thinking cap by his father and is able to stop bad habits like putting spaghetti in his young sister's hair, putting the dustpan in the refrigerator, and sleeping at school. Similarly, Clarence receives a magical scroll that helps him remember to tie his shoe laces, stop putting ice cream on his friends' heads, and stop having accidents on his bike. And Muck the monster goes to another child monster's birthday party and sees how disgustingly others behave in throwing cake at each other, butting heads, and jumping on the bed. Birthday images like these were also found to be specific to boys among the three- to five-year-olds interviewed by Otnes and McGrath (1994). Such behavior is also reminiscent of the subtitle of a paper by Wolfenbarger and Gilly (1991), "...or, Are Men Insensitive Clods?"

A related theme that is most common in stories about boys involves concern for self rather than others. Thus, selfish Russell learns that he must graciously receive the gifts of his birthday party guests rather than criticize these gifts. Davy must learn from his older brother Peter that they should get mother something she wants for her birthday (and even then Davy spends all their money on a pinwheel that he likes). And a male raccoon eats part of the candy he is coerced into getting his sister for her birthday and must be dissuaded from eating the rest (a Chompo bar). He still substitutes "Happy Chompo to me" in the birthday song for his sister, but eventually becomes contrite, apologizes, and promises to replace the four gumballs he got to give her but ate himself. Stories of naturally egoistic behavior are

not totally exclusive to boys, but they are nearly so. They also contrast sharply with nurturing altruistic stories that are much more typical with girls. But while stories of altruistic girls continue in recent publications, there appears to be a decline over the period studied in stories of cloddish boys.

CONCLUSION

Children's birthday stories provide a fascinating vehicle through which to explore gender role socialization of children. Books play a primary role in introducing young readers to what is essentially a "formulaic" celebration of birthdays, and in so doing, create expectations for specific birthday rituals as well as establishing norms of behavior which the child can apply directly to his or her life. Within the "birthday realm," children as a group are shown enjoying birthday parties, seeking love and attention, and receiving magical wish fulfillment. Individually, it is important for females to be caring and nurturing (often manifested through baking/cooking or shopping activities) while maintaining their focus on those around them, and for males to be active adventurers gaining insights through a better understanding of self.

An important aspect of ritual is its ability to provide symbolic connection to the past and to the future (Rosenthal and Marshall 1988). This connection brings with it a resistance to change. Birthday rituals are one way for individuals and society to find stability during the passage of time. Increased interest in various birthday rituals has revealed associated gender expectations, and a sensitivity to gender is the first move toward analyzing the appropriateness of these expectations in today's society. It is unlikely, however, that change will occur quickly within the realm of birthday rituals, for

the children's birthday story is at work socializing young readers to gender roles and expectations which have changed very little in the last sixty years.

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An increasing number of children are being referred to gender identity services. Here is the story of two of them. A full, interactive experience of the story, with clips of the interviews with the girls and their parents plus support information, can be found here. Victoria Derbyshire is broadcast weekdays from 09:15-11:00 BST on BBC Two and BBC News Channel. Follow the programme on Facebook and Twitter, and find all our content online. Watch Sam and Pam as they have a real birthday party adventure. Can you spot all the plurals in the story? Play the game to help you spell the words from the story. Print out the activity sheet for more practice. Remember to read our discussion question and leave a comment! Game. Documents. Print the story. Print an activity for the story. Print the answers. Discussion. There were lots of plural words in this story. What was your favourite word? Do you know any other plural words?