

1 Introduction

How is academia portrayed in English language children's literature? From *The Water-Babies*¹ to *Tom Sawyer Abroad*,² *Professor Branestawm*,³ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,⁴ and on to *Northern Lights*⁵ and the *Harry Potter* series,⁶ professors are established as central characters in children's books: yet this role has been hitherto unexamined. In this ambitious Element, the representation of fictional academics – individuals teaching or researching within a university or higher education context, or with titles that denote a high rank within the academic sector – is analysed, concentrating on illustrated texts marketed towards children. Focussing on graphic depictions of fictional academics allows the gathering of a corpus which enables a longitudinal analysis: 328 academics were found in 289 different English language children's illustrated books published between 1850 and 2014, allowing trends to be identified using a mixed-method approach of both qualitative and quantitative analysis of overall bibliographic record, individual text and illustration. This establishes a publishing history of the role of academics in children's literature, while highlighting and questioning the book culture which promotes the construction and

¹ C. Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, 1885 edition illustrated by Linley Sambourne (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863, 1885).

² M. Twain, *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1894).

³ N. Hunter, *The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1933).

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

⁵ P. Pullman, *Northern Lights*. 'His Dark Materials' series, volume 1 (London: Scholastic Children's Books, 1995).

⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. 'Harry Potter' series, volume 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

enforcement of stereotypes regarding intellectual expertise in media marketed towards children.

It is academics – teachers and scholars within a higher education setting – rather than other mentions of the university which come to represent the academy in children’s literature: mentions of institutions or their associated structures or customs are rare. The appearance of fictional academics is closely tied to the history of higher education, with the earliest occurrences coinciding with the public funding and growth of the university sector in the latter part of the Victorian period. From then on, fictional academics appear regularly in children’s books, and feature in popular and enduring texts. The incidence of professors in children’s illustrated books increases over the latter half of the twentieth century, although this is closely linked to the fact that there are simply more children’s books being produced within this timeframe. The academics are overwhelmingly white and male and tend to be elderly scientists. Fictional professors can be used as a device to explain and instruct in both fact and fiction. Professors and academic doctors coalesce into three distinct stereotypes: the kindly teacher who is little more than a vehicle to explain scientific facts; the baffled genius who is incapable of functioning in a normative societal manner; and the evil madman who is intent on destruction and mayhem. By the latter part of the twentieth century, the stereotype of the male, mad, muddlehead with absurd hair, called Professor SomethingDumb, is so strong that academics in children’s literature are overwhelmingly presented as such without backstory or explanation. Experts, intellect and higher education are routinely presented as either slapstick or terrifying, in humorous yet pejorative fashion to the child reader, although there is also a trope of the trusted pedagogue or wise old man. These developed stereotypes also establish constraints around which authors and illustrators can easily build characterisation and plotlines and allow publishers to pigeonhole and market texts.

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It is first useful to understand how different professions have been studied in children's literature, focussing on the closest sector that has received some attention: scientists. Next, the method is presented, looking at identifying, accessing and then classifying the texts in a methodological fashion. The *corpus*⁷ is detailed, giving an overview of the 289 books, and looking at societal and commercial factors underpinning the growth of occurrences of professors in children's literature over this period of study. *Distant reading*⁸ of bibliometric data – quantitative computational analysis of descriptions of books in the corpus – is combined with traditional close reading practices: a content analysis of the

⁷ A term commonly used in humanities research to denote a curated collection of written texts, particularly the entire body of writing of a particular author, or on a given subject, which can be used for literary or linguistic study. For an overview of corpus construction methods, see J. Sinclair, 'Corpus and Text – Basic Principles', in M. Wynne (ed.), *Developing Linguistic Corpora: A Guide to Good Practice* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), pp. 1–16, <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/documents/creating/dlc/>.

⁸ *Distant reading* is the effort to understand literature by aggregating and analysing large datasets, as opposed to close reading, which is a careful interpretation of a particular section of text. For the mutual relationship between corpora, computational analysis and close reading, see F. Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso Books, 2013), and also J. Rosen, 'Combining Close and Distant, or, the Utility of Genre Analysis: A Response to Matthew Wilkens's "Contemporary Fiction by the Numbers"' (3 December 2011), Post 45, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2011/12/combining-close-and-distant-or-the-utility-of-genre-analysis-a-response-to-matthew-wilkenss-contemporary-fiction-by-the-numbers/>, T. Underwood, 'A Genealogy of Distant Reading', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, Volume 11(2) (2017), www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/2/000317/000317.html, and K. Bode, 'The Equivalence of "Close" and "Distant" Reading; Or, Towards a New Object for Data-Rich Literary History', *Modern Language Quarterly* (December 2017); for the relationship of distant reading to the study of children's literature, see E. Giddens, 'Children's Literature and Distant Reading', in M. Nikolajeva and C. Beauvais (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) pp. 305–13.

gathered collection guides attention to areas likely to repay individual focus. The striking heteronormative, patriarchal, white, scientific, maleness of academics in children's literature is revealed, underscoring previously undertaken research into the lack of diversity in children's literature, while also showing how stereotypes of academics fossilise and concentrate, becoming increasingly hard to break out from in modern texts. Turning to enduring and popular representations of academics in children's books, these stereotypes become blueprints for others to follow, or to deliberately fight against.

Representations of academics are tied to wider societal influences, including the depiction of celebrities such as Einstein, popular culture references to book, film and television such as *Frankenstein*, the resulting public perception of science and scientists, and, more broadly, the 'cult of ignorance'⁹ in a society which has 'had enough of experts'.¹⁰ The corpus demonstrates that, even to a preschool audience, illustrated books are describing advanced learning, intellectual excellence and academic achievement as something to be either feared or laughed at. The ramifications of this for their readership are unknown and unproven. However, the lack of diversity and the mocking nature, showing both the narrow perception of who is allowed intellectual agency in the fictional academy, and what little respect it should be given, potentially impacts the child reader, given previous studies into the effect of negative gender representation in children's books. It is possible to scope out probable effects of this, and point to how children's literature can both increase its diversity and step away from damaging stereotypes. In addition, the corpus of texts that have built up over the past century and a half are a lasting testament to the societal undercurrents of patriarchy, uniformity and anti-intellectualism, and how we teach our

⁹ I. Asimov, 'A Cult of Ignorance', *Newsweek* (21 January 1980), p. 19.

¹⁰ H. Mance, 'Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove', *Financial Times* (3 June 2016), www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.

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children to understand these cultural infrastructures. Although this survey concentrates on professors in children's literature, it is likely that a similar study on different professions would show alarmingly interchangeable results (except vocations in which women have been traditionally 'allowed' to excel: teaching, nursing and librarianship¹¹). The corpus has a complex, and sometimes uncomfortable, relationship with its real-life counterpart, simultaneously mirroring, mocking and reinforcing the lack of diversity in the actual academy.

This study pushes the affordances of digital methods, expanding established research methodologies and showing opportunities for others undertaking longitudinal, corpus-based work on changing representations in the study of children's literature. It is demonstrated that social media tools can be of benefit in the identification of texts to build up large-scale corpora, as well as making use of established methods of library catalogue searching and chaining. Access to digitised texts, particularly those in the public domain and those digitised on demand, improves the range of material that can be included in longitudinal corpora (although copyright restrictions mean a paucity of digitised twentieth-century texts can be obtainable legally). In addition, this research also highlights difficulties in navigating the current state of print-on-demand texts and ebooks, whilst demonstrating opportunities for studying children's literature at scale, over a long timeframe, using bibliographic data. It is shown that a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative approach can be used to allow both distant and close reading of texts, allowing trends and tropes to be identified, scrutinised and explained, in a 'genre study' that 'oscillates between levels of

¹¹ See C. Goldin, 'A Pollution Theory of Discrimination: Male and Female Differences in Occupations and Earnings', in *Human Capital in History: The American Record* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 313–348.

analysis, training its vision on a constellation of objects then telescoping in for a closer look' (Rosen, 'Combining Close and Distant'), this research, then, explores novel methods that may be useful for others in children's literature studies, and those undertaking longitudinal analyses of popular culture.

Relevant literature, including research into representation in children's literature and the portrayal of higher education in other media, is surveyed in Section 2. The research approach adopted here, including gathering and analysing the corpus, is presented in Section 3. Section 4 details the results of the analysis, looking at the historical growth of academics in illustrated children's literature and the main stereotypes that emerge regarding gender, race, class, appearance, subject matter and plot. The main behavioural stereotypes – those of the teacher, the baffled blunderer and the evil madman – are discussed in Section 5, while stereotypes are also presented as a framework for modern children's authors and illustrators to build upon. The influences on the construction of characters are detailed, including the representation of scientists in popular media, the building of the stereotype via popular and enduring works of children's literature, the influence on the representation of fictional academics by the constitution (and public perception) of the real-life university sector, and the wider socio-political media climate that fosters anti-intellectualism and populist rhetoric, revealing a complex network of associations referenced by authors and illustrators when depicting academics in children's literature. Finally, the findings are summarised in Section 6, which questions the dominance of the male, mad, muddlehead, asking what can be done to challenge the stereotype, while discussing limitations of this research, and areas for future study. Many of the early examples discussed in this analysis have also been made available in an open access anthology.¹²

¹² M. Terras, *The Professor in Children's Literature: An Anthology* (London: Fincham Press, 2018).

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It is hoped that by carrying out this analysis, we can start to ask what we are teaching our children when it comes to experts and intellectual agency. The ridiculous parallel nature of our societal structures – the pale, male and stale universities¹³ – and how we reinforce them to our children – the male, mad, muddlehead of children’s literature – are revealed. We can see how children’s literature responds to and, consciously or unconsciously, echoes societal trends in education, politics, history and popular culture. Looking at such a publishing history raises issues of the role of authors, illustrators and publishers in both utilising and standing up to established pejorative stereotypes within the children’s book industry. Need fictional representations – which provide an extension of the world to our children – reinforce negative stereotypes so slavishly? Do these representations encourage us to ask difficult questions about the current constitution of the real-life academy? What can authors, illustrators and publishers do to address these issues? We can see where the shorthand of the male, mad, muddlehead professor emerges from, and then, hopefully, we can – in even a small way – challenge it.

2 Related Research: Representation, Vocation and Higher Education

Although no prior longitudinal analysis of academics and the university in children’s literature has been found, there are various approaches, methods and observations that informed this research. Essentially, this is a study of representation within children’s literature, and there is much prior work done in developing methods in which to identify, classify and analyse specific factors in children’s

¹³ See M. Flinders, F. Matthews and C. Eason, ‘Are Public Bodies Still “Male, Pale and Stale”? Examining Diversity in UK Public Appointments 1997–2010’, *Politics*, 31(3) (2011), pp. 129–139.

books: these are briefly surveyed. Such analyses are important given the effects that dominant narratives can have on child development: an overview is given of material that investigates this link, indicating why this type of study matters. Previously published research on professions in children's literature is summarised, followed by work undertaken which analyses scientists both in books written for a childhood audience and the wider media landscape, including work on how academia is presented in media targeted towards older audiences (including comic books, and popular culture). Although there is no published work on academics in children's literature, there is a wealth of methods that can be adopted and adapted from these prior studies.

2.1 The Study of Representation in Children's Literature

Before considering the portrayal of academics in children's books, it is useful to survey the long history of the study of representation in children's literature. Representation studies – focussing on the analysis of particular aspects featured in children's literature by: their illustration; the tone and word choice used in textual description; and how these two interact – are usually targeted towards broad measures such as gender,¹⁴ ethnic diversity and cultural

¹⁴ A. P. Nilsen, 'Women in Children's Literature', *College English*, 32(8) (1971), 918–926, <http://doi.org/10.2307/375631>; K. E. Heintz, 'An Examination of Sex and Occupational-Role Presentations of Female Characters in Children's Picture Books', *Women's Studies in Communication*, 10(2), (1987), 67–78; J. W. Stewig and R. Theilheimer, 'Men in Picture Books and Environments', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 19(4), (1992), 38–43; S. C. Saad, 'The Gender of Chronically Ill Characters in Children's Realistic Fiction, 1970–1994', *Sexuality and Disability*, 17(1), (1999), 79–92; C. Brugeilles, I. Cromer, S. Cromer and Z. Andreyev, 'Male and Female Characters in Illustrated Children's Books or How Children's Literature Contributes to the Construction of Gender', *Population (English Edition)*, (2002), 237–267; R. Clark, J. Guilmain, P. K. Saucier and J. Tavaréz, 'Two Steps Forward, One Step

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identity,¹⁵ parental roles,¹⁶ sexuality¹⁷ and disability.¹⁸ Qualitative and

Back: The Presence of Female Characters and Gender Stereotyping in Award-Winning Picture Books between the 1930s and the 1960s', *Sex Roles*, 49(9–10), (2003), 439–449; C. Hendricks, J. Hendricks, T. Messenheimer, M. S. Houston and J. Williford, 'Exploring Occupational Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books', *International Journal of the Book*, 7(2), (2010); H. Rao and H. Smith, 'The Representation of Women Doctors in Children's Picture Books', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 107(12), (2014), 480–482.

¹⁵ L. Edmonds, 'The Treatment of Race in Picture Books for Young Children', *Book Research Quarterly*, 2(3), (1986), 30–41; M. Cai, 'Images of Chinese and Chinese Americans Mirrored in Picture Books', *Children's Literature in Education*, 25(3), (1994), 169–191; M. D. Koss, 'Diversity in Contemporary Picturebooks: A Content Analysis', *Journal of Children's Literature*, 41(1), (2015), 32; S. J. Wee, S. Park and J. S. Choi, 'Korean Culture as Portrayed in Young Children's Picture Books: The Pursuit of Cultural Authenticity', *Children's Literature in Education*, 46(1), (2015), 70–87; Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), 'Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017' (2018) clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children.

¹⁶ D. A. Anderson and M. Hamilton, 'Gender Role Stereotyping of Parents in Children's Picture Books: The Invisible Father', *Sex Roles*, 52(3–4), (2005), 145–151; A. L. DeWitt, C. M. Cready and R. R. Seward, 'Parental Role Portrayals in Twentieth Century Children's Picture Books: More Egalitarian or Ongoing Stereotyping?', *Sex Roles*, 69(1–2), (2013), 89–106; V. Joosen, "'Look More Closely,' Said Mum": Mothers in Anthony Browne's Picture Books', *Children's Literature in Education* 46(2) (2015), 145–159.

¹⁷ J. Schall and G. Kauffmann, 'Exploring Literature with Gay and Lesbian Characters in the Elementary School', *Journal of Children's Literature*, 29(1), (2003), 36–45; J. Sapp, 'A Review of Gay and Lesbian Themed Early Childhood Children's Literature', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 35(1), (2010), 32; C. L. Ryan and J. M. Hermann-Wilmarth, 'Already on the Shelf: Queer Readings of Award-Winning Children's Literature', *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45(2), (2013), 142–172.

¹⁸ S. A. Wagoner, 'The Portrayal of the Cognitively Disabled in Children's Literature', *The Reading Teacher*, 37(6), (1984), 502–508; Saad, 'The Gender of Chronically Ill Characters in Children's Realistic Fiction'; N. Matthew and S. Clow, 'Putting

quantitative analyses reveal time and time again that children's literature is severely lacking in all areas of diversity.¹⁹ Representational analysis is also used to study subjects in children's literature as diverse as behavioural issues,²⁰ school environments,²¹ bereavement,²² Art Museums²³ and the appearance of objects such as the moon.²⁴

These previous studies, which often analyse written and visual text in both qualitative and quantitative approaches, informed the methodology. The number of books analysed varies, depending also on the methods used: from close reading – with two books,²⁵ four,²⁶ thirteen,²⁷

Disabled Children in the Picture: Promoting Inclusive Children's Books and Media', *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(2), (2007), 65–78.

¹⁹ P. Nel and L. Paul, eds., *Keywords for Children's Literature* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011).

²⁰ P. A. Opplinger and A. Davis, 'Portrayals of Bullying: A Content Analysis of Picture Books for Preschoolers', *Early Childhood Education Journal* (2015), 1–12.

²¹ E. C. Phillips and B. W. Sturm, 'Do Picture Books About Starting Kindergarten Portray the Kindergarten Experience in Developmentally Appropriate Ways?', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 41(6), (2013), 465–475.

²² K. D. Malafantis, 'Death Shall Have No Dominion: Representations of Grandfathers' Death in Contemporary Picturebooks', *Advances in Literary Study*, 1(4), (2013), 34.

²³ E. Yohlin, 'Pictures in Pictures: Art History and Art Museums in Children's Picture Books', *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(3), (2012), 260–272.

²⁴ K. C. Trundle, T. H. Troland and T. G. Pritchard, 'Representations of the Moon in Children's Literature: An Analysis of Written and Visual Text', *Journal of Elementary Science Education*, 20(1), (2008), 17–28.

²⁵ Malafantis, 'Death Shall Have No Dominion'.

²⁶ Yohlin, 'Pictures in Pictures'; Joosen, "'Look More Closely," Said Mum'.

²⁷ Stewig and Theilheimer, 'Men in Picture Books and Environments'; Phillips and Sturm, 'Do Picture Books about Starting Kindergarten Portray the Kindergarten Experience in Developmentally Appropriate Ways?'.