Beyond the Nuclear Family: A Century of Representation in Images and Text of Children's Literature

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How has the representation of family structure in children's literature evolved over time? Books offer a critical opportunity to understand changing attitudes among individuals, families, and communities. One way to understand the messages that have been conveyed through children's books is to systematically measure who is represented in the images and text across best-selling samples. This investigation coded 2460 pages from 75 bestselling picture books spanning a century of American literature (1922-2022) to quantify representation of families using age, gender, and race. The data was analyzed by both human coders and Natural Language and Vision AI technology to test congruence. As established by Tukey-Kramer Tests, no statistically significant differences ($p>0.05$) were found in multi-dimensional family structure metrics over time. A Chi-Squared Test of Independence also indicated that comparisons between year and “token” words describing age and gender revealed no statistically significant relationship: white nuclear families continued to be most commonly represented in bestselling children’s literature during the past century. When compared to US Census Bureau data, under- and over-representation of different groups was quantified. This suggests that despite notable changes in family structure over the past century, these demographic and cultural shifts have not been reflected in popular children’s books. The investigation highlights why parents, educators, and other stakeholders may need to look beyond bestsellers to find children’s books that reflect the diversity of American society.

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