

## Children's Science Fiction Outside the River of Time

Time changes and washes away all things—or so we like to say. When it comes to young children's science fiction, the currents of time have not changed the genre nearly as much as we might have thought. According to Farah Mendlesohn in *The Intergalactic Playground*, the genre went through significant changes in topic, informational density, and attitude around the 1960s when "Juvenile" science fiction began to make way for "YA" science fiction. When it comes to books for a younger audience, however, change is not as clear. The extrapolative and speculative quality of heavily illustrated books for children has not improved or declined significantly for 90 years. Even more disappointing, the proportion of strong female characters and diverse protagonists in these books has not changed substantially over the years either.

This presentation analyzes the changes in children's science fiction quality and inclusivity as it flows from Mary Liddell's 1926 picturebook *A Little Machinery* through contemporary picturebooks, early readers, comics, and graphic novels. Using my personal database of over 200 illustrated children's science fiction books, I conduct a quantitative analysis on whether the year of publication can predict the speculative/extrapolative quality or presence of strong female and diverse protagonists. I pair this statistical data with analysis of a representative book from each decade in terms of its speculative, extrapolative, diverse, or feminist content. While the style and aesthetic of these books certainly ebb with the times, analysis of the content does not reveal as much development as we might expect from such a forward-focused genre. Fortunately, the last 10 years show *potential* for change. Not enough to register on a statistical measure, but enough to offer hope.

Children's literature runs the risk of being viewed as timeless. In the case of children's science fiction, forcing the genre's historical progress (or lack thereof) into the open reveals that this genre has not sufficiently moved downstream; it seems to be stuck outside the river of time. The hour has come for us to give it a friendly shove over the bank.