

## The fault in our default.



I saw this picture posted on social media, accompanied by a bevy of witty comments from people to the tune of:

*"I think it's great! As a modern woman, I fully support men having hobbies!"*

*"So stunning and brave to see males break into the guitarist scene. Still, I think guitar is naturally a woman's instrument and that male guitarists will always be subpar, but still, kudos to male guitarists for trying"*

*"I'm not sexist; I just think that 'boy bands' aren't as good as real bands, and that's why they don't get as many festival gigs. There's no need to turn it into 'identity politics' like these boys always need to do."*

Most of the comments came from women; however there were also others from men, such as one chap who observed, *"Andy shouldn't have all those tattoos. It makes him look whorish. No real woman will ever want to marry him."*

The images above and the subsequent posted comments may seem overblown but they reflect how we associate certain activities and talents with one gender over another and then ruthlessly police this demarcation with ideologies to protect the status quo. Here were (mostly) women throwing back the comments and jibes they had heard directed at themselves throughout their lives.

It speaks to the default 'maleness' of so many things in our society: the '100 best guitarists of all time' (mostly/all male, depending on the list) versus the '50 best female guitarists'; don't cross the road when the little red *man* is flashing (although kudos to Melbourne and other cities for implementing 'little red women' about the place too); at University I completed a *Bachelor* of Arts, the list goes on. All around us are the reflections of structures that have not been created with me in mind. Patriarchy's



lens has leant an assumed masculinity to so much of what we've built around us, something which can have detrimental effects for women's health and well-being.

As detailed by Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, the consequences of this default setting can be seen in everything from the size of your average smart phone to Google voice recognition software, which was initially 70% more likely to accurately recognise male speech<sup>1</sup>.

There is the ill-fitting PPE for women health workers and body armour for women working in law enforcement, or the fact that when Apple first launched Siri, it could provide help for a heart attack but not if you had been raped (answering "I don't know what you mean by 'I was raped.'").

America also did not think to use female crash-test dummies up until 2011<sup>2</sup>. A crucial oversight considering that a woman's deviation from the 'standard seating position' due to her need to sit closer to the steering wheel and more upright to see over the dashboard, leaves her more prone to internal injury from a frontal collision.

These examples, this disregarding of the lived experience of women, highlights the pervasive undercurrent of the masculine experience as default, and how it can seriously impact women's lives. (Because, although we're less likely to be in a car crash, when it does happen women are 47% more likely to be seriously injured, and 17% more likely to die)<sup>3</sup>.

So why, despite these understandings, is the world still so stubbornly built along these lines? Where are the female voices informing these decisions and choices? Maybe the world is still not truly listening?

The media abounds with the over representation of men and masculinity: in 2019, of the 100 highest grossing films 66% of speaking or named characters were male and 34% female, and this number got even worse in action movies where speaking characters who were girls or women fell to only 28%.<sup>4</sup>

A similar trend is also reflected in children's literature. In *The Times*' list of the '100 Best Children's Books Of All Time' 68% of the stories feature a male protagonist and only 19% a female (13% feature both a male and female protagonist or a character of unidentified gender). That is not even a quarter, and particularly surprising when you consider that just over a third of the authors were female<sup>5</sup>.

As a girl growing up, we are forced to see through the eyes of the other sex if we are at all interested in consuming more than about a fifth of what is on offer. One wonders if boys (who unfortunately, statistically, do not read for pleasure as much) will have the opportunity to likewise consider differing points of view when around 80% of the literature available to them will not encourage them to do so.

It's why the *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* books are so important not only for my daughter to read, but also my son. As I see him engage with the stories of Jacquotte Delahaye (a Haitian lesbian

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

<sup>4</sup> <https://womenandhollywood.com/resources/statistics/2019-statistics/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.romper.com/p/the-gender-gap-in-childrens-books-is-the-real-monster-in-the-room-12576548>



pirate from the 17<sup>th</sup> century), Alfonsina Strada (the first woman to attempt the Giro d'Italia) and Nancy Wake (a total bad ass, why there are 7 million iterations of Spiderman and no movie about her I have no idea) I hope he begins to see them, and by extension all women, as not only strong and capable of achieving great things, but also simply as people whose stories are worthy of being listened to, a part of the mix. Theirs are voices to be heard, opinions to be considered and experiences to be taken into account as we continue along the never-ending journey of reimagining, reinterpreting and reconstructing our society and culture around us.

The great examples of what to tune in to are all around us, the voices are screaming to be heard, if we'll only pay attention. And not get stuck on default.