Persistence of Gender Asymmetries in Book Reviews Within and Across Genres

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Abstract

While literary judgments are considered highly subjective or noisy, gender asymmetries are shown in readers' and reviewers' assessments of literature. This study adds genre categories to the examination of literary reviews. By considering both the gender of authors and reviewers, the media type of reviews (newspapers, online blogs), as well as genres, this analysis provides a detailed overview of the Danish review scene and sheds light on structural biases. Analyzing how genres are reviewed in newspapers and blogs, we identify systematic trends that may be attributed to gender biases in reviewer judgments across, as well as within, different genres and media types. Our results show that the book reviews in Danish media are polarized between the reviewer genders and the two considered media types, upholding additional gender asymmetries in rating.

Keywords

literary genres, gender bias, popularity, prestige, literary quality

1. Introduction

While the phenomenon of gender bias in readers' and reviewers' perception of the literary 'quality' has been observed in multiple contexts [14, 25], the consideration of literary genres provides a more nuanced picture of differential literary judgments across author gender [12, 23]. Moreover, since men and women read, review, and publish different types of literature [14, 23], an analysis that does not consider genres will risk a circularity, inferring gender preferences from genre preferences. Therefore, this study considers the additional layer of genres when exploring the potential impact of gender biases on book reviews while examining variations across media types. By examining how genres are reviewed across two different media types, newspapers and blogs, we seek to assess possible gender biases in reviewers' judgments across and within genres and media types.

1.1. Gender, prestige, and genre

Various studies have shown that literary reviews are influenced by the gender of both reviewers and authors [14, 12, 13]. Interestingly, these gender biases vary depending on the domains in which assessments occur. In a cross-national analysis of gender differences across the popular-highbrow culture divide, Verboord [27] showed that women authors are increasingly present in bestseller lists, while the proportion of women authors remains small among literary award winners.[1] Similarly, Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14] showed how reviews in newspapers display a stronger preference for men writers compared to reviews published in the blogosphere, with a significant preference for women authors. Interpreting this distinction between the institutionally embedded critics in newspapers versus the blog reviewers as 'grassroots' critics [28] as a difference in prestige, allows for an analysis of how women and men authors are perceived differently in the review scene.

In Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14], the findings furthermore revealed that preferences for a particular author-gender were linked to the gender majority within each media type. Specifically, men dominate as reviewers and authors in newspapers, while women dominate in the same roles in blogs. This intricate interplay between the historical contexts of newspapers and the influence of majority preferences highlights the complex nature of social biases within the cultural sphere of literary reviews. As we shall see in the following, genres add further complexities to the study literary judgements.

1.1.1. Genre and implicit quality judgment

Literary genres are hard to define as genre labels are understood as neither fully connected to textual characteristics nor completely extraneous to them [6]. Genres encompass thematic and formal assessments while also reflecting implicit quality judgments made by the readers, editors, and critics who assign genres to literary works. Thereby, genres offer another layer to the analysis of literary prestige.

In his work, Bourdieu [5, 4] sketched out the literary field in France at the end of the nineteenth century, seeking to assess genres in terms of their placement along two axes: consecration and profit [7]. Bourdieu distinguishes between types of audiences and considers "consecration by artists, by institutions of the dominant classes, and by popular success" as axes that are more or less mutually exclusive.[2] His mapping of genres offers a practical visualization with a distinction between top-down and bottom-up literary judgments, represented on one side by intellectual and bourgeois audiences, and on the other, by amateur and mass audiences (Fig. 1). Several quantitative studies have built upon Bourdieu's work, placing literary works along the axes of popularity and prestige [2, 20], and show differences between genres.

Combining aspects of prestige with analysis of gender, Groos [8] has shown that women authors tend to be more often labeled or re-labeled into less prestigious genres, such as 'women's novel' over 'literary novel'. This phenomenon, termed "false categorizing" by Russ [21], leads literary cultures to grant women authors less prestige than men counterparts. One example of

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[1]We use the phrase "women and men authors" instead of the more commonly used "female and male authors" to distinguish the cultural gender (which is examined in this paper) from the biological sex.

[2]Bourdieu writes: "there are few fields [beyond the literary] in which the antagonism between the occupants of the polar positions is more total" [4, p. 46]
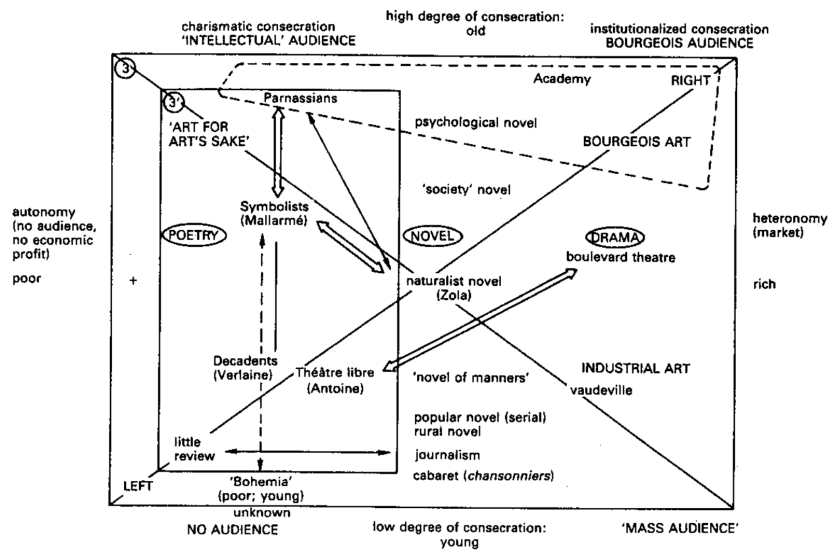
Figure 1: Bourdieu's French literary field of the late 19th century, with popularity on the x-axis and prestige on the y-axis [4].

this is the genre of the 'literary novel'– a "less popular but more prestigious men-dominated genre" [23]. Tuchman and Fortin [26] describe how women writers were 'edged out' as the 'novel' gained prestige as a literary form – having been shaped into being by women novelists [3, 22].

Today, the 'literary novel' is often juxtaposed to 'genre fiction' [9], and large gender differences persist both in the reader and author distribution across genre divisions, also within 'genre fiction.' For example, Thelwall [23] shows that there is a substantial gender difference in author gender within most genres: women mainly write – or at least publish – romantic fiction, children's literature, and young adult fiction, whereas men dominate genres such as crime, thriller, and adventure. Even *within* genres, women and men authors seem to be judged differently [24]. For example, Higonnet [10] reveals gender-based differences in war novels, and research on Bildungsromans[11, 15], crime novels [1], and science fiction [16, 18] shows similar patterns, emphasizing the importance of genre in analysis.

This paper aims to examine the effect of gender and genre on reviews published in two different media types. By mapping out how genres are distributed across media types and the gender of reviewers and authors, our work approaches the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** Which genres are being rated the highest and lowest in each of the two media types (newspapers and blogs)?
- **RQ2:** How does the number of reviews relate to unique book titles within genres? Are there any differences between men and women authors?
- **RQ3:** Within specific genres, how is the gender combination between the reviewer and author distributed? Are there rating differences across these combinations?

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2. Methods

2.1. Data

The dataset used in this work consists of book reviews published in Danish media from 2010 to 2021. The data is retrieved from bog.nu, an online platform collecting book reviews from a variety of sources. For a shared rating scale and gender retrieval, we followed the methods in Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14]. In the present work, regional newspapers are aggregated with national newspapers, resulting in 25 newspapers in total written by 620 unique reviewers. Furthermore, blog-like websites are aggregated with blogs, resulting in 203 book blogs dedicated to book reviews. As the bog.nu dataset does not contain IDs for blog reviewers (presumably due to pseudonyms and shared blogs), we do not have the exact number of unique blog reviewers. Similarly, the gender of some blog reviewers is unknown. For an overview of the review, please refer to table 1.

Table 1
An overview of gender and media type in the dataset presented in this paper.

Data set overview					
No. of reviews	**45 000**	**No. of unique titles**	**12 996**	**No. of reviews by media type**	
Men reviewers	16 633	Men authors	7 083	Newspapers	24 753
Women reviewers	22 680	Women authors	5 913	Blogs	20 247
Unknown	5 687				

2.2. Genre retrieval

The data retrieved from bog.nu lacks meaningful genre categories, why we collected genre categories elsewhere. We collected two special categories to indicate the canonicity of titles (national or international): for the category, 'Danish classics', we relied on the reference work *Danish poets in the 20th century* [17] and the Danish Cultural Canon [19], retrieving a list of 160 unique authors, of whom 113 were extant in the bog.nu dataset. For 'International classics,' we made use of the Open Syllabus by selecting the 1,000 most assigned authors in 'English Literature' syllabi resulting in a list of 502 unique authors, of whom 77 were extant in the bog.nu dataset. For the remaining genres, we used the ISBN system, scraping the DK-5 or 'theme codes' connected to each ISBN on the large online bookshop Saxo, which resulted in 31 unique genre categories. After manual inspection of the genre codes, we merged similar genres, preferring more overarching categories in the DK-5 system.[3] We thus ended up with 18 unique genres. See Fig. 2 for a visual overview of the genre retrieval pipeline.

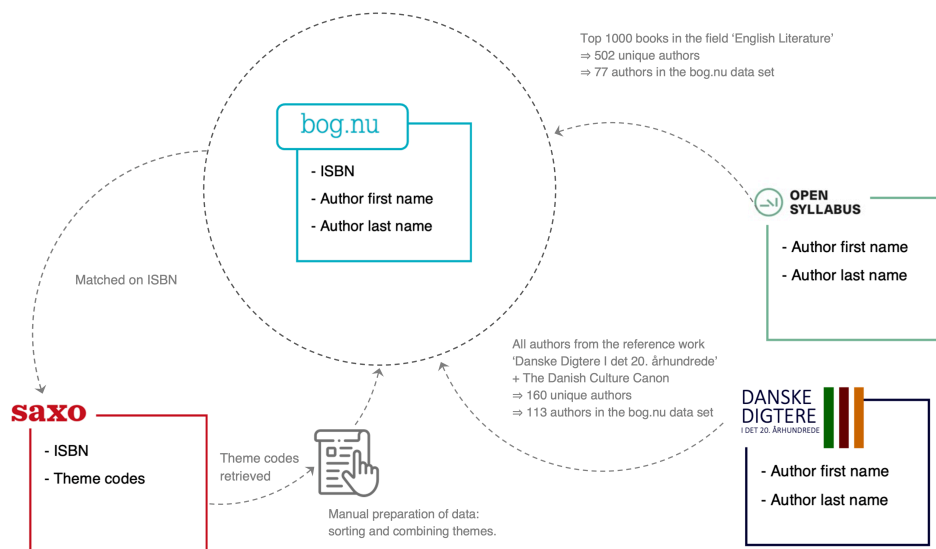[3]See all categories at: https://ns.editeur.org

Figure 2: A visual overview of the genre retrieval pipeline.

Table 2

An overview of genre categories and the review ratio in the dataset presented in this paper.

Genre	Unique book titels	No. of reviews	Review ratio
Literary fiction	2906	12441	4.28
Crime & mystery	1370	5968	4.36
Fiction for children	964	1953	2.03
Young adult (YA)	847	3649	4.31
Books for small children	528	977	1.85
Romantic fiction	518	1997	3.86
Danish classics	510	2055	4.03
International classics	426	1498	3.52
Poetry	397	1197	3.02
Historical & war novels	318	1240	3.90
Thriller & suspense	304	1235	4.06
Fantasy	260	1010	3.88
Family & genealogy novels	231	941	4.07
Biographical fiction	194	904	4.66
Graphic novels	155	394	2.54
Erotic fiction	113	394	3.49
Science fiction	89	349	3.92
Horror	58	173	2.98
Unknown	2808	6625	2.36

2.3. Model

In order to estimate the relative effect of genre on the reviewer-assigned rating (six-point scale), we fit the following linear model:

$$Y_{\text{rating}} = \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{genre}} X_{\text{genre}} + \epsilon \tag{1}$$

with the null model that $\beta_{\text{genre}} = 0$. Where y_i is the rating of review i, x_i is the predictor value (genre) of review i, β represents unknown parameters, and ϵ is the error terms. A linear model is fitted for both blogs and newspapers, respectively.

To estimate the relative effect of author and reviewer gender on reviewer-assigned ratings, we have analysed each genre separately.[4] To do so, we have fitted the following linear model:

$$Y_{\text{rating}} = \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{author gender}} X_{\text{author gender}} + \beta_{\text{reviewer gender}} X_{\text{reviewer gender}} + \epsilon \tag{2}$$

with the null hypothesis that $\beta_{\text{author gender}} = \beta_{\text{reviewer gender}} = 0$. A linear model is fitted for both blogs and newspapers, respectively. For models fitted on data for newspapers, a random effect for each reviewer is added.

3. Results

3.1. Distributions

3.1.1. Genre distribution

Looking at the total number of reviews (See Table 2 for the number of reviews, and Fig. 3 for percentage distribution), we find that beyond 'Literary fiction' and books without a known category, the genres 'Crimes & Mysteries', 'Young Adult' (YA), and 'Fiction for Kids' are the most reviewed genres. Looking at reviews in newspapers specifically, the most reviewed genres are 'Crime & Mystery', 'Danish classics', and 'Poetry'. In blog reviews, the most reviewed genres are 'Crime & Mystery', 'YA', and 'Romantic Fiction'. Looking at the review ratio of each genre (See Table 2), we see that it is highest for the genres 'Biographical fiction', 'Crime & mystery', 'YA' and smallest for 'Books for small children', 'Fiction for children', and books without a known category.

3.1.2. Gender distribution

The distribution of the total number of titles by women and men authors within each genre in the bog.nu dataset show patterns similar to those in Thelwall [23]: titles by women authors are predominant in genres like 'Romantic fiction', 'Erotic fiction', and 'YA'. Whereas men authors are more represented in 'Graphic novels', 'Science fiction', and 'Classics' (both Danish and International).

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[4]A common modelling approach is to include a genre variable rather than working with data subsets. However, we opt for this approach due to interpretability, as it would otherwise involve dealing with ~ 80 parameters.
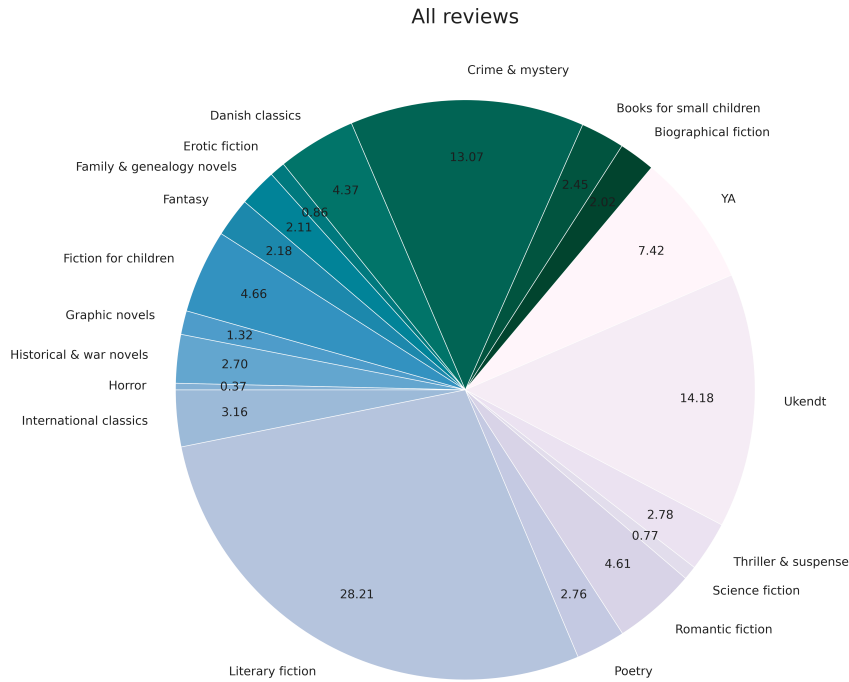
Figure 3: Genre distribution considering *all* reviews

The differences in author gender across genre is further explicit when we nuance the data and look at reviews in newspapers and blogs, respectively. In newspapers, reviews of men-dominated genres are more present, whereas books of women-dominated genres are reviewed more in blogs.

Considering the difference between the proportion of reviews of titles by women/men authors and the proportion of actual titles by women/men authors in each genre, we find an opposite trend in blogs compared to newspapers: in blogs, titles by women authors tend to be reviewed disproportionately *more* in relation to actual number of titles by women authors, while they are reviewed disproportionately *less* in newspapers in relation to the number of titles by women (Fig. 4). In newspapers, the percentage of reviews of women authors is less than or equal to the percentage of books that are written by women authors in almost every genre (i.e., the light-green bars tend to be longer than the dark-green bars in Fig. 4, right). We find that the proportion between reviews and titles of women authors is most unequal for the genres 'Horror', 'Danish classics', and 'Poetry'. Where the former is a small genre (Table 2), the two others are connected to high prestige [20](cf. Fig. 7). In blogs, the opposite seems to be the case, where men authors consistently reviewed disproportionately *less* (i.e., the red bar in line Fig. 4 tends to be longer than the pink). In sum, we find opposite tendencies when looking at the relation between reviews and no. of titles in newspapers in contrast to blogs. Note that this bears no relation to *how* women/men authors are reviewed.
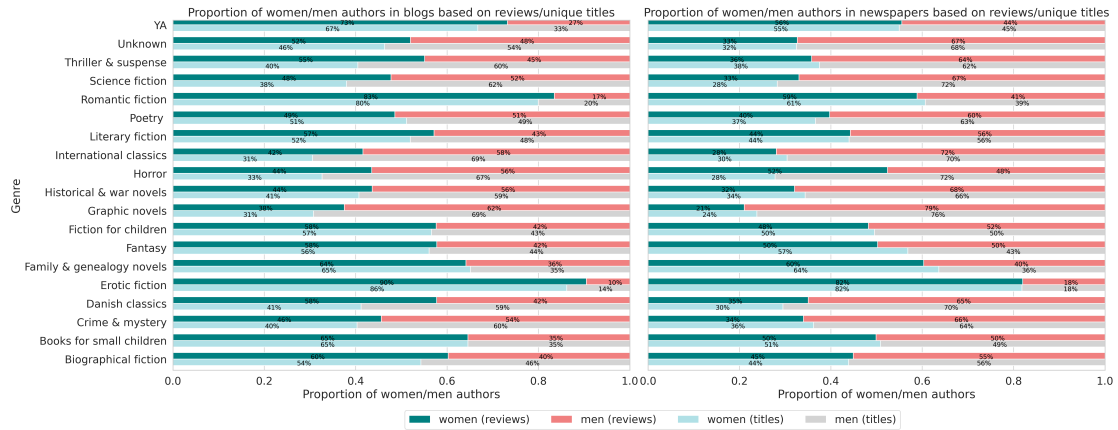
Figure 4: Proportion of women/men authors within genres and between on media type. From left to right, 1) in blogs, 2) in newspapers. We are here comparing the actual percentage of titles that are by women/men authors (titles) in each genre, against the percentage of reviews of women/men authors (reviews). If women/men authors were reviewed in exact proportion to the actual amount of titles by women/men, then the top and bottom bars for each genre would be of equal length in each plot (i.e., the bars in greens and in reds would be equally long).

3.2. Ratio

As earlier studies have shown that men and women reviewers mostly review authors of their own gender [14], we have here examined the gender ratio of the reviews of each genre. Similarly, for media type, we have calculated a media ratio between blogs and newspapers in order to see where each genre is mostly reviewed.

Plotting the media ratio on the *x*-axis and the gender ratio on the *y*-axis, we obtain an overview of where each genre is reviewed. We observe that all 18 genres show a high density of reviews in the corners, representing men reviewers in newspapers and women reviewers in blogs. Distinguishing between books by men and women authors, we furthermore see that reviewers of both genders mostly review books written by their own gender, aligning with the results in Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14]. In the following, we focus on two categories, 'Crime & Mystery' and 'International classics', presenting their full results. Beyond the generic categories ('Literary fiction' and 'Unknown'), 'Crimes & Mysteries' is the most reviewed genre in both blogs and newspapers, while 'International classics' holds high prestige (see Fig. 7).

Fig. 5 shows point plots of where the two genres are reviewed. We see that newspaper reviews of 'Crime & Mystery' are mostly of men authors with a division on reviewer gender. In other words, reviewers are predominantly reviewing crime novels written by an author of their own gender. In blogs, we see that most reviewers are women, confirming the findings in Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14] and that these women reviewers show larger diversity in author gender preference compared to women reviewers in newspapers. In other words, women reviewers in blogs review crime novels by both genders.

For the genre 'International classics', we observe a split on the diagonal, indicating that men
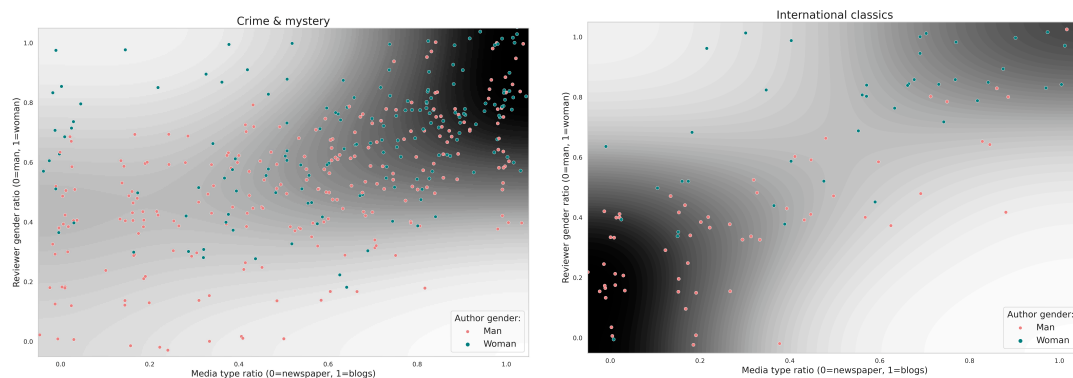
Figure 5: By plotting reviewer-gender ratio and media type ratio, provides an overview of how each genre is reviewed. The colors of the dots furthermore indicate authors-gender, and we observe that reviewers of both genders mostly review books written by their own gender.

review in newspapers and women review in blogs. The newspaper reviews are mostly of men authors, and the few reviews of women authors are mostly reviewed by women reviewers. On blogs, we see a similar preference for same-gender authors.

3.3. Rating

3.3.1. Newspapers

For newspaper reviews, fitting y_i (grade of review) in the model (1) above with a mixed-effect model with reviewer ID as a random effect. This allows us to see the effect of genre and but also the random variability introduced by different reviewers, which is shown to be 0.089 with SD = 0.012, which we interpret as relatively small on point-six scale.

Table 3
Newspapers:

genre	coef	Avg. rating	SD	z	P > |z|	CI 95%	
Intercept [Biographical fiction]	4.210	4.210	0.045	93.112	0.0001	[4.121,	4.298]
International classics	0.442	4.652	0.054	8.130	0.0001	[0.335,	0.548]
Books for small children	0.141	4.351	0.065	2.176	0.0001	[0.014,	0.269]
Danish classics	0.161	4.371	0.048	3.330	0.0001	[0.066,	0.256]
Unknown	-0.231	3.979	0.045	-5.200	0.0001	[-0.319,	-0.144]
Romantic fiction	-0.236	3.974	0.057	-4.146	0.0001	[-0.347,	-0.124]
Crimes & mystery	-0.269	3.941	0.048	-5.596	0.0001	[-0.363,	-0.175]
Thriller & suspense	-0.326	3.884	0.061	-5.345	0.0001	[-0.446,	-0.206]
Erotic fiction	-1.003	3.207	0.113	-8.882	0.0001	[-1.225,	-0.782]
Group Var [reviewer ID]	0.089		0.012				

3.3.2. Blogs

As we do not have reviewer ID for blog reviews, we fit y_i (grade of review) in the model (1) above with a fixed-effect model (ordinary least squares), resulting in statistically significant rating differences in 9 of the 18 different genre categories.

Table 4
Blogs:

genre	coef	Avg. rating	SD	t	P > |t|	CI 95%
Intercept [Biographical fiction]	4.7838	4.7838	0.061	78.302	0.0001	[4.664, 4.904]
Crimes & mystery	-0.1697	4.6141	0.064	-2.660	0.008	[-0.295, -0.045]
Literary fiction	-0.2214	4.5624	0.063	-3.496	0.0001	[-0.346, -0.097]
Science fiction	-0.2649	4.5189	0.095	-2.801	0.005	[-0.450, -0.080]
Family & genealogy novels	-0.2749	4.5089	0.087	-3.146	0.002	[-0.446, -0.104]
Thriller & suspense	-0.3552	4.4286	0.074	-4.821	0.0001	[-0.500, -0.211]
Unknown	-0.3785	4.4053	0.065	-5.789	0.001	[-0.507, -0.250]
Horror	-0.4370	4.3468	0.112	-3.887	0.0001	[-0.657, -0.217]
Poetry	-0.4915	4.2923	0.097	-5.070	0.0001	[-0.681, -0.301]

3.3.3. Effect of gender *within* genre

We examine the effect of reviewer-author gender combinations for reviews of each genre in newspapers and blogs, respectively. We limit this section to include the results on the genres 'Crime & mystery' and 'International classics'.

For reviews of crime novels (see left-hand side of Fig. 6), we fit y_i (grade of review) in the model (2) above with ordinary least squares (OLS) for blog reviews and a mixed-effect model for newspaper reviews. For newspaper reviews we observe a larger span in the ratings with statistically significant rating differences for the gender combinations: woman-women and woman-man, with $p < 0.05$. (Group Var = 0.101, Std. error = 0.036 for random effect for reviewers). For reviews on blogs, on the other hand, reviews of crime novels show no statistically significant differences between the gender combinations of reviewer and author.

We performed the same analysis for reviews of 'International classics' in newspapers and blogs, respectively, by fitting y_i (grade of review) in the model (2) above with ordinary least squares (OLS) for blog reviews and a mixed-effect model for newspaper reviews (see right-hand side of Fig. 6). For blog reviews, there are statistically significant differences between the reviewer-author gender combinations: woman-woman and woman-man. Newspapers reviews show statistically significant differences between the gender combinations woman-woman and man-man (Group Var = 0.135, Std. error = 0.051 for random effect for reviewers). Hence, find that newspaper reviews mirror the results found on all reviews in newspapers [14], where and women reviewers rate women authors the lowest and men reviewers the highest - and the opposite for blog reviews. We furthermore observe that the genre 'International classics' are rated similarly in the two media types.

This indicates that not only does the effect of gender differ between the media types, but also across different genre categories.
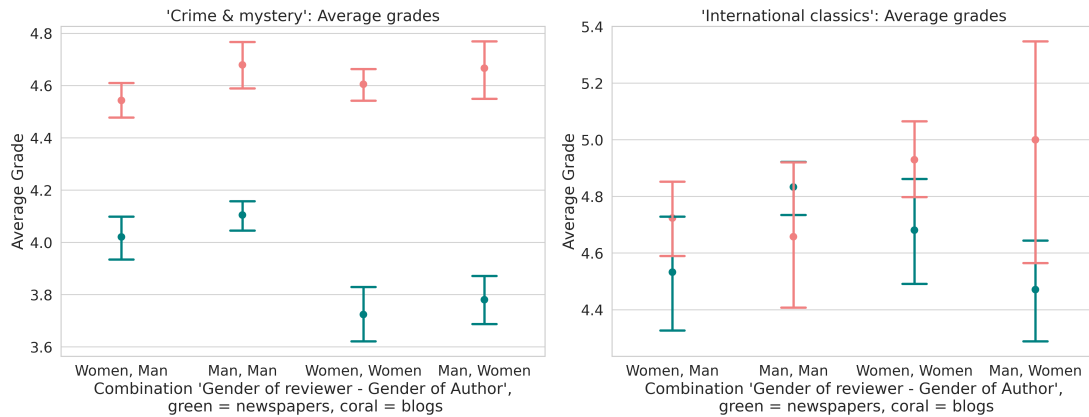
Figure 6: Average grades given to 'Crime & mystery' and 'International classics' for each gender combination in newspaper reviews (green) and blog reviews (coral).

4. Discussion

The work presented in this paper shows that the cultural sphere of book reviews constitutes a complex landscape characterized by intricate interactions between gender dynamics and genre preferences. Our analysis shows that the provided genre categories do not fully elucidate the found gender asymmetries in book reviews. Instead, they add another crucial layer to a nuanced understanding of structural biases in the Danish review scene, split between two genders and the two considered media types. Moreover, section 3.2 shows that both genders predominantly review authors of their own gender – men reviewing in newspapers and women in blogs. This trend is partially explained by a media-type breakdown of reviews in Sec. 3.1.2, showing that genres dominated by women authors receive more attention in blogs, while genres dominated by men authors receive more coverage in newspapers.

4.1. Prestige and popularity - mapping the Danish review scene

Following the heuristic dichotomy of popularity and prestige as in Bourdieu [5], we provide a similar map of the cultural field of book reviews. Popularity, represented on the *x*-axis, is derived from average ratings, while prestige, shown on the *y*-axis, is calculated by the media ratio of each genre's reviews.[5]

In Fig. 7, we see that 'Danish classics', 'Poetry', and 'Graphic novels' are of high prestige, whereas the genres 'YA', 'Fantasy', and 'Horror' are of low prestige, aligning with findings in Porter [20]. The colors of the circles represent the author distribution, with dark colors corresponding to mostly women authors, measured on the number of published reviews. Hence, women dominate in the genres, which are low-prestige genres (mostly reviewed in blogs). Men, on the other hand, dominate in genre located at the high-prestige end of the spectrum (mostly reviewed in newspapers). This corresponds to the popular-highbrow culture divide examined

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[5]As reviews in blogs give, on average, higher ratings than reviews published in newspapers, there is a skewness towards high popularity in low-prestige genres.
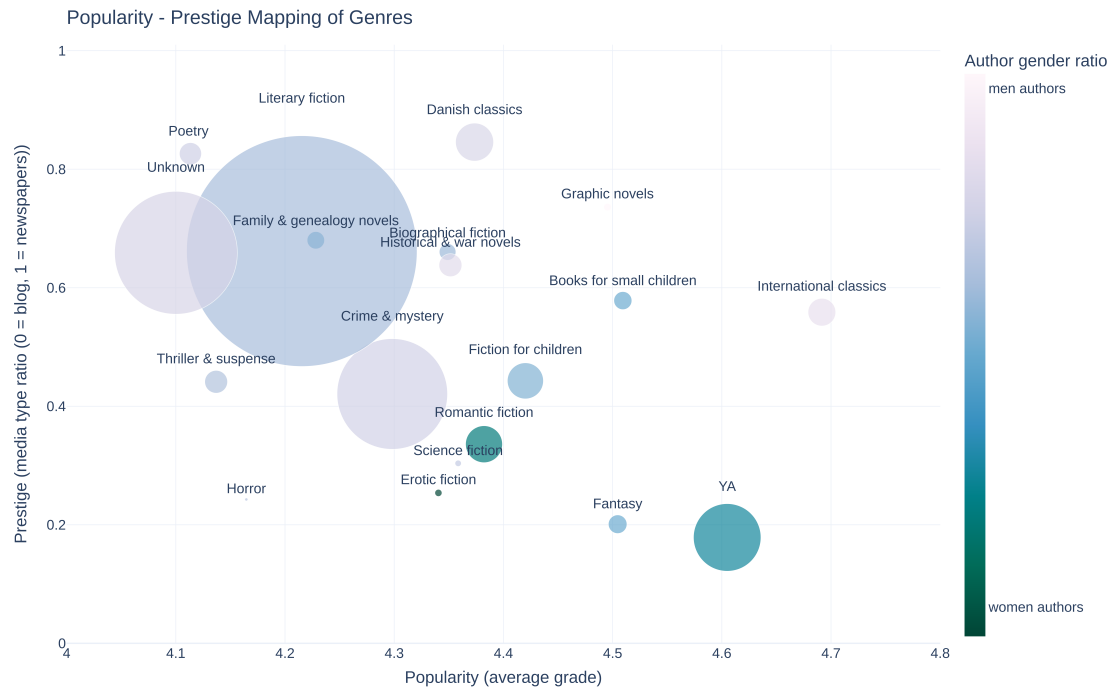
Figure 7: The popularity is the average rating in reviews, and prestige is the ratio between newspaper and blog reviews. The size of the circles corresponds to the total number of reviews within each genre, and the colors represent the gender distribution of author gender on the number of published reviews of each genre.

by Verboord [27].

Rating of specific genres differs across the two media types. The poetry genre, which is rated the lowest in blogs (~ 0.5 points lower than intercept), is mainly reviewed in newspapers resulting in Prestige > 0.8 in Fig. 7. Similarly, genres that are rated low in newspapers, such as 'Thriller & suspense' and 'Romantic fiction', are reviewed more in blogs – however, they are still reviewed in newspapers. Blog reviewers tend to avoid genres they dislike, while newspaper reviewers continue to review low-rated genres, possibly influenced by editorial choices in newspapers. This disparity in grading behaviours between the two media types, as noted in Lassen, Bizzoni, Peura, Thomsen, and Nielbo [14], may be attributed to these factors.

4.2. Outlook

In conclusion, we see that gender differences vary from genre to genre. Further work is still needed to model the full landscape of the Danish review scene (e.g., a Bayesian model including all parameters), but from the presented work we see that when the two media types align with the rating of a genre, for instance, 'International classics' and 'Graphic novels', there are different gender disparities at play compared to genres with rating disagreement between the two media types. Analysing genres individually, we see the same pattern of structural biases on

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a small scale as found on a large scale [14]: low ratings of women authors by women reviewers and higher ratings of men authors by men reviewers. This highlights the persistence of gender biases even within smaller subcultures as well as in larger social spheres, emphasising the structural aspect of the found asymmetries.

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5. Online Resources

See https://zenodo.org/records/10011269 for code.