

Is History Written About Men, by Men?

A careful study of recent popular history books reveals a genre dominated by generals, presidents—and male authors.

By and



The history men.

Photo illustration by Lisa Larson-Walker. Photos by Getty Images, via Wikimedia Commons.

In recent years, as academic history has taken [a turn toward the cultural and social](#), producing more and more works about women, minorities, and everyday life, the kinds of history books you see on the New Releases table at

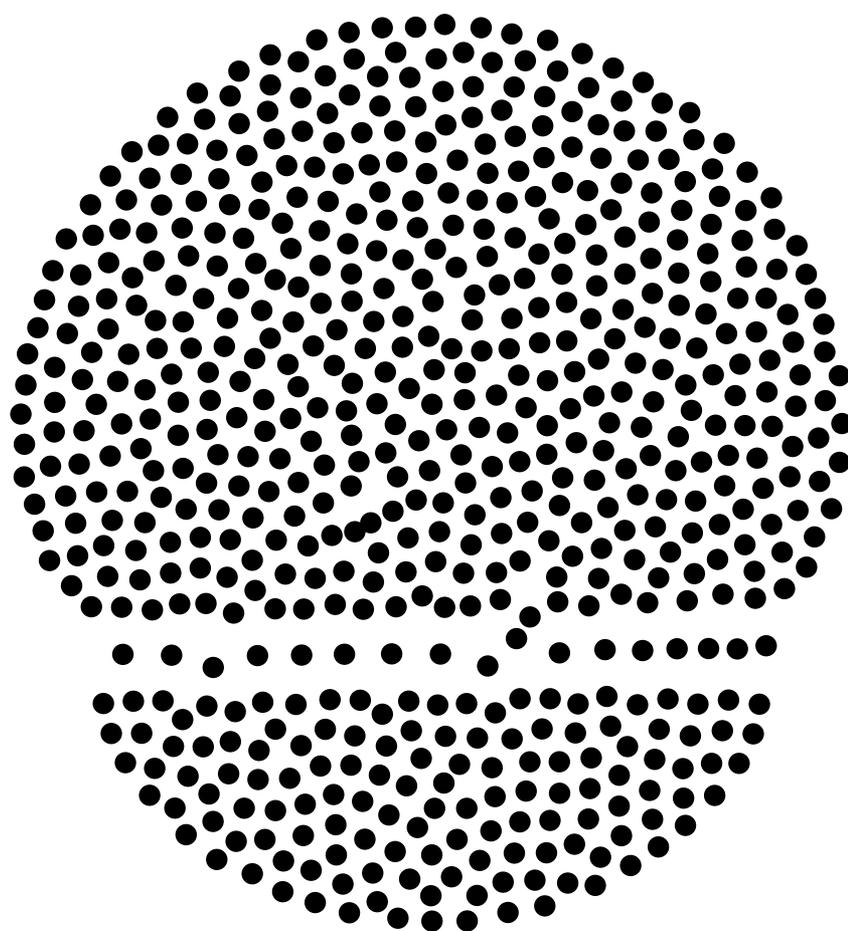
a Barnes & Noble have begun to feel like throwbacks. A quick survey reveals naval battles, grand adventures, and biography after biography about the Founding Fathers. Call these “uncle books”—tomes that you give an older male relative, to take up residence by his wingback armchair.

This state of affairs dismays many academic historians. Last year, at the American Historical Association’s annual meeting, a presenter in a session on “Buying and Selling History” included [a slide listing the best-selling trade history books of 2014, as tallied by BookScan](#). The generous helping of politically conservative histories by Glenn Beck and Bill O’Reilly caused concern, but some historians noticed another troubling trend: The list was dominated by male authors. Of 23 titles, two were written by women.

Is popular history still a male preserve, in terms of authorship and subject matter? We decided to find out. Inspired by the [Vida Count project](#), which tallies bylines at major literary and intellectual magazines to see how many women can be found in their author pools, we looked at author gender among history books published for general readers in 2015. We also wanted to know more about content and approach. Is it true that most popular history books are about presidents and war, or is that just our perception? Are the Nazis as omnipresent as they seem to be? How many biographies are written about men, and how many about women? Do the Founding Fathers have an iron grip on the genre?

Who Writes History?

In the interactive below, each dot represents one trade history book that was either published or made the *New York Times* Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction best-seller list in 2015. Blue dots represent books by male authors; yellow dots represent books by female authors; green dots represent books co-authored by men and women. Mouse over a dot for more information about individual titles, and use the menu below to see how the gender divide plays out across different categories: biographies, books about World War II, and more.



- male author
- co-authors
- female author

We examined a set of 614 works of popular history from 80 houses, which either published books we defined as trade history or landed books we defined as trade history on the *New York Times* Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction best-seller list in 2015. (For our full methodology, [click here](#).) We found that 75.8 percent of the total titles had male authors. Interestingly, the effect was slightly less pronounced among titles that made the *New York Times* best-seller list—but only slightly (70.4 percent of those authors were male). University press and trade imprints had roughly the same proportion of male to female authors. The persistence of this imbalance, even among authors writing for presses that publish more academics, seems to reflect a continuing gender disparity among academic historians. In 2010, Robert Townsend of the American Historical Association [wrote](#) that among four-year

college and university history faculty surveyed in 2007, only 35 percent were women.

Biographies represented 21 percent of the total number of books published. Their subjects were 71.7 percent male, with the list dominated by big names like Richard Nixon, Winston Churchill, and Napoleon Bonaparte. While some of the biographies of men were written by women (13 percent), female authors were far more likely than male writers to write biographies about women. Sixty-nine percent of female biography authors wrote about female subjects, and there was a huge gap between this number and the 6 percent of male biography authors who wrote about women. Clearly, there is some relationship between the gender of authors of biographies and the gender of their subjects.

Why does this matter? Academics are interested in cultural and social history because those approaches allow room for contemplation of what it was like to live life as an everyday person in a certain period, not just as a general or president or pioneer. Last year, historian Ann M. Little [noted](#) that the best-selling biographies of 2014 tended to be about men—and a particular kind of man, at that. Popular biographies of Founding Fathers and war heroes, wrote Little, “reflect our contemporary preoccupation with modern history themes: politics, economics, warfare, the nation-state. ... These biographies are invested in a particularly modern kind of subjectivity, that of the heroic individual who bends history to his will.” In other words, the popularity of biographies of presidents and sports heroes reflects and reinforces the idea that interesting lives are lived in public, often defined by conflict and glory. Cultural and social histories make the meta-point that history is about communities, not just individuals.

Thirty-two percent of books in the pool met one of our criteria for being what we dubbed an “uncle book”: about a president, the founding era, the Civil War, World War II, Abraham Lincoln, or royalty. There were fewer total books about presidents (8.6 percent) and the founding era (3.7 percent) than

we had guessed there might be. Our hunch about the American fascination with the executive branch was correct, though: of the *best-selling* books, 21.1 percent were about presidents. In the 150th year since his assassination, Lincoln was king: His name appeared in the title or subject headings for 68.8 percent of the total of those books.

Even given Lincoln's popularity in 2015, there weren't as many books bearing Civil War keywords as we'd anticipated (only 3.9 percent), but 13.5 percent of the total pool of titles had a World War II keyword in the title or subject headings (World War II; Hitler"; "Nazi; 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945). That period exerts a powerful pull on the market, fitting many of the perceived criteria for best-selling popular history: It's a war, with all of wartime's opportunity for adventure and narrative; it was recent enough to have happened within living memory, and within a historical paradigm that doesn't require too much contextual explanation; the event continues to yield new approaches and angles; and the war offers clear and uncontroversial lines of good and evil. Even in a centenary year, World War I, with its much less clear-cut historical story and its diminished level of American involvement, did not account for nearly as many books; only 3.7 percent of our pool contained variants of World War I keywords in their titles.

Our data set revealed some answers about the publishing of popular history that we expected: Authors are largely male, biographical subjects too; "uncle books" make up a third of the total titles published. But the data also raise interesting questions. Is it possible to sell biographies of unfamous people? Why are some historical episodes that fit some of the criteria we outlined above, like the Vietnam War, so absent? And when will World War II ever stop being interesting?

We shared some of our results with editors, agents, authors, and publishers who work on trade history books, and asked for their impressions. On the whole, the people we spoke with were unsurprised by the gender gap in our data set. "I tend to find that most of my history authors are male, too. That's

certainly not by conscious design but it does seem to be the pattern,” Andrew Miller, an editor at Knopf, wrote in an email. Lara Heimert, the publisher of Basic Books, added in her own emailed reply: “There is no question that there is a real problem with gender imbalance in trade history publishing. It is something I worry about a lot.”

Heimert, who has been publishing history books for almost 20 years, posited that received ideas about the market govern publishers’ decisions. “The conventional wisdom has been that men read more non-fiction and women read more fiction, though as with most conventional wisdom in publishing (and life) I’ve never actually seen a study proving that to be true,” she wrote. Well-founded or not, these truisms drive production of trade history books. In history publishing in particular, Heimert wrote, schedules are “organized around gift-giving seasons—Christmas and ‘dads and grads’ (Fathers’ Day and graduation)—which is to say that we assume many of our big history books are bought as gifts, and specifically as gifts for men.”

Asked about the biographical gender gap, Nancy Toff, an editor at Oxford University Press, said over Skype, “I love to publish women’s biography. I did a [Helen Gurley Brown biography](#), [an Alice Paul biography](#). I love to do it. But it doesn’t tend to sell very well, overall. I think that is a fair statement.”

Offering some explanations for the maleness of our pool of biographies, Toff said, “When you think about the topics that sell the best, you have sports—those are mostly, if not all, men. Then you have political biographies. Presidents, so far, are all male.” Toff could, however, think of several key exceptions to this rule—[Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America](#), by Rachel Hope Cleves, did well as a trade book for Oxford in 2014, as did the Brown biography.

Even if one-third of our data set was made up of stereotypical uncle books, we were cautiously excited about the two-thirds of the titles that didn’t fit that profile, yet made it to market nonetheless. A few people we queried offered some reasons to hope that the situation might be improving, allowing for

more diversity in subject matter. “There’s definitely a sense that books on World War II and the Civil War, or presidential biographies, tend to be somewhat more reliable than other categories,” Andrew Miller wrote. “But I think publishers are always looking for something different in addition to those more familiar books.” He went on: “My experience is that there’s always room for something out of the tried and true if it’s sufficiently ambitious and engaging and original.”

Miller pointed to more than a few female historians who write for popular audiences, including Doris Kearns Goodwin, Stacy Schiff, Drew Gilpin Faust, Karen Armstrong, and Pauline Maier. Author Jean Strouse, who has written one biography each of a man and a woman ([J.P. Morgan](#) and [Alice James](#)), added Jill Lepore, Annette Gordon-Reed, Megan Marshall, Maya Jasanoff, Susan Pedersen, Sara Lipton, Linda Colley, Judith Thurman, Jennifer Homans, Patricia Limerick, and Mary Beth Norton to that list. Clare Alexander, a literary agent in the U.K. who represents historical authors and makes a point of representing women who write in the category, wrote in an email: “In the UK, while history in non-fiction definitely skews male and is largely published, edited, and reviewed by men, Hilary Mantel [the lauded author of [Wolf Hall](#)] has been the harbinger of a renaissance of historical *fiction* in the UK, much of which is also successful in America”—and is written by women.

While a longitudinal analysis of trade history publishing might reveal a swing toward female authorship and diversity of subject matter, and anecdotal evidence points to some improvement, our data for 2015 still look grim. “We have a real problem in publishing, but it’s not just a publishing problem,” Heimert wrote. “What is it about the way we educate our children that channels women toward literature departments and men toward history and politics departments? What are our assumptions—and by ‘our’ I mean publishers, booksellers, book reviewers &c—that lead us to publish history books for Father’s Day and fiction and memoir for Mother’s Day? Are these based on data or merely stereotypes?”

In order to determine which imprints tend to publish trade history books, we used Publishers Marketplace's database. We searched for imprints that had made acquisition deals in three categories: History/Politics/Current Affairs, Narrative Nonfiction, and Biography. The database lists top deal-makers in each subject category, with statistics broken down into two sublists: one ranking imprints by overall number of deals in a category in the past 12 months, and the other ranking imprints by number of six-figure-plus deals in that category since 2004. With our three subject categories, each broken down into two sublists, we had six lists of imprints that had transacted recent deals in a category or had invested significantly in that category in the past 11 years. We gathered the names of the Top 20 imprints listed in each of the six lists. Cross-referencing these results to eliminate duplicate entries, we produced a master list of 45 imprints that seemed likely to have published books in our categories of interest in 2015.

Because many university presses publish trade books through deals that aren't brokered with agents, and thus would not show up in the Publishers Marketplace database, we also secured a list of presses that exhibited at the Organization of American Historians' most recent annual meeting, using that list as a baseline to determine a pool of university presses that publish in history and might have been likely to have put out trade books in the past year. Some of these presses had already turned up through our Publishers Marketplace research, but we added the names of 35 additional university presses to our list.

With a master list of 2015 catalogs for 80 imprints in hand, we began to search these for titles. *Slate* intern [Claire Landsbaum](#) went through the trade imprint catalogs, and Rebecca Onion handled the university press catalogs. Each data-cruncher created an entry for the history books she found in her set of titles. Rebecca determined which university press books to include by looking for books designated General Interest in the catalogs, or priced at a trade discount, usually marked with a T. The historical content of these university press titles was usually clear.

Claire faced the task of deciding which trade books should be counted as “history.” Some edge cases gave us pause. Are memoirs historical? Are biographies of still-living figures? Are true-crime books, if they’re about historical crimes? What about journalism about the recent past—books about the Iraq war, for example? We decided that these matters should be decided on a title-by-title basis. If it seemed that a given title was historically focused—if a true-crime book was cast in the mold of Erik Larson’s [*Devil in the White City*](#), for example, and tried to set its murders in historical context, evoking the political and social scene that surrounded all that blood—we included it.

For each book, we gathered the following data: the title, the author’s name, the ISBN-13, the name of the imprint, an informed guess at the author’s gender, whether the book was a biography, the subject of the biography (if it was one), an informed guess at the subject’s gender, whether the book dealt with the Founding Fathers or the American Revolution, whether the book dealt with presidents, and whether the book was published by a university press.

A note on guessing gender: When gender was not immediately clear (as in the case of a gender-neutral or unfamiliar name), we looked for pronouns used in an author biography, or searched for an author’s Web page. When a book had both male and female co-authors, we split the authorship proportionally. That’s why you’ll see that some books are classified as, for instance, “one-third female-authored.” We tallied biography subjects in the same way, splitting the count in cases where there were multiple subjects.

We now had 556 titles. Because we wanted to compare books first published in 2015 with books that made the best-seller list in 2015, Rebecca turned to the *New York Times* Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction list. This meant adding titles that sold well in 2015 but had been published in previous years. There were 58 such titles, bringing our total set of books to 614

To determine subject matter, we used human discernment to decide whether a book was about presidents or the founding period (Founding Fathers and

the Revolution). Andrew Kahn wrote a Python script that gathered subject headings for most of the books from the Library of Congress website. We searched the books' titles and subject headings for particular keywords of interest: Lincoln, Kennedy, Civil War, World War II (or WWII), World War I (or WWI), Hitler, Nazi, 194? (i.e., any year in the 1940s), king, queen, prince, and princess.

Because many of the decisions we made are subjective, there is the possibility of human error in our data set. In the interest of transparency, we're making it public: [Here's the link](#). We would love it if others would build on the work we've done and refine the set in the future. What, for example, would such a tally look like, if it took into account the ethnicity and race of history authors, and of books' subject matter? There is much room for further study.

Correction, Jan. 7, 2016: *The interactive graphic originally misidentified the author of Madison's Gift. It was written by David O. Stewart, not David O. Swift.*

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