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**From the Selected Works of Rebecca Tolley**

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# Eighty-four Percent Women & Academics: Demographics from a 2010 Study of Tennessee Libraries Book Reviewers

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## **Eighty-four Percent Women & Academics: Demographics from a 2010 Study of *Tennessee Libraries* Book Reviewers**

by

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Fueled in part by recent reports in the mainstream literary media of the underrepresentation of book reviews written by women, I undertook a study of book reviews published by *Tennessee Libraries* in 2010. Such a project has, in fact, consumed my thoughts over the past five years that I've managed and edited the book review arm of *Tennessee Libraries* because frankly, your vital stats and demographics fascinate me ... but I'm a geeky book review editor, and I may be the only one who cares about such specific data sets and what they reveal. Yet I was struck by the immediacy of [Jessa Crispin's](#) February report featured on PBS.org, and her words and the introduction to a study done by [VIDA](#)—an organization that promotes women in the arts--spurred me to do this quick and dirty-like. Therefore, I set aside my long-envisioned longitudinal study that I add data to haphazardly when I find a spare hour or two between semesters, and I got to work.

I don't mean to downplay the serious accusations made by [Jessa Crispin](#), [Jodi Picoult](#) and [Jennifer Weiner](#) over the past few years against the mainstream media outlets like *The New Yorker* and their ilk about how they short shrift women writers and women reviewers. I agree whole-heartedly that reviews of women's writing and books are not published as frequently, nor are they published as prominently, in nationally-circulated newspapers and journals. And I really mean to get around to my longitudinal study of reviews done by Tennessee's librarians, someday, when there's time. But as librarians and librarianship are already marginalized, who besides ourselves might find the results of such a microscopic study illuminating? In the meantime, as we struggle to keep on doing more with less and less, I present to you a snapshot of the noble service that Tennessee's librarians provide to the profession each year in part to further the promotion of books, literacy, and reading. And to offer a different perspective to the discussion of book reviewing and to illustrate that while librarianship is not the norm, it does offer more opportunities for women reviewers, but yet it also falls prey to the same problems cited by Crispin, et al as to the small numbers of books published by women writers that are available for review, and that, dear readers gets to the crux of the matter.

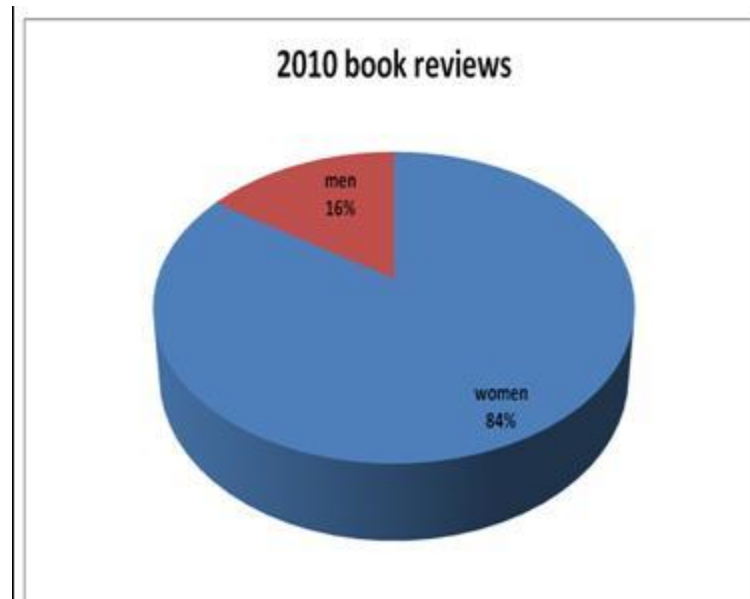
A word about the methodology: for the purpose of this study I sampled volume 60 issues 1-4 of *Tennessee Libraries*, even though some of those issues were published over the boundaries of the calendar year 2010. So, this study is nowhere near scientific and should not be considered rigorous. It's meant to give an overview, an idea, a report of sorts.

In categorizing books, I looked at titles and jogged my memory to determine what its contents covered. The book categories don't conform to Library of Congress Subject Headings or Sears List of Subject Headings. They are descriptive and more akin to social bookmarking tags that patrons and students

might use. I'm happy to share my Excel files with you so that you can play with data and do your own study in order to replicate the results. The data are also online and available for you to copy, paste, and sort into your own files. I'd love to see what you do with it, what subject headings you might assign, and what conclusions you might arrive at, especially if your interpretations differ from mine.

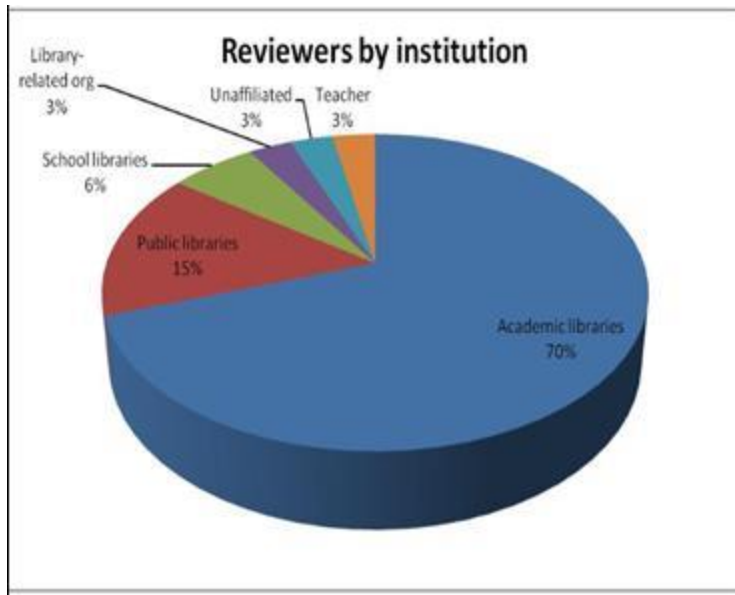
Another thing to consider is how books are selected for review in *Tennessee Libraries*. The books reviewed in *Tennessee Libraries* often reflect my own values and biases about books and subjects. I love books on cookery and food and try to feature them; I love books that present subjects in new light, or that uncover gaps in Tennessee's history of civil rights or the American Indian experience. I've expanded our journal's scope to include southern and Appalachian topics since our state is geographically located in those regions. Much of Civil War history bores me, but Tennessee historians focus on that era in our past, so I feel duty-bound to review those books since often those are the only history books being published by the university presses and written by scholars. And sometimes local presses or independently-published authors contact me and ask to be reviewed. In the interest of fairness, I cannot say no. If the book falls within our scope, I do not turn them down. I do assign books to reviewers. Often books that nobody wants to review sit on my shelves for years. An example of that is *Correspondence of James K. Polk, Volume XI, 1846*. Without further ado, onto the results:

In 2010 *Tennessee Libraries* published 64 book reviews; 54 were written by women and 10 were written by men.



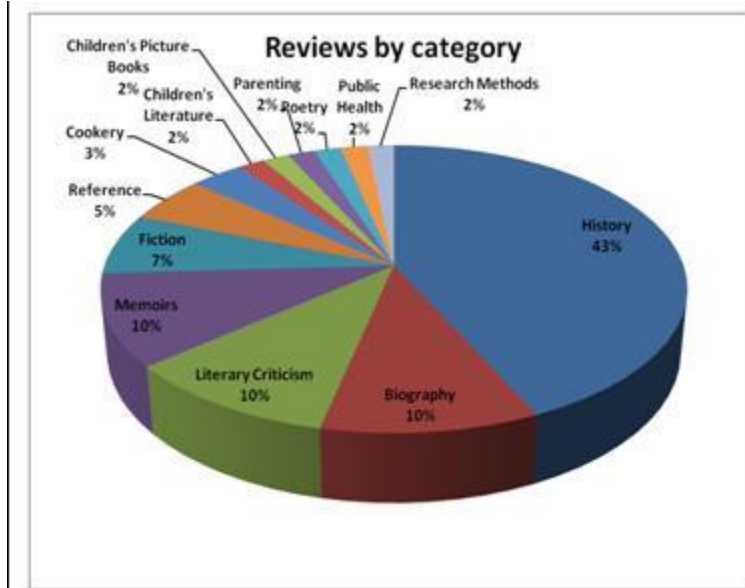
While this gender imbalance may shock readers who are not librarians and who expect male reviewers to dominate the review section of *Tennessee Libraries* as they do in the mainstream media, let me remind readers that librarianship is a feminine and feminized profession. Ratios of male to female librarians vary according to studies, but average between 4:1 and 3:1 in academic libraries [see studies listed in reference list below by Carmichael, Piper & Collamer, and Gordon, for more details]; academic libraries attract more male librarians than school and public libraries for various reasons.

Of these 64 reviewers, they represented 23 academic libraries, 5 public libraries, 2 school libraries, 1 library-related organization, 1 unaffiliated librarian and 1 reviewer who was not a librarian but a teacher.

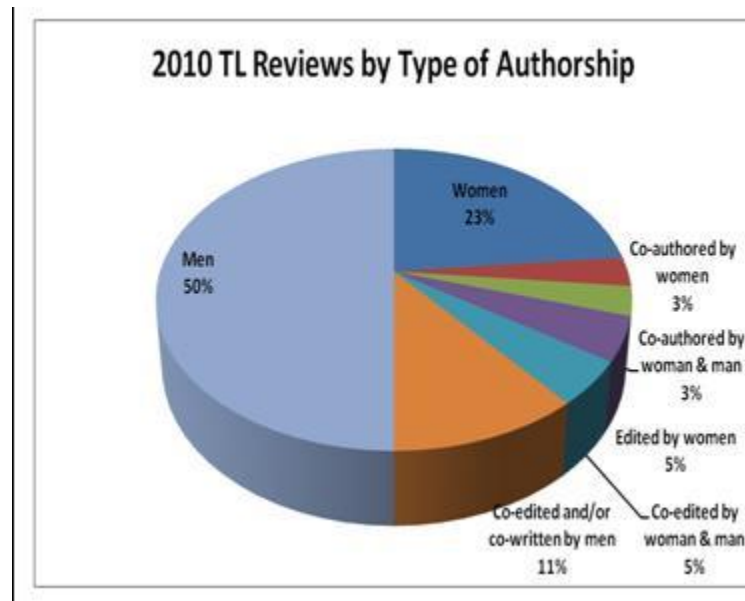


Without first surveying academic librarians in Tennessee regarding faculty status at their institutions for librarians, I cannot determine at great length the reasons why academic librarians seem more inclined according to this data, to review books for *Tennessee Libraries* than their colleagues working in other types of libraries in Tennessee. But, perhaps a survey would be a good start to answering this question. It could be a matter of workflow and the scheduling of the librarian's duties throughout the day. Or something else entirely.

The range of titles reviewed in 2010 fell into fourteen categories: history (25), biography (6), literary criticism (6), memoirs (6), fiction (4), reference (3), cookery (2), children's literature (1), children's pictures books (1), parenting (1), poetry (1), public health (1), and research methods (1).



Of those 64 reviews-- here's where it gets interesting. Fifteen were written by women. Two were written by two women and two were co-authored by a woman and a man. Three works were edited by women. Three works were co-edited by women and men, and seven works were co-edited and/or co-written by men. That leaves exactly half of the reviews published by Tennessee Libraries in 2010, 32 books, written by men. Thus, Tennessee Libraries is by far above the national average for reviews of female authors. Here's the visual:



**Weiner, Picoult, and Crispin** contend that high-profile literary magazines such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, the very journals that make or break an author's career, are practice gender bias by not profiling the work of women writers. This is compounded also by the fact that these literary journals' reviewers overwhelmingly male.

Obviously *Tennessee Libraries* does not offer the same type of book reviews as do these publications nor does this library journal focus on fiction, especially since our statistics revealed that we reviewed one work of fiction in 2010. The authorial outcry is supplemented in part by research undertaken by an organization called **VIDA Women in the Literary Arts** that studied the premiere literary magazines and journals in the United States and the United Kingdom who posted their results on their website in a series of illustrative piecharts, much like the ones within this article.

In conclusion, VIDA Women in the Literary Arts has revealed a stark gender bias in the world of literary journals and newspapers, but this is really not news. Granted, much applause goes to the organization for their efforts in reminding us of the inequities existing not only in gender but in all the under-represented minority areas such as class, ethnic, religious, and even regional disparities that prevent access to publishing and forms of expression scholarship and literature. What this means for *Tennessee Libraries* is that we can pat ourselves on the back because we fail to fit the norm, once again. *Tennessee Libraries* is exceptional because 84 % of its reviewers were women, which departs from the national norm in book reviewing, yet also reflects the library profession's predominantly female workforce. While it may be easy for VIDA, or other bodies to discount this study for its obvious skewing, and self-admitted lack of scientific-rigor, it offers evidence of differing ecosystems of values and models for VIDA to examine and the mainstream literary media to consider should they decide to alter their gender biased approach to editorial workflow and publication.

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