

What Makes a Family? The Radical Portrayal of Diverse Families in Australian Picture Books

Sarah Mokrzycki, Victoria University Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Children's fiction has a history of challenging family conventions, from the inevitable wicked stepmother throughout fairy tales to the orphaned protagonists of 19th century children's novels. In recent years there has been a small, but important, increase in Australian published picture books that showcase family diversity. However, family diversity is still a contentious issue in Australian picture books. Divergence from the traditional or nuclear family model, whether by structure, culture, gender or sexuality, remains nothing short of radical. The most common portrayal of a 'typical' Australian picture book family is white, middle class, with both biological parents and a male child protagonist. Australian picture book families are not just traditionally 'intact', but heteronormative, able-bodied, fully biological and highly gendered.

1 In "Changing Families in Children's Fiction", Kimberley Reynolds notes that the nuclear family is "tested for obsolescence" in modern children's fiction (Reynolds 193). Indeed, children's fiction has a history of challenging family conventions, from the inevitable wicked stepmother throughout fairy tales to the orphaned protagonists of 19th century children's novels. In recent years there has been a small, but important, increase in Australian published picture books that showcase family diversity, such as Mem Fox's 2017 release *I'm Australian too* and Sophie Beer's 2018 release *Love makes a family*. However, family diversity is still a contentious issue in Australian picture books. Divergence from the traditional or nuclear family model, whether by structure, culture, gender or sexuality, remains nothing short of radical.

2 Labels are used pervasively to define and differentiate family types. The label of 'step' family signifies the inclusion of step children, for example, and differentiates it from the similar 'blended' family, which includes at least one biological or adopted child and at least one step child (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). However, the official label used by the Australian government to define what we might call the 'traditional' family model (a two-parent family with biological or adopted children only) is still 'intact' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). By this label's very definition, families with step children, half siblings, single parents or anything else that diverges from the traditional family model, are considered deviations from this norm.

3 Furthermore, while all other family labels reference a defining structural trait, the ‘intact’ label references a specific societal value; a conventional and somewhat old-fashioned view of what constitutes an ‘intact’ family. Such labelling places the so-called ‘intact’ family type as superior to all others, and this word choice becomes all the more problematic when examining the Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘intact’: “Not damaged or impaired in any way. Complete. Whole. Unbroken” (Oxford University Press 2019). What does that infer about all the Australian families that don’t fit the ‘intact’ label? The 56,000 children in foster families, the 600,000 step and blended families or the 500,000 single parent families – and that’s just to name a few (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018; Churchill 2018). Despite the diversity of modern families, the Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘family’ as “a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit” (Oxford University Press 2019). This highlights the societal prejudice towards diverse families and the need to re-evaluate family terms and definitions.

4 The most common portrayal of a ‘typical’ Australian picture book family is white, middle class, with both biological parents and a male child protagonist. Australian picture book families are not just ‘intact’, but heteronormative, able-bodied, fully biological and highly gendered. While the official ‘intact’ label doesn’t specify the gender or sexuality of parents, this remains the prevailing way families are represented in picture books. Family-based picture books showcasing cultural diversity and LGBT or gender nonconforming characters are exceedingly rare - whether the family unit is presented as ‘intact’ or not.

5 The issue with having such a specific (and limited) family type as the default form in picture books is that it denies children from diverse families the possibility of representation. The ability for children to see themselves represented in literature should be a right, not a privilege, and representation is a vital tool for educational and emotional development. Studies by Samuel Perez (1984), Sue Mankiw and Janis Strasser (2013), Carol Bland and Linda Gann (2013) and Sharon Hollander (2004) highlight the importance of relating to book characters to promote engagement with (and an ongoing love of) literature, develop reading skills, connect to the wider world and, importantly, validate personal lived experiences. Similarly, Lindsey White (2015) examines the link between educational and emotional development, and highlights the importance of acknowledging diverse home lives in literature at school to help children forge healthy social-emotional development and personal relationships.

6 Despite the importance of representation, Australian children’s bookstores - even those with impressive lists and a focus on promoting diversity, like *The Younger Sun* in Victoria and *Rabble Books and Games* in Western Australia - rely heavily on international publishers for

family diverse titles. Australia's reliance on international publishers is problematic for several reasons. Using foster care as an example, foster themed stories from America (where many picture books are sourced from specialist publishers such as Magination Press) end with foster children being adopted by carers. Fostering to adopt is not permitted in many regions of Australia, and thus seemingly 'relatable' stories are deemed not relevant or appropriate for an Australian audience. Likewise, the nuances and cultural and social differences between countries mean that families relying on international picture books to reflect their stories can never obtain a complete picture of their experiences.

7 Picture books play a pivotal role in the educational and emotional development of children. It is in picture books that we first come to understand the power of stories and the wonder of illustration (Swartz 6). Picture books introduce children to language, storytelling and art: they are our first introduction to the world of literature and the joys and potential of the written word. They provide a multitude of emotional, imaginative and educational benefits that reverberate throughout society. As such, picture books are invaluable not just to children, but to families and the wider community. It is for this reason that picture books need to act as windows and mirrors: a way for children to see themselves and others (Bishop 1990).

8 It is well understood in both academic and educational communities that picture books are integral to the life and development of young children. It stands to reason that as a child's first introduction to language, picture books act as a resource for teaching reading and spelling. If this was all picture books accomplish, this would still prove them to be a vital educational tool - but picture books offer so much more than this. Picture books help children develop critical thinking skills (Roche 2015) and an understanding of language and storytelling. By introducing children to reading (and written stories), picture books are in fact introducing them to the endless possibilities of imagination.

9 There is a great need for Australian-published family diverse books. There is also a concurrent need for understanding, sensitivity and accuracy in the books currently available. A common issue in both Australian and international children's publishing is the misrepresentation of family types. The Australian-published *Just the Way We Are* by Jessica Shirvington, released in 2015, is a largely enjoyable and inclusive book that showcases a variety of family types (including single and divorced households and same sex parents). Included amongst the different families is a foster family. As a foster carer myself, I was initially thrilled to see a family like mine represented in a picture book. However, upon reading the text I realised the book misrepresented Australian foster families and would therefore be inappropriate for children from a foster background. In the book, the foster child refers to their

carers as “Mum” and “Dad”. While it is true that some children in care will refer to their carers in parental terms, most will refer to carers by their first names. Furthermore, the use of parental terms for carers is strongly discouraged by foster agencies. The reason for this is that the majority of children in care in Australia have ongoing contact with their biological parent(s), whom they already refer to as “Mum” and/or “Dad”.

10 While misrepresentation in this book is unintentional, the same cannot be said for all family diverse picture books. *Julian is a mermaid* by Jessica Love is an American-published picture book (2018) that showcases a wealth of diversity. The story follows a small Latinx family: Julian, a trans and gender non-conforming protagonist and the grandmother he lives with. The story is beautifully told, and even includes two Spanish words: *Abuela* and *Mijo*. However, in the Australian-published version of the book, these terms are removed and replaced with English alternatives: ‘Nanna’ and ‘honey’.

11 The removal of the Spanish words robs the reader of the opportunity to explore a different language and culture. By removing the Spanish words and replacing them with English alternatives, the subtext and unconscious message of this act is that ‘English is better’. The decision to eliminate non-Western culture (by silencing another language) deprives children from all backgrounds and family types. Picture books need to act as windows; showing children worlds outside of their own understanding. Just as importantly, they must also act as mirrors; reflecting children’s own lived experiences (Bishop 1990). What happens, however, when children are only ever exposed to windows and not mirrors?

12 When I was eight years old the school librarian read *Bamboozled*, an Australian published picture book written and illustrated by David Legge in 1994. It was the first time I was truly required to suspend my disbelief. Prior to *Bamboozled* I had been exposed to countless fairy tales and stories of dragons and other mythical creatures - but unlike these stories, *Bamboozled* was set in the ‘real world’:

Visual jokes and trompe l’oeil overflow from newcomer Legge’s watercolors as a girl visits her grandfather and notices that “something seem[s] odd.” There is no dearth of candidates, for in Grandpa's house nothing is ordinary. Grandpa pours his visitor tea from a watering can; a kangaroo washes dishes with water that streams from an elephant's trunk ... Finally the girl puts her finger on the problem - furnishing perhaps the reader's greatest surprise, she points out merely that Grandpa's socks are mismatched ... Satisfying as well are the multiplicity of discoveries to be had in the illustrations, at once hyperrealistic in their style and surreal in their content. The visual possibilities can be plumbed for hours. (*Publishers Weekly* 1995 n.p.)

13 I sat cross-legged with my classmates as with each turn of the page we were introduced to a new realm of fabulous absurdity. There were so many things to like about the book, but the thing I enjoyed most was the story's protagonist, the granddaughter. I saw myself reflected in her white (but olive) skin, comfy jumper and long brown hair worn in a side pony-tail. Picture books at the time largely relegated female characters to the role of damsel or mother, or excluded them entirely - something that has not changed in 25 years (Mokrzycki 2019). Yet here was a book with a female lead (one that was not a blonde princess) that I could physically identify with. The simple yet extraordinary act of 'being seen' gave me a sudden and previously undiscovered sense of self. Would I have felt so strongly had I not personally (and physically) identified with this character? The evidence suggests not. Certainly, it would not have detracted from my enjoyment of the book, but research by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) and the UK Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2018) shows that not being able to identify with characters negatively impacts children in important ways.

14 Take, for example, a very different early reading experience; that of Nigerian-born author Chimamanda Adichie. Unlike me, who at an early age found a picture book character I personally and physically identified with - from gender and skin colour right down to the character's penchant for side ponytails, Adichie had "skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails" (Adichie 2009). Instead, she grew up on British and American children's books where characters like her did not exist:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them, and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.

(Adichie "The Danger of a Single Story" 01:37-01:50)

However, like me, Adichie had the same life-changing experience when she finally saw herself in literature. African books were not as freely available as foreign books, but eventual exposure to them brought about a significant 'mental shift' in Adichie's perception of storytelling: "I realised that people like me could also exist in literature" (Adichie 02:15-02:20).

15 Adichie's earlier inability to identify with characters greatly impacted her sense of self and where she belonged - and, importantly, where she did not belong. Her early stories, written as a child of seven or eight, revolved around white, blue-eyed protagonists who played in the snow and drank ginger beer: all experiences she herself could not personally identify with. Her understanding was simply that people who looked and lived like her had no place in stories. Adichie credits her discovery of African writers as saving her "from having a single story of

what books are” (Adichie 02:30). In the case of literature, the single story presented is that of the white middle class (White 2015).

16 Picture books are intrinsically linked to early childhood development, shaping children’s understanding, compassion, world view and sense of self. They play such an integral role because children largely take their cues about life (and how it works) from early literature:

As children enter school, many still have very little life experiences and lack of knowledge about the world they live in. Through literature, children can learn about this world and can work toward becoming accepting and well-rounded individuals. (White 5)

However, what children can learn is limited by what picture books are willing to show: when they show a single story - such as the dominant white, middle class narrative - children learn to view divergence from this norm with scepticism or even prejudice. In Adichie’s case, when she moved to America for college at the age of 19, her roommate viewed her with pity and confusion as she did not fit their single story understanding of Africa. The roommate was “shocked” at Adichie’s ability to speak English, her middle-class background and lack of “tribal music” (Adichie 04:10-04:20).

17 Adichie’s experiences highlights the importance of literature acting as both windows and mirrors. Much of the research examining this concept focuses on cultural diversity and the ongoing lack of people of colour in children’s literature (such as Adichie’s experiences above). However, findings from these studies are relevant to all forms of diversity and representation - or lack thereof. Bishop’s work, for example, while exposing the lack of people of colour in children’s books, specifies issues that are felt by all those who remain underrepresented or ignored in literature:

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. (Bishop 1990 n.p.)

The single story of families in picture books is that of the ‘intact’ family unit: white and middle class (as per the single story norm), but also confined to traditional standards and expectations of Western society, particularly in regards to gender and sexuality.

18 Gender stereotypes are rife throughout the history of children’s literature. One need only look at fairy tales for examples of wicked stepmothers and inept husbands. Fairy-tale fathers are seemingly incapable of parenting, as seen in classics like the Grimm’s “Cinderella” (1812) and “Hansel and Gretel” (1857). In both stories, the father is a passive participant in the

story; weak-willed and largely useless, and a slave to the demands of his overbearing and nagging new wife. In neither story does the father actively contribute to parenting. What is most extraordinary about this is that in the 200 years since these stories were written, the ‘uninvolved father’ remains a staple of picture books today.

19 In April this year, I examined 240 bestselling picture books at Australian book retailer Dymocks. The collection was an almost 50/50 mix of modern stories (published in the past five or so years) and classic stories (published predominantly in the 1980s and 1990s). Patterns of representation soon became apparent, but none more so than the gendering of parental figures (most often presented as a biological mother and father) and protagonists. In the vast majority of the books in the Dymocks bestseller list, father figures fit the same archetype as they did 200 years ago in fairy tales. Fathers are presented as distinctly detached from the parenting experience and, in some cases, unwilling to engage in parenting at all. In Sheena Knowles’ 1996 Australian classic *Edwina the emu*, number 39 on the Dymocks bestseller list, part of the humour is meant to come from the male emu Edward’s ‘hopelessness’ as a parent. He is first seen as reluctant, screaming and ‘choking’ at the idea of raising the ten eggs Edwina has laid (“You must be joking!”) and then struggling with the role of primary carer (““You’re late,” muttered Edward, ‘and I need a rest’” n.p.).

20 Of course, it is not just fathers who are subjected to conventional gender roles and parental stereotypes. Mothers in picture books are still conveyed predominantly as primary carers and/or stay-at-home mothers. Importantly, their connection to parenting is in complete contrast to that of fathers. Mothers are never shown as reluctant parents, and rarely seen struggling with parenting duties. Rather, they are shown as almost super human and self-sacrificing; performing most (if not all) of the parenting and domestic duties with ease and grace, and seemingly uninterested in life outside of motherhood.

21 In *Edwina the Emu*, Edwina decides to get a job after laying her eggs, telling Edward, “Don’t get depressed, I’ll look for a job, you stay on the nest”. Edward, as described, is a reluctant parent and struggles with this new role. Meanwhile, Edwina goes out to find “the right job”. She tries a variety of work with no luck. Finally, she has an epiphany: “Take me home, make it fast, I know what the right job for me is - at last!” When she returns to the nest, Edward is grumpy and tired. Edwina tells him, “From now on we share. I’ll sit on the nest, you pull up a chair!” (n.p.). After trying multiple jobs, Edwina comes to the realisation that motherhood is the “right job” for her. While the text states she and Edward will share parental duties, Edwina’s epiphany that motherhood is the “right job” coupled with Edward’s negative attitude towards parenting (compared to Edwina’s relaxed, competent one) indicates this role will not be equally

divided between them. Furthermore, Edward's exhaustion at the end of the day is presumably meant to highlight how difficult and draining being a primary carer or stay-at-home parent is. However, because it is the father who finds this challenging (while Edwina is pleasant, happy and calm throughout all interactions to do with parenting), it also indicates that parenting is something women are meant to be naturally good at, while conversely being something men are naturally incompetent at.

22 A more recent example of the vastly differing roles mothers and fathers are shown to have in raising their children can be seen in Yvonne Morrison's books, *My Aussie Mum* (2009) and *My Aussie Dad* (2016). The descriptions of the mother and father in their synopses highlight the differences in how their roles are perceived, and what is socially expected of both parents:

An Aussie mum doing her best every day and in every way. If she's not playing netball or cheering on her kids at cricket, she is looking after her sick children and being a chauffeur and more, all without breaking a sweat...well, sort of. (*My Aussie Mum* n.p.)

My Aussie Dad likes thinking that his barbie skills are tops... Even if the snags have burst, or if he's burnt the chops! A playful and humorous story of the jovial, the kind, the slightly embarrassing and the wholly lovable Aussie Dad. (*My Aussie Dad* n.p.)

23 The differences in these descriptions are startling and deeply indicative of gender expectations. The mother is "doing her best every day and in every way", cheering on her kids, driving them around and caring for them when they are sick. In contrast, the father is positioned purely as a figure of comedy, focusing on his delusions of grandeur at his barbecuing skills. Importantly, there is no reference to any form of parenting duties in the father's description, while they are the focus point of the mother's. Like *Edwina the emu*, this highlights the stark differences in how mothers and fathers are positioned in picture books. The father's description focuses on the father's personal interests (showing him as a parent whose life is not confined or defined by parenthood), while the mother's description focuses almost exclusively on her role as carer. The description of the mother's various parental duties, as well as the reference to her doing them all (almost) "without breaking a sweat" also firmly positions the picture book mother as a self-sacrificing 'super mum' character. The larger concern, beyond the stereotyping of parental roles, is that how parents are portrayed in children's books is strongly connected to how children understand the roles of parents and their expectations of them (Anderson & Hamilton 148).

24 As well as the ‘super mum’ being the default in picture book families, mothers (and motherly figures) also conform to strict physical standards. There are two Australian classics that specifically position women to act as discussion points on weight and dieting (and, presumably, a woman’s obsession with both). In 1993’s *Our Granny* by Margaret Wild, the titular granny is described as having a “wobbly bottom”. In a spread listing the different things grannies do for recreation, ranging from playing cards to hiking, the titular granny “does special exercises to make her bottom smaller” (n.p.). In the 1976 classic *There’s a hippopotamus on our roof eating cake* by Hazel Edwards, the only text that references the mother directly states: “Mummy is on a diet. She eats lettuce, tomato and cheese” (n.p.).

25 The older picture books examined in this article, *Edwina the Emu*, *Our Granny* and *There’s a hippopotamus*, have contributed much to the growth and popularity of the Australian children’s publishing industry, but the gendered elements outlined here are outdated for an audience more than twenty years after their publication. While dieting or exercising to make your bottom smaller are no longer seen in picture books, it is still rare to see mothers with varying body types. While it is not uncommon for dads to range in size and shape, mums are rarely allowed to be anything but thin. Interestingly, *Our Granny* is very progressive in its portrayal of female bodies. Many of the characters have unashamedly big tummies and wide hips. This book is also a rare example of family diversity. While the family structure is not specified, only a mother is shown (indicating a single parent family) and the titular granny lives with them.

26 The gendering of characters also extends to child protagonists. In the Dymocks bestsellers’ list, almost all the books with female leads are conventionally presented: pink and/or purple covers, with characters wearing traditionally feminine clothing such as tutus and pink dresses. For example, on the cover of Jane O’Conner’s *Fancy Nancy*, first published in 2005, a young girl wears a tiara and bright red high heels. As well as the overall gendered presentation of books, those with female characters rarely showed them in occupations outside of conventional ‘feminine’ roles. For example, in 2018’s *Claris, the Chicest Mouse in Paris* by Megan Hess, the titular mouse is a fashion designer who “read about handbags” and “dreamed about clothes” (n.p.). In fact, in all the books with a female lead, the protagonist was only ever employed or engaged in ‘traditional’ feminine activities.

27 I hasten to add that there is nothing wrong with showcasing and celebrating ‘traditional’ femininity. However, I argue that a lack of diverse protagonists for girls, and an overabundance of conventionally gendered stories, presents problems for all genders. It perpetuates the idea of ‘girls’ books’ and ‘boys’ books’ - a concept that has no place in modern times - and enforces

specific expectations of female and male behaviour. When the majority of female-led book covers are pink and show protagonists confined to interests like dancing and fashion, and the majority of male-led book covers are blue and show protagonists being loud, boisterous or smelly (as they were in the bestsellers' list), it sets a very clear standard of expected behaviour.

28 The exclusion of female protagonists is another significant issue. In the Dymocks bestsellers' list, male-led books provided just over half of all books in the top 50 (26 books), while there were only seven books in the top 50 with a female lead. Furthermore, 46 per cent of the books in the 240 analysed had male leads, while only 17 per cent had female leads (the remaining 32 per cent had no lead character). This confirms research by the ABC in 2018, which found that in the top 100 picture books published in Australia in 2017, it was more common for a book to have no lead character than a female lead character (Tilley 2018).

29 These findings are not particularly surprising when you consider that male protagonists (and male pronouns) have long been the default in picture books. Consider favourite Australian protagonists like Blinky Bill, the dingo in *Wombat Stew* (in fact all but one of the Australian animals shown in this book are male), *The Very Cranky Bear*, *Macca the Alpaca*, *Grug and Pig the Pug*. Much like white, intact families, "he" is the default in picture books. 24 per cent of the books in the Dymocks bestsellers' list had either all male characters or used all male pronouns. This was even the case when characters had no discernible gender or were non-human, such as animals and monsters. Conversely, there was only one book on the list that used all female pronouns - the 1983 classic *Possum Magic* by Mem Fox – and none of the books on the list had all female characters.

30 LGBT and gender non-conforming characters are practically non-existent in Australian picture books. The 2015 book *Mummy and Mumma get married* by Roz Hopkins and Natalie Winter is Australia's first picture book to show a same sex marriage, and one of only a handful to show same sex parents at all. In comparison to LGBT representation in international titles, like those from the US and UK (where Australia sources the vast majority of diverse picture books), this gap in the Australian market is, as Hopkins says, "a reflection of how behind the eight ball on the topic we are in Australia" (Hopkins, cited in Maios 2016 n.p.).

31 The publication of LGBT picture books in Australia is often met with hostility. After the publication of *Mummy and Mumma*, there was much discussion over the book's 'appropriateness' for school libraries. The resulting controversy over the book highlights the Australian education system's failure to properly acknowledge, and be inclusive of, diverse family types. As researcher Megan Beren says:

Including families is an important theme in the early childhood classroom ... Teachers, however, report feeling unprepared when a child's family is composed of same-sex parents, while gay and lesbian families, in turn, feel invisible, silenced and excluded. (Beren, cited in Maios 2016 n.p.)

A community survey conducted by *Neos Kosmos* highlighted ongoing issues of bigotry towards same sex couple families in Australia:

The parent should be aware and be asked permission to have the book exposed to their child. Then the parent can either consent or not.' Katina, 30, mother; 1 child, child educator. (Maios 2016 n.p.)

I don't believe we should ever allow a book like this to be in school libraries ... (We shouldn't) introduce concepts in children's little heads that they have not even thought of at such a young age ... I don't feel that it is necessary to be aware of this concept at such a young age. It's not natural. Our religion doesn't recognise it. Marriage should be between a man and a woman. Eleni, 72, grandmother; 5 grandchildren. (Maios 2016 n.p.)

It is up to the parent as to when their child is ready to learn about same-sex relationships. Pat, 25, single. (Maios 2016 n.p.)

I would not encourage the reading of the book or being made available in lower school libraries as young children should not have to be exposed to concepts and lifestyle choices that would be better handled in their teen years and adulthood. Chris, 56, father; 2 children. (Maios 2016 n.p.)

32 Not all responses from the survey were negative, although many followed the same objections as the examples above; specifically, that the book exposes young children to a confusing subject, and that parents should be able to consent to its use in schools. A reoccurring theme in the responses was the idea that children needed to be 'taught' about same sex parented families at a specific, appropriate age. This speaks to the idea of homosexuality as being unnatural or strange, and therefore something that requires explanation and consent to discuss. Conversely, heteronormative relationships are never considered something that needs to be taught, or left for discussion until the child is 'old enough to understand', as these relationships are seen as natural and appropriate, and therefore something children are exposed to from birth without explanation.

33 The lack of representation of same sex parented families, and all other diverse family types in picture books, presents ongoing issues of exclusion that impact children's understanding (and acceptance) of different family lives. In her Master's thesis from 2015,

Lindsey White examines the impact of children's literature on children's perceptions of family. She notes the importance of acknowledging diverse home lives in literature at school in order for children to feel included. A sense of belonging is vital not only to a child's feelings of self-worth, but also their education:

When children's lives are being ignored in the classroom it sends a message that their situation is less than and is not important. If young children are feeling out of place in their classrooms it affects their learning of educational topics. (Ferfolja & Robinson 2004; Pohan & Bailey 1998, cited in White 3)

She continues by arguing that while other types of diversity, such as "racial, ethnic, religious and language backgrounds" are now being more consciously considered by teachers wishing to create inclusive "classroom communities", the family structures of students' home lives remain "overlooked" (White 3).

34 This in turn creates an often overlooked issue: acceptance of how children are raised, and of their family, plays a crucial role in feeling included at school and in creating positive feelings of self-worth (Cloughessy & Waniganayake 2013, cited in White 3). Importantly, White notes that "having negative perceptions about others' or their own home dynamic can hinder (a child's) learning in the classroom or (forming) friendships with peers" (White 3). This research highlights the ripple effect of exclusion. A surface-level examination of the lack of family diversity in picture books may uncover the simple issue of underrepresentation. However, the impact of this ripples out into all areas of a child's life: their sense of self and belonging in the world, their reading and education and their ability to make strong social connections.

35 There was an incident in early 2019 at a primary school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. A guest speaker came to teach the Grade 6 class. During the course of the talk she singled out a twelve-year-old girl and asked her what her mother's favourite possession was. The girl replied that she did not know. The speaker pressed her for an answer; again, the girl said she did not know. The speaker pressed further, and further. Now the girl stayed silent. The speaker grew angry, and admonished the girl in front of the class for purposely disrupting the lesson and refusing to answer. In return the girl swore at the speaker. She was removed from the lesson and received detention, where she was forced to write the speaker an apology letter.

36 Let me now add some context to this story. The girl in question lives in permanent foster care with a grandparent. Her father is in jail and she was removed from her mother's care at the age of four. She was being truthful when she told the speaker she did not know what her

mother's favourite possession was. She was embarrassed by the question, and did not elaborate on her answer because she was uncomfortable explaining her family situation to a stranger in front of her peers. When pressed to answer, she acted out in anger. An understanding of family diversity, and of the fact that approximately 1.2 million Australian children do not live with both biological parents (Churchill 2018), could have prevented this situation from escalating as it did. The speaker would not have felt disrespected and the student would not have felt embarrassed and ashamed.

37 Approximately 20 per cent of Australian families diverge from the default 'intact' family type (Churchill 2018). Despite this, the 'intact' definition of family continues to dominate not only our picture books, but all areas of society; including our classrooms, as the example above shows. As Churchill explains:

The image of the typical family - mum, dad, and two kids - still permeates how we define and understand the family in contemporary Australia. This ideal saturates our screens and newsfeeds and was the centre of the marriage equality debate, underscoring the pervasiveness of the nuclear family as the dominant family form in our consciousness. However, this conceptualisation masks the true nature of Australian families, which has changed significantly in recent decades. As sociologists and demographers have long known, the Australian family is as diverse and different as the country's terrain'. (Churchill 2018 n.p.)

The modern Australian family constitutes a multitude of diversity, and it is time this diversity was properly acknowledged. It is vital that family diversity is represented in picture books: as the first books bought for and read to children, picture books have the ability to both introduce diversity and normalise it.

38 The World of Difference Institute (as cited in Mankiw & Strasser 85) states that: "Books are mirrors in which children can see themselves. When they are represented in the literature we read, they can see themselves as valuable and worthy of notice". Stories that introduce children to families like and unlike their own ensure that young children don't have a 'single story' of family, and with over a million Australian children living in diverse families, the need for greater representation - and acknowledgement and understanding - of family diversity has never been greater. It is vital that all children are able to see themselves and others reflected in their literature: because all families, whatever shape they take, are intact.

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