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## Diversifying YA and Children's Literature: Issues and Perspectives

Guest Edited by  
David Kern

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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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## Editorial

by David Kern

1 The field of children's and young adult literature seems haunted by a deep-seated contradiction: while this field arguably constitutes one of the biggest, thriving and continuously growing literary markets, the global YA market does not at all reflect the diversity of children and young adult readers that form its audience. The issue of who is represented and who can see oneself represented – who can and who cannot relate to characters in a story and on which grounds – are powerfully foregrounded in Gail Gauthier's (2002) question: "Whose Community? Where Is the 'YA' in YA Literature?"

2 Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale's 2009 quantitative analysis of 370 YA titles in the U.S. offers insights which are telling beyond the U.S. market. Their findings uncover a deeply conservative literary field privileging predominantly white, euro-centric, ableist, hetero-normative and gender-conservative frameworks of representation. Thirty-two percent of texts in their archive foreground predominantly European-American protagonists, closely followed by a thirty percent portrayal of "international" albeit largely European characters, firmly relegating multicultural and non-white people to the 'sidekick' position. Only twenty-five percent of their archive depicted disability, and only ten percent of texts employed LGBTQ\* characters.

3 The articles in this issue reveal that not much has changed ten years later, and contributors deal with the above-mentioned discontinuity and the YA literary market's resistance to change on various levels, with different areas of focus and with respect to a variety of genres and forms. The articles corroborate a general picture of precarious absences, blind-spots, and exclusions, and offer critical discussions of the multiple implications and effects of a literary space which excludes vast parts of its audience. Stories matter! And which stories we tell (our) children and which stories will be available to them to read, are part and parcel of either the perpetuation of a legal, political, cultural, epistemic and creative status quo, or the possibility to radically change the world and facilitate cultural shifts. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's talk on "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009, further discussed here in Sarah Mokrzycki's contribution), illustrates this amply and powerfully.

4 Beyond their different perspectives and points of interest, the articles in this issue are unified in an unequivocal call for the radical diversification of literature for children and young

adults. Josh Simpson's article is an investigation at the intersection of law and literature, and critically focuses on the lack of research exploring the connection of law and literature with respect to texts for children and young adults. Beyond the representation of the law in or inside the literary text, Joshua Simpson critically examines the (historical) role of the law in discouraging and even hindering the publication and promotion of allegedly 'queer' and non-heteronormative themes in literature for children and young adults, as he argues, "to understand the relationship between law and youth literature's representations of queer identities".

5 Critically exploring young adult literature's agency as a cultural institution which potentially re-enforces a normative status quo, consumer-capitalist ideals and self-interest, Kabir Chattopadhyay's article focuses on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels and looks at how narrative strategies in this unprecedentedly successful series can shift attention away from the more problematic aspects of commodity and the gendered manipulation of consent within the logics of capitalist consumerism and economic rationalism

6 Sarah Mokrzycki's article closely examines the representation of families and family life in Australian picture books for children. As she argues, "family diversity is still a contentious issue in Australian picture books" to the effect that divergence "from the traditional or nuclear family model, whether by structure, culture, gender or sexuality, remains nothing short of radical". Deeply interested in the ethics of representation, highlighting the importance for young readers to be able to relate to characters, her article challenges the heteronormativity of Australian picture books and underlines the demand for a yet to be radically diversified representation of family life in (Australian) picture books, towards a right of the child reader to be represented.

7 Dalila Forni's article also looks at the representation of family in picture books for children, and offers a quantitative-qualitative analysis of picture books, their representation and construction of parental roles and gender dynamics. Forni critically comments on, as she argues, a tendency of many picture books to silently reproduce heteronormative frameworks of representation despite their, seemingly, non-conformist intentions.

8 The articles in this issue decisively challenge a visible lack of representational diversity that still characterizes the field of literature for children and young adults, one that clearly fails to reflect the diverse living realities of young people, families, and many of the changes and cultural shifts that mark the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But they also suggest ways forward in offering critical registers and analytical avenues to think more deeply and productively about the state of this literary field.

Suggesting different ways to theorize the YA literary market's reluctance to embrace diversity, and identifying a number of areas of concern, these articles – and together with them this issue – seeks to invite further critical inquiry and research.

9 Two literary reviews complement this issue. Anja Wieden offers a perspective on German human rights lawyer, feminist and author Seyran Ateş's 2017 book *Selam, Frau Imamin. Wie ich in Berlin eine liberale Moschee gründete* (Selam, Mrs. Imam. How I Founded a Liberal Mosque in Berlin – Anja Wieden's translation). In her review, Anja Wieden engages in a reading of Ateş's autobiographical account of her experiences in co-founding what she calls a "liberal Mosque", as well as her related thinking about the cultural politics of projects to 'reform' Islam in Germany and Europe. David Kern's review of Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's *Catching Teller Crow* (2018), foregrounds the critical engagement of this YA novel with trauma, but also healing and cultural/spiritual resistance to abuse in relation to the colonial violence of Indigenous child removal in Australia, known as the Stolen Generations.

### **Works Cited**

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# Queer Youth Literature Within the Context of the Evolving Recognition of Human Rights

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## Abstract

While law and literature written for adults is a long-established field, there is a paucity of research focusing on texts written for young people. Even more so, however, is a dearth in research on texts with queer characters and how those texts connect with the latter. My work aims to understand the relationship between law and youth literature's representations of queer identities. This article provides a literature review of these emerging areas, connecting them with debates surrounding Section 28 legislation in the UK, a law that was spurred by queer children's literature and which effectively silenced queer identities in schools and libraries across the UK. Finally, this article offers possible pathways forward.

## Introduction

1 The interface of law and literature – that is, the comparison of “literary and legal texts for the insights each provides into the other” (Rockwood 533) – is by now a well-established field<sup>1</sup>. Until recently, however, it has largely been confined to the realm of adult literature, leaving texts written for young people relatively unexplored (Manderson 12-13; Saguisag & Prickett viii; Todres & Higinbotham, 2013, 2015). This paucity of research exists despite the fact that youth literature, which includes picture books, middle-grade novels, and young adult (or YA) novels,<sup>2</sup> is “an essential site for the emergence of particular understandings of law” (Manderson 7) and a greater sense of right and wrong. Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham (2015), two leading researchers in this area, note that “children's rights are still marginalized in mainstream academic legal circles... Similarly, although the books children read and have read to them are a central part of their childhood experience, so too has children's literature been ignored as a rights-bearing discourse and a means of civic socialization” (1).

2 In the following essay, I explore the development of this field and discuss my work to extend current conversations on law and queer<sup>3</sup> literature, with a focus on youth literature. I first discuss a general history how the field has evolved, including work that frames youth literature as a source of law and as a reflection of law. I then discuss youth literature within the

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1 The emergence of the field can be traced back to *The Legal Imagination: Studies in the Nature of Legal Thought and Expression* (1973) by James Boyd White. Other seminal works include *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (1989) by Stanley Fish; and *Law and Literature* (1995) by Ian Ward. For early work surveying the use of literature in law schools, see Elizabeth Gemmette (1989, 1995).

2 I use the terms “youth literature” and “children's literature” alternatively throughout this essay to refer to this range of books collectively.

3 I use the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term intended to be inclusive of the full spectrum of gender and sexual identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, aromantic and non-binary identities.

context of human rights issues and debates today and, finally, conclude by offering possible pathways forward.

### **Youth Literature: as a Source of Law**

3 Following the 2015 call of Todres and Higinbotham for further research in this area, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, one of the leading journals in the field of children's literature, devoted a special issue in 2016 to youth literature and the rights of children. Edited by Lara Saguisag and Matthew Prickett, the issue aimed to "investigate and interrogate children's literature in light of children's rights discourses... as well as demonstrate how children's rights can enhance and complicate critical studies of children's texts" (v). Their goal, as the editors write, was to lay "the groundwork for new, vibrant perspectives" (v) by identifying intersections of children's rights and literature (viii).

4 The language used by the journal editors suggests that the exploration of such intersections is new; however, similar investigations have been called for since at least the 1970s. In 1977, for example, Marc Soriano identified children's literature as providing young readers with "a clearer awareness of their rights and those of others" (208). Similarly, Ian Ward (1995) argued that children's literature, where "[t]he good and bad are clearly determined, the order-anarchy contrast is always sharp and there is an immanent justice present", is jurisprudence (116). The texts analysed by Ward included *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Hunting of the Snark*, and *The Jungle Books*. In 2003, Desmond Manderson called for further exploration of "children's texts as performing particular jurisprudential work" (13), arguing that children's literature is "an essential site for the emergence of particular understandings of law" (7).

5 In a similar vein, Manderson (2013) also focuses on texts as tools through which young people learn about their own rights, calling for further exploration of "children's texts as performing particular jurisprudential work" (13). Like Ward, Manderson argues that children's literature asks readers to make choices that affect others (65) and to understand the responsibility one has toward other members of society. In doing so, children's literature orients the child reader "to the meaning and purpose of law and the function of the civilized citizen in relation to it" (65). To demonstrate his conclusions, Manderson analysed Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* as, in part, "a way of constituting a specific form of legal subjectivity in children" (18).

6 An early contribution to this area also includes the work of Lana A. Whited and M. Katherine Grimes (2004), who demonstrate how *Harry Potter* reflects Kohlberg's work on

children's moral development in six stages: punishment and obedience; instrumental exchange; interpersonal conformity; social system and conscience maintenance; prior rights and social contract; and universal ethical principles (185).<sup>4</sup> For example, during the punishment and obedience stage, "young children learn to do what adults and older children want them to do in order to avoid punishment" (185). Whited and Grimes use this stage to interrogate *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*<sup>5</sup>, such as when, for example, "Harry intimidates Malfoy into" returning the remembrall Malfoy had stolen from Longbottom (185). Another example is Dudley, who, instead of learning to share, is gluttonous and remains concerned only with himself (186).

7 Others have taken up fairy tales as jurisprudential texts. Katherine Roberts (2001) argues that "fairy tales are 'legal' because they seek to internalize norms of good behaviour in readers and concern themselves with the legitimacy of violent punishments" (499). Kimberly J. Pierson (1998) takes this one step further by exploring the concept of revenge in the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales. Citing Richard Posner, an early pioneer in the law and literature movement, Pierson argues that revenge is both an alternative form of justice and "a manifestation of private law or justice" (4). Her concern is "with those insights into the legal justice system that can be provided from modern and traditional fairy tale literature" (6), and she argues that fairy tales, as "teaching tools" (9), "are frequently a child's first exposure to rules, laws, and punishments" (8). The texts analysed by her include *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Bluebeard*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. She concludes that understanding revenge in these and other tales "can be a crucial step in the evaluation of the principles of law governing today's society", positing revenge as "one of the dangers of an ineffectual justice system" (32).

### **Youth Literature: as a Mirror of Law**

8 As is clear in the examples discussed so far, exploration of fictional legal worlds has tended to centre on just a handful of texts, including *Harry Potter*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and fairy tales (just as the work on literature as jurisprudence does). The Texas Wesleyan Law Review, for example, devoted an entire issue to *Harry Potter* and the law (see Thomas, Smith, Wright, and Barton, 2005), while Paul R. Joseph and Lynn E. Wolf (2003) explore "not only a world of magic but one of politics, social institutions, and law" in *Harry Potter* (194). Joseph

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4 See also Marc Soriano (1977), who identifies five stages of development he considers relevant to children's literature and rights: the mirror stage; the Oedipus complex stage; the latency period; pre-puberty; and adolescence (216-217).

5 *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published in the USA as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

and Wolf find the world to be largely a negative one when it comes to the law, describing the Ministry of Magic as an “unelected bureaucracy” that is “heavy-handed, corrupt, and incompetent” (195). For example, while the Ministry conducts raids on homes believed to contain Muggle artefacts, Arthur Weasley, who conducts such raids, is himself a collector of banned items (195). A bleaker example is found in the Dementors, who drive prisoners mad, calling into question when punishment becomes torture (and, presumably, illegal) (197). The authors argue that “*Harry Potter* reminds us, through their absence, what lawyers do and why they are important” (201). This is a bridge – albeit a small one – connecting the authors’ analyses with the real world, and their conclusion attempts to cement the connection by suggesting that “*Harry Potter* gives us an example of an inadequate legal system” (202).

9 William P. MacNeil (2002) also explores the inner legal world of the *Harry Potter* book series.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Joseph and Wolf, MacNeil’s work considers such matters as elf rights advocacy and trials by jury. He also considers the pensieve’s “vision of judgement” and centres his analysis on *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, a book he describes as “a minor classic of the law-and-literature movement” (546). In doing so, MacNeil connects the imaginary legal realm with the real-world litigation faced by J. K. Rowling, such as a lawsuit for trademark and copyright infringement over the word “muggles” (558); however, he offers little substantive analysis in this regard.

10 Shifting beyond *Harry Potter*, Mary Liston’s (2009) work is concerned with “the social imaginary of the rule of law” (42) in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass*, and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. A primary contribution of her examination is the connection of how imaginary law within texts presents legal order to children and even “the adult reader” (43). Liston frames her work in contrast to the notion that literature itself is a source of law (44; see also Manderson, 2003), focusing instead on the ways in which children’s literature “engage[s] the political and legal imaginary of readers in order to illuminate aspects of the rule of law” (44). Specifically, she argues that

*Alice in Wonderland* reveals the mistake of understanding law solely as the ‘rules of the game’ within a regime characterized by absolute sovereignty. *The Phantom Tollbooth* discloses the dangers of valuing order and stability over responsive regulation. And, *Order of Phoenix* illustrates how we can lose responsible rule when governments sacrifice their commitment to lawfulness, democratic accountability, and human rights (46)

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<sup>6</sup> See also his discussion and analysis of the legal world in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2003).

Such arguments, in focusing on the “flaws and weaknesses” in the structure of law (45), position the fictional worlds not as a source of law but as perhaps a mirror of law in the real world.

### **Queer Rights and Literature**

11 Given the narrow focuses within law and youth literature so far, it is perhaps unsurprising that there remains little work published on texts written specifically for young people who identify as queer.<sup>7</sup> Understanding how queer young people perceive or absorb their human rights from texts, and how those texts represent queer human rights, is, however, timely and even vital. For example, a school in Birmingham, England, initiated a programme called “No Outsiders”, part of which involved “sex and relationship education lessons” intended to teach about the UK’s Equality Act (Parveen, 31 January 2019, n.p.). It was “the first of its kind to systematically investigate ways to address gender and sexuality diversity in primary schools” (DePalma 842). Because of that focus, however, “about 600 Muslim children, aged between four and 11, were withdrawn from the school” in protest (Parveen, 14 March 2019, n.p.).

12 These matters affect not only education policies but also the lives of students themselves, and the importance of supporting queer students in particular cannot be understated. While all students require support, queer students in particular are threatened, harassed, and physically attacked at school, in the home, and/or on social media because of their actual or perceived sexual or gender identity (Horn et al. 792; Katz-Wise et al.; I. Meyer; I. H. Meyer; Muižnieks, 2016). Abuse and harassment come not only from fellow students but also teachers, counsellors, and administrators – “the very people whose role it is to ensure that the learning environment is safe and supportive” (Horn et al. 792).

13 In Scotland specifically, where much of my work takes place, Stonewall, a national charity that focuses on queer equality, published its 2017 report on the experiences of ‘LGBT’ (these are the initialisms used in the study) young people in Britain (Bradlow, Bartram, Guasp, & Jadvā, 2017). The report reveals that nine in ten trans students, and seven in ten of LGB students, have thought about ending their life (for the general population, one in four have had similar thoughts). More than four in five trans young people, and three in five LGB young people, have self-harmed. More than two in five (45%) of trans young people, while one in five (22%) of LGB young people, have actually ended their lives. Contributing factors included

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term intended to be inclusive of the full spectrum of gender and sexual identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, aromantic, non-binary, and so on.

school bullying, disinterested teachers and intolerant school environments, and worry about being placed with homophobic people in university accommodation. For many such students, matters are even more bleak because they are isolated at home, unable to talk about their problems due to intolerant families, churches, and “friends” (35). One young person, for example, reported that her “mum said she’d rather kill herself than have a gay son” (35). Stonewall’s report makes clear that the situation for queer students is dire and often tragic, and it reaffirms the need to understand the perceptions of teachers who, quite clearly, have a direct impact on whether queer students see life as even worth living.

14 Children’s literature has, of course, a decisive role to play in schools and in supporting the lives of queer students. As Francis Ann Day (2000) notes, “books can play an important role in helping young [queer] people survive the life-threatening circumstances in which they find themselves... One way to provide hope to these isolated youngsters is to share compassionate books that deal honestly with the very issues with which they are grappling” (xviii). Literature has arguably an even more essential role in the lives of queer people, especially if they have no one else to turn to for help or for answers. For example, in one particular study, participants reported using various media sources, including fiction, to avoid isolation and to find people, even if fictional, that they could relate to and learn from (Kivel & Kleiber 2000).

15 Youth literature may thus offer hope to young people by providing access to identities they might not otherwise encounter, allowing them “to engage with different roles at an imaginative level” (Hopper 114). As Sarah Hamilton (2005) notes, youth literature “provides an alternative method of social education” (79), including “the development... of legal consciousness” (114). My research is motivated, in part, by whether or not queer students are denied access to the very literature that could help them, and the perceptions that teachers have of that literature, given they are often the gatekeepers of what is and is not read by young people.

### **Studies on Queer Youth Literature**

16 While there are no published analyses of, and no fieldwork involving, children’s literature and queer rights specifically, the study of queer children’s literature itself has continued to garner more and more attention, especially since the turn of the century. Among the more significant texts in this area is *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* by Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart (2006). This text was expanded and updated as a volume called *Representing the Rainbow in*

*Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content since 1969*, which begins with a discussion of adult LGBTQ+ fiction from the 1940s and 1950s and moves through subsequent decades by considering titles the authors judge to be “remarkable either for their excellence or for their failures” (xiii) in portraying queer experiences. The discussion of these experiences, however, largely ignores human rights. Another significant text is *Are the Kids All Right? The Representation of LGBTQ Characters in Children’s and Young Adult Lit* by B. J. Epstein (2013), a survey of English-language children’s literature with queer characters. Its scope is wider than *Representing the Rainbow*, with a focus that includes picture books, middle grade books, and young adult novels. While *Are the Kids All Right?* is interested in how queer characters are portrayed and the information that the literature provides for young readers, a focus specifically on human rights and how those rights are conveyed is not included.

### **Queer(ing) Literature in the Classroom**

17 Studies on queer children’s literature in the classroom tend to focus on how the literature can be used to challenge heteronormativity. Renée DePalma (2014), for example, examines the “No Outsiders” project and its pack of 27 children’s books that explore diversity in gender and sexuality. DePalma is interested in not only what kinds of literature to use but also how to use texts to “productively challenge prevailing heteronormative school discourses” (842). In US classrooms specifically, Caitlin Ryan and Jill Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) use a queer lens to read literature in elementary school classrooms. Their interest was in exploring how “classroom communities can engage books already on the bookshelves of elementary school libraries and classrooms to tease out and discuss experiences and subjectivities that been considered inappropriate for school, including issues of sexuality and gender identity” (144).

18 April Sanders and Janelle Mathis (2013) argue that “[c]lassroom discussions should not avoid topics related to the LGBT characters or themes in texts” and further argue that to avoid such discussions is to silence diversity, which reinforces heteronormative constructions and the notion that queer identities should be kept hidden (n.p.). Positing that, in classroom texts, queer “themes must be so deeply embedded in the development of the story that teachers would not even have an option to practice heteronormativity,” they examine literature to determine the nature of those themes. Per their findings, the themes include coming out; tolerance and acceptance; homophobia; decisions (such as how to come out, whether to confront prejudice, etc.); acceptance; family inclusion; stereotypes; and demonstrating normalcy (such as a happy and content disposition of a child who has queer parents). In their conclusion, the authors call for more research on student responses and reactions to queer texts.

19 Mollie Blackburn et al. (2015) conducted a study of queer youth literature with students and teachers in an out-of-school reading group. Such a study no doubt provides the opportunity to answer the call of Sanders and Mathis in exploring student responses to queer texts (and thus extend the work of Todres and Higinbotham). The focus of their work, however, is on the textual analysis of 24 texts, for which the reading group discussions served as mere background. Their ultimate aim was to “provide guidance, techniques, and even impetus” for teachers to use queer texts in classrooms “without unintentionally reinforcing heteronormativity” (Blackburn et al. 44).

20 Most recently, and touching on my own area of analysis, Catherine Lee (2019) compared the perceptions of LGBT+ teachers who experienced Section 28 with LGBT+ teachers who entered the profession after the repeal of Section 28. Section 28 was a UK law that ‘prohibited’ the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities. Specifically, it read in part:

- (1) A local authority shall not -
  - (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
  - (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

Even though Section 28 regulated local authorities and not teachers specifically, the law had the effect of silencing many LGBT+ teachers during its lifetime. Lee found in her 2019 study that teachers who had experienced Section 28 were, even today, “less open about their sexuality, unlikely to engage in the school community with their partner and more likely to see their teacher and sexual identities as incompatible” (2).

### **Youth Literature: in the Context of Human Rights**

21 Instead of focusing on children’s literature as a source of law or on the legal imagination within children’s literature, my work aims to understand the relationship between law and youth literature’s representations of queer identities. In other words, I seek to correlate real-world legal systems and legislation with fictional worlds. To accomplish this, I focus on a specific instance of the role of children’s literature within law itself: the British parliamentary debates on enacting Section 28.

22 The 1980s, when Section 28 was passed, was a time when discrimination against queer people first “began to be extensively documented, one reason for which was the increasing number of queer organisations, including the Campaign for Homosexual Equality; London’s

Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights Group, and the Gay London Police Monitoring Group” (31). In 1984, the European Parliament even “adopted a resolution urging the member states of the European Community to end discrimination against homosexuals” (McManus 102).

23 But while certain advancements were being made, the 1980s also saw the rise of the AIDS crisis (see Hallsor; and Gallo), which the media referred to as “the gay plague” and “gay cancer” (Clews 232; Hallsor 59; Berridge 180; Weeks 244; Epstein 3–4). As the epidemic grew, fears soon turned towards AIDS spreading to the general population (Berridge 180; Weeks 246). In fact, a newspaper poll taken in 1986 found that 56% of respondents believed people with AIDS should be sterilized, with 24.5% believing they should be kept in isolated camps (Haste 276). In a 1987 survey, nearly two-thirds said that homosexual activity was “always wrong” and an additional 11% viewed it as ‘mostly wrong’ (Park et al. 2013).

24 The general public’s changing attitudes accompanied the rise of the New Right and its opposition to lesbian and gay identities (Smith; see also Berridge 179; Weeks 238; and Wise, para. 3.10; Epstein 2–3). In 1984, for example, the UK government conducted a raid and seizure of books from Gay’s the Word Bookshop in London, eventually making charges of importing obscene literature, charges that were later withdrawn (McManus 103; Weeks 238). In 1986, Tory Baroness Cox introduced a debate on “the case for avoiding the politicisation of education,” attacking both the Greater London Council and Inner-London Education Authority (ILEA) and “denounc[ing] material about gay rights as ‘essentially anti-heterosexual’” (as cited in McManus 109).

25 In 1987, Margaret Thatcher won her third election victory and claimed at a party conference that “[c]hildren who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay” (Weeks 239). According to Jeffrey Weeks, Thatcher’s statement was targeted at Labour-controlled local authorities (239), such as the Greater London Council, whose 1985 charter declared that “[l]esbian and gay pupils and students should see reflected in the curriculum the richness and diversity of homosexual experience and not just negative images” (as cited in Weeks 239).

26 Section 28 was an effort to “clamp down” on the advances of lesbian and gay people and to reassert the “compromise” of the Sexual Offences Act 1967<sup>8</sup> (Weeks 241). Its oft-cited spark was the English version of the Danish picture book *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* by

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8 The Sexual Offences Act 1967 (the 1967 Act) decriminalised homosexual acts between two men, as long as those acts occurred in private (that is, not in public and with no one but those two men present) between two men, both of whom were at least 21 years old. This Act applied only to England and Wales; a similar act in was passed in Scotland in 1980 and in Northern Ireland in 1982.

Susanne Bösche (Colvin & Hawksley 2; Elliott & Humphries 227). Published by the Gay Men's Press, the book is about a young girl living with her father and his male partner. In 1986, the Daily Mail, a British newspaper, learned that a copy was kept in a local authority library in London. As Colvin et al. (1989) note, that one copy was not available to children: it was instead kept in a 'teachers' resource centre' with controlled access (see also Elliott & Humphries 2017). Nevertheless, the Daily Mail published propaganda that local councils were promoting homosexuality to children at taxpayer expense.

27 Given the British public's attitude toward homosexuality (see the surveys cited above) the uproar that ensued is perhaps unsurprising. And soon other texts for young people were dragged into the limelight of the debate.<sup>9</sup> Another book which prominently featured in the campaign was *Young, Gay and Proud*, a 1980 collection of essays edited by Sasha Alyson. That book was said to have "been advertised on a notice board in a school run by the Labour-led ILEA [Inner London Education Authority]" (McManus 138). In the 1987 election campaign, the Conservative Party issued posters with the claim that the Labour Party wanted *Young, Gay and Proud* and another book, this one called *The Playbook for Kids about Sex* (1980) by Joani Blank, to be read in schools (Sanders and Spraggs 93).

28 In the parliamentary debates on whether to enact Section 28, Jill Knight, a Conservative MP, claimed these books were being taught to "little children as young as [f]ive and six" and that they contained "brightly coloured pictures of little stick men show[ing] all about homosexuality and how it was done" and that such books "explicitly described homosexual intercourse and, indeed, glorified it, encouraging youngsters to believe it was better than any other sexual way of life" (HL Deb, 9 December 1999 c1102). These claims are false, as is revealed by even a cursory review of the book; nevertheless, the rhetoric galvanised support, and Knight further claimed that parents contacted her with objections "to their children at school being encouraged into homosexuality and being taught that a normal family with mummy and daddy was outdated" (HL Deb, 9 December 1999 c1102).

29 According to Knight, the objections to queer-inclusive children's literature was in fact "the motivation for what was going on, and was precisely what Section 28 stopped" (HL Deb, 9 December 1999 c1102). In other words, Section 28 was, essentially, the result of questioning what children should and should not be allowed to read. As Labour MP Dr Cunningham argued,

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<sup>9</sup> After the Section 28 debates, Conservative Peer Guy Black recalled in an interview: 'Large numbers of copies had to be sought of [*Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*] because they kept disappearing. There was one famous Friday afternoon when Norman Tebbit wanted to brandish a copy above his head and we couldn't find any. So library boys were sent scurrying to bookshops, undercover, to get yet more copies. I think the [Conservative Research Department] purchased more copies than any other organisation' (McManus 138).

Section 28 was an effort “to control what is taught in the classroom, not directly through an education Act, but indirectly on the provision of books or other materials that are not themselves prohibited by law” (HC Deb, 9 March 1988 c371).

30 The parliamentary debates on Section 28 are extensive, covering approximately 400 pages just on the debates to enact the legislation, let alone those on its repeal. I will explore these debates further in future work, but even the brief overview provided in this article reveals that lawmakers did not entirely conceive of childhood as separate from sexuality; rather, they saw sexuality as being produced in, or co-produced with, childhood, and as precarious and in need of state intervention. That is, children were perceived as developing as heterosexual so long as their childhood was protected from homosexuality ‘corrupting’ (through the use of, for example, children’s literature) that ‘natural’ development. Of course, the irony here is that if heterosexuality were indeed the ‘natural’ course of development, it would not need protection in the first place. But such possibilities required, according to parliament, containment, and thus the literature children read had to be censored, even if indirectly.

31 Containment of (homo)sexuality through regulation and legislation calls to mind Foucault’s argument that sex, as a concern of the state, requires individuals “to place themselves under surveillance” and includes the discipline of “pedagogy, having as its objective the specific sexuality of children [...] the sin of youth” (*The History of Sexuality* 116–117). Indeed, for Foucault, the “pedagogization of children’s sex” is a “double assertion” that the sexual activity of children is both natural and contrary to nature and “pose[s] physical and moral, individual and collective dangers” such that “[p]arents, families, educators, doctors, and eventually psychologists [will] have to take charge, in a continuous way, of this sexual potential” (104). In other words, a “specific ‘children’s sexuality’ [i]s established: it [i]s precarious, dangerous, to be watched over constantly” (*The End of the Monarchy of Sex* 141).

32 One way to achieve this was through protection of the heteronormative family itself and, in particular, its sexual and reproductive practices. Indeed, Knight argued bluntly that homosexuality was “an attack on the family” (HC Deb., 9 March 1988 c387) and another MP, Fairburn, agreed in more crude terms, calling it “a perversion of a human function” for “using the excretory anus and rectum with a reproductive organ” (HC Deb., 9 March 1988 c382). Sexuality, in other words, was meant to be confined to “the family” as “the serious function of reproduction” (*The History of Sexuality* 3). Homosexuality was therefore not just an attack on children but on the very *production* of children.

33 In other words, the law, in seeking to protect those deemed vulnerable (i.e., children), created and produced vulnerability in others (i.e., family arrangements not centered on

reproduction). Parliament's framing of children as innocent was a refusal to see children as sexual and gendered agents having the ability to exercise their own rights. Children were thus seen as objects of regulation and possession, whose vulnerability made legal mediation and intervention a necessity. They, in their innocence, "must be protected" (HC Deb., 15 December 1987 c987). This anxiety was reflected by the British parliament, the majority of whom believed protection was needed from homosexuality and homosexual 'deviants' who would corrupt innocent children and 'recruit' them, and the literature which might be used for those purposes.

### **Conclusion**

34 This essay has provided a brief literature review on law and youth literature and demonstrates the need for additional research focusing specifically on queer youth literature. First, there is a need for research that includes young people's responses to texts. Second, researchers should explore not only how texts are used in the classroom (which previous studies have already touched on, as discussed above) but also how teachers respond to difficulties presented by parents and others who object to teaching about equality for queer people. This exploration of the tension between law and practice has not yet been explored but may provide valuable contributions to the field. Third, a focus on law in the real world as a reflection (or, conversely, a reflector) of society and how it bears on literature itself is another relatively unexplored avenue.

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# “Powerful Infatuations”: The Love Potion and *Harry Potter*’s Ethics of Consent

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## Abstract

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books have been remarkably successful on a global scale, and have been lauded for their optimistic, affectively celebratory visions of justice, ethics, and individual freedom. At the same time, a number of scholars including Farah Mendlesohn, Jack Zipes, and Maria Nikolajeva have pointed out the problematic conservatism and ethical insufficiency of the texts’ moral visions, which perpetuate a stultifying vision of autonomy. In this article, I seek to highlight the ideological roots of this vision in a late capitalist rationale of self-interest, with a focus on the texts’ treatment of romantic relationships and issues of consent, by analysing depictions of the love potion. My article explores the different narrative strategies employed in *Harry Potter* to shift readerly attention away from the problematic aspects of a magical commodity, whose function is to manipulate consent and autonomy, by instead highlighting them as amusing, largely harmless artefacts of wizardly childhood. Such strategies, as shall be explored, range from comic relief and abrupt narrative breaks in the form of foils to reversal of real-world gender associations and sanitisation of teenage romantic narratives. By examining how a popular fantasy text dilutes the issues of consent and coercion with reference to such an object, I seek to illuminate how the contemporary neoliberal ethos of the books participates in the reconfiguration of autonomy in terms of individual self-interest. Such a reconfiguration has a pervasive and significant influence not only on socio-economic behaviour, but also on cultural depictions of socio-romantic agency and perceptions of consent, autonomy, and manipulation.

## Introduction

1 Very few contemporary texts of children’s fantasy, and more broadly, children’s literature, have enjoyed as much commercial success, or had as substantial an impact on global popular culture, as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books. As of February, 2018, the seven books in the series have been translated into 80 languages all over the world, and have sold an excess of 500 million copies. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Peter Mandaville identify the global impact of the fantasy narrative, and posit that “it may be a slight exaggeration to compare the success of the *Harry Potter* books to the Bible, but the extent of the books’ reach cannot be doubted” (Jackson and Mandaville 45). It is this global popularity of *Harry Potter* that necessitates a careful academic consideration of the ethical messages transmitted to young readers, following Jack Zipes’ argument that “it is exactly because the success of the *Harry Potter* novels is so great and reflects certain troubling sociocultural trends that we must try to evaluate the phenomenon” (Zipes 172). Much of the narrative appeal of the texts derives from the central metaphor of magic in the fantasy, portrayed most concretely in terms of the various

magical objects and artefacts which saturate the wizardly life of the child characters. Such objects, while drawn from older cultural narratives of magic, double in the texts as commodities - objects of “wizardly technologies [which] may not look like the commodities we are used to... nonetheless marketed and consumed as ours are” (Teare 340). The narrative often frames instances of autonomy and individual agency within the acquisition and use of such magical commodities.

2 When considering how this narrative device frames commodities as the material loci for young readers to approach images of autonomy, it also becomes important to acknowledge how such commodities simultaneously raise certain important ethical questions which accompany the notion of individual agency. *Harry Potter* does offer certain instances for the reader in which questions of ethics are raised with respect to the use and sale of potentially dangerous magical commodities. The character of Hermione Granger, for example, is offered as an occasional interlocutor who prescribes and sometimes enforces responsible and disciplined use of such objects in the magical school space. To provide an example, her responsible, somewhat adult, voice dominates her denunciation of Fred and George Weasleys’ use of younger students to experiment with potentially dangerous magical commodities; she is shown to confiscate their products, threaten to report them to their mother, and forbids them from using young students as their guinea pigs, even though she “can’t stop [them] eating the stupid things” themselves (*Phoenix* 230). While, in this instance, the narrative directly portrays a conflict regarding the ethical use of magical commodities, there are instances and aspects of commodity culture in the books which are never questioned as problematic, yet have pervasive and disturbing suggestions for the reader. The affective optimism of the narrative necessitates an investigation into *how* the narratives successfully elide these problematic aspects of specific commodities.

3 My article seeks to focus on one such commodity which is frequently portrayed in the latter half of the series, namely the love potion, examining similarities between the potion as depicted and its real world counterparts, as well as looking into the troubling socio-historical sources of consent and violation it is drawn from, foregrounding how the re-imagination of the love potion as commodity largely sanitises such aspects. Such an exploration can address how the negation of ethical questions is directly connected to a contemporary, late capitalist ethics of prioritising individual autonomy in terms of self-interest, often in competition with the agency of others.

## The Love Potion: The Dilution of Issues of Consent, and Autonomy as Individual Self-Interest

4 The readership of *Harry Potter*, over the course of the seven book series, is presumed to grow up with the characters, and this maturation is evidenced in the changing pattern and nature of commodities which saturate the stories. While the early books are more invested in the child characters' fascination with commodities concerned with play, like Chocolate Frog cards, toys, and magically enhanced eatables, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, where Harry is shown to be sixteen years old, and the texts start addressing themes more commonly found in young adult fiction, the love potion makes an appearance. The potion, like other commodities, is also introduced for sale in the marketplace, the use of which requires economic power (*Prince* 117). In keeping with the young adult themes prevalent in the later books, the potion crystallises questions of autonomy with a focus on the ethics of coercion, consent, and subversion of personal freedom in romantic relationships. These questions, however, are raised largely in a humorous and somewhat more frivolous manner than in other works of young adult fiction.<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced when the potion is introduced for the first time to the reader, clearly as 'joke items' among other similar commodities for sale in the market. The reader is told that they are "violently pink products", a commodity targeted primarily at young female consumers, in a conversation which offers some light humour at the expense of the young Ginny Weasley, concerning her romantic relationship with a classmate (*Prince* 117). This gendering of the commodity as a largely 'feminine' product is a distinct narrative strategy aimed at distancing the love potion and its use from the differently gendered real-world use of similar products the young adult reader will be familiar with. However, even at the level of the story, Rowling cannot avoid highlighting the problematic aspect of using the potion, although much of the seriousness is elided by slapstick humour.

5 Ron, who is frequently employed as a comic foil to other characters in his bluntness and regular display of confusion (and sometimes, in his treatment of Hermione, derision) towards more cerebral issues, is the figure Rowling uses to frame the love potion as undesirable but not overly serious. When Harry is shown to refuse the romantic overtures of a fellow student named Romilda, the latter tries to trick him into consuming a love potion hidden in chocolates. Harry avoids this, as the ever-sensible figure of Hermione is shown to warn him

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<sup>1</sup> One of the early examples of this would be Judy Blume's *Forever*, where issues of consent, adolescent sexual desire, and the need for frank, serious communication dominates the relationship of the central characters. See Judy Blume, *Forever* (Macmillan, 1975).

against this act of subterfuge, and the potion is accidentally ingested by Ron instead (*Prince* 366-369). This (mis)use of the love potion cannot avoid raising questions of coercion and consent in romantic/sexual relationships; questions pointedly averted through two distinct narrative strategies in this episode. Firstly, Ron's over-the-top buffoonish behaviour provides a slapstick comic relief for the reader, which offers humour as the chief filter through which this incident is read. For the reader, this is communicated in Ron punching Harry, and while the latter levitates him into the air in rebuttal, Ron keeps asking to introduce him to Romilda.

'Romilda?' he repeated. 'Did you say Romilda? Harry - do you know her? Can you introduce me?' Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. A part of him — the part closest to his throbbing right ear — was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off...but on the other hand, they were supposed to be friends, Ron had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted Ron to declare undying love for Romilda Vane. (*Prince* 369)

6 This use of slapstick to frame the episode as largely humorous is complemented by the second strategy of diverting readerly attention from the misuse of the love potion to a grim incident of far deeper implications, as Ron is almost immediately shown to be poisoned as part of a conspiracy by Voldemort (*Prince* 372-373). What this strategy draws attention away from is a more complex engagement with the love potion in the texts. On one level, the love potion may ostensibly be read as an apparent material embodiment of abstract notions of romantic or sexual attraction, a symbolic object which would not be uncommon in a fantasy text. However, as we are informed earlier in the book through the figure of Horace Slughorn, the old potions master, the love potion "doesn't really create *love*...this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession" (*Prince* 177). The object is thus firmly located outside the realm of true love, and in the domain of manipulating desire and obsession. Rowling's narrative use of humour, and the introduction of a greater crisis as *deus ex machina*, thus draws readerly attention away from dwelling too long on the problematic aspect of the love potion; the fact that the chief purpose of this commodity lies in its overpowering the target's independent, cognitive faculties to manufacture a form of artificial attraction, a perverse and corrupted simulation of love, expressly against the victim's consent.

7 There is thus a palpable problem in the texts' categorisation of the love potion along with other, more harmless magical collectibles, a depiction which is facilitated by the portrayal

of the Weasley twins' sale of such products in their joke shop. At the affective level, the twins are unequivocally portrayed in a positive and humorous light. They are shown to have unparalleled knowledge of all the secret passages and rooms in the enchanted school castle, frequently disrupting everyday schedule by pulling pranks on students, teachers and ghosts alike, and featuring as the go-to-guys for any of the students who wish to acquire forbidden or illicit eatables, joke items or other magical accessories – attributes overtly depicted as exciting and attractive. In their cultural peer group, their ability to procure exciting and affectively appealing magical commodities, in particular, turns them into celebrities of sort in episodes such as the one following Gryffindor's Quidditch victory in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George Weasley disappeared for a couple of hours and returned with armfuls of bottles of Butterbeer, pumpkin fizz and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets. 'How did you do that?' squealed Angelina Johnson, as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd. (*Azkaban* 195)

8 The twin's rule-breaking is celebrated by their peers as a mark of great achievement, and is contrasted sharply with the narrative dullness of foil characters who are depicted as disciplinarians. David K. Steege, reading the influences of the genre of the British school story in the books, discusses how "Rowling...perpetuates the common notion of prefects...in a subtle struggle to maintain their position and dignity with the younger students" (Steege 147). The figure of Percy Weasley, the twins' pompous elder brother (*Azkaban* 50), is consistently used as a "self-important and authoritarian" foil to their spontaneity in the texts, setting him up primarily as "a target for humour, particularly by his twin brothers" (Steege 147). Although (and to some extent, because) the twins are presented as such rule-breakers, a behaviour frowned upon by more authoritative figures, their disregard for discipline is never portrayed as cruel or ethically problematic, being "motivated only by what amuses them" (Whited and Grimes 196). Overall, the Weasley twins are generally appreciated in the language of the narrative as boisterous but friendly troublemakers, unlike other 'bullying' figures. Indeed, Harry is shown to use them consciously as a moral compass of sorts. When it is revealed that Harry's father was an unpleasant young bully as a student, Harry tries to justify his behaviour by comparing him with the twins but fails to rationalise that the twins would ever behave like his father in "dangling someone upside-down for the fun of it" (*Phoenix* 575).

9 On the ethical spectrum, Rowling firmly sets the twins on the ‘good’ side. The sale of love potions as amusing joke shop commodities, endorsed by such overtly ‘good’ and attractive characters, therefore dilutes to a considerable extent the two conflicting aspects of such a commodity. At one level, the purchase and use of this commodity, much like the twins’ other products, depicts for the reader in clear terms the child consumers’ socio-economic autonomy in the marketplace. However, unlike other commodities whose role is simply to play pranks on others, the love potion necessarily functions through the *subversion and overpowering* of the autonomy of its intended target; the consumers of this commodity can express their autonomy *only through* the negation of another’s. Like many of the magical objects which populate *Harry Potter*, this aspect of the love potion reinforces and perpetuates the associations surrounding it in older European narratives on witchcraft it borrows from, narratives which may provide a historical context to the love potion’s pervasive tension with the issue of autonomy.

10 From early modern times onwards, the potion has functioned as a popular political and cultural image depicting the threat posed by witches to civilised Christian society. In *A Collection of Rare and Curious Tracts on Witchcraft and the Second Sight* (1820), a detailed account is provided of the trial of a Doctor Fian. He is allegedly a wizard who is found guilty of an attempt to bewitch a young woman with a concoction brewed with the help of a hair taken from her body, which would coerce her magically into having a sexual relationship with him against her will. The primary threat posed by such magical power lies in its perceived ability to manipulate the agency of its victims, thus coming into direct conflict with the fundamental Christian tenet of the free will of individuals (Webster 30). Such historical European narratives deeply inform Rowling’s depiction of the love potion. Of course, in *Harry Potter*, magic is no longer shown to be derived from Satanic sources, but rather organised as a discipline where magical knowledge is safeguarded, shared, and trained within the academic community of Hogwarts. However, the threat of coercion is still preserved as a problematic undercurrent to the love potion as a trope borrowed from older narratives. While the potion thus moves from the early modern Christian to the largely secular contemporary context, it is necessary to examine how its primary image as a tool to overcome consent/autonomy is reinforced for the reader according to contemporary social discourse about agency and consent. Self-expression which denies the autonomy of another agent, while considered a threat to the Christian tenet of free will, can occupy a quite different register in the socio-economic context of a contemporary text – a context which is informed by the primacy of individual autonomy in *Harry Potter*.

11 This contemporary economic context of Rowling's texts is deeply involved in a late capitalist, neoliberal ethos. The magical world of *Harry Potter*, Karin E. Westman contends, is constructed in terms that are recognisably modern, global and "late capitalist" in the "post-Thatcher" neoliberal mode (Westman 306). Jennifer Sterling-Folker and Brian Folker further comment on how the witches and wizards of the books "live in nation-states, identify with the countries of their origin, [and] have developed state structures that are similar to our own" (Sterling-Folker and Folker 103). Considering this specific socio-economic context, self-expression as simultaneously self-serving is not an entirely unexpected narrative construction. Neoliberalism can be differentiated from the older, classical liberal economic ideology in its deep and far-reaching impact not only on economic life, but also on the social and personal behaviour of individuals inhabiting this culture (Hamilton 54-59, Sugarman 103-106). In Rowling's texts, the love potion represents a site of self-expression of the reader's autonomy, and a commodity perpetuating, in the sphere of romantic agency and gender relations, the notion of autonomy as an expression of the 'self' in terms of individualistic self-interest. The love potion in *Harry Potter* is thus an object as concerned with love or romantic attraction as it is with its role as consumer commodity to advance the user's self-interest, and self-centred autonomy (Sen 4-21).

12 It needs to be pointed out here that Rowling demarcates her 'good' characters from the 'bad' through their individual decisions to use/misuse such commodities; using the love potion is clearly a violation of the other's autonomy, and truly kind or empathetic focalising characters are not shown to be using it. However, the existence of the potion itself for potential misuse, and casual references to it as harmless even by Hogwarts teachers (*Chamber* 176), is not interrogated in the texts, and the questions of ethical activity are subtly transferred to individual choice in using the potion, rather than to an investigation into the existence of it as a market commodity. This narrative strategy is involved in a construction of ethical action for the reader around the locus of individual responsibility, while suggesting that such objects, regardless of their potential for harm, shall continue to circulate in the market as a given. On an ideological level, this construction can be assessed as resonant with the neoliberal transformation in popular culture of the "purpose of the state from a responsibility to protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to insuring protection of the market itself" (Wren and Waller 500).

13 It follows, then, that this model of "individualistic ethics based on self-interest" within an economic community in which each individual *homo economicus* is guided by self-interest, will necessarily "atomise people as individuals who must compete with each other to succeed" (Littler 2). On the level of the text, this vision of competition not only dominates narratives of

success, but also has deeply pervasive influences on how romantic/sexual interest and action are portrayed for young readers. The love potion, in this context, functions as a site of conflict not simply between two subjects in the process of a romantic transaction, but also between two reciprocal autonomies. That such an object is very much in place within the competitive ideology of self-interest the texts are informed by is evidenced by its re-imagination as a market commodity, unlike its depiction as a liminal, dangerous product of an individual witch's malicious intent as in older narratives.

14 Looking at the love potion from this distinct socio-economic perspective, explains how the ideological constructions of the text privilege its depiction as an amusing, desirable commodity in the market place, rather than highlighting the problematic notions of consent and coercion in relation to it. Rowling's conscious dilution of the love potion as mere 'joke' item is evidenced in the narrative regularly, most overtly when Hermione dissociates them from truly dangerous artefacts by claiming that "love potions aren't dark or dangerous" (*Prince* 288). As discussed in case of Romilda, the problems of her attempt to manipulate Harry's autonomy are somewhat suppressed by the humorous framing of the narrative. Even when a discussion of the love potion enters the story in a considerably disturbing and sinister manner, a possibility of serious introspection is introduced by Rowling only to be dismissed in a rather abrupt narrative moment. This episode reveals to the reader that Voldemort, the antagonist, was conceived while his non-magical father was under the influence of love potion secretly given to him by his magical mother, Merope Gaunt, whom he abandoned the moment the influence of the potion had ended (*Prince* 201-202). Rowling introduces a truly complex moment in Harry's ethical development when she portrays him considering the unfair and difficult circumstances of his enemy's birth and childhood, with the image of rape looming in the background, only to abruptly end the conversation not with a logical introspection, but with a comparison to a foil character.

'In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life.' 'She wouldn't even stay alive for her son?' Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. 'Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?' 'No,' said Harry quickly, 'but she had a choice, didn't she, not like my mother —' 'Your mother had a choice too,' said Dumbledore gently. 'Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage'. (*Prince* 246)

15 Much like in the instance of Ron's poisoning closing the episode of his ingesting the love potion, Rowling once again avoids a problematic instance in the story by using a foil in the form of Lily Potter's greater courage, offering only a pitiful comment on Merope's innate lack of the same, before Dumbledore's voice abruptly draws narrative attention away to Harry's next lesson (*Prince* 246). Farah Mendlesohn's observation that the conflict between good and evil in *Harry Potter* is actually a struggle between "two competing visions of aristocracy" (Mendlesohn 169) can be illuminated in such a narrative strategy. In offering a moral standpoint concerning the (mis)use of love potions and the abandonment of children, the text centres its commentary on the inferior behaviours of a weak individual, rather than the structurally problematic magical object at her disposal. In other words, the problematic aspect of a love potion is somewhat diluted in the suggestion that only morally compromised or weak characters ever seem to use it. Through this association, the love potion becomes an extension of the ethical inferiority of characters like Merope and Romilda, rather than a deeply dubious commodity in its own right.

16 The narrative strategy of highlighting the love potion as a necessary commodity for self-expression, even when this takes the form of subverting the autonomy of others, particularly necessitates academic attention, as such commodities are not unfamiliar in the real world. The love potion in the books is not meant to be ingested voluntarily, but is always associated with the act of tricking or deceiving an unsuspecting victim into having it. This image of 'slipping' the potion into someone's drink necessarily invokes a serious contemporary social problem involving narcotics commonly referred to as 'date-rape drugs.' The love potion, in its purpose and intent, is disturbingly similar to such narcotics, and Rowling uses two major narrative strategies to dissociate the love potion from this real-world counterpart, desexualising teenage life in the books, and reversing gender associations with the love potion.

17 The first strategy introduces an image of teenage romantic attention in which the sexual aspect is diluted or even negated. The children in the texts are not shown to indulge in activities any more physical than kissing, and even when characters like Romilda attempt to use the love potion, their motives are expressed in the somewhat euphemistic terms of wanting to 'go out' with someone.<sup>2</sup> There is no detailed discussion of feelings of physical attraction and consecutive teenage sexual experience, and romantic narratives are mostly sanitised. The threatening image of the love potion as something disturbingly similar to the date-rape drug is

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<sup>2</sup> This is a consistent aspect in the texts' depiction of love. Even adult romantic relationships emphasise not on sexuality, but on abstract notions like domestic affection (Mr. and Mrs. Weasley), courage and nobility (Bill and Fleur, Lupin and Tonks), or the relief in finding someone similar (Hagrid and Madame Maxime).

downplayed to a large degree through this narrative strategy of dissociating sexual activity from romantic attraction. Thus, Romilda's attempt to enforce Harry's consent by giving him a love potion is tempered largely by the narrative insistence that her intentions are limited to "hinting heavily that she would like to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with [Harry]" (*Prince* 281). Removing the sexual aspect of romantic attraction, therefore, dilutes most of the potential narrative sharpness in perceiving love potions in terms of date rape drugs, at the level of the reader.

18 Secondly, a more subtle strategy adapted by Rowling in distancing the love potion from the date-rape drug can be detected in the inversion of the gendered associations of the use of such a commodity. Statistical analyses demonstrate that the victims of date rape globally are overwhelmingly female, while purchase and use of the common date-rape drugs is largely limited/confined to male users (Muehlenhard, Sympson, Phelps, and Highby 144-146, and Valentine 22-29). In *Harry Potter*, this social reality is inverted through the depiction of the love potion as both, being targeted at female consumers in the market as well as (more frequently) being used by women. This gendering of a magical object concerned with romantic relationships derives in no small part from the somewhat stereotypical description in Rowling's texts of girls as more aware of emotional and romantic affairs than the boys who are mostly shown to be affably clueless. This contrast is used to provide humorous incidents of male characters learning to understand the intricacies of the social etiquette of dating, as evidenced in Hermione's admonitions of Harry's disastrous date with Cho Chang.

'Oh, Harry' she said sadly. 'Well, I'm sorry, but you were a bit tactless.' 'Me, tactless?' said Harry, outraged. 'One minute we were getting on fine, next minute she was telling me that Roger Davies asked her out and how she used to go and snog Cedric in that stupid teashop - how was I supposed to feel about that?' 'Well, you see,' said Hermione, with the patient air of someone explaining that one plus one equals two to an over-emotional toddler, 'you shouldn't have told her that you wanted to meet me halfway through your date.' "But, but," spluttered Harry, "but - you told me to meet you at twelve and to bring her along, how was I supposed to do that without telling her?" (*Phoenix* 504)

19 Harry's inability to understand how he has offended his love interest, and Hermione's exasperated, matronly patience in educating him, provide a humorous account of the bumbling boy hero's socio-romantic development. However, in the context of the love potion, this gendering also serves the purpose of distancing the potion from its real-world equivalent and

depicting it as something that is, if not harmless, then at least not actively harmful as an instrument of sexualised violence in the hands of largely male perpetrators. For the reader, these narrative choices construct a curated image of the love potion as a commodity that is not much different from other magical eatables or prank items as desirable objects to own and use. The presence of these conscious strategies in the texts highlight an ideological necessity in the narrative to avoid introspection into possible problematic readings of the structures of self-expression it communicates.

20 Gender, and the romantic/social engagement between male and female characters in *Harry Potter*, is thus presented in a largely sanitised light in the books. Such a depiction allows the texts to represent the love potion as a largely harmless commodity, whose role in manipulating consent is presented not in the sinister context of abuse and gender violence, but in the frivolous, even playful, language of pranks and jokes. On the affective level, this invites the reader to approach the commodity (and through it, issues of romantic agency) in terms which are pointedly not introspective. At the same time, this allows the texts to use the image of this commodity to frame personal, romantic, and emotional visions of action in terms which are deeply influenced by the individualised vision of autonomy as self-interest.

## **Conclusion**

21 The notion of individual autonomy, and visions of child characters taking important ethical decisions and exercising their agency, has always been integral to the genre of fantasy literature. Colin Manlove argues how children's fantasy in England has largely been concerned with "broad patterns of behavior that have guided humanity to its best achievements," and while he observes in post-1950s fantasy literature a growing insecurity about ethical ideals, he relates the immense popularity of Rowling's texts to her depiction of "school life...founded on a social structure and values no longer to be found in the outside world" (Manlove 201). In other words, Rowling's focus on the issue of autonomy is very much a part of the tradition of English fantasy. However, the attributes of freedom and individual autonomy are equally central to the functioning of the contemporary neoliberal economic machinery; the late capitalist market demands a constant supply of pro-active participants, acting ostensibly out of self-interest and self-expression (Steger and Roy 5-20). It is imperative for any governmentality concerned with such an economic society to effect, as Michel Foucault contends, this identification of individual economic autonomy with the affective optimism of personal freedom (Foucault 19-43). *Harry Potter* as a work of fantasy, a genre already familiar with

narratives of autonomy, provides an effective literary mode to participate in the cultural perpetuation of this popular vision of freedom-as-individual autonomy.

22 What makes the love potion a particularly important object of study in the analysis of such autonomy in *Harry Potter* is the *specific* construction of autonomy as not mere self-expression but also an active pursuit of self-interest *in conflict with* another's autonomy, while concealing the more problematic aspects of such self-seeking consumer behaviour through the strategies discussed. As discussed, a substantial amount of work has been undertaken by children's literature scholars with regards to issues of gender and the female voice in *Harry Potter*. My particular focus on the love potion, however, seeks to highlight the pervasive influence of the social principle of self-interest on contemporary life. In its contemporary incarnation, it is a principle which seeks to govern and re-organise not only contemporary economic activity, but also social and subjective agency in spheres as personal and fundamental as romantic/sexual desire and behaviour. Within the principles of neoliberal social behaviour, as Jeff Sugarman argues, "relationships are reduced to means-ends calculations, and pursued solely for self-interest, and emotional self-optimisation" (Sugarman 111). While *Harry Potter* does uphold the role and power of selfless love in the larger quest narrative, the model of social behaviour concerning relationships as Sugarman discusses, still asserts itself in the more immediate instances through the depiction of objects like the love potion. Personal freedom and individuality remain important concepts in *Harry Potter*, although they often covertly structure and reproduce what scholars have described as an immutable status quo. Rowling's depictions of magical commodities like love potions help illuminate this status quo as governed by a distinctly neoliberal emphasis on the atomised ethos of maximising self-interest, and allow the identification of *what* specific politico-economic ideologies the often criticised conservatism of the texts entails. Within modern, neoliberal life, even perceptions and constructions of gender and romantic agency are not entirely untouched by the all-pervasive principle of the *homo economicus*, or the rational human guided solely by self-interest. The 'unproblematic' and humorous depiction of a deeply conflicting commodity such as the love potion, in a work of children's fantasy which has been globally lauded for its optimistic visions of freedom, offers a significant pointer towards this pervasive cultural process whereby neoliberal self-interest penetrates deep into everyday exercises of socio-romantic autonomy.

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

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## 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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# **Same-sex Families and New Parental Models: Redefining Motherhood and Fatherhood Through Children's Picture Books**

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## **Abstract**

Family is one of the most common and influential topics in children's literature. However, depictions of families with non-traditional gender dynamics are still not common in picturebooks addressed to young audiences. In particular, fathers and mothers rarely counteract their gender roles; they usually fulfil socially constructed expectations linked to masculinity and femininity. Parental models are particularly influential in children's construction of gender identity. For this reason, it is fundamental to promote inclusive children's literature. This paper explores a selection of children's picturebooks from different countries in which where new parental gender dynamics are presented. The depiction of gender standards will be related to family structures: children's literature on same-sex families seems to be particularly effective in counteracting gender stereotypes linked to fatherhood and motherhood challenging traditional family structures and parental gender norms.

## **Gender Socialization and Children's Literature**

1 Gender socialization (Stockard, 2006; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Burgio, 2015; Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996; Carter, 2014) has been widely studied by scholars from different fields, such as psychology, education, cultural and literary studies. Gender socialization is a multifaceted process that shapes men's and women's lives and influences their perception of what is socially and culturally 'acceptable'. Theories of gender socialization argue that this process starts from a very early age, when children learn what is expected of them by identifying with role performances displayed by agents of socialization. Some of the most common and influencing tools of socialization are family members, educators and peers, and media (Ulivieri, 2014; Burgio, 2015).

2 Thus, gender education is a lifelong, complex process which takes place in many contexts and through different tools. Male and female standards are passively learnt through various elements that build gender identity. From a very early age (3-4 years old) children express their need to label female and male roles as opposites, creating a strong dichotomy based on sexual difference. This leads to a stereotyped identity that usually does not differ

much from prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity in a specific society (Ulivieri, 2007).

3 Popular culture and media have an indirect but significant impact on this educational process: products addressed to children and young adults, such as toys, literature, cinema, cartoons, magazines, advertisements, videogames, and so on, create and reinforce gender ideals and promote male and female stereotypes. Moreover, most of the entertaining products offered to children are based on storytelling. Stories—even if narrated and disseminated through different media—are part of children's, teenagers', and adults' life and, consequently, children's and adults' narrations can be considered most powerful tools in silently promoting specific gender roles (Lopez, 2017; Biemmi, 2012; Witt, 2001; Seveso, 2000).

4 Considering the depiction of gender identity in children's books, and specifically in picture books (Faeti, 1995), most international studies on the topic agree that girls and women are usually underrepresented and seldom portrayed as relevant characters or protagonists. By contrast boys and men are particularly common in works for children and are usually presented as active, powerful characters (Biemmi, 2012; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Accordingly, men and women are portrayed as opposite poles with fixed identities that cannot be confused, mixed or questioned. Consequently, family structures are influenced by gender standards, as heteronormative families with specific dynamics and corresponding parental roles are seldom deconstructed in books addressed to younger audiences (Trisicuzzi, 2018; Alston, 2012; Tucker, Gamble, 2001).

5 Thus, picture books for children often present specific gender and family models that silently shape young people's ideals of masculinity and femininity, and of fatherhood and motherhood. In such literature, these gender stereotypes are indirectly transmitted to the next generations (Sunderland, 2011). Books that partially deconstruct stereotypes and fixed models, offering non-heteronormative identities, roles, and family dynamics, are necessary in order to build an inclusive, complex collective imagination, where masculinity and femininity are not perceived as an unalterable dichotomy. Picturebooks should thus show multilayered identities that go beyond established gender canons (Ulivieri, 2014; Bishop, 1990; Beseghi, 1994).

### **Learning to be Fathers and Mothers**

6 Western societies are by now characterized by an openness to a plurality of family structures: not just nuclear, heterosexual families, but also single parents, divorced parents,

same-sex families<sup>1</sup>, adoptive families, and so on (Contini, 2007). In addition, family dynamics have widely changed in the last decades: when in the 20th century women started to work outside their homes, family dynamics slowly transformed. In particular, in the last decades of the 20th century, familial roles became more fluid, modifying the traditional opposition of what is perceived as “masculine” or “feminine” within certain limits (Gigli 57).

7 Parental models – both literary and real – encourage a specific perception of what is culturally adequate for a woman/mother and a man/father. Gender dynamics of family life affect children’s perception of masculinity and femininity. As they are perceived as unquestionable model to follow, parents have a strong influence on youngsters’ construction of identity and self-awareness (Riva, 2011). Parents represent the first model children experience and imitate: for this reason, their roles in family life create specific expectations. Accordingly, both real and literary parents can contribute to a change of gender norms offering new possibilities.

8 However, children’s literature appears to be particularly conventional in portraying parental identities. A comprehensive study on the topic was carried out by DeWitt, Cready and Steward (2013), who analysed the evolution of parental figures in picture books for children over the last five decades. According to the authors

Traditional roles that involve nurturance and caregiving from mothers and providing from fathers continue to dominate children’s literature. Since little significant variance was found between any of the mother and father role variables across time, traditional role performance remains the norm. Little boys learn that nurturing and caring for children are not masculine traits. And little girls continue to learn that the broom, not the scalpel, is a woman’s future tool for success. (DeWitt, Cready and Seward 101)

9 Several studies (Biemmi, 2012; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2002; Adams, Walker, & O’Connell, 2011) noticed that fathers and mothers are characterized by opposing actions and habits: fathers are portrayed as being in the workplace, working in the garden, fixing objects in the home, reading the newspaper or watching TV, while mothers are presented as cleaning the

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1 I prefer to use the general word “same-sex families” rather than focusing on the sexual orientation of the parents. Families composed of two members belonging to the same biological sex will be considered, while other non-heteronormative families (e. g. different-sex partners with non-heterosexual orientations or transgender identities) will not be part of the analysis for lack of material regarding family dynamics and parenthood.

house, cooking for the family, or taking care of the children. This distinction is highlighted by both the narrative texts and the pictures (Trisciuzzi 2017).

10 In this literature fathers are traditionally portrayed as breadwinners who are not directly involved in their children's education and, for this reason, often have a secondary role in the plot. In the few cases where fathers are represented while nurturing their children, they do it for a specific reason: the mother is ill or is working. Fathers' attempts to substitute the maternal figure in children's literature is usually (tragi)comic: they manage to somehow accomplish the necessary tasks, but they cannot do it as well as the mother would. They are depicted as largely inadequate, funny, not keen on domestic chores and educational activities. Vice versa, mothers are represented as naturally gifted at taking care of kids: they are strict but tender, and ready to sacrifice their own desires for their children's wellbeing (Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer 260-262). Thus, many books for young audiences reinforce the idea that mothers are more adequate to educate and take care of their children than fathers (Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer 260).

11 In 2005, David A. Anderson and Mykol Hamilton analyzed 200 picturebooks and discussed common stereotypes linked to parental figures. Employing a quantitative approach, they found that mothers are represented in 64% of the selected works, while fathers in 47,5%. Moreover, half of the books analysed present just a maternal figure, while only 27,5% showed a single-father: fathers are more absent than mothers in children's fiction (Anderson and Hamilton 147). This tendency contrasts with the general trend considering male and female portrayals in children's literature: female characters (girls in particular) are largely underrepresented, while male characters (boys in particular) figure centrally. However, if we consider parental figures, mothers are far more common than fathers. The study also focused on the display of affection and emotions, verifying that affection—and mostly physical affection—is still quite uncommon in portrayed fathers, who are mostly depicted as physically detached characters. Finally, the study shows that mothers take care of children twice as much as fathers, nurturing babies ten times more often than fathers.

With the exception of hugging babies and carrying older children, mothers in these books performed every measured nurturing behaviour at least twice as often as fathers, [...]. In support of the hypothesis that fathers would be relatively hands-off parents, there was no action that fathers performed significantly more often than mothers, and fathers were never seen kissing or feeding babies. (148)

The same results were found by Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer (262). Thus, mothers in picture books are still highly stereotyped and considered as keener in educating and taking care of their children, while fathers are still presented as absent or not involved in children's education and nurturing.

### **Modern Families, Non-Traditional Parenthoods**

12 In 1996, Louise B. Silverstein argued that the depiction of stereotyped paternal (and maternal) roles in children's literature could be overcome by an increasing focus on same-sex couples (Silverstein 24-25). Sociological research on the topic since the eighties suggests that same-sex parents adhere less to traditional role patterns (McPherson 1993; Trappolin & Tiano 2015; Scallen 1981). In same-sex couples, gender roles are more flexible and, consequently, parental roles tend to mix: house labour and children's education are equally divided between the partners (Kimmel 2011; Bigner & Jacobsen 1989). Same-sex couples are slowly revising stereotypical notions of fatherhood and motherhood (Giesler 2012). As research suggests new family structures lead to new family dynamics, and new family dynamics lead to innovative, fluid parental roles, changing long-lasting gender norms (Gigli 2007).

13 As society is opening up to non-heteronormative family models, in the last decades, children's literature has started to turn to non-canonical relationships and dynamics. Children who are part of non-canonical families (single parents, adoptive families, divorced families, same-sex families, and so on) need to be represented in children's fiction in order to recognize their own experiences. Picture books with same-sex families may offer a new, innovative approach to gender dynamics, challenging heteronormative concepts of femininity and masculinity.

14 Jane Sunderland and Mark McGlashan carried out important research on this issue: they analysed picture books written in English representing same-sex families. Their study shows that, on the one hand, these books are particularly 'modern' in depicting 'taboo topics', while, on the other hand, some stereotypes still persist. Through a comparative analysis of female and male same-sex families in picture books, the study demonstrates that women are still strongly linked to essentialising notions of motherhood, while this 'natural' connection is not offered in all-male families. Thus, fathers (mostly presented as two partners with children) are not primarily defined by their parental role. The word 'father' appears far less than the word 'mother' in these texts. While mothers tend to be presented as educators or nurturing figures, fathers are more often shown while playing with their children. However, fathers in these books

have to perform maternal roles as well, and are at times shown while cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes, and so on. These features are not usually presented in picturebooks depicting heteronormative family dynamics, where fathers are seldom represented in non-canonical roles.

15 Picture books can thus be useful tools by including different family models and gender identities, and thus offer a discussion of gender norms and parental patterns within familial contexts. Same-sex families in picture books present parental figures that —despite some recurrent, stereotyped structures— foster new familial paradigms. Maternal and paternal roles partially mix in order to create new, fluid characters who are not constrained by strict gender models. In particular, paternal figures are the ones most significantly reconfigured. In the remainder of this paper, I offer an analysis of case studies of picture books for children to exemplify the considerations offered so far.

### **An Analysis of Case Studies**

16 In what follows I briefly explore eight picture books, published between the years 1989 and 2015 with focus on same-sex families in order to understand which family and gender dynamics are presented by authors and illustrators through words and/or images. The analysis aims to give examples of the process of redefinition of parental and gender dynamics through a brief historical overview of the topic, from the Nineties to the present. The works were selected according to the following criteria:

- Picture books, as to say, books based on the cooperation of words and images in giving specific meanings to the storytelling;
- Contemporary picture books published in the last three decades;
- International books published in English;
- Books addressed to an audience between four to eight years of age;
- Books presenting male and female same-sex parenting, with a strong focus on parenthood and familial life.

17 All of the selected books could be labelled as ‘issue books’ since they explicitly present a simple plot that focuses on everyday life and potential problems of same-sex families, narrated from the child’s perspective and trying to normalize this reality: for this reason, they often select an overtly didactic approach, over-emphasizing the ‘problem’. The emphasis on

familial life in these texts enables an analysis of non-canonical approaches to parenthood ideals, and of the deconstruction of fixed norms related to fatherhood and motherhood.

18 The study does not claim to be comprehensive exhaustive, but rather intends to offer an overview of the strategies for redefining parental standards following different criteria of analysis based on some key principles relating to the representation of parental and gender roles:

- *Naming*: An analysis of how mothers and fathers are called by children and narrator will enable an assessment of naming as indicator of gendered differences in parental roles;
- *Affection*: The display of physical affection of same-sex parents between each other and towards their children in the selected picture books will be analysed
- *Household chores and familial tasks and activities*: The division of labour inside and outside the house will be investigated considering both domestic and educational aspects of familial activities.

***Heather Has Two Mommies [1989] (2016) by Lesléa Newman and illustrated by Laura Cornell***

19 This work was one of the first picture books to present same-sex families to a young audience. The first version of the book was published in 1989, but in 2016 a second version, with changed illustrations was published. The protagonist Heather has two mommies, called Mama Jane and Mama Kate. The book tells the story of the young girl's everyday life and her first day of school, when she faces some trouble because of her family structure. Considering family dynamics, Momma Jane is a carpenter: a 'non-traditional' job for women. In their spare time, Heather and her mommies play baseball in the park or, when it is raining, stay inside and bake cookies, blurring the line between stereotypical gender norms. Education is an important consideration of both mothers: Kate and Jane tell Heather she has to go to school and help her deal with her first day. Physical contact is common: Heather lays down with her mothers, who hold her in their arms. In some cases, they are depicted while holding hands – for example on the cover of the book –, and in a specific passage the text tells that the two moms kiss Heather before leaving her at school: “Soon it's time for Mama Jane and Mama Kate to leave. They kiss Heather goodbye, and Heather cries. But only a little” (n.p.). Physical affection is displayed thus equally by both mothers, and their roles are not presented as masculine vs. feminine, but rather attempt to offer a more gender 'neutral' approach.

***Asha's Mums* (1990) by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse, illustrated by Dawn Lee**

20 This book tells the story of Asha, an African-Canadian girl who also lives with two mothers. This 'controversial issue' work specifically focuses on problems related to growing up in a non-standard family. Asha has to face difficulties at school because her teacher cannot believe that she lives with two mothers. The girl risks not to go on a school trip because her permission form is signed by the women rather than by a mother and a father. Asha struggles to fit in with her class –some of her classmates are curious about her family– but her mothers manage to convince the teacher to reconsider his preconceptions. The cover of the book transmits a feeling of sadness since it shows the little protagonist looking worried, while the two mothers, who sit on the sofa reading, are relegated to the background. The mothers are usually called Sara and Alice by the narrator, and "mum" by the protagonist in the dialogues. Both of the women ironically define themselves as "mummy number one", mocking children's confusion about their roles within the family. Both wish to be 'number one', but they actually share household chores and responsibilities. Regarding physical affection, the two mothers kiss and hug the child, even if these episodes are described, but not visualized. Both mothers are represented in terms of typically maternal roles, with no reference to what is socially considered masculine/paternal behaviour: other roles they might perform do not emerge in the book.

***Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990)**

21 In this book, the young, nameless protagonist has to face his parents' divorce. After the separation, the father – called "Daddy" throughout the text – moves in with his partner Frank. The boy spends every weekend with Daddy and Frank, who organize fun activities for the protagonist, such as visiting the zoo, going to the beach, and so on. The two partners organize their work at home on equal terms: Frank cleans the house and cooks, while Daddy irons and takes care of his plants; they both play football with the boy and observe nature together. Both partners are portrayed while hugging the boy or with an arm around his shoulder. Throughout, the book presents their identities as fluid rather than restrictively gendered. By contrast, the boy's mother is depicted in stereotypically traditional terms: in one of the few pictures focussing on her, she is baking a cake in the kitchen, wearing a pink apron. Significantly however, it is the mother who takes on the task to explain to the child Daddy's and Frank's relationship and their sexual orientation. This choice denotes the mother's importance in dealing with 'delicate' issues and in educating her child, even when the topic discussed directly regards the father. The book clearly shows the persistence of the power of the maternal stereotype despite the reconfiguration of the father figure(s).

***And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, illustrated by Henry Cole**

22 This book has been one of the most criticized and at the same time most celebrated picturebooks about same-sex parenthood. It is based on the real-life story of the relationship between two male penguins, Roy and Silo, who lived together in New York's Central Park Zoo. The couple built a nest and tried to hatch stones as a substitute for eggs. When the zookeeper gave an abandoned egg to them, Tango came to life. While anthropomorphic animals are a common feature of books addressed to children, this picturebook prefers a non-anthropomorphic approach. As a consequence, animals are depicted without specific gender characteristics, but with realistic traits that relate to their natural appearance. Even if Roy and Silo are identified as male penguins verbally, they visually appear like all the other penguins of the zoo, without, at least for human readers, recognizable markers of sex. The cover of the book presents the physical affection in the family, as the three members are shown standing close together, Tango being happy to be with her fathers. Different forms of physical interaction recur throughout the book. The presented division of labour corresponds to real-life, as both male and female penguins do take turns to care of their eggs. Parental roles are not divided in terms of sex or gender, presenting an egalitarian division of responsibilities.

***In Our Mothers' House* (2009) by Patricia Polacco**

23 *In Our Mother's House* tells the story of how the protagonists' family came into being. Two women fall in love and adopt three children from different countries. The book describes their joy when meeting them for the first time, their everyday life as a family and the troubles they face as a same-sex family (e.g. in the neighbourhood). Beyond these concerns the book presents a larger circle of life showing the three siblings growing up, getting married and having children of their own, closing with the two mothers peacefully dying together. Although the two mothers are characterized by very different and to some extent even opposed personalities, both women mostly adhere to familiar gendered role patterns: Mina is a pediatrician who loves to cook, while Marnie is a paramedic who cleans the house and likes to organize everything. The two mothers are often shown while doing activities related to the house, such as washing, cleaning or sewing, while the most prominent outdoor activity – building a treehouse – is done with the help of the entire neighborhood. The mothers are called by their first names and are often depicted while showing affection to the three kids: they both hold the children in their arms, hugging and tickling them. The two women's roles are presented as interchangeable, but stereotypically maternal, without questioning implied gender norms.

***Daddy, Papa and Me and Mommy, Mama, and Me* by Lesléa Newman and Carol Thompson (2009)**

24 The two books present two androgynous nameless children and their family-life, told in pictures and rhymes. *Daddy, Papa and Me*, presents a young protagonist growing up with two fathers (called Daddy and Papa). On the very first page he/she is shown running toward them. The two fathers are depicted on the right side of the double spread page washing the dishes together after breakfast. Throughout the book, chores and educational responsibilities are equally divided: Daddy teaches the protagonist how to draw, while Papa bakes a cake; Daddy plays with him/her, while Papa builds paper airplanes; Daddy teaches him/her how to sew, while Papa plays football with the child. Physical contact is often highlighted: already on the cover, the two fathers are holding the little protagonist. In the book, the fathers are shown resting against each other or sitting close on the sofa. Thus stereotypical concepts of (paternal) masculinity give way to more fluid and multifaceted readings of fatherhood.

25 In *Mommy, Mama, and Me*, the protagonist is brought up by two mothers (called Mommy and Mama), who – as in *Daddy, Papa and Me* - are presented holding the child on the book's cover. Their affection is highlighted by verbal and visual references to hugging or kissing the child. Throughout the book the two mothers are involved in a variety of interactions with the child: Mommy cooks, prepares snacks, combs the protagonist's hair, teaches him/her how to count etc, while Mama rocks her/him in the chair, rides the child on her back, plays hide and seek, prepares a bath full of bubbles, or reads a book. Although these roles seem interchangeable and balanced between them, both mothers still conform to stereotypical notions of maternity as they are both represented in tasks which are considered typically female, without negotiating them.

***A Tale of Two Daddies and A Tale of Two Mommies* by Vanita Oelschlager and Kristin Blackwood (2013)**

26 The young protagonist, a little girl whose name is not mentioned in the text, presents her life with two fathers, called Poppa and Daddy. The girl has to answer a lot of questions by her friends, who are curious to understand her family dynamics. The friends wish to know more about familial and parental patterns in relation to notions of femininity and masculinity. In the book, the two parents are not directly depicted: readers can never see their faces as the illustrator decides to only illustrate their feet and their legs, adopting the child's perspective. Consequently, affection is not directly portrayed since the two adults are not fully represented, but are simply hinted through the depiction of their lower bodies. Gender division of labour is

equal and fluid: Poppa and Daddy do not have gendered preferences regarding education or spare time: they both do domestic chores, they both take care of the girl's health and they both want to have fun with her, as is shown verbally and visually. Although fathers are not entirely shown, we can see the little protagonist engaged in different activities with them. For instance, Poppa braids her hair and builds a treehouse, while Daddy kills insects and helps the girl when she cuts her knee. The book creates a rhythm alternating between supposedly "feminine" and "masculine" role patterns in order to suggest that gender roles are flexible and not necessarily linked to sex. This also applies to the presentation of the young protagonist, who plays football, and refuses to be totally cast in outdated notions of femininity.

27 A complementary book was published by the same author and illustrator, showing a female version of the parental couple. In this case, the young protagonist is a nameless little African-American boy living with two mothers, who – like his female counterpart - answers the questions of curious friends about his everyday life. Like their male counterparts the two mothers, who are called Momma and Mommy, are only shown partially, readers can only see their legs, sharing in the child's eye-level perspective. The book explains how the two mothers equally divide household chores and education between them: they cook, go fishing, fix objects, teach the boy how to ride a bike, fix things, and so on. Both mothers are presented showing affection to the boy. Like the fathers in *A Tale of Two Daddies* the mothers in *A Tale of Two Mommies* represent a flexible concept of motherhood. The boy, too, is presented as counteracting gender stereotypes, for example, when he is shown riding a pink bike.

***Stella Brings the Family* (2015), by Miriam B. Schiffer, illustrated by Holly Clifton Brown**

28 This picturebook focuses on Stella who lives with two fathers (called Daddy and Papa) and is worried when her school organizes a party for Mother's Day. Her fathers manage to help her to explain that a family is composed of people who love each other, regardless of sex. Thus, Stella brings all the family to the party, even her grandparents. Although most of the book is set at the school, some scenes describe family life at home. Parental dynamics are presented as fluid: the two fathers wash the dishes together; they both cook and educate the child. In addition, both parents hug and kiss the girl, particularly when she feels sad. Physical contact is explicit in the cover, too: the fathers and Stella are portrayed together, holding hands.

## Discussion

29 All of the books described so far present everyday life stories based on same-sex family dynamics. Most of the scenes presented in the books are set in familial contexts, but in addition the school is a recurring setting. The protagonists are mostly single children, only in one case siblings, who explain from a first-person narrative perspective or through the use of an external narrator's voice the dynamics within their families. Children are always the main focus of the narration.

30 In the books discussed, naming is a significant feature starting with the titles, where the characters are usually presented with reference to their parental roles, highlighting the specificity of the family structure. Parents are mostly called *momma*, *mummy*, *mum*, or *daddy*, *poppa*, *papa*, etc. However, in *Heather Has Two Mommies*, this is combined with their given name (Mama Jane and Mama Kate), while in *And Tango Makes Three* and in *In our Mothers' House* parents are called by their given names only (Roy and Silo, Marnie and Mina). So, parental figures are strongly linked to their roles, even if in some cases their personal identity is stressed through the use of their given names. Mothers seem to be more characterised as subjects through the use of their personal names rather than or in addition to their maternal roles, while fathers' names are usually not mentioned, except for anthropomorphic representations, focusing in this way on their parental duties more than on their subjectivity.

31 Affection is one of the central aspects highlighted in most of the books selected. All of the books present moments of physical affection, starting with the cover of the books, (except for *A Tale of Two Daddies* and *A Tale of Two Mummies*, where adults are not fully portrayed as they are represented through the depiction of their legs and their feet, with no hints about their faces). Generally, both parents seem to demonstrate the same amount of affection. Although fathers are usually 'distant' or largely absent figures in children's books (Adams, Walker, & O'Connell, 2011), in male same-sex family stories they are presented as caring, loving figures hugging and kissing their children. In these cases, fatherhood is reconsidered and reconceptualised offering a more caring, emotional portrayal.

32 As far as tasks and chores are considered, they are equally divided among parents in the selected texts: mothers and fathers perform a variety of different tasks with no particular stereotyped relation to gender roles. The books reject the representation of parental couples in terms of a gender binary, but rather mix diverse roles and features. Despite this change, there are still significant gender-related differences between books with male and female same-sex

parents. While books about two-dad families portray fathers performing traditionally female tasks (baking, sewing, washing the dishes, cleaning the house, educating or cuddling children), mothers in two-mom families are seldom linked to typically paternal roles. Mothers can be seen fishing or as a carpenter, but engagement in stereotypically ‘female’ actions for male parents is definitely more common than in stereotypically ‘male’ actions for female parents. Women are still perceived as natural caregivers (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012, p. 202), with authors and illustrators still struggling to represent them in a different light.

33 Earlier picture books on the same-sex parents still present more stereotypical roles, while more recent works tend to be more open to emphasizing the fluidity of parental dynamics. In this set of selected texts fatherhood was the first issue to be taken up critically: both *Daddy’s Roommate* and *Asha’s Moms* were published in 1990, but the two books are based on a different approach considering parental standards: the former partially deconstructs them and offers new possibilities considering gender and parental roles, the latter offers an overtly traditional representation of motherhood that does not propose new dynamics, but simply represent typical traits of motherhood in Western culture.

## **Conclusion**

34 Picture books for children which present non-heteronormative families contribute to including different family structures and identities into the collective imagination, but also function as a powerful tool in fostering new, fluid gender/parental role models that overcome limited concepts of masculinity and femininity. Same-sex parenting in picture books can serve to disrupt heteronormative family structures and parental gender norms, providing examples of a different division of tasks between parents.

35 Although there is a strong potential to re-conceptualise long-lasting gendered family patterns, these books focusing on same-sex parents still disclose decisive limitations with regard to changing notions of motherhood and fatherhood. While fathers are presented as deviating from the stereotype of the distant working dad, performing a supposedly maternal role, mothers are still linked to this maternal role as natural caregiver, struggling to redefine norms of femininity/motherhood.

36 To conclude, despite persisting stereotypes, this short analysis of eight picture books depicting same-sex parents, has shown the need for new parental models and gender relations.

In contemporary families, household chores are being distributed more and more flexibly, and “male” and “female” tasks and patterns of behaviour are increasingly interrelated and interchangeable. As picture books for very young children, the works discussed offer great potential to challenge stereotypical gender norms through their portrayal of non-traditional familial structures.

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**Seyran Ateş: *Selam, Frau Imamin. Wie ich in Berlin eine liberale  
Moschee gründete, Ullstein 2017.***

By Anja Wieden, Oakland University, USA

“Wo sind die Feministinnen? Warum gehen sie nicht auf die Straße?” (“Where are the feminists? Why don’t they take to the streets?”, my translation)

1 By asking these questions, Seyran Ateş publicly expressed her disappointment with the German Left in the popular Austrian political TV talk-show *Talk im Hangar 7*, titled *Ist der Islam noch zu retten? (Is it possible to save Islam?, my translation)* that aired in 2017. Ateş, a well-known human rights lawyer and female Imam, had recently founded the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque in Berlin, which is the only self-described ‘liberal’ mosque in Germany. It is important to add here that the adjective ‘liberal’ in reference to Islamic places of worship or Islamic movements is a rather vague description, given the fact that many Muslims claim this attribute for their specific religious orientation. Ateş’s definition of ‘liberal’ implies – based on her claims made in *Selam, Frau Imamin. Wie ich in Berlin eine liberale Moschee gründete (2017) (Selam, Mrs. Imam. How I Founded a Liberal Mosque in Berlin, my translation)* – that the Ibn-Rushd-Goethe mosque serves as a counter-model to a place of worship where women and man are strictly separated. Moreover, women are encouraged to lead prayers and head coverings are not mandatory. In the spirit of building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures, Ateş explains that the mosque is purposely named after medieval Andalusian-Arabic polymath Ibn Rushd and German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Both are representatives of, in many ways, avant-garde thinking in different times and cultures. People of all genders, sexual orientations and religious denominations are welcome to visit the mosque and partake in the ceremonies.

2 According to the *Spiegel*, immediately after its opening, various Muslim voices in opposition to the project ridiculed and even boycotted the place of worship due to the fact that women pray alongside of men (“Türkische Medien hetzen,” Popp and Reimann) (“Turkish media outlets stir up hate”, my translation). On account of Ateş’ promotion of an inclusive Islam, *Zeit Online* reported that she received bomb and death threats, leading

to permanent police protection of her person (“Polizeischutz für Gründerin der liberalen Moschee verstärkt”) (“Police Protection for the Founder of Liberal Mosque”).

Surprisingly, feminists did not – and still do not – stand up for Ateş in defense of her liberal project. Why this hesitation? Is Ateş’s enterprise to reform Islam too touchy of a subject, even for Leftist voices? While Ateş does not directly answer this question in her work, she gives enough food for thought as to why her reformist enterprise might rub many people the wrong way. As she explains in the opening chapters, the mosque is specifically committed to promote the message of Islam as an inherently peaceful religion while openly addressing uncomfortable and critical topics, such as Islamist terror groups who abuse Islam to further their thirst for political and social power. According to Ateş, the silent majority of Muslims do not identify with these powerful and politically active groups, who claim to speak for the entire Islamic community. It is her goal to mobilize Muslims to publicly distance themselves from political Islamic opportunists, whose violent actions have strategically spurred prejudices and Islamophobic sentiments against Muslims worldwide. This might be the reason why her seven-chapter book reads more like a call to political action than a mere description of her project. Although Ateş does not claim in her work that her ‘liberal’ understanding of Islam should be the status quo for modern-day Muslims, her positions on the necessity of re-interpreting Quranic passages through a contemporary/Western lens dominate the narrative. Hence, her work falls into a line of criticism like for instance Bassam Tibi’s vision of a Euro-Islam that favors a Kantian engagement with the religion.

3 While the book begins with the founding history of the mosque and ends with its opening, her overall work is interspersed with personal anecdotes, chapters on her religious beliefs, her assessment of Turkey’s authoritarian regime, and the author’s general views on rightwing and leftwing politics. This narrative style prominently features in chapter three, “One God,” for instance. Here, she gives the reader insight into her childhood and early adulthood. She states that her Muslim upbringing has never stood in opposition to the Christian religion Ateş experienced around her as a young girl. Ateş carefully carves out the divisive as well as unifying factors in both religions. Similarly to her previously published works, like *The Multicultural Mistake* (2007) and *Islam is in Need of a Sexual Revolution* (2009), Ateş personable narrative style enables the reader to identify her

weaknesses and strengths in analyzing political, historical and religious statements, which diversifies her overall account. She openly tells the reader who she is: a feminist, a former squatter, a leftist, and a critic of radicalised Islam. One of the most spiritual passages in the text is the description of her near-death experience. In 1984, the female Imam was shot by a Turkish radical in a counseling center for Muslim women. Surviving this attack not only bolstered the author in her faith, but also made her aware of the destructive forces that result from radicalism and that it was high time to shun, expose and bring these violent – and therefore un-Islamic – individuals to justice. In that sense, her mosque serves the purpose to educate both non-Muslims and Muslims on the rich history of an enlightened Islam; a vista of or on Islam that has been largely silenced in Western mainstream media in the twenty-first century.

5 In order to demonstrate how difficult her position is as an advocate of a ‘liberal’ Islam, Ateş also compellingly details her assessment of the yearly Islam Conference, first initiated by Germany’s Federal Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, in 2006. As an outspoken critic of mosque associations who enforce the headscarf for girls and promote gender apartheid, Ateş was a thorn in the eye for many Muslim representatives. Already in 2007, representatives like herself and Necla Kelec were excluded from the conference. The author calls this move to oust liberal Muslim voices – with the blessing of German politicians – a “death sentence” (48) for the Islam Conference<sup>1</sup>, as any actions taken or proclamations issued therein would exclude a large portion of valid albeit alternative voices. Her standpoints are reflected in contemporary political discourses. Both the author Güner Balci and the journalist Samuel Schirmbeck, for instance, see potential dangers in liberals’ misguided tolerance towards unconstitutional behavior of religious minorities within German borders.

6 Following the stream of liberal Quranic teachings and interpretations that Ateş favors in her work, in chapter 4, “Turkey and Germany – my two homelands”, she outlines the special role of Turkey with its omnipresent traces of state-enforced secularism and its recent transition to a form of government which re-introduces its version of Islamic values

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<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Ateş was invited again. It was the most heated Islam Conference to date, as conservative and liberal Muslims engaged in fierce altercations. See *Zeit Online*, Nov 29, 2018 <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2018-11/deutsche-islam-konferenz-islamverbaende-dtip-zentralrat-muslime>.

against the grain of long years of republican secularism. Ateş highlights how Erdoğan in his popular rhetoric against assimilation<sup>2</sup> discourages Turkish-Germans from assimilating into German society based upon their supposed religious superiority. When the Turkish government caught wind of Ateş's project to open a liberal mosque in Berlin, they targeted her with a well-planned smear campaign. Rumors were spread that the Ibn-Rushd-Goethe mosque was funded by the Gülen-movement. Ever since the summer of 2016, when Erdoğan's former ally, Fethullah Gülen, supposedly planned a coup against the leading government, any association with Gülen poses an immediate threat to an individual. Ateş distances herself from these unwarranted accusations that have put an end to her frequent travels to Turkey for the time being. Despite her critique of both Erdoğan and Gülen, who succeeded in destroying the secular Turkey that Ateş remembers, she acknowledges the dangers of laicism being enforced overnight. It should be added here that the author, a self-identifying devout Muslim, favors a secular government since it guarantees the religious freedom of everyone, including apostates and atheists.

7 Ateş's prose is straight-forward and therefore recommendable to a wide and diverse audience. For readers who are not familiar with the works of liberal Muslim advocates in Germany, I would suggest consulting the works, amongst others, of Mouhanad Khorchide and Bassam Tibi. Since *Selam, Mrs. Imam* particularly criticizes and distances itself from conservative mosque associations sponsored by DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) in Germany and Austria, it would be helpful to learn about their roles and founding history in Europe. Readers should always keep in mind that Ateş engages with Islam from a strictly feminist perspective. Her interpretations of Surahs are developed through a gendered lens with which other Islamic scholars might not agree, as the foregrounding of female figures might question cultural (not necessarily Islamic religious) traditions. For academic engagements with the text, it would be a revealing enterprise to consult the works of the anthropologist Esra Özyürek who is quite critical of the establishment of an enlightened Islam. In her 2015 work *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, she analyzes reformist voices that come out of the European/Kantian tradition as exclusive

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<sup>2</sup> See Erdoğan's multiple state visits to Germany, in which he demanded from Turkish migrants to not assimilate into German culture, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/erdogan-urges-turks-not-to-assimilate-you-are-part-of-germany-but-also-part-of-our-great-turkey-a-748070.html>.

forces that promote prejudices against cultural and immigrant Muslims. By comparing these opposite viewpoints, scholars of Islam will be able to experience a more diversified picture of the plurality of the Islamic religion that is practiced in Germany, and how Berlin's liberal mosque might be able to advance or inflame religious discourses.

**Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina. *Catching Teller Crow*. Allen and Unwin, 2018.**

By David Kern, University of Cologne, Germany

1 *Catching Teller Crow*, published in August 2018, is Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's first co-authored YA novel. As a sibling team, they have collaborated in the past on short novels and picture books, and this publication adds to their long-standing literary track record – delving deep into one of colonialism's darkest legacies: the stolen generations in Australia and the history of forced child removal.<sup>1</sup> "I'm not telling you what happened to ask for help", says Isobel Catching, one of the narrative's young adult protagonists, but "to be heard" (100), thus offering the novel's programmatic punch-line. Twenty-one years after the "Bringing them Home Report", which concluded the "National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families" (1997), *Catching Teller Crow* tackles the unfinished business of colonialism and offers a powerful story of strength, resilience and survival.

2 *Catching Teller Crow* is not the coming-of-age narrative one might expect, as the narrative strategically informs the coming-of-age theme with a highly political undercurrent: if, as is the case for the three teenage girl protagonists, coming of age means, ironically, to become able to overcome the trauma of abuse and death, to become able to 'move on' – where is the line between past and present? Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's work establishes a powerful narrative space between fantasy and/or speculative young adult fiction, and a literary call to keep alive the memory of Aboriginal children separated from their families and abused in mission schools and white foster homes during the stolen generations. Combining elements and conventions of fantasy, speculative, crime- and horror fiction, *Catching Teller Crow* foregrounds and centers around the multiple dimensions of 'unfinished business' in relation to Australian settler-colonialism and genocide against Indigenous peoples.

3 Beth Teller, the novels lead protagonist, died in a car accident aged 15, but has not moved on to the 'other side' but instead inhabits a place 'in-between' the world of the living and the dead.

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1 For in-depth reading about Indigenous child removal in Australia, please see the works of Anna Haebich (Curtin University, Perth), who has written extensively about the stolen generations and genocide in settler-colonial Australia: *For Their Own Good – Aborigines and Government in the South West of Western Australia 1900-1940* (first published 1988), *Broken Circles – Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (first published 2000), and *Dancing in Shadows – Histories of Nyungar Performance* (2018).

Indeed, the narrative challenges and transcends the clear-cut boundary between these two levels of existence and thus opens up a narrative space in which the spirits of the dead hang on to a world which they, like Beth Teller, are not yet ready to leave behind or, in the case of Isobel Catching and Crow, not ready to forgive. As a ghost or spirit being, Beth follows her father – police detective Teller, who is investigating the consecutive deaths of three men running a children’s home that mysteriously burned down in remote and rural Australia. The investigation reveals a history of organized child abuse under the very eyes of a complicit local chief of police, and the uncovering of the home’s dark history which provides the starting point of a healing process outside of and far beyond the text: “It’s the beginning that hasn’t happened yet” (188). The deep roots of systematic abuses of power targeting Aboriginal children remain yet to be unearthed and a ‘reconciliation’ of the past, a potential beginning of a decolonized future, has yet to happen. The ‘closure’ of one particular story, the narrative suggests, is just the beginning of a much bigger project of healing and acknowledging the many other stories that are still hidden from view.

4 *Catching Teller Crow* merges elements of narrative prose and poetry, and blurs the line between the present and the past as Beth Teller and her father listen to Isobel Catching’s account of being captured, held hostage in a tunnel system under the home, being abused and, finally, being able to escape. The merging and blending of perspectives, as well as of forms and modes of narration, is the novel’s primary strategy to craft a powerful and politically charged story of trauma without, however, running the risk of traumatizing its young adult readers or sanitizing the issue of abuse. Rather, a strong sense of resilience and resistance against ongoing forms of victimization are characteristic of Catching’s accounts, offered in free verse poetry which is densely metaphoric and rich in symbolism: “The Feed is large. White. Thin. .../ He bends to inspect me. .../ The Feed grabs my wrist. Drags me across the room...Long fingers dig into my skull.../As if I’m bleeding rainbows. He *eats what’s* inside *our insides*.../ ‘This grey is yours’ I say. ‘My colours are mine. I’m not carrying your shame for what you did. Only my pride. For surviving you.’” (110, 168). Expressing experiences in poetry in this narrative, functions to ‘visualize’ the fracture and shock caused by pain and abuse, achieving a visual language which is able to express and narrativize violence without resort to ‘sensationalism’. Isobel Catching’s free-verse poetry is a function of her expressive autonomy and display of sovereign agency. Her words, like her colors, are her’s.

5 Significantly, *Catching Teller Crow* stresses that storytelling matters deeply, and that narrative can be a key to healing and thus a means to survive. In captivity, Isobel Catching recounts

the names and stories of her ancestors, holding on to a long family line of strong Aboriginal women who survived colonization, acknowledging the power of imagination harnessed in words: “When I was in the beneath-place”, says Isobel, “it was stories that got me through. Stories had brought me home” (147).

6 The diversification of the field of YA literature is a gradually emerging process, as new texts are beginning to capture the spectrum of diversity that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet the representation and *celebration* of diversity in texts for young adults remains largely unfulfilled within the YA literary market. Navigating past and ongoing injustice and coming to terms with issues like, in this case, the stolen generations in Australia, remains a vital future task for literature for young adults.

7 It is in this precarious context of absences, blind-spots and silences that *Catching Teller Crow* hits home and impacts in the cultural landscape of Australian YA literature and fantasy/speculative fiction more broadly. Its vital contribution in foregrounding the power, resilience, love, strength and compassion of three Aboriginal teenage girls is the call to never forget the atrocities of colonialism, and racist Indigenous policies in Australia, and to celebrate the resilience of the oldest living culture on planet earth. The year 2018 marked the conclusion of the World War I centenary – Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina’s YA novel, published in the same year, offers a lasting “lest we forget!” to the commemoration and celebration of Indigenous children, teenagers and young adults.

## List of Contributors

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