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Sh-h-h: Representations of Perpetrators of Sexual Child Abuse in Picture Books

This paper, which covers dangerous and emotive terrain, explores how the perpetrators of child abuse are presented in narrative picture books with sexual child abuse as a central theme. This examination of these books is interested not only in how these perpetrators are presented in image and print, but also in what is not presented – the absences and invisibilities. It is especially interested in the meanings that may be made based on the common understandings in these texts about what a dangerous adult looks and acts like. Together the eight texts examined provide a picture of current normalised, taken-for-granted discourses of sexual child abuse, discourses that include healing, disclosure as an end-point, and a marked hesitance to address such key taboos as familial abuse, race and social class, the physical effects of child abuse on the child, and the lived and complicated consequences of telling. Thus this paper hopes to begin a discussion of how the readers of children's books about child abuse (both children and adults) are positioned to accept ideological stances that specifically represent our time and place.

These eight texts are representative of what Jacki Stallcup (2002, p.125) calls “fear-alleviating books”; explicit attempts at bibliotherapy, designed to help children, psychologically and emotionally, by demonstrating how young characters overcome frightening situations.” As Stallcup writes, they engage in a complex discourse that both tells children they have nothing to fear whilst at the same time representing some very real dangers. While she, like Metcalf and Meyer (1992) reminds us that *much* children's' fiction deals with abuse and neglect in one way or another, Stallcup posits

that these books often take an ideological stance towards danger that may inadvertently deny the child of agency by telling only a partial story.

Out of the sixty-odd books about sexual child abuse funded by a philanthropic grant, eight picture books were selected that take a narrative approach to informing children about child abuse. Six of these are written as fiction and two of them as autobiographies, written by adult authors who were themselves abused as children. These eight books are also unique in that they describe the perpetrators of abuse in both written description and depicted in illustrations. Whereas most picture books about sexual child abuse are didactic, cautionary, and are often about ‘saying no’, these tell *stories* to make their points. Though their aesthetic, literary merit may be dubious this is not generally their main objective. This raises another issue, that of the literary-didactic split’ (Nikolajeva, 2005, p.xii) . Though it is possible that ‘better written’ literature might be more likely to have greater impact, this is not the main focus of this study. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that others, such as Smith-D’Arezzo and Thompson (2006) in their study of depictions of stress and abuse in children’s picture books (including sexual abuse) have attempted to distinguish compelling and poignant books with literary merit from those that were didactic, contrived, one-dimensional, without plot and lacking literary merit. The former, they concluded, were better used by teachers and the latter by skilled counsellors or therapists. For now, aesthetics aside, the texts examined here are treated as equals – all having, potentially, equal impact.

The eight texts discussed in this paper are:

Jessie (1991). Please Tell! A Child's Story About Sexual Abuse. Center City, Maryland, Hazelden.

- Kleven, S. (1997). The Right Touch. Bellevue, Washington, Illumination Arts.
- Kupfer, S. (2005). Sarah's Secret, NooBee Publishing.
- Ledwon, P. and M. Mets (2006). Mia's Secret. Toronto, Canada, Tundra Books.
- Patterson, S. and J. Feldman (2003). NoNo The Little Seal. Bendigo, Australia, St. Luke's Innovative Resources.
- Porett, J. (1993). When I Was Little Like You. Washington, DC, Child Welfare League of America.
- Sanford, D. (1986). I Can't Talk About It. Portland, Oregon, Multnomah Press
- Wachter, O. (2002). No More Secrets for Me. New York, NY, Little, Brown and Company.

One more point before prior to the analysis of these eight books. Any discussion of sexual child abuse, especially one that concentrates on the sacred terrain of children's picture books, must do so alert to the fact that it is entering dangerous, emotive territory. As Erica Burman (2008, p.93) reminds us, "...even before we move to take account of the more metaphorical and rhetorical appeals to childhood, we are into affective domains that are highly politicised and highly emotionally charged." These books are all well-meaning in intent, and they have the best interests of vulnerable children at their heart. That children are vulnerable is central to these books, and to suggest they may unwittingly present worrisome, even questionable representations may seem uncharitable. On the other hand an unpacking of how the literary strategies within these books mobilise certain subjectivities, positioning readers to understand both perpetrators and victims is crucial to understanding their effect.

This analysis is informed in the beginning by current information on the common characteristics of perpetrators, and by Kinnear's (2007) definition of sexual child abuse as including the elements of exploitation of the child; use of coercion; and some level of gratification gained by the adults (p.1). Most definitions agree that offenders are generally motivated by power (Sgroi 1982). Though not an expert on sexual child abuse, it seemed important to know some of the more commonly accepted research in

order to see which understandings are taken up in the picture books, and even more significantly, to notice when what is known (or believed) to be ‘true’ is glossed over, absent or missing from these texts.

For instance, in the majority of child abuse cases, the parent (generally the father) is the offender, yet only one of the eight texts, Sanford’s lyrical *I Can’t Talk About It*, names a father. It does so, too, in a powerful way. The little girl Annie, seemingly around 7 or eight, is befriended by a dove at the beach, and confides in this dove, whose name is Love, “Sometimes Mommy is at home at night when Daddy comes to my room. WHY DOESN’T SHE STOP HIM?” (np). This text, the oldest of the selection (published in 1988) and the most overtly Christian, is the only one where the father is the offender. It is also the only one of the texts not to situate the abused child in an otherwise loving family.

It seems, despite a common awareness that much abuse is enacted by fathers, that this is largely taboo in books for children themselves.

Representations of perpetrators: Illustrations

However, of the eight selected texts, only Sanford’s does not include an illustration of the offender. Acknowledging that a child can be hurt by a father is one thing, showing him is clearly another. This section of the paper now discusses the illustrated representations of offenders present in each of the other seven books, beginning with some comment on how hands, in many of these books, come to signify menace. In Poret’s *When I was Little Like You*, which is written in first person by the author who had herself been abused as a child, a central illustration presents a faceless man

peering down at a young girl saying “Sh-h-h” (np). His pointer finger is disproportionately large as he holds it up to his lips. The distinction between good and bad secrets is a central theme in the books, and the finger here is a common signifier. This same signification is utilised in *No-No the Little Seal*. Again, in the pivotal scene where “Uncle Seal did not stop touching no-No and he began to touch him in private places – places where NoNo did not want to be touched (np) Uncle Seal emphasises their “special secret. We must not tell anyone. Anyone”. On the illustration on the facing page, Uncle Seal takes up the entire page holding his fingers to his lips, with NoNo crooked in his arm, looking terrified, his image which spills over onto the next page. Unlike the perpetrator in *When I was Little Like You*, who has no eyes at all, in this illustration Uncle Seal gazes directly at Nono, who looks back. The impact of this gaze makes Nono appear much more vulnerable than the girl in the first book. Similarly vulnerable is the young girl in Ledwon & Mets’ *Mia’s Secret* – here the secret becomes a promise. The nameless man (and this is *almost* always the case) is a friend of Mia’s mother. When Mia says she’ll tell her mum, he reminds her “You promised...Bad things happen when someone breaks a promise” (np). Here the illustration shows a similarly oversized man. Framed as a close-up, the reader gazes up at the two of them as though we’re taking a shot from below, so that the man appears foregrounded and proportionately much larger than Mia, as does his hand this time grabbing Mia on the wrist. The fingers here are not signifying secrets but force. This signification is exaggerated most of all in Kupfer’s *Sarah’s Secret* where, again on the most disturbing of the pages we see only a very large though surprisingly graceful hand reaching out in our field of vision. Underneath it the print reads, “She felt sad on the inside and yukky and sick. She liked John when he cared, but she did not like this” (np) In an example of ambivalence that only very few of the books

approach, John's hand has potential for both good and bad. Here the hand is seen at 'close personal distance' (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p.32), huge and dominating and potentially the most frightening of all, disembodied, reaching out on its own.

These disembodied hands and faceless perpetrators pose an ideological problem. As literary strategies, they are profoundly effective. The dehumanisation of the perpetrator has impact on the reader. On the other hand, a faceless perpetrator manages to retain his anonymity, something the books purport to change. As disclosure is the main game in these texts, refusing to name the offenders helps maintain his privacy while the children, always shown and almost always named are themselves outed. The only three texts to name the offenders are *Mia's Secret* ("a man named John" [np]), *Nono* (Uncle Seal) and the offenders in the three short stories in Wachter's *No More Secrets for Me*.

The visual images in several of the texts merit specific discussion. *NoNo* depicts its main characters as animals rather than humans, a literary device not uncommon to picture books about child abuse. Stallcup (2002, p.138) explains that animal figures are often believed to be safer than humans to represent dangerous characters in children's fiction, and also that 'conquering the monster' has historical precedent in children's literature, "a model of resistance to adult power". Animals are both once removed from a reader, so that she may distance herself from personal fear; they also signify the most primitive, base aspects of humanity, though a seal is an unusual choice. More common, the autobiographical *Please Tell* illustrates the four year old girl's uncle/godfather as half man/half monkey. Drawn crudely in black and brown crayon, as though by the four year old herself, the uncle is huge, filling the space of

the entire page. He glares straight at the reader, black gash of a mouth in a gaping frown. Most notably, his ears are set at the side of his head, like a monkey. The accompanying text reads, “He had an evil smile. It seemed like his eyes almost turned red” (np). By turning her abuser into a red-eyed monster, the author Jessie makes him fiendish and evil, while at the same time, slightly foolish. Interestingly, media depictions of those who sexually abuse children often include the term monster exemplifying the heinousness of the act. The picture books examined in this study run the gamut between portraying child abusers as familiar, and representing them as potentially anyone, even monsters (Lampert & Walsh 2010)

Though none of the texts named here are explicitly graphic, they vary in their directness. More metaphoric than the other texts, Kleven’s *The Right Touch* is possible the most disturbing. The illustrations do include children’s naked bodies, but more significantly a young girl’s fearful story of the man who “‘tried to put his hand down her panties”’ (p. 12). This is in contrast to *Sarah’s Secret*, where Sarah is touched in “‘places that made her feel sick”’ (p. 9), with those places left unspecified and vague. Significantly, when explicit use of anatomical terms *are* used, it is nowhere near as confrontational as it is in the texts wherein explicit description is replaced by metaphor. For example, in Kleven’s book, *The Right Touch*, Jimmy’s mother has a heart to heart talk with her son while tucking him into bed. Jimmy’s mother asks, “‘Have you ever been tricked?”’ “‘HmMMM,” Jimmy wondered. “‘Do you mean like when someone says ‘Open your mouth and close your eyes, and you will get a big surprise’ and the surprise is a worm?”’(p. 8). Later in the same book the mother recounts a story about a man who says to a little girl “‘If you sit on my lap, I’ll show you the kittens”’ (p. 12) whereupon he puts his hand down her panties.

The fact that this book is both explicit *and* metaphoric gives it powerful and uncomfortable impact. Though the dust jacket describes this treatment of a “very difficult topic” as “gentle and thoughtful,” with “delightful illustrations,” it is especially graphic and unsettling. The benign looking offender, with his woolly jumper and red sneakers with shoelaces childishly untied seems as harmless as the tiny blond girl who stands at his feet looking up at him. Behind them both are the kittens, made terrifying through the text. Here depicted NOT as a monster but as a kindly familiar neighbour, this ‘monster’ is more frightening than the one stereotypically drawn as a beast.

Taboos: Race, social class

This paper now moves on to discuss the raced representations of cultural identities within these eight books. Despite recent reports such as the Australian *Little Children are Sacred* report (2007) which focussed on Aboriginal communities, child abuse can, of course, affect anyone no matter their cultural background or social class. There is no question of that. It is difficult, though, to ignore the distinct whiteness of the characters in these eight texts. In these books, aspects of ‘diversity’ are managed through erasure. Of these eight books, only one story in the collection *I Can’t Talk About It* depicts a black offender. ‘Talking Helps’ tells a story of a boy Darryl and his babysitter, who appears to be a young woman of colour. Indeed in the entire collection of picture books about sexual child abuse, which number about 60, very few include illustrations of any characters at all who are explicitly other than White. So should there be more representation of colour in these texts? Generally we would say yes – children’s literature should represent cultural diversity. Criteria for child protection measures all include teaching children that perpetrators can be older

children or adults of any age, size, race, ability, or gender. How ethnicity is represented in picture books about child sexual abuse is both significant and contentious. Authors and illustrators of picture books about child sexual abuse walk a fine line between accurately representing a variety of ethnicities and cultures in their text and illustrations, and avoiding the terrible stereotypes that might inaccurately over-represent people of colour as perpetrators or victims of child sexual abuse. Similarly, though harder to pick, social class is also invisible, and most of the families represented wear the markers of middle class: Mia's house, in *Mia's Secret*, is scattered with toys which she spreads out on polished wooden floors. Sarah and her brother Tom, in *Sarah's Secret* live in a neighbourhood where "They all went to town and had fun when they shopped". In *When I was Little Like You* the protagonist Elizabeth is portrayed standing by a swimming pool and Jimmy's family in *The Right Touch* live in a large suburban two story house. Though not as obvious as race, these are in some ways very middle class texts.

Taboos: physical effects of child abuse

The third taboo of child abuse, if these picture books are representative, is the physical effect of child abuse. Though each of the texts explores, implicitly or explicitly, the emotional effects of abuse – confusion, fear, anger, hurt – not one of them deal directly with the physicality of the abuse. In fact, in seven of the eight texts the reader is presented with near misses. In *The Right Touch* the man "tried" to put his hand down her panties, but "the little girl ran out of there as fast as she could" (np). *Mia's Secret* and *Sarah's Secret* do both refer to inappropriate behaviour disguised as play, but it isn't specifically identified. In *Sarah's Secret*, "John made Sarah play games she wished would end" (8), and Mia, in *Mia's Secret* is confused by the

friends' "secret game". "Mia was very mixed up...The secret game made him happy but it hurt her". In each of these cases the main effect of abuse is psychological confusion more than physical violation, which seems too hard for the authors of these children's texts to discuss.

Only the two autobiographical books write about abuse as having taken place rather than having been escaped. Jessie explains, "He made me do things I didn't want to do at all! He hurt my arms and legs and places that are private on my body." (np). Nicky's mom, in *No More Secrets* tells her daughter, "I'm glad you had the gumption to tell him no and get out of there." (p. 24). *I Can't Talk About It* delivers a victim who did not get away. With grief-stricken honesty, Annie tells the dove,

You are all white and clean.

If you really knew me

You wouldn't like me

Because I am dirty

Daddy said so

And he's right.

Something is terribly wrong with me

That other children don't have wrong with them

The dove replies,

Little One

Precious Annie

You feel guilty not just because of what

Your daddy has done to you

But because you sometimes enjoyed the special attention.

It's not your fault

You are a child

Of COURSE you want your daddy's approval

But you didn't want to be HURT. (np)

The 'hurt' referred to here seems to encompass physical hurt in ways the other texts shy away from.

Descriptions of offenders: traits, relationships, motivations

Similarly, reflecting another taboo, there is little explanation at all in these texts of the offender's motivation, if any. The child may have a relationship with the offender – *When I was Little Like You* lists, “an older boy or girl, a man, or a woman. someone you love, like a daddy, a mommy, an aunt, a brother, a baby-sitter, or a friend of the family” (Porett, np.) but there's nothing to explain *why* “he touched my private parts and made me touch his” (Porett np). Nothing explains the puzzle games (*Mia's Secret*), the touching in private places (*NoNo*), the touching “in places that made [Sarah] feel sick (Kupfer, p.9) or even the terribly disturbing bedtime story the mother tells her son Jimmy in *The Right Touch* about the man in *The Right Touch* who tells the little girl, “if you sit on my lap, I'll show you the kittens.” In this text, Jimmy is simply told the “little girl got an uncomfortable feeling. She was about to go home when the man tried to put his hand down her panties” (np). In fact, Jimmy does ask “Why would somebody want to do that to a little kid, Mom?” but his mother has no

satisfactory answer: “I don’t know, honey...I just know that it does happen sometimes.” (np) It may be that motivations for sexual child abuse are not well understood, or that the offender’s motivation is not believed to be the concern of the child, but surely it is frightening that terrible things can happen for no apparent reason at all – power, illness, alcohol...none of these are evident in the books. The risks are real – no question – but surely the thought that anyone at any time might, for no reason, be a sexual offender escalates the ‘panic’ Beck (2007) identifies as key features of our times.

Problematic closures

Finally, this paper briefly turns to textual closure, or more specifically the privileging of *disclosure* as an end point in the texts. In accordance with normalised discourses around sexual child abuse, and in an age of American self-help each of the books here ends with the child ‘telling her secret’ , at which point like Maureen in *No More Secrets for Me*, they feel better (p. 46). They may finally share their secret, show a therapist what happened with dolls, as in *Please Tell!* And *Mia’s Secret*, or seek counsel as Annie does from the dove, who tells her, “When you are ready, Little One. When you are ready, I will listen” (Sanford, np). Sarah, in *Sarah’s Secret*, demonstrates one of the gaps in the texts, ending with the lines, “If you have a secret that someone’s hurting you, Tell some grown ups you trust. They will know what to do. Be brave and tell someone. You can do it. You’re great. Tell someone right now; there is no need to wait” (pp. 30-31). The smiling blond Sarah is shown in the accompanying illustrations playing in a park, relieved of her burden. But there’s nothing to tell Sarah how to tell which adults are trustworthy. Though some of the books, such as *No More Secrets For Me* and *The Right Touch* explain that the

offender, once identified, will get into “big trouble” (*The Right Touch*, np) Annie in *I Don't Want to Talk About It* does initially encounter disbelief from her mother, and the autobiographical Jessie does recount that she still has terrible memories and nightmares, but for the most part simply telling is the end of the story, happy endings which, according to McDaniel (2001, p.214) require no hard work and according to Dresang (1997, p.134), provide closures in which “the danger ends and homeostasis returns”. These books may provide hope, but it’s debatable how far they go in promoting agency.

Conclusion

There’s much more to be written about these texts. The common elements of these representations may increase our understanding of how ideas about abuse come to be normalized and to identify potential misreadings. In particular, this paper has specifically addressed the make-up of offenders within these texts, which might reflect, rightly or wrongly, common beliefs about which individuals and communities are most likely to be abusive and its effects on children who are victims.

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