



Vol. 2, No. 2, 2014

Lucie Jarkovská

Masaryk University (Czech Republic)

Children's literature and the politics of gender*

ABSTRACT. The article discusses children's literature as a matter that can become highly politicized. While often viewed as apolitical, stories for children have always been subjected to hegemonic ideologies and mediated dominant norms. The analysis focuses on gender dimension of this normativity and shows that the attempts to create gender subversive stories for children have to face not only the conservative backlash but they also have to deal with wider cultural context and contemporary meanings of childhood. The last section of the article shows that no matter how gender balanced or stereotypical a story is, the interpretation lies with children themselves. Thus, researchers analyzing messages in children's stories always have to take into account young readers and their diverse ways of understanding.

KEYWORDS: children's literature, gender, gender subversion, innocence, sexuality

As any other form of art, children's literature is a product of its time; it reflects contemporary thought and general ideals, as well as specific ideals of scientific disciplines such as psychology or pedagogy. The plurality of lifestyles brings the plurality in the subjects of children's literature. And thus, the field of children's literature is marked by political and ideological conflicts that stir the society. Parents who read and tell stories to their children want to communicate to them a worldview to which they can commit. For some parents, it is enough if the stories correspond to the basic moral principles, but others can be sensitive to seeming details that do not correspond to the ideals they want to live to. This internal conflict with mainstream stories for children is experienced e.g. by vegetarians, who mind how matter of course it is for story characters to eat meat; by environmentalists, who need not agree with the exploitation of nature or adoration of the world of machines and means of transport that get anthropomorphized and equaled to humans

* This work was supported by Czech Science Foundation under Grant Educational Strategies of Migrants and Ethnic Minority Youth [grant number P404-12-1487].

(remember the films *Cars* or *Plances*); or by some religious groups (c.f. the Christian critique of *Harry Potter* for occult and Satanist features). Mainstream children's literature is criticized for reproducing hegemonic structures, raising children into modernist-capitalist subjects focused on performance and rewarded by consumption. Part of this critique concerns also the reproduction of social inequalities related to the categories of gender and ethnicity. This article aims to discuss the relations of children's literature to gender and politics.

Gender and children's stories

Childhood gets often connected to the world of fantasy and fairy tales. Fairy tales are stories with magical motives that show an idealized world in which good triumphs over evil and justice always wins. Frequently, social inequalities are overcome. The borders of class are transgressed (a villager marries a princess), there is a remarkable social mobility (a poor girl becomes queen) and wealth inequalities are balanced (a poor person can find a treasure, leaves turn into gold), or sometimes wealth turns against the wealthy (they end up imprisoned in treasure caves, or lack basic food, like salt, etc.). Other inequalities, however, remain unchanged, and gender inequalities are among these.

Since 1970s, gender analyses of children's literature have been pointing that the literature for children reflects gender structure of society and helps to reproduce it (e.g. Dixon, 1977; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Jackson & Gee, 2005; Pace Nilsen, 1971; Weitzman et al., 1972; Zipes, 1986). In addition to the fact that male and female characters show stereotypical gender features, there is a significantly lower number of female characters and almost always their stories involve heterosexual plots, while stories of male characters can function without any relations to the opposite sex. Moreover, the author team McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, who analyzed almost 6000 titles of American production since the beginning of 20th century, have illustrated that the shift towards gender equality has been uneven, non-linear and closely tied to the level of feminist activism or anti-feminist backlash (2011).

As Judith Butler shows, gender and the ways in which we are recognized as men or women, stem from the (hetero)sexual framework of our culture (2003). Heterosexual relations represent certain fundamental grid that forms the structure of society. This is clearly obvious in children's tales where a heterosexual relationship between the hero and the heroine

is the drive motor of the story. These stories are not only heteronormative; they also present very narrow gender norms. That is to say, the heterosexual couples that inhabit fairy tales usually demonstrate indispensable normative traits: the male hero is valiant, inventive, and strong, while the female heroine has to be beautiful in the first place, and it is also considered appropriate when she is hard-working, kind, and humble—and when she is not, then she should reform herself and become like that. The male character is an active human subject, while the female character often finds herself in the role of an object that for example a king can donate to a prince for killing a dragon. Children's tales thus contribute to the fact that children who do not correspond to gender norms—e.g. those who are or will be attracted to same-sex persons—will see the culture they are born into as strange, and they can feel lonely and unwelcome. Children, who conform to heterosexual norms, only confirm that otherness is strange, dangerous and despicable. It is difficult to come up with educational programs promoting tolerance and diversity, when the environment children meet with both at school and outside of it, acts as a cultural monolith with a uniform image of the right life, not open to other variants.

Even if children's tales suffer from the under-representation of women, stereotypes about women as well as men, and heteronormativity, there is a production that strives to un-follow these literary patterns. From 19th century, we can see a specific category of books with a strong heroine defying the gender norms, such as *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, or *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren. Hopes and desires of many young girls have been set on these heroines and similar characters, as these girls have not been content with the ideal of a languid waiting princess.

Contemporary children's literature offers also other types of heroines and heroes transgressing gender norms. It is populated by boys who want dolls (*William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow, 1976) or who want to dance (*Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie de Paola, 1979), by transgender children (*10 000 Dresses* by Marcuse Evert, 2008), or same-sex couples (*King and King* by Linda de Haan, 2001). The authors of these books attempt at the subversion of dominant gender structures and/or try to reflect their own experience or the experience of children whom they know e.g. from stories of homoparental families (*Jura a Lama* by Markéta Pilátová, 2012; *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, 2005). The literature that is created intentionally strives to subvert the gender orders; however, this literature is not only a contribution to larger offer by demand, but—as we will see later—it becomes the object of political disputes.

Children stories as a political matter

Children's literature is not an apolitical genre standing outside of the wider societal debate—which can be proved by disputes running for more than a hundred years. At the beginning of 20th century, a Swedish teacher was punished by a school board in Skanör for reading loud from the book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (*Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige / Nils Holgersson's wonderful journey across Sweden*). The author of this book was the later Nobel prize winner Selma Lagerlöf, who wrote this book on demand from the Swedish National Teachers Association. After they had ordered a geographic reader for public schools in 1902, Lagerlöf created a readable text that children liked. Not so much the church authorities that held power also in the school institution and that disapproved of some parts of the book, such as the chapter dealing with "how it happened that our Lord and Saint Peter created Småland" (Strömstedt, 2006). Some fifty years later, a stormy debate was started with the publication of another Swedish author's book—*Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren. Her book became criticized for offering a bad example that children would follow. Pippi as a literary heroine is untidy, cheeky, and has no respect for social order that parents, educators and teachers have such a hard time to imprint into children. Lindgren, however, is an author who has been criticized from many different camps. Besides the conservatives, she had struggled later, in 1970s and 1980s, with the critique by the neo-Marxists (Strömstedt, 2006).

Similar controversies are aroused by books that do not copy the long-term gender codes. And some cases show that these do not have to be programmatically feminist or activist literature. In Slovakia, a textbook called *Hups' Spelling-book* (2013) was published, in which the main character was a gender-less person Hups. Hups was neither a woman, nor man, and this was seen by the conservative Catholic circles as a dangerous implant of gender ideology threatening the social order. Part of the critique involved the aversion to a story of a little boy who is growing up fatherless, and later his mother marries their neighbor and he gets a new father. The Catholic Church perceived this story as undermining the traditional family, and based on their critique, the minister of education decided that the text must be removed from the spelling-book. Hups can (for the time being) stay.

Another tempestuous debate was inspired by the TV series *Teletubbies* intended for the youngest children, in which we find the character

Tinky Winky. In 1999, US pastor Jerry Falwell criticized this character, because he could see Tinky Winky as a gay role model—the character is violet (a color representing gay pride), has a triangle antenna (i.e. pride symbol) and moreover, carries a red bag that looks rather like a ladies bag. According to Falwell, “the role modelling the gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of children.” A similar debate sparked in 2007 in Poland, where the Ombudsman for Children Ewa Sowińska demanded that the character is examined by psychologists of their office in an apprehension that Tinky Winky might endanger children's development by seeming promoting homosexuality. Already during the US debates over Tinky Winky, Kim Viselman from Itsy-Bitsy Entertainment that was in charge of the series distribution in the USA, said that Tinky Winky was neither gay, nor straight. Sexuality was not supposed to be represented, and still it was, coded by apparently non-sexual signifiers like a bag or violet color. It might not have been intended by the authors, yet the viewers (mainly those who were vigilant of the intruders against the gender system) found it in between the lines.

Tinky Winky's case reveals the anatomy of relation between gender and sexuality in Butler's meaning of the words. According to Butler, gender system is legitimized by heterosexual matrix, and only those individuals can be socially acceptable, whose sex-gender-desire triad is constant and stable (Butler 1990). In case Tinky Winky is a boy, who walks around equipped not with a gun, but with a magic hand-bag, this triad is disrupted and the defenders of gender order find it easier to put this sign in harmony with desire. It is much more easier than admit that a heterosexual man walks around with a hand-bag. This would have been a more dangerous threat to the gender order.

Homosexuality in children's tales is often rejected even by relatively tolerant public, and this is because it seems to visualize sexuality more than heterosexuality does. It can be assumed that Tinky Winky was regarded as a more sexualized character than a prince kissing a princess. For the very same reasons, stories of homoparental families can annoy some people.

The first title in which a homoparental family appears was *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (1981 in Danish, 1983 in English) by a Danish author Susanne Bösche. The book composed of black-and-white photographs pictures the life of a five-year old Jenny, who lives with her dad and his boyfriend. Her mother lives not far away and often comes to visit. The book captures the everyday life of the family. Also homophobia is thematized, when a woman passing by expresses her contempt for

Jenny's family. When this book was published in Great Britain in 1983, it became one of the pretexts of the disputed Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, i.e. the regulation that prohibited promotion—mere mentioning—of homosexuality in education at schools or documents issued by local administration. This regulation was in force between 1988 and 2003, and it resulted in the fact that the book about little Jenny could not be displayed in any school library, and during educational process, homosexuality could not be mentioned.

A beautiful story about homoparental family is found in the book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. It portrays an actual event that happened in New York's Central Park ZOO, where two male Chinstrap penguins formed a couple. In vain they tried to hatch a chick on an egg-like rock, until one of the zookeepers gave them an egg discarded by another couple and Roy and Silo managed to hatch a penguin girl named Tango, who got admired by the whole of New York. This book, together with other children's books depicting homosexual characters or families (*Daddy's Roommate*, *King & King*, *Heather has Two Mommies*) made it to the list of the most challenged books of the American Library Association, which contains books that attracted most protests and attempts at censorship or complete ban.

Homosexuality in the children's stories is more considered to be sexuality than heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is a kind of blueprint that we do not even notice in children's tales; so that when mother and father appear in such a story, nobody thinks about them having a sexual life. When two mothers or two fathers appear, sexuality seems to be more present. That is why the children's stories that involve a homosexual couple or family seem to cause embarrassment at least, or aversion even in relatively open and tolerant people. In the contemporary Euro-American culture, childhood is constructed as innocent and helpless, calling for our protection. We love children, because we are captured by their vulnerability, fragility, innocence, sincerity and totally unspoiled nature. Children who are not like this are not considered childish at all. We love the idealization of childhood that is the embodiment of paradise on Earth.

Childhood as a paradise of innocence

In our culture that is built on the Jewish-Christian grounds, the concept of paradise excludes sexuality. When Adam and Eve tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they became conscious of their nudity and

experienced shame—and lost paradise forever. In this Biblical narration, we can see the roots of our current debates over the impropriety of the connection of children and sexuality. That is to say, childhood serves as the projection of Jewish-Christian paradise, in which there is no place for the consciousness of one's sexuality.

Sexuality is related to sin and possible defilement, and that is why it has no place in the paradise. It is conceived as a very problematic field, in which one can easily slip to the darkness of perdition. In the past, it used to be the Church that would connect sexuality with sin. As Foucault shows, nowadays it is mainly science—medicine, psychology, and others—that set the boundaries of the right experience of sexuality and the transgression of these boundaries is defined as deviance calling for redress. Sexuality in our cultural context represents something that is always potentially unclear and dangerous, which is in an utter contrast with the representation of childhood. The connection of childhood and sexuality is taboo, and it seems that the sexual revolution that questioned many taboos has reinforced the one concerning sexuality and childhood. A gay or lesbian character in a children's story is problematic not only for conservative defenders of the "traditional" gender order, but also for all who find it unpleasant to open the topic of sexuality with children.

There is a point in the connection of sexuality and knowledge in the myth about Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. Part of the construction of childhood as naturally asexual involves the fact that a child does not practice sex, does not experience erotic desire, and has no consciousness of sex. And, as Foucault says, this is the reason why children should be denied sex, they should be forbidden to talk about it, and they should close their eyes and cover their ears, whenever they might give an appearance of knowing about it (Foucault, 1980).

In accordance with Foucault's concept that knowledge is power, children's ignorance in some areas constitutes a hierarchical order in which adult people (parents and teachers mainly) are the more powerful once, and they decide when the children get certain knowledge, and when they are prohibited or allowed to engage in sexual activities. The protection of children from information about sexuality at the same time means their control. Children are kept in ignorance, and this ignorance legitimizes the refusal to grant them access to power and their subordination to authority (Jackson, 1982). Thematizing sexuality in children's stories is not just a question of the conservative lobby, whether church-

related or political, but it is closely related to the effort at preserving other social categories and hierarchies. If we admit the sexual subjectivity of childhood and its right to information, it can lose its paradise-like innocence and purity, and cease to be childhood for us.

Defying the structure

On one hand, we can see that the subversion of the gender order and heteronormativity conflicts with the general norms and hierarchies. On the other hand, the books that attempt to transgress the boundaries and norms set, are often conforming to gender patterns or to the more general structures of repression. An excellent illustration of this is the analysis of Jane Sunderland and Mark McGlashan focused on children's literature about homoparental families (2012). They analyzed 25 picture books featuring two-mum and two-dad families, and focused on 'explicitness' of these couples about their sexuality, and they explored differences in the representation of the gay mums and the gay dads. Their analysis has shown that mums and dads were displayed differently. For example the dads were more frequently called by their first name and displayed physical contact with their partners, while the mums were more identified by 'relational identification' (Mum, Mama, Mommy) and displayed less physical contact. Women and men in the analyzed books to some extent followed gendered stereotypes. Mums were more constructed than dads as co-parents, and dads were more frequently than the mums constructed as partners. Not even the literature about homoparental couples could defy the deeply rooted gender order.

A significant symbolic place in stories about gender-unconventional children belongs to the topic of bullying. Especially the stories about sensitive boys who may engage in girlish activities tend to repeat the same scheme—the main character is different, other than the majority, his environment despises him—or at least the male part of his community, he is being driven out of places, mocked, and people are angry at him; later on, he achieves something good or useful, and thus he gains the right to exist or even the respect and friendship of others. Such a merit-based recognition can be found in the books *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, *10 000 Dresses*, *The Boy with Pink Hair*, etc. This scheme is, however, quite tricky. It does not present diversity as something which we all are part of and which is valuable in itself, but as something that puts a dif-

ferent individual against a homogeneous majority—and the only thing s/he can do to make it right is to be useful enough. When we read children stories like this, we remind them of the marginality of the other and the dominance of mainstream. One can remedy one's handicap by being a productive individual, who may be a little bit queer, but who has not resigned on the more general modernist-capitalist meaningfulness dwelling in merit.

Bronwyn Davies reminds that the feminist analysis of stories requires not just the identification of stereotypes, but besides focusing on the content, we also need to focus on metaphors, forms of relationships and models of power and desire that are created in the text (Davies, 2003, p. 47). The poststructuralist perspective laid the emphasis from the text on the reader. A fundamental question for the feminist reading of children's texts is how the child relates to the text, how s/he invests herself/himself in it, how s/he interprets and uses it. A text does not work in a linear, unequivocal way; its interpretation always is related to the way of reading, the experiences of readers, and to their relating to the text and context in which they read. It is not at all certain that gender-stereotypical stories will determine children to traditional gender structuring of their lives, while feminist stories will emancipate them from these traditional structures. It is not just a matter of what is happening in a story and who the characters are, but mainly of what children take from them. It often can be significant details that the adult do not even notice.

Similarly to Davies, I read the story of *Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch (1980) with children of one Czech school. It narrates the story of a princess who had been kidnapped by a dragon and saved by a prince (Jarkovská, 2013). The fairy tale, however, does not end with a marriage, since the saved prince does not like that the princess is dirty and clothed in a paper bag. For some children (mainly those who were considered to be "good girls"), it was a story about a brave princess and a stupid prince who did not want the princess. For some (mainly boys), it was a story of a stupid prince, who got kidnapped by a dragon. For others (boys), it was a story of a dragon who demolished a kingdom (for one boy, the dragon was a mother who taught little dragons how to set a castle on fire), for other children it was a story of a burnt castle, and one girl, the class tomboy, tried to prevent me from reading the story. She did not want to accept that the dragon kidnapped the prince, and she started to protest at this moment and asked me to admit that the princess should

be kidnapped. When I refused, she found a different solution—she declared that it was a homosexual dragon. Similarly to Tinky Winky, a queer character became more acceptable as gay as an atypical heterosexual male.

REFERENCES

- BÖSCHE, S. (1983) *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin*. Gay Men's Press.
- BUTLER, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- DAVIES, B. (2003) *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- DE HAAN, L. (2000) *Koning & Koning*. Gottmer Uitgevers Groep.
- DE PAOLA, T. (1979) *Oliver Button is a sissy*. Brace & Company.
- DIXON, B. (1977) *Catching Them Young: Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction*. London: Pluto Press.
- EVERT, M. (2008) *10 000 Dresses*. Seven Stories Press.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1980) *The history of sexuality*. New York: Vintage.
- GOODEN, A. M. & GOODEN, M. A. (2001) Gender representation in notable children's picture books: 1995–1999. *Sex Roles*. 45(1–2), pp. 89–101.
- HILTON, P. (2011). *The Boy With Pink Hair*. Celebra Children's Books.
- HIRSCHNEROVÁ, Z. (2013) *Hupsov šlabikár. Lipka. 1. Časť*. Aitec.
- JACKSON, S. (1982) *Childhood and Sexuality*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- JACKSON, S. & GEE, S. (2005) 'Look Janet', 'No you look John': constructions of gender in early school reader illustrations across 50 years. *Gender and Education*. 17(2). pp. 115–128.
- JARKOVSKÁ, L. (2013) *Gender před tabulí*. Praha: Slon.
- MUNSCH, R. (1980) *Paper Bag Princess*. Annick Press.
- NEWMAN, L. (1989) *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Alyson Books.
- PACE NILSEN, A. (1971) Women in children's literature. *College English*. 32(8). pp. 918–976.
- PILÁTOVÁ, M. (2010) *Jura a Lama*. LePress.
- STRÖMSTEDT, M. (2006) *Astrid Lindgrenová. Životopis*. Praha: Albatros.
- SUNDERLAND, J. & MCGLASHAN M. (2012) The linguistic, visual and multimodal representation of two-Mum and two-Dad families in children's picturebooks. *Language and Literature*. 21. pp. 189–210.
- WEITZMAN, L. et al. (1972) Sex-role socialization in picture books for preschool children. *American Journal of Sociology*. 77. pp. 1125–150.
- WILLHOITE, M. (1991) *Daddy's Roommate*. Alyson Books.
- ZIPES, J. (ed.) (1986) *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Fairy Tales in North America and England*. Aldershot: Gower.
- ZOLOTOW, CH. (1972) *William's doll*. Harper & John.