Beyond Normalization:  
An Analysis of Heteronormativity in Children’s Picture Books

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Over the past twenty years, one of the most fascinating sites of struggle with regard to queer families has been children’s storybooks. Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing body of books that depict families with same-sex parents (or other relatives in same-sex relationships). From *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman (1989) to *Mom and Mum Are Getting Married* by Ken Setterington (2004), the emphasis has been on same-sex relationships as “normal” and “healthy.” Despite their unthreatening tones, these books have been highly contested and often banned. The most notorious Canadian example took place in Surrey, B.C., when the Surrey School Board banned three such books. The case began in the late 1990s and dragged on for years, in local and supreme courts. Intensely polarized reviews of these books had some reviewers warning potential readers that the books in question dealt with unnatural relationships, while others praised the books for honouring diversity. Unaddressed in both these perspectives are the ways that power, privilege, and heteronormativity are reproduced or challenged in these books. The highly polarized debate also pays little attention to the ways that literary quality is often sacrificed in order to make a political point.

In this essay, I examine some of these children’s books to show how they attempt to break down homophobia and heterosexism. Many of these picture
books focus on convincing a homophobic public that "homosexuality" and same-sex relationships are normal. It is important to examine the literary and political implications of this trend. Below, I analyze some of the nuances involved in creating anti-oppressive politics and how literary form can help or hinder a political message.

The framework from which I analyze these books has been shaped by current queer and anti-racist feminist theory as well as by children's literary criticism. Often, discussions of children's literary criticism and discussions of anti-oppressive politics take place in isolation from one another. The result is that children's literary criticism has a tendency to discuss literary quality while ignoring issues of systemic power and privilege; while books that actively engage with anti-oppressive politics can ignore the way didactic political messages can compromise not only literary quality but also the effectiveness of the message itself (more on this below). My framework takes into account the ways in which this isolation can be problematically reflected in children's books that challenge homophobic norms when illustrating meanings of family. Central to my analysis is the assertion that an intentional engagement with anti-oppressive politics does not have to be done at the expense of literary quality; rather, that a combination of theories is useful in assessing ways in which quality children's literature can challenge normative regulation of relationships/identity so that gay and lesbian relationships can be more fully developed and represented in this literature.

With the poverty of resources depicting queer families, queer communities have been quick to defend any children's books which include same-sex couples. Children's stories, so often repeated, can begin to shape values and expectations. It is important that we take a closer look at the messages in the still-growing literature that deals with queer families so that we can understand what they are saying and how they are saying it.

**Questions for Analysis**

The first step in my analysis was to compile a list of critical questions that I could use to analyze children's picture books with characters in same-sex relationships. To do so, I drew on political theory by authors such as Kevin Kumashiro, Shane Phelan, and Himani Bannerji. I also drew on the literary works of such critics as Hazel Rochman, Sheila Egoff, Deidre Baker, and Ken Setteringston. The following political and literary questions guided my overview and critiques:
POLITICAL QUESTIONS

• Do the picture books recreate power hierarchies from the dominant culture such as gender expression, race, and class in order to normalize homosexuality (for privileged populations of LGBT/queer people)? How is this reflected in the illustrations?

• Is the LGBT/queer reader “othered”? Is the education structured in a way that assumes the reader is heterosexual and homophobic to the point where LGBT/queer readers are excluded as potential readers?

• Is homophobia dealt with in a way that shows homophobia as the problem to be challenged as opposed to families with same-sex relationships needing to justify that they are healthy and not damaging their children?

• Is the family validated for homophobic reasons; for example, are they framed as acceptable because their children are straight, or because the child has straight friends, or because they have positive role models of the other sex?

LITERARY QUESTIONS

• Are the pictures visually stimulating? Do they ignite the imagination? Do they draw the reader further into the story?

• Is the story told in an interesting way? Is the only event the fact that there are same-sex relationships, or is there something happening to these characters that the reader can come to care about?

• Is the use of language engaging for a picture book (that is generally meant to be read out loud)? Can the reader be drawn in through lyricism, rhythm, or patterns?

• Are the characters in the story distinct individuals or static symbols? Does the reader get to know them in ways that show their uniqueness, their humour, their quirks? Can the reader identify with them?

• Does the theme come through as an engaging story or is it merely an explicitly stated “moral message”?

How “Gay is Normal” in Children’s Picture Books

When I began researching children’s picture books with “gay” characters, I was glad to see that there were close to forty books that could be grouped
into this category. It was my hope that among this number there would be books that depicted a wide range of individuals with family structures departing from hetero-nuclear family norms. I was dismayed by the number of books that replicated normative conceptualizations of family and gender (more on this below). Many books focused on the assertion that “gay is normal” at the expense of enthralling story lines, multi-faceted characters, enticing language, and other elements of literary quality.

For example, in Daddy’s Roommate by Michael Willhoite, the young boy narrator’s parents got divorced the year before the story opens. His dad now has a “roommate,” an obvious euphemism for partner/lover/spouse. The boy’s dad and his roommate “live together, eat together, sleep together, shave together, and times even fight together. But they always make up.”

The pictures are cartoonish and oversimplified, depicting conservatively gendered, white, middle-class norms. There is truly nothing else in the story besides a description of how gay people can eat, sleep, shave, and so on, just the way real (a.k.a straight) people do. If difference (from the mainstream) is depicted as okay because it is actually sameness, the underlying message becomes that difference is really not okay.

Similarly, in another book by Michael Willhoite, Uncle What-Is-It Is Coming to Visit, a brother and sister find out that their uncle is coming to visit. When they ask if he has a girlfriend, they find out that he is gay. Not knowing what that means, they ask homophobic people in their neighbourhood who tell them tales about gay people being leather people and drag queens. The children get so terrified by this that they don’t know if they want their uncle to visit after all. In the end, he is just an “unthreatening,” conservative man who doesn’t like Brussels sprouts just like them. The cartoonish pictures depict 1950s-style gender roles with the parents and children. The uncle is unthreatening because he looks like a white, middle-class, gender-normative man. The homophobic bullies appear to be working class, probably mechanics. This book definitely falls into the category of those that do more to uphold the status quo than contesting it. Adding conservative, middle-class, white, gay men to the margins of what is acceptable does not necessarily do much to break down barriers and embrace difference.

In my research, I grouped the books into two categories: books explaining how a family can include people in a same-sex relationship (expository books), and books with the same-sex relationship as the background, but not the focal point, of the story (background books).
While expository books tend to focus didactically on messages that the family is “normal,” background books tend to use storylines and illustrations to create an environment in which the background characters in same-sex relationships are as close to the heteronormative mainstream as possible. Both categories often position the reader as heterosexual and homophobic — thus denying the possibility of gay and lesbian readership. As a result, the same-sex relationship, as opposed to homophobia, is usually positioned as the aberration to be studied.

Within the expository category there is a trend towards explicitly stated moral messages. Unfortunately, the didactic nature of the message shifts the focus away from the characters as individuals as they become symbols of something to accept, as opposed to specific and interesting people with whom a reader can connect. For example, the daycare teacher at the end of Leslea Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989) gathers her students around her and tells them, “It doesn’t matter how many mommies or how many daddies your family has ... it doesn’t matter if your family has sisters or brothers or cousins or grandmothers or grandfathers or uncles or aunts. Each family is special. The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other.” In *How My Family Came to Be: Daddy, Papa and Me* by Andrew Aldrich (2003), the main character describes how he and his family “play, talk, read, hug and sometimes fight, just like other families.” The repetition that all families are the same does not leave room for families with cultural differences and for families with “gay” members to be part of non-mainstream countercultures. This detracts from the message of “diversity” and of valuing difference, because conforming to the mainstream is the trait that makes the family acceptable; the capacity for sameness rather than difference is what is honoured. The reader is also positioned as heterosexual and homophobic through the constant assurance that the family is okay, implicitly suggesting that the reader would have originally thought otherwise. The reader is not engaged in the overall storyline or drawn into an appreciation for the characters as individuals.

Background books often begin with long explanations of every-day things that gay families do together. In *Anna Day and the O-Ring* (Wickens, 1994), the main character, a young boy with two moms, tells the reader that he has sleepovers and eats cookies. *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* begins with a rundown of how Gloria and her moms celebrate Valentine’s Day, Halloween, Mother’s Day, and Hanukkah (Newman, 1991). In both
books, the preambles do not further an overall plot nor are they worded in particularly engaging ways. The reader is again assumed to be both heterosexual and homophobic; children or adults who know individuals in same-sex relationships would already be aware that their families do everyday things together. When the audience is presumed to be homophobic and heterosexual by default, those whose identities fall outside of heteronormative norms are not positioned as a potential readership. Consequently, these readers are “othered” because they are situated not as subjects but as objects to be studied. In addition to perpetuating exclusion, this limits the potential of the books to challenge heteronormative assumptions of potentially homophobic readers as they replicate heteronormative frameworks in the way in which the reader is positioned.

The exclusion does not end with “othering” gays and lesbians. Another aspect of the relentless normalization of characters in same-sex relationships is that often families are exemplified for the ways in which they uphold the status quo in all ways expect for this one exception. The four books I have discussed thus far primarily feature white, middle-class characters. Books that include characters of colour generally do so in the context of “hypernormal,” suburban, nuclear families. For example, in Molly’s Family by Nancy Gordon, the story follows a plot similar to stories previously seen on this subject, such as Asha’s Moms and Heather Has Two Mommies. When Molly draws a picture of her family for a kindergarten open house, some of her peers tell her that she can’t have two mums. The teacher and her mums help validate Molly and her family. In the end, Molly puts her picture up on the wall for the open house. The illustrations depict conservatively gendered and mostly white characters, reinforcing dominant power structures. People of colour, poor, working-class individuals, and those whose familial structures do not replicate nuclear family norms are “othered” when whiteness, class privilege, and normative family structures are used as sites through which select families with people in gay and lesbian relationships are validated. Additionally, such familial depictions detract from the book’s literary quality as characters become stereotypes and their cultures lack the specificity that makes for engaging setting and scenery.

The trend of defending families with same-sex relationships on the basis of their conformity to mainstream standards can result in the replication of homophobic norms. For example, in Zack’s Story (Greenberg, 1996), Zack reassures the reader that he plans on marrying a woman when he grows up (assuring the readers of his straight family; sexual identity is never explicitly stated). In the same book, the couple of a female rower is only mentioned in passing. The book does not have a perspective from that of a female rower.
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(assuring the reader of his future heterosexuality) despite the fact that he has two moms. Would there be something wrong with him or his family if he, too, grew up to be gay? The overarching message of the story is that Zack has a good family; however, the attempt to normalize him results in Zack's potential heterosexuality becoming homophobic reinforcement of what validates his family — his family is okay because he is straight. Similarly in How My Family Came to Be, the reader is reassured that the (nameless) main character has female parental role models and friends from straight families. Again, this reiterates the notion that families with same-sex parents are inadequate in comparison to families with heterosexual parents. From a literary perspective, within this context of normalization, families with same-sex parents are generalized and lose the individualism that makes the members of a family amusing or interesting as characters in the story.

In both expository and background stories, there is a propensity for the same-sex relationship to cancel out any specific attributes the characters have. As a result, the same-sex relationship subsumes all other aspects of a person’s identity in ways that a heterosexual relationship does not. The implications of such a trend counteract the explicit goal these books often have — to challenge homophobia.

However, not every picture book reflects the trends that I have critiqued. While the overall trends show a tendency towards problematic politics and literary shortcomings, there are examples of both background and expository books that do more to engage the reader and challenge oppression than those I have discussed.

One example in the category of background books is Bobbie Combs’s ABC: A Family Alphabet Book (2001), which reflects a broader range of characters than the books previously discussed. In ABC, each letter of the alphabet is depicted in bright, original, and captivating illustrations. The letters are paired up to depict same-sex couples having fun with children. The different genders, ethnicities, and personalities expressed by the alphabet characters break up the emphasis on normalization that is commonly found in books depicting characters in same-sex relationships. The text that accompanies the illustrations describes what is going on in the picture: the couples and the kids are going to the zoo, the kids are waking up moms in the morning with big musical instruments, and so on. The images portray a wide enough range of activities that the depictions of the families move away from stock characters set up as normalizing role models.
Another example of a book in which the same-sex relationship is clear while not defaulting to a "moral message" is *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005). *Tango* (for short) tells a true story about two male penguins who partner-up and make a nest together at the New York City Park Zoo. Whereas *ABC* shows a range of different familial networks in order to move away from heteronormative characters, *Tango* uses specificity in a way that alleviates the same-sex family from the responsibility of having to normalize all families outside the heterosexual mainstream. In the story, the two male penguins sit on rocks and other egg-shaped objects hoping that they will hatch. When a zookeeper eventually finds an egg in need of care, he gives it to them. Together, they take turns sitting on the egg until it hatches into a baby penguin, their little daughter, Tango. The illustrations bring the penguin characters to life, particularly little Tango, and successfully draw the reader into the story.

Within the expository category, Johnny Valentine’s *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads* (1994) describes a family with two dads in a way that challenges homophobia. In *One Dad, Two Dads*, Lou, who “has two dads who both are blue” is asked questions by a friend who doesn’t think anyone can have blue dads. After being asked “If they hug you too hard will the color come off?” and other allegorical questions, Lou shakes his head and wonders why his friend can ask such silly things. Lou replies, “They were blue when I got them and blue they are still.” He declares that although “it is hard to see blue dads against a blue sky,” his dads are “remarkable wonders” and their lives are just fine. It is a humorous Dr. Seuss-style explanation about how dads are dads in all their varieties.

The illustrations feature bold colours and combine images of the dads going about their activities and images of Lou’s friend’s silly questions about how the dads became blue. The story is amusing and there is a greater attention to language, cadence, and rhythm than in other books, which makes it entertaining to read out loud to audiences of younger children. Additionally, it is the questions Lou is asked and not Lou’s family that are positioned as the problem. The focus is less heterosexual because the book does not assume the reader and the reader’s family and friends are heterosexual and homophobic. However, despite these positive attributes, conflating issues of racism with “appreciating different colours” is problematic. It risks perpetuating the idea that anti-racism is about being “colour blind,” which can subsequently erase considerations of white power and privilege. As well,
the emphasis on appreciating difference because "we are all the same" can negate the celebration of difference. While this book successfully avoids homophobic traps, it would be strengthened by a deeper questioning of the systemic power of racism.

* The normalizing trends within children's picture books depicting characters in same-sex relationships often shortchange literary quality and the ability to effectively convey a political message. Analyzing the books from both a literary and political framework, I found the concept of difference is often used in a problematic way. While espousing a politic of valuing diversity, the message frequently asserted is, conversely, that those outside the heterosexual mainstream are "okay" because they are *normal* and *just like everyone else*. If difference is only celebrated because it matches the status quo, then it is assimilation rather than difference that is actually being celebrated.

The nature of privilege is often invisible to those who have it. It is what is taken for granted. One of the ways in which privilege manifests itself is that those who hold it rarely have to question their place as subjects of their own experience, as opposed to objects for others to study. Children's picture books with characters in same-sex relationships continue to overwhelmingly position relationships outside the heterosexual mainstream as objects to be studied. The emphasis on these populations as "normal" turns individuals into stereotypes. While this may be done as an attempt to end homophobia, when one is turned into a symbol, one is no longer in the position of being a fully complex person or of inhabiting a culturally specific space. Creating an anti-oppressive political framework is a multifaceted task informed not only by ideologies but also by the pedagogical forms in which such ideologies are conveyed. Children's picture books that seek to end homophobia and heterosexism provide a rich landscape for examining how the form in which a politic is conveyed can be as crucial to challenging or reinforcing an ideology as the explicit politic itself. They are valuable examples of the multi-layered ways oppressive norms can be reiterated even as they are resisted. Such contradictions need to be addressed in order to understand how family structures outside the heteronormative mainstream are not yet being fully and effectively depicted in diverse and inclusive ways within children's picture books.
REFERENCES


