

BA Illustration: Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Word Count: 2,538

From this semester's lectures, choose a theme or selection of illustrators that relate to your practice or interests. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

My Theme: Sunshine & Shadows –

What is suitable for children? What makes a children's book, and how do certain tales fit the format of what is appropriate for children?

Introduction

This essay will analyse the theme of 'Sunshine & Shadows', examining what topics are suitable for children in picture books. I selected this theme in part due to my own personal interest in how literature and other forms of fictional media can provide a safe place to explore realities, to project onto fictional characters for the purposes of emotional processing and self-evaluation, and for representation of otherwise undiscussed identities

or experiences. Children's picture books are often the first place where these opportunities are accessible, and books that discuss serious issues in a child-friendly way are vital in children's mental development and understanding of difficult topics in life.

This essay will start with a historical summary of the existence of children's literature. It will examine what topics can be considered suitable for children to engage with in picture books, which is impossible to discuss without some level of author bias. It will analyse the topics of fairy tales, identity, mental health, and examine themes and depictions that without context can be distressing in children's picture books, with a corresponding book for each topic. Anthony Browne's illustrated *Hansel and Gretel* (2008) is a retelling of the classic fairy tale depicting a brother and sister abandoned in the woods. It depicts whimsical fantasy elements as well as the darker themes of neglect and physical safety. Authors Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings collaborated with illustrator Shelagh McNicolas to celebrate diversity and identity with their picture book *I Am Jazz* (2014), following the experience of a young transgender girl and the euphoria of acceptance. This picture book in particular is highly controversial due to its intention of introducing the concept of gender identity to children, a topic which some believe to be inappropriate. Author and illustrator Shaun Tan's picture book *The Red Tree* (2001) deals with mental health and depression, showcasing surrealist illustrations whose expressive and detailed nature drive the story, and includes simplified text. And last but not least, *Hope For The Flowers* by Trina Paulus (1972) depicts death, existentialism, and religious salvation through the black and yellow lens of two caterpillars. I hope to examine why this picture book in particular may not or may no longer be suitable for children.

Children's Literature

As the name might suggest, children's literature is a category of literature created for the purpose of being consumed by children, either through the child reading or listening to the stories. The literary category of children's books encompasses stories for and enjoyed by children, and aims to both entertain and educate the children who consume them.

However, books and other kinds of fictional media created specifically for children are a surprisingly new phenomena in history. Academic professor John Sutherland assesses that their popularity is roughly two-hundred years old, stating that "Literature, in short, 'found' the child in the nineteenth century and has never lost its interest in him and her"

(Sutherland, 2013 p.130). Britannica writer Clifton Fadiman recently defined children's literature as a "body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people" (Fadiman, 2022).

This suggests that literature was not about or for children until this time, and that books for children came into popularity when most societies began to accept the concept of 'childhood' as a distinct life period. American historian and psychologist Lloyd DeMause wrote that the books written for children around this time were typically moral tales, designed to encourage good behaviour in children (DeMause, 2006). A well-known example of a story promoting positive behaviour in children is the commonly-reinvented German tale *Hansel and Gretel*, recorded by the Brothers Grimm in 1812. Its origins are much darker than most modern day retellings, however the core "moral lesson" remains. It is a tale that teaches children to be wary of strangers, even if they seem kind (Hase, 2016). Such a

warning is important for a child's physical safety, as well as their ability to determine a stranger's intentions.

Beyond a surface level definition, it is important to understand how many different disciplines and fields of occupation the literary genre involves. The *International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature of 1996*, a mammoth of text and information, is a daunting holy grail of anything and everything someone might want to know about children's literature. Encyclopaedia editor Peter Hunt refers to children's literature as "a body of oral and written text... [that] is the confluence of many cultures and of many disciplines" (Hunt, 2004). The encyclopaedia involves contributions from many different disciplines and fields, such as historians, teachers, librarians, theorists, writers, illustrators, and more, resulting in an interdisciplinary body of text.

Sutherland states that children's literature can also refer to books that are just simply enjoyed by children, even if they were not the intended audience. He gives well-known examples of this, including "Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55)" (Sutherland, 2013 p.130). For most children, their first experience with literature is being read stories and nursery rhymes by parents or guardians. Sutherland stresses that illustrations are a central part of the story at this stage. As the child gets older, the stories and rhymes become more complex, and the illustrations become less important to the story. Children then learn to read along with their parents or guardians, rather than being read to. Finally, the child begins to read for themselves (Sutherland, 2013).

Fairy Tales

Oral folktales were developed into what are now known as fairy tales, but their appropriateness for children can be questioned due to the gruesome content in most, such as getting eaten by wolves. In *Hansel and Gretel* (2008), one could easily argue that certain aspects such as neglecting children in the woods, and children killing a witch make it inappropriate. Yet, as this tale is presented as fiction and sits within the context of a fairy tale, it is deemed acceptable. Although they have their history in adult oral tales, fairy tales are often considered fitting to children's books or children's picture books, because they fit into a recognised format. They're usually marketed for the child demographic, in terms of their cover design, size of print, type of illustration used, and use of child-friendly language (Figure 1.). The repetition of 'all the better to...' in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood appeals to a child's language development and makes it an enjoyable tale for children, despite some unsettling aspects of the story such as the grandmother being eaten by a wolf (Zipes, 1993). Fairy tales are presented as fiction, so children are able to suspend their belief and not get upset by the frightening elements.

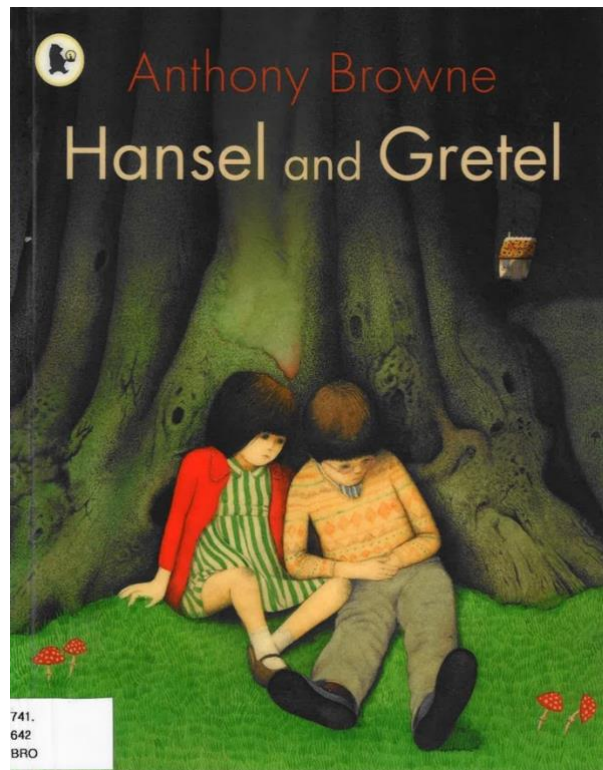


Fig. 1: Browne, A. (2008). *Hansel and Gretel*.

Identity

The appropriateness of fairy tales opens up the question of what is and what is not suitable for children to learn about at such young ages. Children are often sheltered from certain topics that many adults disagree with as to their appropriateness, which can lead to administrative or governmental intervention. In America, writer Lisa Tolin reports on the banning of books for children in 2022:

The most banned books were primarily young adult or adult titles, but picture books for the youngest readers were not spared, with 317 titles banned. Several of the

most banned picture books are nonfiction, including histories of civil rights and gay pride. Others are lighthearted fiction about animals or babies. Most feature a protagonist of color or characters who reflect the LGBTQ+ experience.

(Tolin, 2023)

Among the books banned in schools and some libraries, *I Am Jazz* (2014) has been banned due to its portrayal of a happy and accepted young trans child. It depicts the true story of transgender activist Jazz Jennings, honorary co-founder of the Trans Kids Purple Rainbow Foundation, and her experience as a non-cisgender child (Herthel and Jennings, 2014).

There are people who have wild misconceptions on what gender identity is, so it must be defined for clarity. The Merrimack Webster Dictionary defines gender identity as “a person's internal sense of being male, female, some combination of male and female, or neither male nor female” (2008). While this is a simplified explanation, it can help both parents and children to better understand that gender identity is not the same as sexuality. Teaching children about gender identity is not the same as teaching them about sex or sexuality. It could be argued that children's books can be a place for discussing these topics, as it is a safe way to learn about the world around them. Compared to traditional children's books that were moral tales designed to encourage good behaviour, modern children's books are more open to serious topics for this reason.

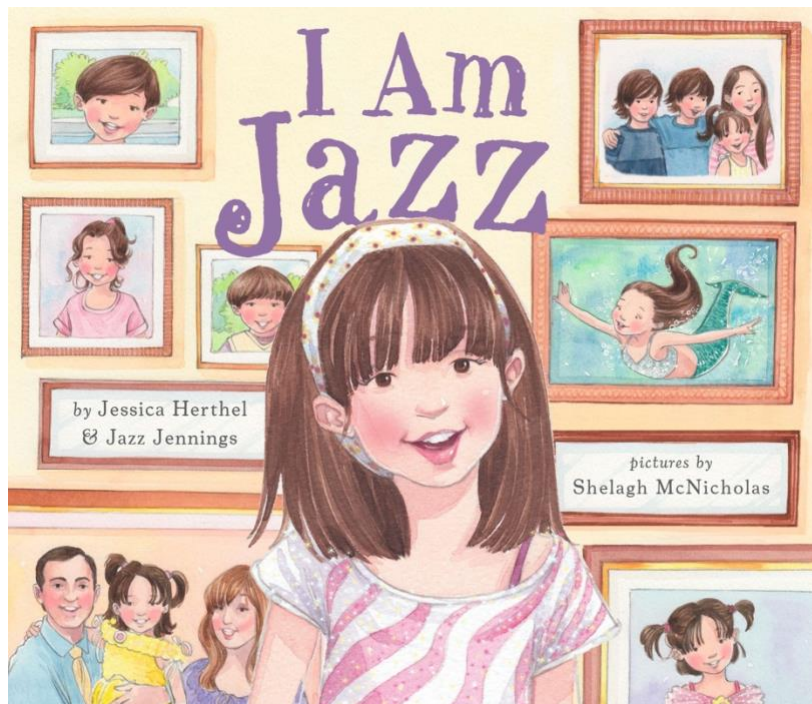


Fig. 2: Herthel and Jennings (2014). *I Am Jazz*.

It is important for children's picture books to cover serious issues such as mental health, identity, race, bullying, grief & loss, illness, disability, and more, so that children will feel represented and understood should they be going through a similar experience.

Representation allows people to see themselves and understand that they are not alone. It is also important for children and people in general to understand issues that others might be facing, in order to learn and practice sympathy. Organisation Literacy Minnesota (2022) identifies the benefits of reading multicultural books with diverse representations of characters:

Reading multicultural books helps people to better understand current world issues, (provides exposure) to multicultural literature, increases awareness of the social practices, values and belief systems of other cultures, (and) promotes unity and

empathy. People learn that not only are differences tolerated, they are embraced. (It) promotes the interaction of children across differing ethnic backgrounds.

(Literacy Minnesota, 2022)

Although books that discuss serious issues and allow children to see themselves in literature is a positive, another drawback could be limited access to the books. “Children’s literature, because of their minimal financial clout, has always been subject to adult control and censorship...” (Sutherland, 2013 p.132). This could mean that children might not be able to see the books if the adult chooses not to purchase it for them. The banning of some books from schools and libraries can also make accessibility difficult.

Mental Health

The book *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2010) opens up a conversation on mental health. The book is about a child who is facing overwhelming emotions, represented by fantastical settings and a surplus of detail (figure 2). The child is losing hope but finds light in the form of a small tree that has grown from a seedling in their room. This is an allegory for bad thoughts and feelings, and a reminder that these feelings will not last. It also aids young readers in understanding that other people also experience negative emotions. The book is made accessible to children by having a child as the protagonist, providing a relatable character to identify with. The illustrations also make it accessible for children as they help to simplify a complex topic. One could imagine a child being daunted by all the detail and

happenings of each illustration, thus invoking the overwhelming feeling. Tan handles the topic sensitively with lines such as “Sometimes you just don’t know what you are supposed to do” (p.26). This resonates with a lot of children, as they are in their formative developmental years and still learning the basic rules of how to be a person. Tan also uses mostly single sentences per page and illustration, which informs readers what the main concepts are. This means that the book is not too complicated for younger audiences. *The Red Tree* is a book that is appreciated by adults, but in this case, the illustrations also allow children to access the message in a meaningful way.



Fig. 3: Tan, S. (2001). *Fate* from *The Red Tree*.

Context

Although illustrations are often associated with children's books, an illustrated book does not always mean that it is appropriate for children. *Hope For The Flowers* by Trina Paulus is a Christian picture book written in 1972. The cover of the picture book states that it is "a tale— partly about life, partly about revolution, and lots about hope for adults and others (including caterpillars who can read)" (Paulus, 1972), however an adult not looking closely can mistake it as appropriate for children. The story follows two caterpillars, Stripe and Yellow, who face a number of depressing circumstances. There is a giant pillar of "squirming, pushing caterpillars" (chp. 1, no page numbers) in constant claustrophobic pain, the devastating abandonment by a loved one, the detailed witnessing of multiple deaths, immobilising depression, feelings of pointlessness and existentialism, all within the first four chapters. Yellow meets an old caterpillar who instructs her to build a cocoon and 'die' to become a butterfly (chp. 4), which an adult reader with knowledge of the author's religion and intent could understand is a metaphor for religious salvation. But without parental instruction or context, this could be interpreted by an uneducated child as a depiction of horrific life experiences, and encouragement to 'die' by committing suicide. The story also depicts the first caterpillar Stripe as having developed terrible but necessary violent traits in order to reach the top of the aforementioned pillar, only to find that there is nothing there at all (chp. 5). Once again, an adult reader will most likely be able to see the intended analogy, but a child could take this at face value and understand the story so far to be one of pointless abandonment, death, and violence. The story has an eventual happy ending of both caterpillars becoming butterflies, something adults with context can understand represents converting to Christianity. A child without context, however, has the potential to

once again misunderstand the subtext and believe the moral of the story to be that one is only happy once they are dead.

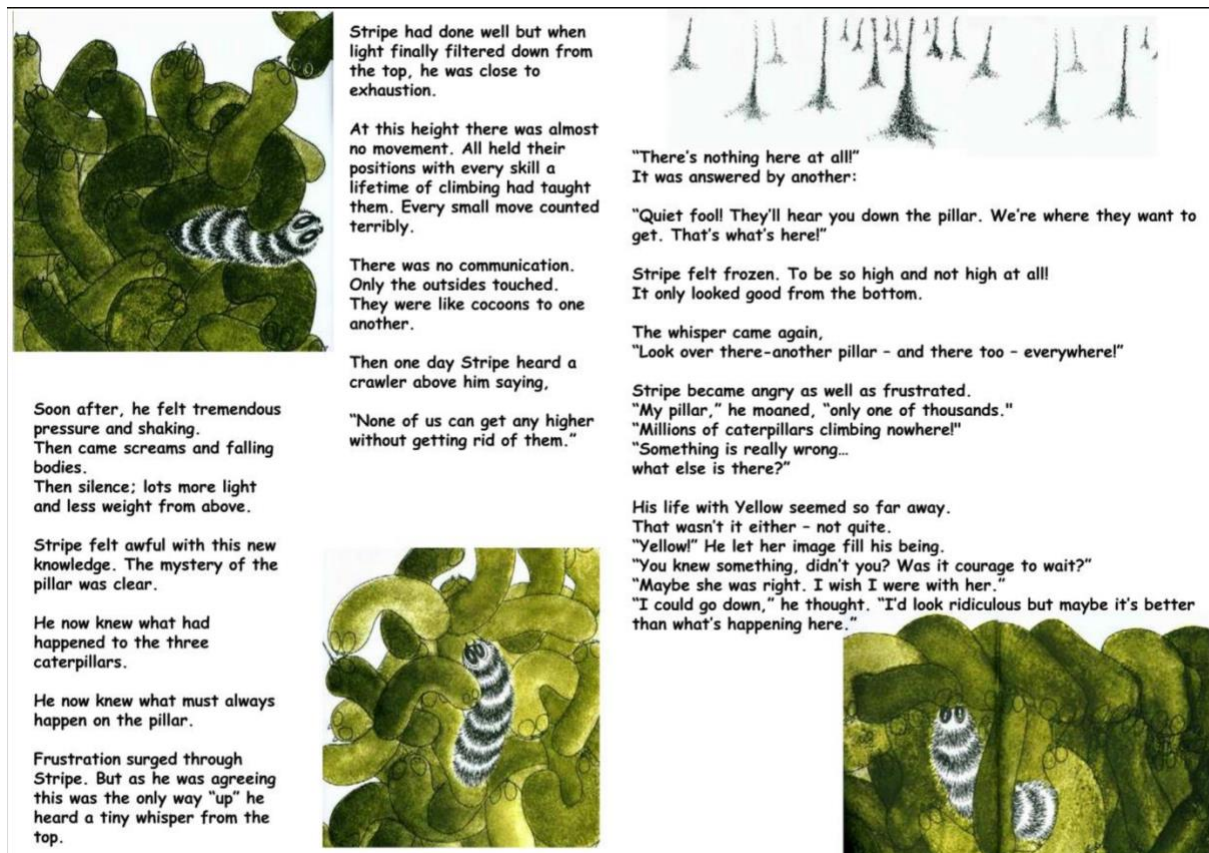


Fig. 4: Paulus, T. (1972) *Hope For The Flowers*, chapter 5.

Conclusion

This essay set out to argue that children's literature and picture books are suitable platforms for exploring certain topics like physical safety, identity, mental health, and more, that

children might not otherwise have access to. I feel that picture books that explore difficult topics are important for children to read and have access to, so that those children may understand that they are not alone in having difficult emotions or experiences. It is also important for children to understand that others may be experiencing different difficulties, and that we must have compassion and sympathy for those people. I believe that while these topics should be discussed, there should also be clear and logical restraints on the language used and the circumstances depicted. The books I have mentioned in this essay provide examples of children's literature that deal with topics that can help children understand the world around them. This essay has also provided an example of a picture book that I would argue is not suitable for children. My analysis of *Hope For The Flowers* (1972) is neither an attempted attack on Christianity nor a statement that this is a universal reaction. It is of course just one child's experience, but it cannot go unmentioned, having already stated that no essay including this one is free of authorial bias.

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