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Analyse the work of illustrators and, particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive and sometimes shocking themes.

Title: The Importance of Feminism in Picture Books

Picture books are a unique and powerful tool to use when it comes to children discussing, representing and understanding difficult and sensitive topics, especially in terms of the education of children. Feminist themes and tools within author illustrator storytelling can open up a child's world to the extraordinary array of unique people within our society. It's the role of a picture book to give children an idea of what the world looks like, without fear of censorship. Children are able to explore what that picture book means to them and how they relate to it personally, discovering things not only about the world but about themselves in the process. Picture books can provide children with an explanation to their thoughts and feelings, and characters they can see themselves represented in. This essay will research and discuss how feminist picture books give children a greater understanding of the

world as well as their place in it, and how this is perceived as a negative by certain members of society.

Firstly, it is important to understand why children need feminism in picture books as many may see this kind of topic to be too intense for little minds. According to McRobbie and McCabe (1981, p. 6) feminism is “about having choices...being who you want to be – and finding out who you are in the first place.” These authors believe that feminism is more inclusive than many may first believe and that it’s more about having the opportunity to be yourself without fear of judgement, rather than one gender having superiority over the other. It’s important for children to carry with them this knowledge as they will encounter gendered situations and assumptions all throughout their life, starting in childhood. Although gender differs in expectation depending on where you are in the world, there’s “continuity in the idea of gender, in that all human societies have some recognition of differences that are based on gender” (Woodward, 2011, p. x). This author therefore highlights the importance of gender, as it carries with it certain rules wherever you go; it’s an inescapable looming presence. And gender roles in Western society dictate that women are ‘simply’ caregivers and cooks, whereas men are fighters and providers.

Picture books can be used as a tool by parents and teachers as a way of introducing children to the outside world in a controlled and familiar environment. Therefore, it can be argued that author illustrators have an incredibly important and influential role in the beginning of a child’s introduction to society; “Stories provide the metaphors, the characters and the plots through which [children’s] positionings in the social world can be interpreted.” (Davies, 2003, p. 46).

However, with society ever changing in terms of social awareness and representation it could be argued literature and other media vessels are failing to keep up with the times. Although there are more female characters in books, they are still “portrayed with similar stereotypical behaviours” (Louie, 2001, p. 142). It can then be argued that these practitioners are failing in their task to educate and prepare children for modern life. Nevertheless, the responsibility to educate children on the societal issues of gender, bias and prejudice must fall on someone. Picture books are an exceedingly accessible tool, with public libraries and shelters as well as bookstores offering a vast array of options. Louie (2001, p. 143) argues further that “agents of change to reduce gender biases should be authors [and] illustrators”. And with an estimated 10,00 children’s books being published annually as of 2020, according to Words Rated (2022), there are more than enough options for parents, carers and teachers to choose from.

After looking at the influence of children’s literature, specifically picture books, this next section will be looking at a specific picture book and how it benefits children through teaching acceptance and exploring self-expression. *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love is about a young Julian and his Abuela as he discovers his wish to transform into a mermaid. It follows Julian fashioning himself a tail out of curtains and long hair from a plant, all while his Abuela is out of the room as he fears rejection and judgement. Once his Abuela reappears, instead of being upset or repulsed, she presents him with a beaded necklace to wear. Abuela then takes Julian to the beach where he’s surrounded by all the other ‘mermaids’. Upon entering the water, the line between reality and his imagination blurs and Julian sees all the women surrounding him as real mermaids dancing beneath the waves. This book is a wonderful example of how easy acceptance can be, and that being completely yourself doesn’t have to

be complicated. Set in New York, the background illustrations of the city are muted and beige in the beginning before Julian is accepted by his Abuela. Only in his imagination, where he is mermaid, is there vibrant and exciting colour.



Figure 1: *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018, p. 1-2)



Figure 2: *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018, p. 5-6)

This noticeable difference in tone between these pages shows that Julian's perspective on the world around him is boring and dull and he would be much more content if he were able to fully be himself. A detail that highlights this is the similarity

between the colour of the women's mermaid tails as seen in Figure 1 and the ocean in Figure 2. This group of 'mermaids' have clearly left an impression in the young boys mind and begin this realisation that he would be happier as one of them. It's after he's shown acceptance from his Abuela that the surrounding city becomes vibrant also.

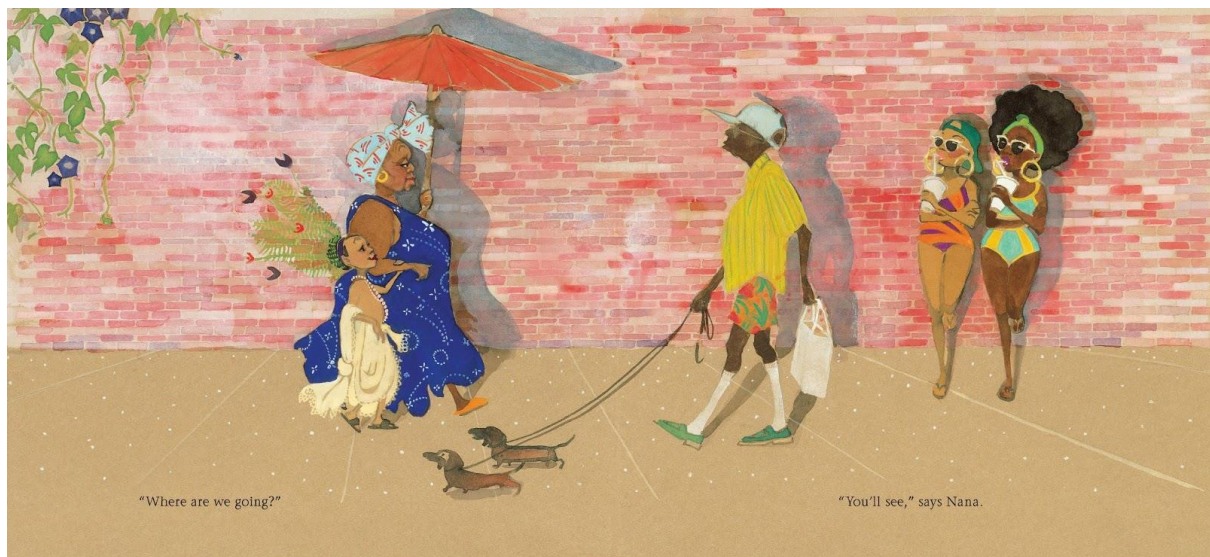


Figure 3: *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018, p. 25-26)

“Emotional connotations are communicated more strongly by tone and saturation than by hue.” (Doonan, 1983, p. 31). This is shown clearly in the drastic change in background from Figure 1 to Figure 3, displaying the happiness that being able to be oneself can bring. Having the opportunity to express yourself freely without the fear of judgement can surely only be good, as represented in the difference in tone and saturation as this picture book progresses. As a part of their weekly review of books banned in the USA, Sridhar (2022) shared their admiration of the portrayal of acceptance within this picture book. Sharing that “[Abuela] understands why he felt the need to transform. She gives him the means to find out what he could be... Julian is not alone or othered.” This picture book is a prime example of how representation of all the different types of people in our society is possible. And the importance

showing it from the perspective of the people who will be reading and learning from it, children.

Of course, while it is important to know why representation matters within children's picture books, we must also look at how representation has changed. During the Golden Age of children's literature, characterised by Sorby (no date) from around 1860 to the early twentieth century, female characters are presented with a passive femininity. When thinking of examples, Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1911) and Jo March from *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868) come straight to mind. These characters are both shown to be defiant in their nature and strive to stand out from the ordinary. Although in the end, both fall into their predestined positions as women of their time. Jo marries and Mary, while no longer tormented by Mrs. Medlock, lives a regular life. However literary progression, especially when it comes to female characters, has really boosted the idea that women are capable of more when it comes to reality. Trites (1997, p. 11) notes that heroines from more modern pieces of children's literature are now not as likely to lose their self-possession. Additionally, in maintaining that personal fortitude female characters often then fall into stretching the bounds of gender roles, therefore "incorporating characteristics that are typically associated with both genders into her actions." We then begin to see female characters that, in their power, look and act in a more androgynous manor.

One such lead female character can be seen in Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants* first published in 1986. The picture book follows a Princess who is more than happy to remain unmarried. However, her parents decide it is high time she is to be married. Then follows the cohort of Princes lining up for her hand in marriage.

Princess Smartypants decided she will only marry the prince who can complete tasks she herself puts forward. Prince after Prince fails, until Prince Swashbuckle turns up. To the Princess's dismay, he completes them all, thinking the Princess is not as smart as she makes out. However, upon giving him a magic kiss, the prince turns into a giant toad and runs off far away. Princess Smartypants then remains unmarried and lives "happily ever after." (Cole, 1996, p. 29). This book is a prime example of altering the traditional values of the fairytale and throwing out the idea of 'the damsel in distress'. This picture book shows young girls that they need not rely on a man, and that it is completely possible to lead a happy and fulfilling life without the prospect of marriage as the main goal. Huck (2001) claims "It is important to have books about girls who do things, who make things happen." Cole's picture book is a prime example, constructing a female character with many hobbies and ambitions, and knowing exactly what she wants in life.

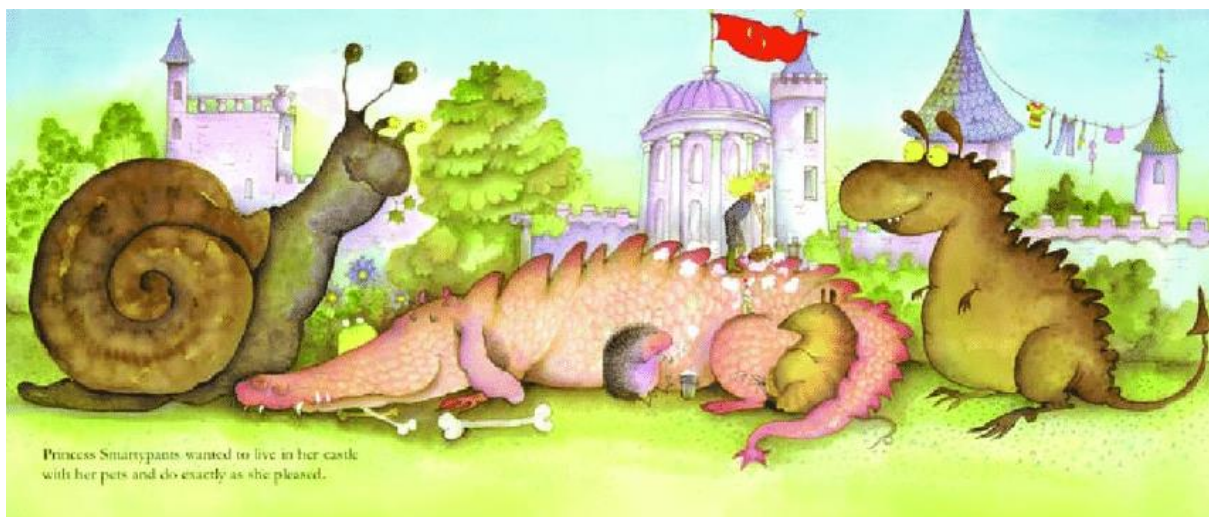


Figure 4: *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1996, p. 3-4)

Such a self-reliant female character is rare to see in children's picture books. As seen in Figure 4, she takes care of her own pets, cleaning and feeding them, which in more traditional fairytales would be seen as the servants job.

Unfortunately, these changes in characteristics of female characters have been small and far between. Woodward (2011) suggests that change in these circumstances is often “uneven and small scale, rather than operating on a macro level of one epoch following another”. The importance of picture books in a young child’s development cannot be denied, as at its best they, and especially their illustrations, are “a subtle and complex artform that can communicate on many levels and leave a deep imprint on a child’s consciousness.” (Salisbury, 2004, p. 6). This lack of development in representation is not helped by recent instances of book banning and censorship seen in both the UK and the United States. The Guardian (Shaffi, 2023) has publicised that a third of librarians in the UK have been asked to censor or remove books from the public libraries in which they work. With the books targeted most involving “empire, race and LGBTQ+ themes. Some 82% of librarians said they were concerned about the increase in such requests.” Everyone, not just children, should be able to explore the variety of texts and characters that are available through public libraries, and this increase in censorship requests would surely only lead to an increase in ignorance. However, in the US the situation regarding book banning is a lot more serious. According to Pen America (2023) book bans have increased by 33% over 2022-23 school year. The organisation has documented 3,362 cases of book bans in public schools and libraries, affecting 1,557 different titles. In tune with the ban requests in the UK, many of the books now banned in the USA centre around themes of race, history, sexual orientation and gender. With notable titles such as ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ by Margaret Atwood, ‘Looking for Alaska’ by John Green and ‘Milk and Honey’ by Rupi Kaur among the list of banned books in public schools and libraries in certain states. It was also discovered that over three-quarters

of books banned fall under the genres of young adult, middle grade, chapter book and picture book (Pen America, 2023). There's a pattern in the themes which adults wish to conceal children from. However, these include groups of people that, once they go out into the world, children will interact with almost every day. Discrimination of gender, race and sexuality are things that certain groups within our society deal with daily, so why are we hiding it from those who would otherwise be unaffected?

Sexism, and other discriminations of a similar nature, are learned behaviours. Prior to entering the school system, children receive their education of the world from their parents. Parents expose their children to the world through books, film, television and music, and through these mediums children relate the messages and metaphors to their own lives.

“Pictures, through their expressive powers, enable the book to function as an art object: something which gives form to ideas and to which we can attach our own ideas”.

(Doonan, 1983, p. 7)

Picture books are incredibly influential to young children especially in forming their view of not just the world, but their place in it. They “stimulate personal expressive response in the beholder” (Doonan, 1983, p. 7), affirming things that children may be feeling or thinking. Through picture books, children are able to relay the book's message into their own lives and find support and recognition that those thoughts and feelings are valid. Some of the more classic fairy tales such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and ‘The Ugly Duckling’ have clear moral messaging behind them, teaching children right from wrong and proper ways to behave within society. However, this

messaging has been reliant upon the text rather than illustration. Salisbury (2007) states that “greater importance has been attached to the role of the image in educational development.” With ‘visual thinking’ becoming a more recognised and respected term, picture books no longer serve as simply pretty pictures to go along with text or simply including a moral fable. Picture books now take on the role of actively teaching children about the real world, its struggles in particular, with the illustrations having more value as pictorial text rather than just a picture.

These picture books may be most beneficial to children who, when they do enter the school system, feel like they don’t fit in with everybody else. And finding comfort within books is a path many children travel down when they don’t feel like they fit in with the rest of society. Therefore, creating picture books and other factions of children’s literature that display a wide range of people in our world would surely only create more tolerant and accepting children. Tolerance, as defined by Elswick (2018, p. 115), is “the ability for one to employ an open attitude and offer respect for identifiable differences that exist among people.” This concept started out in relation to ethnic and racial differences, however as time has moved forward and more hate in society has ensued, it now includes gender, disability, sexual orientation and more. Elswick (2018, p. 115) also suggests that in respecting our similarities and differences, we are able to learn so much more about ourselves and the world in which we live.

In addition, children and their inquisitive and observant natures is not to be underestimated. Davies (2003, p. 47) declares that a feminist analysis of stories needs to “pay attention not only to the content, but also the metaphors...created in the text.” Specifically in how children relate to the text is also crucial for a feminist reading of children’s text. It can then be argued that children will learn and benefit

more from the subtleties and metaphors within their favourite picture books, rather than the text. Children, and their emotional intelligence should therefore not be underestimated by authors and illustrators. The subtle complexities within their picture books will not be missed, perhaps they will be the child's favourite part of that story that they will carry with them through their life.

Illustrations within literature have been, and remain strong vessels of metaphor and learning. It must be noted the power that illustrations hold, especially in young minds, and even more so when it comes to difficult or sensitive topics. Picture books that provide a realistic and wide view of our society should not be shielded from children, but embraced. Children relate the messages in picture books into their own lives, especially female readers who are tired of seeing themselves portrayed as weak characters who need saving. A feminist view of the world is one of inclusivity and acceptance, and why shouldn't this be the message to the young people. There seems to be no reasonable explanation into the banning of books that may introduce children into areas of society they perhaps have not ventured before. Ignorance is not a tool that should be included in education, acceptance and inclusivity is.

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Figure List:

Figure 1: Love, J. (2018) *Julian is a Mermaid*. London: Walker Books

Figure 2: Love, J. (2018) *Julian is a Mermaid*. London: Walker Books

Figure 3: Love, J. (2018) *Julian is a Mermaid*. London: Walker Books

Figure 4: Cole, B. (1996) *Princess Smartypants*. London: Puffin