What Do We Tell the Children?
Critical Essays on Children's Literature

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Edited by

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PREFACE

What Do We Tell the Children? Critical Essays on Children's Literature is the fifth publication of the Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature (ISSCL). It follows the Society's publication of *Studies in Children's Literature 1500-2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), *Treasure Islands: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), *Divided Worlds: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007) and *Young Irelands: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011). The editors of this collection of essays would like to express their sincere gratitude to the following for their support and encouragement: the president of the Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature, Marian Thérèse Keyes; the members of the ISSCL committee, Nora Maguire, Anne Markey, Áine McGillicuddy, Beth Rodgers and Julie Anne Stevens; and past committee members Keith O'Sullivan and Pádraic Whyte. A particular debt of gratitude is due to the members of the ISSCL editorial review board whose expert advice was invaluable: Evelyn Arizpe, Matthew Grenby, Peter Hunt, Vanessa Joosen, Celia Keenan, Emer O' Sullivan, Pat Pinsent and David Rudd. We would also like to thank Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar from Cambridge Scholars Press.

INTRODUCTION

CIARA NÍ BHROIN AND PATRICIA KENNON

It is over a quarter of a century since Jacqueline Rose (1984) drew attention to the power imbalance in the ideologically fraught relation of adult writer to child reader. Rose's argument, that children's literature perpetuates adult fantasies about childhood purity rather than reflecting the desires, characteristics or interests of actual children, exposed for analysis the inconsistencies in a system of texts written for and about children but by adults: "if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (1984, 2). As evidenced by the 2010 Fall themed edition of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Rose's controversial rejection of the possibility of children's literature continues to challenge children's literature criticism. Concepts of childhood and children's status within socio-cultural regimes of power have been problematized as part of this subsequent interrogation of issues of authority and power between the generations. However, as John Stephens (2002) has argued, "the adult's domination over the child appears so complete and so seamless—so a part of the obviousness of childhood—that for some even raising the issue of the child's subjugation seems ridiculous" (xviii). Following Rose, critics such as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) deny the existence of children's literature and its criticism as anything other than adult constructs based on a false view of children as a homogenous group that can be easily defined and addressed.

While acknowledgement of the gap between writer and reader peculiar to children's literature is now commonplace, the contention that children's literature primarily serves adult needs and interests has been contested (Watson 1992; Rudd 2004, 2010; Reynolds 2007; Griswold 2011). The imbalance between adult writer and child reader need not necessarily be malign and young people are far from powerless in the reading process. Even so, there is now a widespread acknowledgment that all texts are ideological and that those produced by adults for children are especially so (Sutherland 1985; Hollindale 1988; Stephens 1992).

> "Since a culture's future is, to put it crudely, invested in its children, children's writers often take upon themselves the task of trying to mould audience attitudes into 'desirable' forms, which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose" (Stephens 1992, 3).

There is a potential tension between the subjectivity of child readers and the implicit authorial control which Peter Hunt (1988) identified as a characteristic marker of the discourse of children's fiction. This tension is suggested by the title of this volume of critical essays which aims to interrogate what adult writers "tell" their child readers about the world, the power relations informing society and what adults consider to be young people's appropriate place in these regulatory systems. Its focus is on fiction addressed at readers from mid-childhood to young adulthood.

Peter Hollindale has argued that "to write books for children, and to write about them, is a political act" (1997, 11). However, this political endeavour is problematized by the elusive nature of the figure of the child and a deep adult ambivalence around how to interpret and mediate the fluidity of childhood experience:

> "Often, in our rhetoric, the child embodies change, its threat and its potential. The child, both literally and metaphorically, is always in the process of becoming something else" (Jenkins 1998, 5).

Thus, a central concern of this volume is investigating how concepts of childhood operate within a field of adult anxieties, desires and hopes which propel the utilization of children's literature as a powerful means of socializing and acculturating its target audience, conveying, overtly or covertly, normalizing messages about how to behave, conform and interact with the world around them.

What kinds of knowledge and experience are considered to be appropriate, desirable and even necessary for young audiences? Who is involved in this decision-making process? How are these attitudes and ideologies produced, managed and circulated? Adult writers, publishers and critics "construct children variously as readers, consumers, producers of meaning, as gendered and class-inflected, as politicized or as its opposites, erased, unspoken and passive" (Thompson 2004, 10). While the conceptualization of childhood as a space and time of innocence has saturated many mechanisms for the socialization and regulation of young people—not least, the powerful instrument of story—the power of the media, the marketplace and the flow of consumer culture in today's globalized world have led to a commodification of childhood that

problematizes the notion of innocence (Zipes 2001; Pattee 2006; Bullen 2009; Napoli 2012). The essays in this collection aim to interrogate how regimes of power and adult authority inscribe norms and notions of belonging, difference and autonomy for young audiences. The various sections address a range of experiences and ways of knowing: the treatment and mediation of relationship between self and gendered embodiment, the configuration of attitudes around representing mortality and pain for young audiences, the power dynamics informing concepts of national identity and global citizenship, the conditioning forces at work in educational and recreational texts for children and, ultimately, the potential for young people to exercise agency and autonomy in critically interpreting media produced by adults and speaking for themselves as equals in the participatory culture of the twenty-first century.

The first section of the collection focuses on performances and government of gender identity and the body in children's fiction. The recognition of children's embodiment and the acceptance of the consequences of the attendant experiences of materiality, sexuality and mortality, are difficult for many adults to accommodate in relation to concepts of childhood innocence and purity. The chapters in this section examine how youth literature and popular culture contribute to the inscription of particular gender ideologies on young people. The commodification of children's literature and its appropriation as an instrument of capitalism and of cultural homogenization are also addressed. Kerry Mallan examines the configurations of gender and sexuality in recent children's fiction in light of the regulatory pressures of heteronormativity and considers the potential for expanding and enriching concepts of masculinity and femininity for young readers. Analyzing a range of texts including the commercially successful *Go Girl*! and *Totalgirl* series directed at "tweens", Mallan considers the role and accountability of the publishing and culture industries in this arena of socialization and emphasizes the importance of providing counter narratives to hegemonic systems of being gendered and ways of knowing gender. While there has been significant research investigating the strategies, ideologies and material practices of the commodification of childhood through the socializing medium of literature (Pattee 2006; Bullen 2009; Napoli 2012), "the trick with and tension around consuming children always returns to their uneasy status as knowing, choosing subjects" (Cook 2004, 69).

Michele Gill addresses the controversial issue of teenage prostitution and the commodification of the male body in her study of agency, Otherness and authenticity in realistic fiction for young adults. She notes

how this genre is situated within tensions and ambiguities about youth sexuality and the subversive roles that young people can play: while the young male protagonists may ultimately be casualties of their circumstances, they also actively collude in their sexualization and are therefore neither passive nor wholly victims. She concludes that this ambivalence ultimately allows complex, multi-dimensional portrayals of young males involved in sex work, thus affording readers the potential to review their expectations about the innocence and experience of youth. Norma Clarke continues this investigation regarding ideologies of "suitability" and "appropriate content" in her discussion of Melvin Burgess's writing for teenagers and the popular and critical reception to his contentious, uncompromising and unflinching depiction of adolescent sexual activity and experimentation. Considering the question of whether children's authors and publishers have a special responsibility to society and their young readers, she probes the generic boundaries of children's literature and the conventional classification of childhood as an asexual space, arguing instead that what is truly needed and appropriate is the realistic, complex and authentic representation of adolescent sexual activity and experience.

The second section of the volume addresses a demanding challenge for children's writers: how to mediate an uncomfortable and often taboo territory—suffering, bereavement and death—for young audiences. While a well-intentioned tendency of adults can be to shield children in their care from potentially upsetting kinds of knowledge of pain and violence, this protective impulse is situated within a constellation of concepts and assumptions about children's state of innocence and their attendant vulnerability to what might be considered "dark" ideas and experiences. Nora Maguire raises thought-provoking questions about the representation of trauma and cultural memory in children's historical fiction in her investigation of how John Boyne portrays the Holocaust in his 2006 crossover novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas.* Reading this narrative as a text of childhood as well as a children's text, she examines the nature of the book's addresses to adult and to child readers and investigates, not only "what we tell the children", but also "what we adults tell ourselves" about the Holocaust through childhood. In her discussion of the novel's historical inaccuracies and problematic reliance on stereotypes of Jewish and German identity, she emphasizes the text's systematic misrepresentation of this traumatic period, its mythologizing of childhood innocence and the troubling political and ethical dimensions of its sanitization and homogenization of history. Continuing this study of the simplifying and reifying impulse of some adult-produced texts for young

audiences, Jane Suzanne Carroll draws upon Susan Cooper's fantasy novel, *The Dark Is Rising* (1973), and its subsequent adaptations for cinema and radio in her analysis of how the medium of landscape can provide a valuable space for young people to reflect on the complex interdependence of life and death. Drawing upon theories of topography, Caroll considers the ideological shifts regarding the representation of death across the various versions of this text. She ultimately argues that the film adaptation's silencing and mitigation of death fail to sufficiently problematize the relationship between good and evil and thus fail to appropriately support its transitional audience's emotional and psychological needs.

Essays in the third section of the volume address issues of inclusion and exclusion regarding concepts of nation, sameness and difference in the world of children's literature. The "imagined communities" of nation (Anderson 1983) play out their dramas of power relationships, belonging and segregation across the imaginative landscape of diverse storyworlds. Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha (1990) have challenged concepts of a unique, hegemonic and stable national identity and instead emphasized concepts of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence and displacement. Shehrazade Emmambokus thus considers the representation of Muslim characters and culture in a post-9/11 mediascape, exploring the negotiation of the global, the national and the personal in recent teenage fiction from the South Asian Diaspora. Considering the bibliotherapeutic impact of these novels and their potential for reassuring and inspiring their adolescent readers to feel valued as equal citizens, she stresses the importance of recognizing the ways in which the international media industry and the children's book world produce, inscribe and circulate conservative notions about cultural identity. Emmambokus emphasizes the value of texts which not only respect the complexity of how young people learn and negotiate ideas of cultural sameness, difference and plurality but which celebrate these young global citizens' right to choose who they want to be during this enculturation process. Anne Markey investigates how the Irish writers, Kate Thompson and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, invoke tropes of fantasy, traditional storytelling and folklore as strategies for their respective negotiation and construction of concepts of Irishness for contemporary Irish and international children. Markey identifies a duality in twenty-first-century Irish children's literature's deployment of the English and Irish languages and its construction and representation of modern Irish society. Tracking the placement of recent works by these two authors within the trajectory and agendas of the international marketplace and adult perceptions of national identity, she concludes that Thompson's

endorsement of an essential Irish identity neglects the shifting divisions of history and the complicated realities of contemporary Ireland. However, she argues that Ní Dhuibhne's work emphasizes the construction of identity as a dynamic process that meaningfully and richly blends allegiances to the past with an empowering orientation towards the future. In her study of the treatment of Japanese-Canadian internment in Joy Kogawa's historical narrative *Obasan* (1981) and its subsequent adaptations for children, Eimear Hegarty probes the processes of appropriation and reclamation of the past and the transmission of cultural memory from the adult generation to children through the socializing mechanism of children's fiction. Tracing the relationship between young people's self-invention and self-reflection, Hegarty discusses the various versions of Kogawa's autobiographical story and how the child reader is respectively positioned regarding concepts of cultural memory, national inheritance and the constitution of Canadian identity

The history of children's literature has been bound up with the agendas of various stakeholders to manage children's literature for their respective ideological purposes. The next section of the volume explores how childhood was constituted and managed through the cultural practices of children's fiction and print media in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish and British society. In her exploration of issues of gender, nation and class in the works of L.T. Meade and Raymond Jacberns, Beth Rodgers investigates the tensions between the didactic and the empowering in school stories for girls in late-Victorian Britain and Ireland and considers the genre's potential for developing young readers' sense of self and agency. Despite this genre's reputation for conservatism, Rodgers argues that girls' school stories offer their young readers an alternative mode of self-identification and that the stories' focus on creating successful female communities should be read within the wider feminist discourse and context of the late-nineteenth-century Woman Question. Marnie Hay addresses the political ideologies and politicizing agenda around issues of gender, nation and citizenship in early-twentieth-century propaganda material generated for Irish children by advanced nationalist groups such as the Inghinidhe na hÉireann. Exploring the strategies deployed by such organizations in cultivating particular concepts of national identity and patriotism, Hay investigates how these media and cultural products were designed to cultivate and recruit the political sympathies and loyalties of Irish youth for the services of the Irish nation at a time of increasing nationalism and political transformation.

The final section of the collection is dedicated to the possibility of recognizing and supporting children's own voices, responses and

perspectives in contemporary children's literature. While the didactic impulse of texts for young audiences is indeed powerful, reading is a dialectic process in which young people construct their own meanings. Kay Sambell poses provocative questions about the impact of today's surveillance culture, the allure of celebrity and the immersive nature of consumer culture on young people's capacity for understanding themselves and also their potential for self-invention in her study of Melvin Burgess's novel, *Sara's Face* (2006). In contrast to the saturating tendencies of contemporary adult media and society to position the figure of the teenage girl as consumed by the controlling gaze of the outside world, Sambell argues that Burgess's novel explicitly contests this passive model of victimhood through an ambitious and successful relocation of the act of surveillance, so that the watched, not the watchers, are offered new forms of control and power. The final chapter turns the question of "what do we tell the children?" in a child-centred and inclusive direction: "what do the children hear?" Kimberley Reynolds explores the frictions between telling and hearing, adult authority and adolescent meaning-making, in relation to two recent plays for adolescents, and ultimately questions the credibility of children's literature itself in the eyes of its intended audience. Emphasizing the importance of young people's capacity to speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for by adult writers and the media, Reynolds considers the provision of open-ended, non-hierarchical and discursive forums for dialogue between the generations in contemporary society. She stresses the need for opportunities for adolescents to construct independently images of themselves and affirms the potential of the internet for enabling young people's active experimentation with different voices and ideas.

The stories children are directed towards, given access to and that they encounter provide them with the crucial instruments of "images, vocabularies, attitudes and structures to think about themselves, what happens to them and how the world around them operates" (Reynolds 2005, 3). However, since ideology is "an inevitable, untameable and largely uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children" (Hollindale 1988, 10), child readers need to be equipped to recognize and interrogate the ideology of fictional texts. In particular, they need to be made aware of narrative point of view, since this serves to construct subject positions and inscribe ideological assumptions (Stephens 1992, 56). While some fictions construct a passive subject position for child readers (as suggested by this volume's title) others, such as the carnivalesque texts identified by Stephens or the radical fiction explored by Reynolds (2007), encourage a fuller dialectic. The project of

sufficiently honouring the equity of youth experience and the integrity of their perspective still remains an ongoing challenge for the adult status quo, requiring as it does a reconceptualization of childhood and the associated power relations between adults and young people. We hope that this collection illuminates how texts may serve to perpetuate and also to question regimes of childhood and adulthood and that the following essays provide valuable insights into the processes of interpretation, negotiation, reflection, construction of norms and modes of surveillance which saturate encounters between adult storytellers, storytelling and young audiences.

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PART I

WHAT DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY AND THE BODY?

(UN)DOING GENDER: WAYS OF BEING IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

KERRY MALLAN

Children's literature has conventionally and historically been concerned with identity and the often tortuous journey to becoming a subject who is generally older and wiser, a journey typically characterized by mishap, adventure, and detours. Narrative closure in children's and young adult novels and films typically provides a point of self-realization or self-actualization, whereby the struggles of finding one's "true" identity have been overcome. In this familiar coming-of-age narrative, there is often an underlying premise of an essential self that will emerge or be uncovered. This kind of narrative resolution provides readers with a reassurance that things will work for the best in the end, which is an enduring feature of children's literature, and part of liberal-humanism's project of harmonious individuality. However, uncertainty is a constant that has always characterized the ways lives are lived, regardless of best-laid plans. Children's literature provides a field of narrative knowledge whereby readers gain impressions of childhood and adolescence, or more specifically, knowledge of ways of being at a time in life, which is marked by uncertainty. Despite the prevalence of children's texts which continue to offer normative ways of being, in particular, normative forms of gender behaviour, there are texts which resist the pull for characters to be "like everyone else" by exploring alternative subjectivities. Fiction, however, cannot be regarded as a source of evidence about the material realities of life, as its strength lies in its affective and imaginative dimensions, which nevertheless can offer readers moments of reflection, recognition, or, in some cases, reality lessons. As a form of cultural production, contemporary children's literature is highly responsive to social change and political debates, and is crucially implicated in shaping the values, attitudes and behaviours of children and young people.

In this chapter I examine a selection of texts for young people that offer fictional imaginings of ways of being that preserve as well as challenge existing normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. To

grasp what these texts propose in terms of the contexts of our present time is to see what adults regard as desirable possibilities or cautionary tales for young people "in the face of a diverse, uncertain, and complex future" (Bindé 2000, 57). The texts I have chosen deal with these contradictory perspectives. I take my title from Judith Butler's book *Undoing Gender* (2004), and, following Butler's lead, I want to interrogate both the doing and undoing of gender with respect to conceptions of a sexual and gendered life, and particularly as it is narrativized in the examples of children's texts. I argue that despite contemporary children's texts' attempts to reflect the changing social and political landscape of the world in which they are produced, a heterosexual matrix is constantly invoked in stories of childhood and adolescence. For Butler, the heterosexual matrix produces sex, gender, and heterosexuality through which the subject is rendered intelligible, and thereby certain "identities" (transgenders, homosexuals, lesbians, even racial minorities) cannot "exist" (Butler 1990, 17). The discussion examines the part played by homophobia, consumerism, coming-out, cross-dressing, and same-sex marriage in challenging or supporting the oppositional logic of heterosexism, a logic based on a gender binary. I begin with a brief framing of the issues that emerge in theorizing conceptions of gender drawing on the work of Judith Butler, before moving on to examine how texts for young people attempt to represent and interrogate identity and social practices that impact gender identity and subjectivity.

Doing and undoing gender

Butler's argument is that "if gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical" (2004, 2). Butler's notion of gender as a performative act has been extensively cited, criticized, and endorsed by scholars across various disciplines. The view that gender is more an activity, a "doing", than a natural attribute is one that is widely accepted within social constructivist frameworks (see for example: Buchbinder 1998; Flanagan 2007). According to Butler, "one is always 'doing' gender with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary" (2004, 1). However, *doing* gender does not mean that we are authors of our own gender, as the terms that constitute our gender are beyond the individual and arise from within a sociality that has no single author. We might enact our own stylized version of a gender, but these are variations on a theme that have been long established before we came into being. These framing narratives about ways of being male or female are

what Butler terms "regulatory fictions" as they attempt to regulate and impose limits on what is possible within normative conceptions of gender. For individuals who are transgender, transsexual or intersex, their bodies do not conform to the imposed ideals that a gender binary dictates. However, individuals are not without agency as they can *un*do gender by not living up to normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity. This undoing is not without difficulties as actions are open to assessment, criticism, ridicule, and censure.

*Un*doing gender can result in *becoming undone* in both positive and negative ways. By refusing to comply with the normative conceptions of gender one can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to enjoy what Butler terms a "liveable life" (2004, 1). This is especially the case when one is rejected or marginalized because of one's choice. In refusing to be part of a set of norms that are at odds with one's sense/experience of self, it is preferable to choose an alternative version of norms and ideals that enable one to act in a way that offers a life that is more sustaining and more human. In the following discussion, I explore the consequences of "becoming undone" for the fictional characters.

Doing masculinity: new boys on the dock

Adolescence may appear as the site of a free-floating play of desire. However, this utopian idea masks the extent to which heterosexuality is privileged in the narrative and discursive construction of adolescence. The disjuncture between the assimilation of same-sex and opposite-sex desire is one that emerges in the following discussion of David McRobbie's young adult novel *Tyro* (1999). Except in a limited generic field such as the coming-out narrative, discussed subsequently, heterosexuality is already in place as the default sexual orientation. As a framing narrative, heterosexuality sets its own regulatory actions and limits as noted above. One of these regulatory practices is name-calling.

The presumption that some people are more or less human than others is a problem that has plagued civilization for millennia. Nomenclatures such as freaks, poofters, weirdos and lesos, serve to name difference and to separate or ghettoize people who resist normative forms of gender and sexuality. People who do not visibly appear to fit the normative conception of gender and sexuality not only pose a threat to the dominant social order, but are often subjected to acts of violence and harassment. Name-calling and its detrimental effects are an element of children's and young adult fiction and extend to characters who are perceived as different from the dominant group for reasons of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, religious

belief, or disability. In the case of gay males, the desire to be one of the boys is a significant part of the identification with masculine solidarity, even when the costs of such identification are high. As David Buchbinder (1998) notes, patriarchal power operates through exclusion and marginalization. Same sex desire for females is often treated as a passing phase or a pathology in need of treatment and cure (see Mallan 2004; McInally 2003).

Ways in which enclaves of "them" and "us" are enforced, and the effects of marginalization, supply the dominant theme for exploring homosocial desire and embodied masculinity in *Tyro*. Just as in a heterosexual frame where women are the object of the male gaze, when it is directed on other males, the gaze is a means of both surveillance and voyeurism. In this novel, class intersects with gender and sexuality. The novel provides an example of how the categorical distinction between the two terms of standard binary axis of sexual orientation—heterosexuality and homosexuality—works within and across masculinity and male sub-cultures, defined by class and workplace hierarchies.

The setting is a Scottish shipyard in 1953, a time and place where rigid rules for gender and sexual conformity were enforced. Part of the initiation rites at the dockyard is to strip the new apprentice and grease his genitals. The perpetrators see this transgressive act as a leveller, a way of erasing class and workplace hierarchies and ensuring that the new kid on the dock becomes one of the boys. The new apprentice, Andrew, is marked from the beginning of the story as "a member o' the upper crust" (14) because of his middle-class background and manner of speaking and behaving. He responds to the name-calling and other acts of marginalization by attempting to "fit in" with the perpetrators, Jack Coultree and his lackeys, The Tigers. However, when Andrew is subjected to the humiliating act of genital greasing, he tries to report it to the police, but his complaint falls on deaf ears. He realizes that any whistle blowing will be quickly quashed and so he has to be seen to be going along with the initiating behaviours in order to access the power and privilege associated with shipyard masculine solidarity. When another apprentice, Oliver, is initiated he does not return to the shipyard, too humiliated and shamed that his "small penis" was seen by the bully boys. Only Jimmy Edgar is prepared to separate himself from the group and to name the greasing ritual for what it is, an act of personal violation or what Jimmy terms colloquially, an act of "bastardry" (51). However, Jimmy, too, pays the price for his decision to stand apart from the others, as he is subjected to taunts and name-calling about his perceived homosexuality.

While the homophobic acts and name-calling directed at Jimmy are a

way of securing the solidarity of the homosocial group, they are also regulatory acts which attempt to ensure that heterosexuality remains the privileged discourse and that any hint of homosexual desire that could disrupt the sexual taboos of patriarchal masculinity and heteronormativity is literally wiped out. This is an ironic move as the stripping, touching and viewing of the male genitals during the greasing is not regarded by the perpetrators as a sexual violation or an incident of homoerotic play. *Tyro* illustrates most cogently Judith Butler's point that every identification comes at a cost. What this story demonstrates is that for straight males who reject the patriarchal order there is a cost to pay in "undoing" their perceived allegiance to hegemonic masculinity. For gay males, they are already engaging in the risk that comes with refusing to abide by the norms of mainstream gender and sexuality. *Tyro* is not a coming-out story, but it provides readers with subtle lines of thought regarding a subject's ability to live a life according to his own desires, especially when those desires may be seen as disruptive to a heterosexual ontology and epistemology.

Doing femininity: girlie style

A visit to any children's bookshop will reveal shelves of books targeting girl readers aged from eight to twelve years, or "tweens" as they are now categorized. There are numerous series which focus on things that girls of that age range are presumably interested in: friends, having fun, sleep overs, school, dancing, music and so on. Two examples are *Go Girl!* series (published by Hardie James Egmont) and *Totalgirl* series (published by Allen & Unwin). The books come with embossed covers packaged with Manga-style, hip, female caricatures. The caricatures on the *Totalgirl* covers are multiethnic. The stories are formulaic and didactic, resembling instructional manuals on how do to gender, girlie style. Following in the footsteps of the globally popular Idol television shows, Totalgirls—Chloe, Sarah, and Alex—dream of becoming big stars and are quickly accepted into a prestigious dance school. Whereas *Totalgirl* is dedicated to "every girl who's ever dreamt of a life in the spotlight", *Go Girl!* is promoted in the blurb as representing "real life, real girls" and focuses on minor rites of passage such as surviving a sleep over, sibling rivalry, learning to succeed at sports, and so on. The Go Girls are Annabelle, Cassie, Lola, Becky, Charlie, Lucy, and Olivia—all white, middle class girls struggling with the concerns of adolescence: Will anyone come to my pool party? How can I become a surfie girl? Learning the pitfalls of kiss chasey and the worst horror of all–turning up at dance class in the wrong clothes! These books,

like others such as the *Go Girl!* graphic novels produced by Dark Horse, provide old-fashioned, puerile plots, catty girls, and superficial values wrapped up in a veneer of postfeminist hype.

Commentating on similar books targeting teenage girls such as *Gossip Girl* written by Cecily von Ziegesar, *A-List* by Zoey Dean, and *The Clique* series by Lisi Harrison, Naomi Wolf (2006) says they represent a new kind of young adult fiction that features a different kind of heroine. In contrast to their tween counterparts, these girls are not suffering girlish identity crises; they are outspoken, in a word EMPOWERED! But as Wolf says, they are empowered to hire party planners, draw up a petition calling for the cafeteria ladies serving their lunches to get manicures, and humiliate the "sluts" in their classes. Wolf calls these "bad girl" books not because of the tacky sex scenes in them but because of the value system they promote: meanness rules, parents "check out", conformity is everything. Stressed-out adult values are presumed to be meaningful to teenagers. The books, like those for younger girls, have a kitsch quality, but whereas the *Go Girl!* series deals with catty girls and harmless plots, these, according to Wolf, package corruption with a cute overlay. There is some truth to what Wolf says, but more important is the fact that despite the proliferation and popularity of girl series such as these, girl readers do not receive many positive messages about their sexuality or positive forms of femininity, which are not based on competition and consumerism. The girls in the *A-List* and *Gossip Girl* series like to shop and the fruits of their labour—the Prada bags, designer clothes and top drawer technological aids—are the means for identification and status in their world. However, the intertextuality extends into the paratext where the clothing featured on the cover is credited to the designer and a website is provided just in case the reader wishes to buy a similar outfit.

In a related way, the Bratz dolls have swept many children and their mothers into a buying frenzy. These ten-inch sexy, party dolls with their marketing slogan—"a passion for fashion"—have enormous amounts of hair, pouty lips, made-up eyes, over-sized heads, and street-chic outfits. Given the targeted age of consumers for Bratz dolls (under eight years generally), it is surprising that the profiling of the Bratz girls includes adult tastes (e.g. Yasmin's "fave food": Mediterranean food; "fave movies": romantic comedies; "fave books": chick lit with happy endings; and "fave music": Black Eyed Peas).

In addition to these examples of girlie-style femininity, other young adult texts attempt a counter narrative which looks at the negative consequences of a commodified femininity, particularly the ideal body and appearance that can come from cosmetic surgery. Melvin Burgess

tackles both celebrity culture and the body dysmorphic disorder in *Sara's Face* (2006), a cautionary tale for modern times. While Burgess treats the subject in a journalistic style by an unnamed narrator, he manages to convey caution about cosmetic surgery in today's beauty-obsessed world. At one point the unscrupulous surgeon Dr. Kaye remarks:

> "'young girls dream of operations like this (new boobs, new tummy, new nose). It's like buying new clothes these days… I never met a woman yet who liked her body. Now, for the first time, it's possible to have anything you want'" (197).

Despite their limitations, these cultural artifacts attempt to forge new forms of subjectivity for girls which are located in a new social and economic category that previously had been the reserve of boys. Commodity culture articulates a complex of fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion which reinforces gender binary and a femininity that is consumer-oriented, superficial, and individualistic. In short, it positions girls in varying ways in relation to the rise of neoliberalism with its often schizophrenic forces which on the one hand promote a self-determining, do-it-yourself identity, and, on the other, reinforce the risk of failing to secure this idealized go-girl femininity.

The above examples of masculinity and femininity show how heterosexuality is constantly invoked in the subjectivity attached to childhood and adolescence. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, children's literature constructs narratives of personal growth or maturation, stories about relationships between the self and others, and between individuals and society. And in their preoccupation with personal growth, maturation and the development of concepts of selfhood, young adult novels frequently reflect complex ideas about subjectivity—or selfhood—in terms of personal concerns and intersubjective relations. Heterosexuality is privileged in the construction of adolescence in young adult fiction, and narratives of closeted adolescence are set against this default sexual orientation. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins (2006, 82) note that gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-queer (GLBTQ) fiction, like other literature produced for young adults, reflects trends in the larger world of publishing for both teens and adults, and "prevailing cultural, social, economic, and political attitudes". While the 1980s saw an increase in books dealing with GLBTQ issues, including gay/lesbian parents, AIDS, and gay teachers and mentors, the 1990s saw an increase in books that had gay/lesbian central characters. However, as Cart and Jenkins note, the gay character is often a secondary character, which arguably results in a narrative distancing from the gay/lesbian/ queer content.

Coming-out narratives, especially those published in the 1990s, can be seen as following either celebratory or shaming teleologies. The world "is schematised according to gender differences and a presumptive heterosexuality" (Mallan 2009, 125). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) claims that "coming-out" is first and foremost a performative act. In the act of coming-out, the person is constituted as a gay or lesbian subject, and thus obliges the observer to recognize the person as such rather than assume heterosexuality. In many young adult texts the coming-out is a moment of epiphany at the end of the story. An example is the Swedish film, *Show Me Love* (aka *Fucking Åmål*) (2000), in which the two young female (lesbian) protagonists literally come-out of the closet when they step outside of the school toilet and triumphantly walk hand-in-hand through the stunned crowd of students and teachers who presumed that one of the girls was in the toilet with a boy. What happens next in many coming-out narratives is outside of the narrative frame.

If adolescence is conceived of as a narrative construction (like the metaphor of coming-out of the closet), then the idea that it is a particular period of life that is structured by transitionality and indeterminacy is brought into question. One could ask: "Is there any time of life which is not characterized by transitionality and indeterminacy?" However, a gay/lesbian person is continually required to "come out" or "undo" normative gender expectations as part of the heternormative culture's requirement that homosexuality always be asked to account for itself. As Edmund White writes: "Since no one is brought up to be gay, the moment he recognizes the difference he must account for it" (1991, ix). A similar situation is called for people who are transgendered or intersexed. In children's fiction, the subject is usually constituted as the effect of an interval or delay between the assumption of (biological) sex and gender, on the one hand, and that of sexual orientation, on the other. A typical delay strategy to mediate gender and sexuality is cross-dressing. In some instances, cross-dressing is used as a transitory space of experimental gender play; in others, it is an indicator of a deeper same-sex desire.

Undoing gender: cross-dressing and homonormativity

Children's fictions such as Anne Fine's *Bill's New Frock* (1989) and *Alias, Madame Doubtfire* (1988), and Louis Sacher's *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?* (1993) employ the trope of cross-dressing as a means to discuss gender inequality and discriminatory social practices. However, the nature of the transgendered subject in these texts is only transitory as the masculine subject has been turned into a feminine subject by a magical

trick. This mediation of transgender through comedy has a long lineage which includes Shakespeare's cross-dressing plays, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. Cross-dressing complicates the heterosexual matrix as it draws attention to the ambiguity of gender, and those identities which cannot "exist". This was given tangible evidence when the "Concerned Women of America" complained about the market-survey questions posed on barbie.com, supposedly directed at four- to-eight-year olds, which asked about their gender, giving three options: "I am a Boy"; "I am a Girl"; and "I Don't Know". The third option was seen as a transgendered category. A Mattel spokesman quickly responded by saying that it was an innocent oversight; it should have read "I don't want to say" (Tapper 2006).

In the Belgian film, *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), seven-year-old Ludovic Fabre describes himself as a "boygirl" (*garçon-fille*): a neologism that captures the transgendered nature of his identity. When Ludo comes out at a party his family is hosting as a "welcome to our home" gesture to meet and greet their neighbours after their arrival in a middle class neighbourhood, the response from the guests is one of confusion. While his father defuses the situation by explaining to the assembled party-goers that Ludo is a bit of a trickster, his mother explains gently to Ludo, as she washes off his makeup, the inappropriateness of a child of his age (and gender) dressing up like a girl: "You're seven, Ludo. Too old to dress as a girl". Ludo simply looks puzzled by everyone's reactions.

This film demonstrates the painful consequences of undoing gender. The family is almost destroyed by internal conflict and they eventually respond to the ostracism by their neighbours by moving to a more downmarket neighbourhood after the father loses his job. Ludo and his mother become estranged. In one scene the mother coldly cuts Ludo's longish hair into a short boyish style erasing the ambiguity of his androgynous appearance. However, resolution is gained through a dream-like sequence when the Mother falls into a television fantasy space, "Pam's World". Her move out of the real world into the fantasy world and again back into the real world provides her with renewed understanding and tolerance for her son. But the film's closure leaves it to the viewer to imagine what will become of Ludo as he grows older, an open ending that is similar to the coming-out story.

While the appearance of alternative gender and sexual identities in popular culture has become more acceptable in recent years for both child and adult audiences, same-sex couples' rights in the real world remain restrictive and prohibitive. For example gay and lesbian marriage has caused heated debates in many countries as it is invariably seen as threatening marriage and parenting norms. In Australia in 2004, an episode

of the children's television programme *Playschool* which featured a same-sex family was publicly criticized by the then Prime Minister, John Howard, who made it clear that the subject matter was not for children. In the report below from an Australian newspaper, *The Age*, it is clear that the strategy of delay is being invoked as a form of protection for children from exposure to an alternative to the heterosexual matrix:

> "Mr Howard would not accept the program's claim that its 'Through The Windows' segment reflected the variety of the contemporary world. 'That doesn't wash with me and I don't think it would wash with most of your viewers,' he said. 'You're talking about a very, very small number and to intrude that into a children's program is just being politically correct and I think is an example of the ABC running an agenda'" (Wroe 2004).

In the same article, another Liberal Party politician, John Anderson, added further endorsement of binary gender and stereotypical gender roles:

> "Gays and lesbians should accept that their choice of lifestyle meant other life options were closed to them….We know that from an incredibly early age children of both sexes look to mum for nurture and warmth, dad for stimulation and play" (Wroe 2004).

A more recent example of censorship occurred in 2009 when the popular Australian television family series *Home and Away* cut a "lesbian kissing" scene after public protest. As reported in *The Australian* newspaper:

> "Some mothers contacted the network to say they didn't want their children exposed to same-sex relationships in a family show. *Home and Away* is screened at 7pm and is rated PG" (Meade 2009).

What these comments reveal is that there is a gap between the reality of many people's lives and the social conditions which both produce and obstruct those realities. Different family configurations are representative of complex societies of late modernity, and same-sex families exist in spite of restrictive governmental agendas and laws. New family configurations are reflected in literature, film, and television sitcoms, thus serving as privileged sites and sights of cultural change. However, it is my contention that despite the diversity of families represented in children's media, there remains, for the most part, a conservative strain which works against the stories' utopian enterprise. For instance, the heterosexual marriage norm remains a highly valued social arrangement, and fictional families remain tied to societal notions of "normality", even when they attempt to subvert them.

Commenting on efforts in various countries to promote lesbian and gay marriage, Judith Butler argues that matters of kinship are invariably tied to family and marriage:

> "efforts to establish bonds of kinship that are not based on a marriage tie become nearly illegible and unviable when marriage sets the terms for kinship, and kinship itself is collapsed into 'family'" (2004, 4).

Children's books have attempted to show alternatives to the heterosexual family life. However, these texts are often at pains to point out how same-sex families are different from, but in many ways are just the same as, heterosexual families. This eliding of sexual difference through an accommodating sameness appears in the picture book, *Molly's Family* (2004), by Nancy Garden and Sharon Wooding. The book's utopian impulse can be seen as founded on difference as the phrase "all kinds of families" is repeated throughout the book, and the book's cover blurb states that "even if a family is different from others, it can still be a happy, loving—and *real*—family" (emphasis in original). The story's implicit double bind emerges here in that the wording provides an explicit, sanctioned endorsement of same-sex families as being as legitimate (as real and as loving) as heterosexual families; yet at the same time it dissipates lesbian sexuality's potential for subverting power relations that exist as part of society's ideal—the patriarchal family.

Another picture book, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, tells the true story of how two male chinstrap penguins became a couple and eventually parents to a female chick named Tango. The story begins by introducing readers to the various heterosexual animal families who live at the Central Park Zoo in New York. It then continues with the familiar courting and mating narrative as follows:

> "Every year at the very same time, the girl penguins start noticing the boy penguins. And the boy penguins start noticing the girls. When the right girl and the right boy find each other, they become a couple" (2005 unpaged.)

The disruption to the heterosexual romance narrative occurs when two male penguins—Roy and Silo—prefer each other's company to that of the female penguins. Their playful and affectionate behaviour prompts the zoo attendant to think that they "must be in love". After observing the home-making techniques of the other penguins, Roy and Silo build "a nest of stones for themselves", sleeping there together like other penguin couples. However, after their failed attempts to hatch a chick from a rock, they