
'Advocating and Celebrating the Abomination of Sodomy': The Cultural Reception of Lesbian and Gay Picturebooks

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Tale of 'gay family' angers Tories. LONDON.

A schoolbook about a five-year-old girl who lives with her father and his homosexual lover has raised the ire of the Thatcher Government which is seeking to ban it. Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin is the most provocative of twenty-seven schoolbooks which have become the targets of a bitter campaign to purge the classroom of lessons on sex outside marriage. In a backlash against the permissive education policies of Leftist councils, parents at one London school burned copies of Eric and Martin and kept children home for a day in protest. Critics contend the councils, which run public schools in London's boroughs, are using sex education to promote tolerance of homosexuals at the expense of family values.

(The Courier Mail, 1986).

Reactions to lesbian and gay picture books range from fatuous public statements made by Australian politicians about school readers featuring a girl with two mums, through to current court cases over the use of the picturebook *King and King* (de Haan & Nijland 2000) in Boston classrooms (Barrett 2006). In the case of Susanne Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (1983), the book was used in government debate in London to justify the introduction of Section 28, a controversial piece of legislation which forbade the promotion of 'homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Local Government Act 1988). On the whole, these reactions have little to do with picture books. Controversies about these texts are really about much bigger social questions, such as childhood 'innocence', constructions of sexuality, paedophilia, conversion and the dissolution of the family. These simmering anxieties erupt into moral panics when the culturally sacred and/or unspeakable categories of childhood and non-normative sexualities come into contact. In this paper I will examine reactions to a range of texts, and track the similarities between the media reaction and the contents of the picturebooks themselves, and the ways that these react to and feed off each other. I will discuss some of the recurring topics of this circular relationship and consider some of the problems caused by circling these topics. For this paper I will define lesbian and gay picturebooks as fiction for children which addresses sexualities other than heterosexuality,

primarily picturebooks about children with same sex parents, such as *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (Bosche 1983). Although 'cultural reception' can be expanded to include a wide range of phenomena, for the purposes of this paper I will be relying mainly on newspaper articles addressing panics over these texts, with some forays into cyberspace and archives of parliamentary debate.

Debates about lesbian and gay children's literature revolve around notions of family. A great number of lesbian and gay picturebooks thematise familial relationships, including: Elwin and Paulse's *Asha's Mums* (1990), Combs' *ABC: A Family Alphabet Book* (2000), Aldrich's *How My Family Came to be: Daddy, Papa and Me* (2003) and Garden's *Molly's Family* (2004). Many of these picturebooks have the composition of their 'alternative family' as their primary focus, and expand the term 'family' to include those with same sex parents. On the other side of the debate there is also an obsessive focus on the family. In parliamentary debate over *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*, Baroness Knight of Collingtree asked those people who sought to repeal Section 28 'on what grounds they so deplore normal family life' (Local Government Bill 6 Dec 1999). Recently, Walter B. Jones, writing on *King and King*, warned that 'The traditional family is being attacked with an unconventional weapon: children's story books' (2005). Both sides of the debate use the same terms and concepts to argue opposing points. This odd situation illustrates the symbiotic relationship of the texts and their cultural reception.

At first glance it is difficult to understand how commentators make the rather desperate leap from picture books which represent adults who desire someone of the same sex to attacks on 'normal' family life. This process seems particularly odd as the picture books themselves almost never make any judgements about heterosexual families. The impetus behind such disproportionate reactions is not so much about the texts themselves, but is symptomatic of much larger social anxieties. Jeffrey Weeks describes moral panics as occurring 'in a climate of uncertainty' in which 'deep currents of feeling come to the surface and find expression in what are called moral panics' (Weeks 2003, p. 101). He defines moral panics as 'flurries of social anxiety, usually focusing on a condition or person, or group



of persons, who become defined as a threat to accepted social values and assumptions' (p.101). This description neatly fits the more violent reactions to lesbian and gay picture books and is a useful way of considering their cultural reception. In a climate of uncertainty over how the family is constituted, deep currents of feeling about identity and society find expression in moral panics about a book which says:

This is Eric. He lives with Jenny's dad.
(Bosche 1983)

In the resulting controversy anxieties over, for instance, a perceived discontinuity between the golden past and a future in which the nuclear family is outdated are funnelled into scapegoating gay men as child-molesters who threaten accepted social values and assumptions.

The idea of the normal is strongly linked with concepts of family. In the cultural reception of lesbian and gay picture books in mass media texts, 'family' implies the word 'normal'. Politicians worry that 'their children at school [are] being encouraged into homosexuality and being taught that a normal family with mummy and daddy was outdated' (Local Government Bill 6 Dec 1999). In other cases commentators use it sarcastically, in quotation marks, to refer to gay families. In a newspaper article entitled 'Gay mothers defend their "normal" family', a journalist remarks snidely of some picturebook authors that 'In their world, two mums and a sperm-donor gay father make them a perfectly normal, nuclear family' (Crawford 2004). Picture book texts respond to this media reaction by explaining over and over again that they are 'just like' other families. The two blue fathers in *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* are 'just like all other dads' (Valentine 1994), and the conclusion of *How My Family Came to be: Daddy and Papa and Me* says:

We play, talk, read, hug and sometimes fight, just like other families.
(Aldrich 2003)

The prevalence of this assimilationist thread in lesbian and gay picturebooks continues the debate spiralling endlessly around limiting issues such as 'normal'. In his text *The Trouble with Normal* Michael Warner considers some of

the problems with this strategy. One such problem is that extolling 'normal' embraces the standards of those who look down upon alternative families. The politicians and journalists I've quoted above are unlikely to be convinced by the argument that a boy with two fathers is 'just like' everyone else. Warner writes:

Like many stigmatized groups, gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture.
(Warner 1999, p.50)

The restrictiveness of circling around 'normal' ignores all the joys of difference and otherness, and the possibility of extending the normal beyond current definitions. As Warner warns: 'The history of the movement should have taught us to ask: whose norm?' (p.59)

So why might both sides of the debate over lesbian and gay children's literature circle around the concepts of 'family' and 'normal'? One way this problem can be understood is through conceptions of childhood and sexuality. Traditionally, gay culture has been understood as separate from family life, or even opposed to it. As Kenneth Kidd has noted, there is a 'lingering belief that homosexuality in particular is incompatible with, or even antithetical to, childhood and its culture' (Kidd 1998, p.114). In addition to this essential disparateness, gay people have been figured as actively threatening to small children. In negative responses to picture books, gay and lesbian people are constructed as sexual predators, paedophiles or converters - people seeking to turn 'little children into little homosexuals' (Chapman 2005). Opponents of *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* claim that:

the kind of teaching which condoned homosexuality as a 'valid' alternative to heterosexuality was not only undermining traditional family life and encouraging divorce, but was also linked with the increase in rapes, attacks on children and sexual crime in general.
(Chitty 2000, original emphasis)

In this case lesbians and, particularly, gay men, are not only cordoned off from the young, but deservedly so. Here

the construction of the child as innocent and vulnerable becomes relevant. As Fred Nile, the conservative Australian politician and clergyman, puts it, the books are nothing more than ‘homosexual propaganda aimed at brainwashing children at such a sensitive age.... Kids at that age are innocent until you start putting these ideas into their heads’ (Saleh 2005).

Children are figured as utterly impressionable, and sexuality as a sort of contagion: a crime against innocence. Here the idea of the ‘normal’ is implied. The word ‘normal’ works to define heterosexuality as a morally correct default position. In contrast, homosexuality is abnormal and is intent upon defiling the minds and bodies of children in order to fill the ranks. As a writer for *Conservative Truth* warns: ‘Homosexual activists [. . .] want to indoctrinate our kids with the lie that homosexuality is normal’ (Barrett 2006).

The title of my paper comes from a fairly rabid argument on a blog about the picture book *King and King* (de Haan & Nijland 2003). A participant identified only as ‘hrw’ comments:

Where, I ask, is the benefit from books advocating and celebrating the abomination of sodomy? Where is the evidence that the normalization of this unnatural sexual behavior is good for kids?
(hrw 2005)

This commentator explicitly links heterosexuality with the normal and the natural, and makes it clear that any connection between lesbian or gay people and children comprises an intention of conversion. The freedom of the medium also allows ‘hrw’ to invoke the spectre of AIDS. She or he continues:

On the contrary, such ‘literature’ serves only to paint for impressionable children a picture of the world which so far has led to 1,000,000 cases of the deadly HIV virus, hospitals crowded with the diseased, dead and dying, and countless broken homes and shattered lives.
(hrw 2005)

This connection between homosexuality and disease often hovers in more respectable public reactions to lesbian

and gay picturebooks, but is generally not made explicit. Figuring lesbian and gay people as contagious is another way that constructions of sexuality impact the reception of lesbian and gay picturebooks. Here the trope of the innocent, impressionable child is evoked and contrasted with the figure of the predatory, diseased, gay man or militant lesbian. Thinking about these two constructions also explains to some extent the fascination with family. The idea of children and gay people together seems impossible. Families in lesbian and gay picturebooks respond by asserting repeatedly that they are a family, just like other normal families.

Another reason the texts and their critics are so obsessed with ‘family’ is the problem of the public/private split. For a number of reasons, conceptions of homosexuality are strongly associated with the private. To understand this it is helpful to consider the concept of heteronormativity. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain the term:

Heteronormativity [. . .] is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.
(Berlant and Warner 1998)

This description acknowledges that the institution of heterosexuality has become so ‘normal’ and ever present that it’s not really considered a sexuality. In contrast to this asexual hegemony, homosexuality is strongly associated with sex, and therefore with the adult and the private. Therefore, it is completely unexceptional and unnoticeable to have libraries full of books about heterosexual couples, but when picturebooks featuring gay people appear in classrooms and libraries it can seem an obscene intrusion of the private into a protected public sphere. See, for example, Neil Mitchell’s scathing response to the school readers by Vicki and Brenna Harding:

If these people want to set themselves up as a pink version of the Brady Bunch, and provided they care for their children, this is no concern of ours.

But they have no right or need to use school libraries to force onto children who live in a

'normal' family the potentially confronting reality of sexual diversity. They are too young, and that is a matter to be addressed by their parents, not the library and a few militant lesbians.

(Mitchell 2003)

In this newspaper article the public/private split is used to justify the exclusion of all gay-friendly material from schools. It makes sense then that these picturebooks re-figure lesbian or gay identities as family to remove the problem of the sexualization of these identities. Lesbian and gay picturebooks claim the sacred space of family for themselves, but in doing so repeat the terms and concepts of their opposition.

Another paradox of the genre is that, while the picturebooks are promoting normality, they're also writing about difference. This problem of articulating difference within an overarching theme of normality is complicated by a restriction of language, in that the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' haven't appeared in picturebooks since the early nineties. There has also been a shift in focus over time from introducing the concept of a same sex couple and justifying it, to simply documenting the activities of a lesbian or gay couple and their children. This movement leaves a situation in which picturebooks are no longer able to say a person is gay or to explain that sometimes one man falls in love with another man. In this awkward situation the texts fall back on terms such as 'different' and 'special'. De Haan and Nijland's *King and King* (2000), Fierstein's *The Sissy Duckling* (2002), Garden's *Molly's Family* (2004), Richardson and Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) and, of course, Carson Kressley's *You're Different and That's Super* (2005) all use the words 'different' or 'special' to explain the sexuality of their characters. Relying on these terms within a discourse of normality is odd and contradictory. In *And Tango Makes Three*, for instance, the text claims that 'two penguins in the penguin house were a little bit *different*' but that they are also '*just like the other penguin couples*' (Richardson & Parnell 2005, my emphasis).

The public/private split and cultural constructions of children as vulnerable, innocent and asexual, and constructions of lesbian and gay people as predatory,

contagious and the antithesis of children help to understand the harping on 'normal' and 'family' in media reactions to lesbian and gay picturebooks. Given the very passionate reactions these picturebooks can evoke, the presence of these same obsessions in the picturebooks is also understandable. But this deadlock is not productive. For one thing, controversies continue, regardless of how blandly normal the families in lesbian and gay picturebooks are. For instance, one of the school readers by Brenna and Vicki Harding opens:

Today my mums and I are working in our backyard. Jed is coming over with his two dads. We are all going to make a cubby house. We've got hammers and nails and a shed full of wood.

(Hardings 2005)

This text is about two white middle-class suburban families who spend a day building in the back yard, but has been denounced in New South Wales parliament as 'an outrageous attempt to brainwash our kids' (West 2005). Circling round the concepts of 'normal' and 'family' also limits the interest level of the picturebooks themselves, as the plots of the texts and even the language used is repeated again and again. Hiding behind normalcy doesn't make for interesting reading, nor is it effective camouflage for avoiding moral panics. In order to further the political and aesthetic merits of lesbian and gay picturebooks we need to get past 'normal' and 'family'.

Two recent lesbian and gay picturebooks from the Netherlands have made the leap away from 'normal' and 'family': *King and King*, published in 2000, and *Hello, Sailor*, published in 2003. *King and King* is about a prince who 'has never much cared for princesses' and how he finds love (de Haan & Nijland 2000). It is a clever and funny fairytale re-figuring with lavish multi-lingual collage illustrations. In contrast, *Hello, Sailor* is a haunting and sad picturebook about Matt, who is waiting in his lighthouse for his friend Sailor to come back from sea so they can sail around the world together (Godon 2003). The illustrator of *Hello, Sailor*, Ingrid Godon, is credited as the main creator of the picturebook, which has 'words by Andre Sollie'. This book, like *King and King*, is more about aesthetics than politics. They're literary books, well

written and beautifully illustrated, with high production values, which mean challenges to the books have to focus on the content of the texts, not excuses of presentation. The books are also notable as they are about adult men who are in love with one another, rather than same sex headed families. The characters make no claim for 'normal' and do not discuss family, but by telling absorbing stories about engaging gay characters, they perform their politics in an effective manner.

These picturebooks are not immune from controversy. Two fundamentalist Christian couples in Boston are suing their school board for reading *King and King* aloud in the classroom without obtaining written permission first (Jan 2006). However, challenges to even the most conscientiously normal of these picturebooks continue. *King and King* and *Hello, Sailor*; as well as being engaging children's literature, define debate on their own terms, rather than circling obsessively around the themes raised by critics opposed to alternative families. In these two texts I see the future of the lesbian and gay picturebook genre – away from the normal family.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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