

***JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE: THE KNOWLEDGE/IGNORANCE  
BINARY IN CENSORSHIP AND LESBIAN AND GAY  
PICTUREBOOKS***

by

**LIAN JUDITH BEVERIDGE**

**Dip. Creative Arts, The University of Melbourne 2004.**

**B.A. (Hons), The University of Melbourne, 2005.**

**M.A., Simon Fraser University, 2007.**

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I analyse lesbian and gay picturebooks and the discourse of a censorship challenge to these books. I take a deconstructive approach to the material, using queer theory, children's literature criticism and children's culture theory to analyse the ways in which the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries are reinscribed and undone in these discourses. I focus on absences of LGBT-specific language, physical bodies, difference and non-normative gender identities in the picturebooks, and analyse a wide range of media in a challenge in Lexington, Massachusetts which began in 2005. I argue that both the books and the discourse of the challenge have the effect of reinscribing a construction of the ideal child as ignorant and asexual. This conceptualisation of childhood dismisses actual children's ability to absorb, challenge or disseminate knowledge, and refuses to offer them possibilities of non-normative genders and sexualities for their lives.

I argue that, due to the focus on sexuality and the unavoidably pedagogical nature of children's literature, the picturebooks inherently trouble the knowledge/ignorance binary. Due to this disruptive condition the normalising politics of the picturebooks are inadequate to prevent the books from becoming controversial. Queer picturebooks that resisted normalisation and represented real difference would better respect the intellectual and emotional needs of child readers.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

*Chadwick: First, from Massachusetts, the story of a fairy tale that got a teacher sued for reading it to her second grade class. The story is about two gay princes. Several parents objected to it, some sighted [sic] religious beliefs. School officials say gay marriage is legal in Massachusetts, teachers have an obligation to talk about it. [ . . . ]*

*Ms. Robin Wirthlin (Parent): And suddenly it was love at first sight and you see the hearts and butterflies flying between the two of them and they kiss at the end of the book. [ . . . ] And I thought, What are they trying to teach these children? [ . . . ]*

*Smith: [this incident], she says, violated her religious freedom and her right to privacy.*

*Ms. Wirthlin: It makes me think that they are trying to indoctrinate the children and normalize and affirm homosexuality before the parents have had an opportunity to present a balanced view.*

-“Teacher, School Sued” n. pag.<sup>1</sup>

In this National Public Radio Broadcast Robin Wirthlin discusses the time a teacher read Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland’s picturebook *King and King* to Wirthlins’ seven-year-old son. This excerpt exemplifies how LGBT picture books have come to be used as tools in larger cultural debates around sexuality and childhood.

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<sup>1</sup> I have corrected a misspelling of “Wirthlin” in the original transcript.

In this dissertation I examine adult cultural constructions of childhood innocence in lesbian and gay picturebooks and in the discourse of a debate over the place of such books in elementary classrooms in Lexington, Massachusetts. More specifically, I analyse how both the picturebooks themselves and debate over them employ and reinforce the binary opposition between knowledge and ignorance. The picturebooks and the discourse that surrounds the challenge generally construct the ideal child as innocent, ignorant, asexual and entirely vulnerable. At the same time, and ironically, the picturebooks inherently undermine the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries in that they contain information about sexuality. The picturebooks and those defending them would better serve actual child readers if they embraced this disruptive position rather than attempting to mute it.

## **Definitions**

By “knowledge/ignorance binary” I mean the ways concepts of knowledge, information, fact, opinion, indoctrination, education, maturity and wisdom are constructed in opposition to concepts of ignorance, innocence, purity, secrecy, protection, age-appropriateness, vulnerability and emptiness. The knowledge/ignorance binary is tightly related to the adult/child binary, and specifically the reasons adults desire childhood innocence, and the ways in which they enforce it. The knowledge/ignorance binary inescapably invokes the binary of guilt and innocence, as sexuality is linked, in many Western cultures, with the Fall of Adam and Eve. I argue that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “innocence” is the “sentimental privileging of ignorance”

(*Epistemology* 7). Therefore, I use the terms “innocence” and “ignorance” more or less synonymously (I explore this topic in more detail in Chapter Two).

In her essay on the definition of a “child” Karin Lesnik-Oberstein writes “although the idea that ‘children’s literature’ might pose problems of definition is often accepted and discussed by critics, the idea that the ‘child’ might pose equal—if not greater—problems of definition is strenuously resisted” (17). She traces a trajectory of criticism that engages with the problem of defining the “child.” Philippe Ariès’ *Centuries of Childhood* is a key text discussing the shifting, contradictory and historically bound concept of the child. As Margaret King writes in her article “Concepts of Childhood”:

Ariès’s greatest contribution [. . .] is his insistence on the historicity of childhood: that childhood was not an essential condition, a constant across time, but something that changed—or, if childhood itself, bound by biologically- and psychologically-determined phases of development, is constant, then the understanding of it differed, as did the way it was experienced by both adults and children. (372)

Jacquelyn Rose further complicates the definition of the child by acknowledging that “children’s literature rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple” (1), but actually “a set of divisions—of class, culture and literacy—[. . .] undermine any generalized concept of the child” (7). In this dissertation I am primarily interested in the ways in which adults construct the idea of “the child.” As Rose argues, “What we have been given instead is a glorification of the child. This suggests not only a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood; it implies that we *use* the image of the child to

deny those same difficulties in relation to ourselves” (8). I rely on the work of these theorists in my analysis of constructions of the ideal child as simple and ignorant. Although I speak in broad terms of adults and children, there are, of course multiple competing discourses and resistances within both groups. Following Foucault, I “conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable” (Foucault 100).

The definition of “child” is complicated by the many different types of children we may mean we use the term “child.” The term may refer to the actual child, the implied child reader, the ideal child, and the remembered child, among others. These categories are overlapping, and the distinctions between them are difficult to maintain in any sustained discussion of childhood.

The actual child may be understood as the flesh-and-blood child, such as that person sitting in our classroom, borrowing books in our library, or eating at our kitchen table. There is, as I will discuss, an absence of actual children in this dissertation.

The term “implied child reader” is a variation of Iser’s term “implied reader,” which “incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process” (qtd. in Nodelman and Reimer 17). In other words, it is the “role a text implies *and* invites a reader to take on” (Nodelman and Reimer 16). Children’s literature theorists such as Aidan Chambers, Peggy Whalen-Levitt and Mavis Reimer have taken up Iser’s theories of the implied reader to think about the complexities of a child written by an adult author. The child created by children’s literature is the focus of Chapter 3.



Fictional children populate the picturebooks under analysis. In some ways this child performs a similar role to the implied child reader, as the texts rarely engage in postmodern literary strategies, or encourage the implied child reader to know more than the fictional protagonist. In other ways, the implied child reader must have more knowledge of sexuality than the fictional children in these books, in order to make sense of the texts. The works of queer theorists writing on childhood are also frequently about fictional children, but these are, as I will discuss, children written for adults, as these theorists tend to analyse the works of canonical authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Oscar Wilde, rather than literature written for implied child audiences.

The ideal child is the future child, the imagined child, the child we all *should* have been. It is closely tied up with adult memories of our childhoods, as they were, or as we wish they were. The desire for the ideal future child and the past self as child are entangled. In their introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley write that utopianism and nostalgia follow the child “around like a family pet” (xiii). This child is, I argue, the primary one under debate in the censorship case, and therefore the focus of Chapter 4.

A slightly different ideal child is the focus of queer theorists: the queer child. Their ideal child is no less imagined, and no less associated with adult memories, but is not idealised or nostalgic, rather being associated with death, sex, money and power. The queer child is, perhaps, the dystopic version of the ideal child. This child is discussed primarily in Chapter 2.

Slippage between these categories is inescapable. As I mentioned, ideas about the remembered child affect ideas about the ideal child, while ideas about the ideal child affect the implied child created in children's literature. Lives of actual children are often used as a focus for debates over the way in which we define the ideal child, and real children become confused with the ideal. Ideas about the ideal child and the implied child reader have effects on actual children. For instance, I argue that the picturebooks write a fictional child character and also create an implied child reader who is ignorant of homophobia, even when discrimination is directed towards them. This implied reader is aligned with the ideal child under debate in the censorship case, who is, and should be, ignorant about homophobia. These books affect actual child readers who do not receive information about homophobia from the texts, and the legal and practical outcomes of the censorship debate may affect what information about homophobia actual children receive in schools. These different understandings of "the child" all interact in our cultural understandings of sexuality and childhood.

I study thirty-one LGBT picturebooks published in the US, the UK and Canada between 1983 and 2011 (see Appendix). The books are drawn primarily from annotated bibliographies including Laurel A. Clyde and Marjorie Lobban's *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom*, Frances Ann Day's *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults* and Jamie Campbell Naidoo's *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and Using Children's Books With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Content*. In my search for the texts I was guided by researchers who wrote about the process of identifying and acquiring lesbian and gay children's literature, such as Laurel A. Clyde and Marjorie Lobban's

article about their process of producing their 1996 annotated bibliography. This text aims “to include all books in which there is a homosexual character, or references to homosexuality, or in which homosexual terms are used” (“A Door Half Open” 18). Their “resources and strategies [. . .] used to identify and locate books [were] varied,” and included searching:

national and trade bibliographies [. . .] national library catalogues [. . .] databases created by Internet-based bookstores such as Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble on the Web [. . .] catalogues of libraries that specialize in children’s literature [. . .] specialist bookshops [including] Little Sisters and Vancouver Kidsbooks in Vancouver (Canada) [and] review sources [including] *Lambda Book Report*, *VOYA*, *School Library Journal*, *Books for Keeps*, *Scan*, *Magpies*, and *Reading Time*. (18)

Despite this effort, they found acquiring or even reading all of the books they identified to be a challenge. They write:

the older books, and some newer ones, have proved difficult to purchase or to locate through inter-library loan. Some were not even listed in the standard national and trade bibliographies, or in the catalogues of libraries that specialize in the collection of children’s literature. It was almost as if a conspiracy existed to keep the books from readers. (19)

Vivianne Fogarty’s investigation into “the accessibility and availability of GLBTQ picture books, written in English and French and suitable for K–6 students” in Winnipeg, Manitoba was also illuminating in its difficulty (22). She found that “many school and

public library collections under-represent GLBTQ materials and that searches for these materials can be difficult and cumbersome” (23).

I have chosen my sample of texts based on the following criteria: picturebooks in English, aimed at an audience of children under five, fictional, containing at least one explicitly lesbian or gay character and available at public and university libraries, or in bookstores. My own searches have been conducted primarily in Vancouver, Canada, and Melbourne, Australia. Speciality LGBT or children’s bookstores such as Little Sisters and Kidsbooks in Vancouver, and Hares and Hyenas and The Little Bookroom in Melbourne, have been key sources for such material, but large chain bookstores such as ChaptersIndigo and Collins Bookstores often carry a good range of picturebooks. I have also used internet sources, such as Amazon subject lists, to identify relevant picturebooks. However, as far as possible I have excluded self-published books. The books I analyse in this dissertation are generally readily available in libraries and bookstores across Canada, and are regularly mentioned in online and published bibliographies of LGBT children’s literature. As this dissertation focuses on cultural understandings of childhood and sexuality, and public debate over these issues, prominent and easily accessed picturebooks are particularly germane.

I analyse only picturebooks that are explicitly about lesbian or gay characters; I will not analyse queer subtext in other picturebooks. The texts I discuss range from board books for babies such as Leslea Newman’s *Mommy, Mama and Me*, to longer fairytales such as Johnny Valentine’s *The Duke Who Outlawed Jellybeans*. I use the narrow term “lesbian and gay” very consciously. The books do not encompass the diversity indicated by the acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), as, with the notable

exception of Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses*, the picturebooks do not contain any self-identified bisexual, transgender or intersex characters. The current texts are normalising to the extent that they cannot accurately be described as "queer." In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* Michael Warner writes queer "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal [and] has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence" (xxvi). As I will argue, the picturebooks I study have the effect of supporting the regimes of the normal, and thus cannot be called queer.

For the purposes of this dissertation I rely on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of the definitions of sex, gender and sexuality, as it engages with the complexity of the relationships between the three concepts. Her work relies on feminist and queer theory, which are both key schools of thought in understanding the conceptual links and disconnects between childhood, ignorance and sexuality. She writes that sex, gender and sexuality are "three terms whose usage relations and analytical relations are almost irremediably slippery" (*Epistemology* 27). She discusses the separation of sex and gender according to feminist thought, in which "'sex' has had the meaning of a certain group of irreducible, biological differentiations between members of the species *Homo sapiens* who have XX and those who have XY chromosomes" (27). Gender refers to "the far more elaborated, more fully and richly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviours – of male and female *persons*" (27). Sexuality includes an "array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely

around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them” (29). An important point to take from this definition is that sexuality encompasses both identity and behaviour. Sexuality is defined by physical acts, yes, but it is also centrally defined by cultural and social expectations, narratives, and knowledges. Sexuality tends to “represent the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being” (29).

Another important point about sexuality is that it is defined by the heterosexual matrix: one is sexed male, has a masculine gender and is attracted to females, or one is sexed female, has a feminine gender and is attracted to males. Judith Butler writes that “the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (*Gender Trouble* 24). She defines “follow” as “a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality” (24). In this heterosexist assumption the relation of sex, gender and sexuality is seamless and unnoticeable unless one violates these cultural laws.

While almost all of the picturebooks I study are concerned exclusively with sexuality, I also consider gender in my dissertation. Sedgwick, referencing Gayle Rubin, argues that “the question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are in that each can be expressed only in the terms of the other, are nonetheless not the same question” (*Epistemology* 30). Although the questions of gender

and sexuality are certainly not the same in the picturebooks, gender and sexuality are intertwined throughout the books and the debates over them. Sedgwick notes that “particular manifestations or features of particular sexuality are among the things that plunge women and men most ineluctably into the discursive, institutional, and bodily enmeshments of gender definition, gender relation, and gender inequality” (30).

I use the term “cisgendered” to refer to people whose gender identity matches the sex assigned to them at birth, and either “straight” or “heterosexual” to refer to people exclusively attracted to people of a different gender from their own. I often use the term “non-normative genders and sexualities” in this dissertation. I mean this as a very broad term which includes all genders and sexualities that do not fit the heterosexual matrix; all genders in which one’s gender identity does not neatly match with the sex assigned at birth, and all sexualities that are not heterosexual. Another term I use is LGBT, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (I have not included I for intersex, as many intersexed people are identified as such when children, which would greatly complicate my discussion).

The terms “challenge” and “censorship” also require definition. Peter Hunt’s “Censorship and Children’s literature in Britain Now, or, The Return of Abigail” is a key text. He addresses the complexity of censorship of children’s literature, describing it as “a texture of paradoxes: between benevolent control and fearful repression; between commonsense attitudes to words and meanings and necessary freedom of interpretation; between a ‘trivial’ subject and a far-from-trivial reaction to it—and [. . .] between the overt and the covert” (103). Hunt also makes the important point that “[a] censor of children’s books does not have to answer to anything except ‘common sense,’ which is

blithely (or aggressively) assumed to be ideologically neutral, and which assumes [. . .] a spectacularly simplistic relationship between text and reader” (99).

Hunt refers to “quiet censorship,” which occurs when “publishers of children’s literature who, in anticipation of negative reaction or unwanted pressure from the public, exercise censorship outside of the public eye” (paraphrased by Booth 27). Judy Norton expands on the chain reaction of quiet censorship: “in the contemporary American world of children’s literature, author reacts to publisher, who reacts to school, library, and bookstore constituencies, which react to their fear of ‘trouble’ (read parents)” (297). Challenges are defined as “the formal, written request[s] to remove [books] from library shelves or otherwise restrict public access” (Doyle 16). Although I rely on Hunt’s work, I use the language of “challenge” rather than “censorship”, as it covers both successful and unsuccessful attempts to suppress literature. In this language I am indebted to library studies, which argues that “challenges are as important to document as actual bannings that result in removing a book from the shelves of a library or bookstore or from the curriculum at a school” (17), because “the threat of banning can be as dangerous as the actuality” (8).

The particular challenge I analyse did not ultimately result in any books removed from the shelves. However, three lesbian and gay picturebooks were the origin of the challenge, and they were brought up consistently over the three years of discourse I study. I chose the challenge in Lexington, Massachusetts not because it is particularly representative of challenges, but because it involves a wide range of opinions from different parties across the political spectrum, and therefore provides a window into a broad range of cultural discourses on sexuality and childhood. This case involves a



number of large and important organisations such as the Mormon Church, and some participants in the challenge went on to be involved in high profile political campaigns, such as those around marriage bills in California and Florida. The discourse of this debate is intertwined with crucial cultural groups and movement in the United States. Given the current political prominence of the U.S. on the international stage, and that the bulk of the picturebooks in my sample are published in the U.S, (as indeed are most lesbian and gay picturebooks), it is appropriate for this dissertation to study a challenge from this nation. Equally rich material is available in challenges such as the Surrey School Board case in Canada in 1997, and the case of Brenna and Vicki Harding's early readers and Play School segment in Australia in 2004 (see Naidoo 55 and Harding 29). I am indebted to previous case-studies on lesbian and gay picturebooks such as Marta L. Magnuson's "Perceptions of Self and the 'Other': An Analysis of Challenges to *And Tango Makes Three*," which "focused on the motives behind challenges to the acclaimed children's book *And Tango Makes Three* and the reasoning given by those in the community who opposed these challenges," with the intention of helping "librarians [. . .] better understand what motivates people to challenge books and find effective ways to work with challengers to achieve acceptable solutions" (Magnuson n. pag). Damian Collins' "Culture, Religion and Curriculum: Lessons from the 'Three Books' Controversy in Surrey, BC" applies a geographical framework to a challenge, reviewing "the 6 years of controversy that surrounded the Surrey School Board's actions, and the ways in which the issues raised were framed and resolved by the courts" (Collins 343). He argues that "geographical categories—in particular, the distinction between public and private—are central to cultural and legal conflict over religion's place in the curricula and governance

of public schools” (343). My analysis contributes to this scholarship on picturebook challenges by applying a deconstructive framework based on the knowledge/ignorance binary, and by analysing a body of picturebooks with a challenge.

## **Significance**

The picturebooks I study represent one of the only sources of information intended for children about sexualities other than heterosexuality. There are certainly some films that tackle the topic, such as the documentaries *It's Elementary* and *It's Still Elementary*, both directed by Debra Chasnoff, or Barb Taylor's short animation *Tomboy*, about a girl fighting against gender stereotypes, but the picturebooks play an important role in child-orientated media about non-normative genders and sexualities. I argue that it is important that the sources that are sporadically available to actual children be politically astute, and vital that children's literature be thoughtfully and vibrantly written and illustrated, to respect the emotional, creative and intellectual qualities of implied child readers, and actual children.

## **Structure**

In my literature review, theoretical framework and methodology chapter I situate my work within an academic landscape. I outline the work of children's literature theorists who write on the lesbian and gay picturebooks I have chosen to study, and explore the knowledge/ignorance binary and the adult/child binary, with a focus on how and why adults construct the ideal child as innocent. I then explain my use of a deconstructive framework, and situate this study within queer theory.

Absence in lesbian and gay picturebooks is the focus of my third chapter. I perform a close reading of the words and images of the picturebooks in my sample through a knowledge/ignorance framework. I argue that the picturebooks have the effect of reinforcing the knowledge/ignorance binary as they have central absences around specific pieces of knowledge adults wish to keep from the implied child reader, and therefore, the ideal and actual child. I argue further that the picturebooks have the effect of making the instability of the binary evident, as they are so centrally about ignorances one cannot read them without an awareness of the knowledge they occlude. I close with a reading of the picturebooks in my sample based on Warner's work on "normalising speech" and Butler's work on "injurious speech," which explores the potentially detrimental effects of this reinforcement on the implied child reader.

In my fourth chapter I study a case in which two couples sued over the inclusion of three lesbian and gay picturebooks in an elementary school in Lexington, Massachusetts. I analyse the discourse of a wide range of participants through a lens of the knowledge/ignorance binary. I argue that the discourse of the majority of participants has the effect of reinforcing an understanding of the ideal child as ignorant, asexual and extremely vulnerable to the impact of information about non-normative genders and sexualities. However, the discourse of the challenge demonstrates the binary collapsing through the emphasis on defining and shoring up "natural" innocence.

In the final chapter I consider the picturebooks and the discourse of the Lexington case together, and draw conclusions about the effects of the way the knowledge/ignorance binary acts in these discourses. I argue that lesbian and gay picturebooks are inherently disruptive of adult constructions of childhood innocence in

that they are about sexuality and they provide information to their implied child reader. I hypothesise what a picturebook that embraced its disruptive position would look like.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

In this chapter I outline the intellectual traditions in which this dissertation is situated. In the first section I discuss children's literature theorists who have written on lesbian and gay picturebooks, and queer children's literature more generally. They offer readings of the books in terms of ideology and adult/child power relations.

In the second section I review the literature on the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries. I draw on theoretical work from psychoanalysis, cultural studies, queer theory, children's literature and children's culture criticism to consider how and why adults construct ideal childhood innocence.

I take a deconstructive approach to the picturebooks and the discourse of the challenge. I am influenced primarily by North American queer theorists who write about the ideal and the queer child, whose post-structuralist approaches offer deconstructive insights into conceptualisation of childhood and sexuality. In the third section in this chapter I discuss the work of queer theorists whose insights into knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries I build on to analyse my texts.

### **Literature Review: Children's Literature Critics on Lesbian and Gay Picturebooks**

Scholars in the field of children's literature criticism such as Kenneth Kidd, Melynda Huskey and Michelle Ann Abate have analysed many of the picturebooks that I study here. In this dissertation I draw on this previous scholarship and its focus on the power dynamics implicit in adult conceptions of childhood innocence. Children's

literature criticism is a key academic force in analysing the power dynamic between children and adults, and especially the role of children's literature in creating and mandating ideals of childhood. A foundational critic is Jacqueline Rose, who, in her book *The Case of Peter Pan: Or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, made the observation that children's books are written, illustrated, edited, published, promoted and purchased by adults, setting up "a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)" (1-2). Children's literature constructs an ideal, adult-centred child through text "in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). In fact, John Stephens argues that this controlling impulse is the defining element of children's literature: "What this otherwise rather amorphous body of texts has in common is an impulse to intervene in the lives of children" (8). He argues that this intervention takes the form of ideological education. The intention of children's literature "is to render the world intelligible," and "the intelligibility which a society offers its children is a network of ideological positions, many of which are neither articulated nor recognized as being essentially ideological" (8). These theorists argue that children's literature is inherently didactic and controlling, intended to secure the implied child reader in ideological ways.

One way in which lesbian and gay picturebooks are written about is in a bibliotherapeutic manner. For example, Suzanne Bunkers discusses Susanne Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* in her *The Lion and The Unicorn* article "'We are not the Cleavers': Images of Nontraditional Families in Children's Literature." She notes the scarcity of lesbian and gay picturebooks in libraries and bookstores, and writes approvingly of *Jenny* that "the book highlights the caring environment in which Jenny

lives, and it subtly reminds readers that a gay home can be a happy home” (119). Kay Chick discusses a range of books in her *Blackbird* article “Fostering an Appreciation for all Kinds of Families: Picturebooks with Gay and Lesbian Themes.” She critiques the older picturebooks for containing stereotypes and being both too dense and too dull for young audiences, but argues that, on the whole, “gay-sensitive picturebooks [. . .] can help young children to understand themselves and others while modelling for them what is important in homes, schools and society” (15). These articles illustrate what is perhaps the most common estimation of the picturebooks; they are not terribly good art, but they play an important psycho-social role for actual children.

Kenneth Kidd’s insightful work on lesbian and gay picturebooks makes clear the overwhelming difficulty of writing about sexuality in children’s literature in his 1998 introduction to a special edition of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* on “lesbian/gay literature for children and young adults.” Kidd writes that lesbian and gay picturebooks “typically downplay even adult sexuality in favor of a normalizing rhetoric of family values” (114). He attributes this downplaying “both to the reticence about sexuality in general in children’s books and to the lingering belief that homosexuality in particular is incompatible with, or even antithetical to, childhood and its culture” (114).

Melynda Huskey builds on Kidd’s argument in her article “Queering the Picture Book.” She argues that a popular strategy for dealing with the problem is to normalise lesbian and gay characters: “in the realm of children’ literature, where the condition by which homosexuality may be named is that its normality, which is to say above all its nonsexuality, must be overdetermined in every context” (68). She suggests authors and editors attempt to avoid charges of recruitment by making the picturebooks unappealing

to children: “Produced under financial constraints that favor undistinguished illustrations and unimpressive book design, gay-themed picture books embrace their limitations, allowing the book to support the ideological message, ‘nothing overly appetizing or fun here’” (68). Huskey’s article is focused on the older picturebooks. While the newer picturebooks frequently contain full colour illustrations on glossy paper and so forth, the unappealing nature and overwhelming normativity of the books persists.

Huskey suggests a solution is to look “outside the [. . .] explicitly gay picture books to the innumerable theoretically ‘nongay’ picture books” and adopt a queer reading of these books (69). In their introduction to the edited collection *Over The Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature* Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd extend this strategy to include queer readings of explicitly lesbian and gay picturebooks. They point out that “understanding children’s literature as queer rather than more narrowly as lesbian/gay broadens the interpretive possibilities” (4). This strategy acknowledges that the books are not queer in themselves, but rather need to be read against the grain in order to be queered. Abate and Kidd argue that applying queer theory and queer readings to children’s literature is intellectually and socially important, as “entrenched denial about (homo)sexuality, combined with the phobic conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, has made children’s literature the final frontier for queer theory in some ways” (14). Noting that “queer theory has lately shown great interest in the figure of the child [. . .] but not so much in children’s literature” (8), they offer hope “with this volume to encourage a more dynamic relationship between queer theory and children’s literature studies” (8).



Abate and Kidd's collection contains another children's literature scholar who famously advocated for reading against the grain: Judy Norton, in her article

"Transchildren and The Discipline of Children's Literature." She writes:

pending the creation of a substantial body of specifically trans-children's literature, we can intervene in the reproductive cycle of transphobia through strategies of transreading: intuiting/interpreting the gender of child characters as not necessarily perfectly aligned with their anatomies. (299)

Since the publication of this article, *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert has appeared, which is about a young trans girl and her dress designing dreams, but with this fine exception, Norton's appeal for transreading is still pertinent.

Norton references another article published in the collection: Elizabeth Ford's "H/Z: Why Leslea Newman Makes Heather into Zoe." Ford posits that "you may skirt, but not approach a gay/lesbian theme in literature for children *and* sell your book if, and only if, the gender identity of your young protagonist is unambiguous" (209-10). I agree with her argument that, "ultimately, it is the fear of what children might learn about their own sexual identities, not about the sexuality of adults around them, that makes these books controversial" (202). She writes that Heather of Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies* arouses this fear, and the fear "that gay or lesbian parents will produce gay or lesbian children because her clothing, her features, her body, signals *androgynous child*, not *boy* or *girl*" (205). Norton and Ford both argue that gender-normativity marks the lesbian and gay picturebooks, and enables their publication.

Eric Rofes' "Innocence, Perversion, and Heather's Two Mommies" also analyses the representation of fictional children in the picturebooks, but his focus is on their

childness, rather than their gender. He argues that “children retain the characteristics they have been granted within mainstream American culture (cute, innocent, simple, asexual), and the family unit in this body of literature escapes without being problematized” (18-19). He refers to these images of children as “oppressive” (19), and argues that:

the homosexual as pervert and the child as innocent are bound [so] tightly together [. . .] that lesbian and gay advocacy strategies will be ineffective in dislodging perversion as the central representation of homosexuality until they abandon tactics that patronize and ‘infantilize’ children and perpetuate a vision of childhood as simple, pure, and dependent upon the superior wisdom of adults. (5)

Rofes’ argument highlights the power dynamic of adult constructions of childhood innocence, and argues that actual children will continue to be subject to victimisation and queer adults subject to characterisation as perverts until we acknowledge the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary (22-3).

The work I have outlined insightfully explores the power dynamics between adults and children, both actual and ideal, the way these dynamics play out in children’s literature and the consequences of the power of adults over actual children. Writing about lesbian and gay children’s literature and queer readings of children’s literature exposes the difficulty of such literature and such readings, and draws connections between this body of literature and the adult/child relationship. In this dissertation I address similar questions of power dynamics and cultural discourses of sexuality and childhood by focusing on the absences in the picturebooks. As Peter Hunt explains, “it is the ‘blindnesses’ of, or the omissions from children’s books – what they *don’t* or *can’t* say – which are important” (*Children’s Literature* xi). My contribution is also to study together

both the picturebooks and the language of a challenge to them, which offers further evidence for the arguments of Kidd, Huskey and Ford in the connections it draws between cultural antipathy to information about non-normative genders and sexualities being present in children's literature, and what does not appear in lesbian and gay picturebooks.

### **Theoretical Framework: Knowledge/Ignorance and Adult/Child Binaries**

Psychoanalysis offers an explanation for some of the reasons why adults might desire childhood innocence so strongly, and the methods by which adults construct it: adults are attached to their own idealised childhood, or nurture a desire to compensate for their less than ideal childhood. These are deep, unconscious, psychological needs for a particular concept of childhood. Diane Gittins suggests that “each and every one of us [. . .] carries our own, usually well-hidden and frequently denied, emotional and irrational baggage relating to our own subjective experiences of having once been a child” (2). She also writes that adults have “a desire to maintain our own myth of having once been innocent” (204). Perry Nodelman expands this desire to create an idyllic past for our individual selves; he includes an idealised past for our whole society:

Adults who understand childhood as a time they once experienced themselves, then left behind by growing more complex, tend to equate it with other mythic golden pasts – gardens of paradise, pastoral idylls, and so on. They view it in the same idyllic terms, in the golden glow of retrospective nostalgia. (*Hidden Adult* 46)

These theorists suggest that adults need the ideal child for unconscious reasons, both personal and emotional. These nostalgic desires have less to do with an actual past and more to do with the idea of what that past should have been: an investment in the past rooted in fantasy.

Cultural studies theorist Henry Jenkins claims that “almost every major political battle of the twentieth century has been fought on the backs of our children” (2). The ideal child is an easily manipulated political tool, and being seen to be fighting “for the kids” is an expedient way for a public figure to be seen performing an ethical role. These battles often have little benefit for the actual child. Henry Giroux writes that “lacking opportunities to vote, mobilize, or register their opinions, young children become an easy target and referent in discussions of moral uplift and social legitimation” (41). Giroux’s attention to the moral dimension is apt: rhetorical use of the figure of the ideal child targets illogical, affective elements of an adult audience. Adults are invested in the ideal child because it is a useful tool to manipulate people. This rather cynical explanation can be tempered by a more generous reading that the emotions raised by the figure of the ideal child stimulate adults’ political engagement. In this reading, people are motivated by a desire to improve the lives of actual children, and this desire leads them to advocate for social change. Either of these readings could apply to the participants in the challenge I analyse in this dissertation.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*, Lee Edelman offers a provocative reading of adults’ political use of the figure of the ideal child. He suggests that those in power use the future of the child to prevent any change for those in need of it now. He argues that adults’ construction of the ideal child as blank, innocent and empty

causes any adult desire for radical political change to be read as destructive: “the lives, the speech, and the freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to imaginary Children” (19). Edelman’s work does not subvert traditional concepts of adult constructions of childhood innocence; he constructs childhood as entirely oppositional to adulthood. As Kenneth Kidd writes, “Edelman’s *No Future* refuses to engage that prospect [of queer childhood(s)]. Edelman happily dispenses with the child, or rather the Child” (“Queer Theory’s Child” 183). However, Edelman’s battle cry against conservative and disabling uses of the figure of the ideal child in politics gets to the root of adult manipulation of the child: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net” (29).

Theorists on sexual education argue that adults are so invested in the innocence of the ideal child that adults deny actual children knowledge they need to protect their lives. Robert McRuer, in his article “Reading and Writing ‘Immunity’: Children and the Anti-Body,” writes that “‘adult’ and ‘child’ are by no means innocent, descriptive categories that emerge naturally; they are categories constructed in accordance with mechanisms of power and control that would serve to keep those designated children ‘in their place’” (188). He analyses children’s literature about AIDS, noting the absence of gay male bodies and of practical information about protecting oneself from infection. He argues that these exclusions are “potentially lethal, since [. . .] the life-saving lessons learned in gay and lesbian communities during the AIDS epidemic have been effaced” (185). The specific knowledge that is kept from actual children in the name of their innocence may

not only keep children in their place: it may kill them.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex*, Judith Levine provides an exhaustive description of sex education in the US, focusing on abstinence-only education. She concludes from rates of teen pregnancy, STIs and imprisonment that “America’s drive to protect kids from sex is protecting them from nothing. Instead, often it is harming them” (xxxiv). Levine also points out that “prosecutions of minors as adults are becoming almost common” (88). Innocence is such a defining factor in the construction of the ideal child that guilt negates the chronological age of the actual child. McRuer ends his article with the clear, practical argument that “gay and proto-gay (and heterosexual and proto-heterosexual) children do exist, and these children need to learn not only that they should be compassionate toward those people already living with AIDS, but rather that AIDS may affect them directly if they share needles or engage in unprotected sex” (197).

In *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting and Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, James Kincaid provides controversial and persuasive readings of adult investments in childhood innocence. He offers a challenging thesis about adults’ cultural need for stories of child abuse: “what [these narratives] are offering is a nicely protected way of talking about the subject of child sexuality” (in Jenkins 246). These titillating tales of sexual abuse allow us to safely and publicly enjoy child eroticism, “an eroticism that can be flaunted and also screened, exploited and denied, enjoyed and cast off, made central and made criminal” (247). His analysis describes a society that talks constantly about children and sex, “a society which has been loudly

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<sup>2</sup> I am reminded at this point of Kincaid’s work on dead children, particularly a controversial claim that adults actually desire dead children. As he points out, a gawky adolescent is no longer cute or desirable. A dead child on the other hand, is perfect: “the good child is patient, quiet, submissive; the best child is eternally so” (*Child-Loving* 234).

castigating itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, [and] takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say” (Foucault 8). This claim provides a persuasive interpretation of the insistent and passionate ways those who seek to censor lesbian and gay picturebooks describe what the “homosexual agenda” has in mind for ideal and actual children. It also resonates with Judith Butler’s analysis of censorship in *Excitable Speech*, especially her observation that censorship efforts “are compelled to restage in the spectacles of public denunciations they perform the very utterances they seek to banish from public life” (17).

Kincaid argues that “childhood in our culture has come to be largely a coordinate set of *have nots*: the child is that which *does not have*” (247). He argues that blankness is attractive to adults as anything may be written upon it. We can read this blank innocence as a guarded space, created and protected by adult desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads ignorance “not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space” (*Epistemology* 77). She writes that “ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth” (25). Sedgwick describes “innocence” as the “sentimental privileging of ignorance” (7). “Childhood innocence” often means “childhood ignorance,” perhaps relating to a desire for adults’ own nostalgic, imagined, innocent, ideal childhoods. In ascribing and maintaining this innocence, adults must keep particular knowledge from children, ideal, implied and actual. Robert N. Proctor, in his collection, *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, writes that:

We need to think about the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or suppression. The point is to question the *naturalness* of ignorance, its causes and its distribution. (3)

Therefore, in questioning the naturalness of innocence, we must start to think about why adults desire the innocence of the ideal child so fervently.

The innocent child is an adult construction, not a naturally existing entity. As Perry Nodelman argues, adults teach implied child readers how they should experience childhood:

[texts of children's literature replace] actual childhood innocence with an adult vision of childhood innocence – inviting child readers to value their lack of knowledge, to develop an understanding of the meaning of the lack rather than just to lack it. (*The Hidden Adult* 45)

The innocence adults ascribe to ideal children and implied child readers is an enforced space, and it is created in relation to specific knowledge adults do not wish ideal children to have.

This work offers explanations of adults' investments in childhood innocence, and the ways in which adult desires for a particular ideal conception of childhood disrespect actual children's experience, knowledge and intellectual abilities. These theories cohere with those of children's literature criticism in exploring ways in which adults project their ideas about the ideal child onto actual children – mandating a certain way of being for children. My project adds to this body of thinking by analysing a picturebook challenge for the ways both those seeking to censor the books and those defending them use



language which has the effect of reinscribing an innocent/ignorant child. The example offers support to Kincaid and Sedgwick's arguments about the slippage between innocence and ignorance, and the ways adult desires for childhood innocence can fail to acknowledge and support actual children's capabilities.

### **Method: Deconstruction and Queer Theory**

I have explored the knowledge/ignorance binary in several ways in this literature review, focusing on how and why adults construct ideal childhood innocence. I have also outlined ways in which children's literature critics have analysed lesbian and gay picturebooks using this framework. In this dissertation I build on these theorists, using a deconstructive approach to the picturebooks and the challenge. In this section I will explore theoretical and methodological approaches to the knowledge/ignorance binary and adult/child binary that share a common set of poststructuralist assumptions.

I hesitate to write about deconstruction under the heading "method", as Derrida was quite clear that "deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (*Letter 3*). However, I admire Derrida's ability to "make [. . .] the constructed character appear as such" and, in my work, I focus on the other side of "all the themes that have been privileged until now [. . .] that is, presence, consciousness, sign, theme, thesis, etc." (*Negotiations* 16). To manoeuvre in this situation I am led by Gert Biesta, who suggests that "deconstruction is not something that Derrida does or that other philosophers can do after him. Deconstruction is rather something that 'occurs'" (76). Therefore, the most appropriate course is to *witness* deconstruction, which, he argues:

not only hints at a set of activities that is different from “critical analysis” but also suggests a different attitude, one that is affirmative more than destructive and that is ethico-political more than that it operates on the plane of cognition and rationality. (74)

This strategy can usefully be applied to the way the knowledge/ignorance binary, under inspection, deconstructs itself. As Paul de Man puts it: “the deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place” (1376-77). I argue that the lesbian and gay picturebooks constitute a deconstruction of the knowledge/ignorance binary.

Much of the work of queer theorists writing on childhood is influenced by deconstruction and post-structuralism. These theorists tend to use a literary criticism approach, rather than philosophical or hermeneutic approaches. Their work has hallmarks of deconstruction in their dedication to doubleness, tension and the uncanny: “instead of choosing *between* incompatible or contradictory readings, [one] attempts to understand the double binds and tensions that are articulated in the text” (Leitch et al. “Introduction” 1683). They refuse to conclude at natural stopping points, instead dwelling in the difficult and ghostly. They deal with important and complex binary pairs such as adult/child, real/ideal, male/female, and straight/gay. Identifying the ways in which they observe the deconstruction of these fundamental binaries is helpful for observing the deconstruction of the knowledge/ignorance binary in the picturebooks, and the discourse of a challenge to the books.

Lauren Berlant’s classic essay “Sex in Public” engages with the adult/child binary by demonstrating how the figure of the adult is defined and undermined by the figure “of

the seducible little girl” (66). Her essay turns on revealing the mutual dependence and instability of the public of the nation and the private citizen. Her work introduces a familiar binary in queer theory on childhood: future/past. She writes that “because the only thing the nation form is able to assure for itself is its past, its archive of official memory, it must develop in the present ways of establishing its dominion over the future” (58). This dominion over the future, as Edelman points out, is a dominion of imaginary, ideal children. Berlant advocates identifying the ways in which these adult/child, future/past and public/private binaries do not hold, unlike Edelman, who uses them as a base for his argument. Identifying the instability of the future/past binary in relation to childhood is a productive tool in queer temporality studies. Indeed, Natasha Hurley comments, “the figure of the child found itself at the heart of the most heated debates in queer theory—a debate that has, in many respects, paradoxically left the child behind and morphed into one about refusing futurity” (121-2).

In her *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* Judith Halberstam argues that “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Halberstam describes queer children who refuse this logic as disengaging from the adult/child binary and taking advantage of the subversive possibilities of queer temporality. She seems to extend “queer” to include children queered by illness, early death, sexual abuse, etc. Sara Ahmed complicates the temporality of heterosexuality by reading it through a phenomenological lens: ideal children must follow the “straight line” of the family. She writes that one can link “the

compulsion to become straight to the work of genealogy, which connect the line of descent between parents and children with the affinity of the heterosexual couple, as the meeting point between the vertical and horizontal lines of the family tree” (92). A queer child disavows a straight line to the future/past, and “can only, in this wish for the straight line, be read as the source of injury” (91).

Both Michael Moon and Kathryn Bond Stockton engage with the ways in which queer childhoods interact with queer temporalities through the concept of ghostliness. Moon’s *A Small Boy and Others* is about memory, imitation and artistic revisiting of queer boyhoods. He analyses canonical texts along with pop culture artefacts in order to consider the ways that the past and the present unravel each other in the lives and creations of figures such as Andy Warhol and Joseph Cornell. Moon writes of each of the “small boys” in his study being “haunted” by ghosts of “the highly improbable person he became” and “by their eventual intimate association as artists and as persons with untimely deaths – those of others as well as with the possibility of their own” (3). Stockton’s *The Queer Child Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* “scouts the conceptual force of ghostly gayness in the figure of the child – this child’s subliminal, cresting appearances only *as* a fiction” (4). She offers a haunting image of the “gay child” as “a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died” (7).

In addition to ghostliness, Kathryn Bond Stockton defines queer childhood in terms of “growing sideways,” the “fascinating asynchronicities” that indicate “ways of growing which are not growing up” (11). She also explores the child queered by innocence, colour, money and Freud. She introduces the concept of the sexual and aggressive child: the cruel child. Undoing the binary of innocence and guilt, Bond

explores Freud's queer child, who has a "love of anality, voyeurism, and aggression" (27). This queer child is natural and innocent *because* it is guilty of murderous and sexual desires. Stockton's work on the child/adult binary demonstrates the ways in which the ideal and queer child are infinitely complex constructions, intertwined with the concept of the adult in surprising ways.

Judith Butler comes from a philosophical tradition, working in a long tradition of French post-structuralists. Her work on the iterability of gender has done much to trouble understanding of the binaries of real/imitation as well as male/female. Butler famously writes about performances that destabilise "the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer, through which discourse about genders almost always operates" (Leitch et al. 2541). Her writing on childhood is less obviously focused on binaries than that on gender, but is still relevant to the knowledge/ignorance binary. Her chapter "Undiagnosing Gender" discusses *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders'* diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in relation to its enabling and destructive potential for ideal and actual children and transgendered adults. While this piece seems oddly invested in maintaining adult/child boundaries (children function as the innocent victims of GID) her analysis identifies the collapse of real/imitation and male/female binaries within the diagnosis. She offers a close reading of the diagnostic criteria for childhood GID in which the gender binary is undone by itself. In the section on boys' play she notes that "what the boys are said to do is to engage in a series of substitutions and improvisations" (*Undoing Gender* 96), while for girls, "evidence of one's cross-gendered identification is confirmed by being identified as a boy by a stranger" (97). In both of these instances, she argues, "the DSM seeks to establish

gender as a set of more or less fixed and conventional norms, even as it keeps giving us evidence to the contrary, almost as if it is at cross purposes with its own aims” (98). Butler completes her observation of these deconstructing binaries by observing the collapse of the self/other binary. She concludes by commenting on the mutual interdependency of mortal bodily beings, writing poignantly on “the social conditions by which autonomy is strangely, dispossessed and undone,” concluding that “we must be undone in order to do ourselves” (101).

According to the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* the main objections to Butler’s work “echo the objections often made to post-structuralist work. Key questions focus on agency, power, and ethics, while her difficult style and specialized terminology seem to guarantee a small audience for work that aims to have political consequences” (Leitch et al. 2538). Such criticism could be levelled at many of the theorists I am discussing here, who embrace indeterminacy at the level of both the sentence and the argument. This criticism ties into ongoing debates in and about deconstructive criticism over the primacy of the text and the importance of social or political context. According to Jonathan Culler, “the deconstructive critic is frequently accused of treating the text being analysed as an entirely self-referential play of forms with no cognitive, ethical, or referential value” (279). This description does not tally exactly with the queer childhood theorists. Many of them do perform extraordinarily close readings, but they frequently engage with the ethical implications of the texts they are reading. As Biesta put it, their writing is ethico-political more than analytic.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has produced important critical material on childhood and on the knowledge/ignorance binary. She models an analysis of the

knowledge/ignorance binary in her chapter “Epistemology of the Closet” (*Epistemology* 67-90). The binaries that structure this chapter include secrecy/disclosure and private/public (72), but most crucially knowledge/ignorance (73). She explores this binary by first translating “knowledge” as “sexual knowledge,” tracing this shift via Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and Genesis, and secondly translating “sexual knowledge” as “homosexuality,” via the nineteenth-century culture of the individual, St. Paul and Lord Alfred Douglas. Sedgwick then focuses on ignorance, drawing attention to its deliberate construction. Treating ignorance this way, focusing on the marginalised side of the binary, destabilises the power relations of knowledge/ignorance. She is “interested at this point in trying, as we are getting used to trying with ‘knowledge,’ to pluralize and specify [ignorance]” (*Tendencies* 25). This desire is played out as she discusses the wide range of available ignorances around someone coming out, the “imponderable and convulsive [matters] of the open secret” (*Epistemology* 80). Sedgwick explores the changing terms of the key binary, focuses on the marginalised side, and witnesses it collapse. In the final step of her methodology, she brings the knowledge/ignorance binary into play with the issues of homo/heterosexual definition in a number of ways, including focusing on the heterosexist culture which requires a closet and ignorance, and whose “intimate representational needs [the closet] serves” (69).

Queer theorists witness instabilities in binaries of adult and child, innocence and guilt, and knowledge and innocence. They draw connections and oppositions between the ideal child and concepts of nationhood, gender, temporality, family structure and death. Children’s literature theorists and children’s culture theorists have produced illuminating material on texts written for children, the adult/child binary and the ways in which this

power dynamic is enacted by children's literature. My dissertation contributes to the work that brings these fields into dialogue by using a deconstructive lens to analyse both absences in the picturebooks and the discourse of a challenge to them, to explore cultural understandings of sexuality and childhood as they are enacted in these discourses.

Kenneth Kidd asserts one "cannot possibly ignore the fact of the engagement of queer theory with the figure of the child" (184). However, Natasha Hurley, in her article "The Perversions of Children's Literature," argues, although queer theorists have produced confronting material on childhood, they rarely analyse texts written for children:

To point to the history of [queer theorists'] engagement with the figure of the child is not at all the same thing as pointing to its engagement with children's literature, however. The latter has tended to be either elided or eclipsed in these queer theoretical debates. The objects of analysis for most queer theorists have been works for adults that represent queer children. Similar kinds of analysis of children's literature have simply not risen to the same kind of status. (122)

Kidd writes more specifically that, while "children's literature scholars know their queer theory, queer theorists don't seem to know much about children's literature" ("Queer Theory's Child" 184). He suggests that this ignorance is detrimental to the field of queer theory, as "queer critiques of Childhood and theories of queer childhood would have a field day with children's literature and its criticism" (184). With this dissertation I contribute to the tradition of children's literature scholars applying queer and post-structuralist theory to texts written for children, and add to our knowledge of the ways in which the ideal child is constructed in and by a specific body of such texts.



### **Chapter 3. Absence in Lesbian and Gay Picturebooks**

The picturebooks offer a representation of non-normative genders and sexualities, but explicit language specific to LGBT people and issues, LGBT bodies, visible difference and gender variation is conspicuously absent from these texts. In this chapter I analyse the text and image of the picturebooks and argue that these absences both reinforce and undo the knowledge/ignorance binary.

I will structure my chapter around absences of language, bodies, difference and gender variation. The language that is absent from picturebooks includes specific terms for gender identity and sexual orientation, such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “queer,” and “homosexual.” In considering absent bodies I include the absence of physical affection between lesbian or gay adults, between adults and children, the absence of naked bodies, and the absence of information about reproduction. The absence of difference is the most crucial and the most difficult to quantify. I explore the overwhelming normativity of adult and child characters in the picturebooks, and consider the ignorance of identity-based difference and differences in physical appearance. I also consider the absence of people with non-normative genders. I outline picturebooks that could be read against the grain as representing transgender experience.

These absences relate to a number of ignorances of specific knowledges that are being maintained by the books. These ignorances are closely tied to adult conceptions of ideal childhood innocence. However, as the picturebooks are writing about the very things of which they are trying to preserve ignorance, we can witness the knowledge/ignorance binary coming undone.

## Absent Language

Perhaps the most obvious absence in picturebooks is that of language specific to non-normative genders and sexualities. In the lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample the list of language that is conspicuously avoided is surprisingly long and broad. Even what would appear to be essential words such as *gay*, *lesbian* and *homosexual* rarely appear. The picturebooks published in the early 1990s occasionally include some language specific to non-normative sexualities, but after this point the picturebooks I study explain sexuality through vague language about love, when they explain it at all. There is also a complete absence of words such as *bisexual*, *transgender*, *intersex*, *genderqueer*, *polyamorous*, *partner* and *lover*. The picturebooks are also missing words such as *straight*, *heterosexual* or *heterosexist*. There is an absence of political activism in the books, and of words such as *homophobia*, *discrimination*, *rights*, *politics*, *demonstration*, *march*, *pride* and *community*. There is an absence of information about reproduction, and of terms such as *donor*, *sperm*, *birth*, *surrogate* and *step-*. Even the term *sexuality* does not appear.

One of the earliest lesbian or gay picturebooks to be published was *Daddy's Roommate*, written and illustrated by Michael Willhoite and published by Alyson Wonderland in 1990. This full colour picturebook is illustrated in Willhoite's characteristic caricature style, and written in a plain, informal way. It contains this exchange between the child protagonist and his mother:

Mommy says Daddy and Frank are gay. At first I didn't know what that meant. So she explained it. Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness.<sup>3</sup>

This passage is one of the few times the word “gay” appears in a picturebook. Its definition of “gay” is classic in its vagueness. It leaves out crucial information, such as the information that, unlike the majority of people, gay people love someone of the same gender. Willhoite's *Uncle What-Is-It is Coming to Visit!*, published in 1993, also includes the word. The young characters ask various neighbourhood characters what “gay” means, and are given lavishly described and illustrated stereotypes: a drag queen, a leather man. When their reassuringly middle-class, gender-normative Uncle Brett arrives he explains that “some gay men *do* dress up like women and some *do* wear black leather. But that's all right, too.”

In 1991 Leslea Newman's *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* obviously foregrounds the word “gay.” It even includes the chant “Two-four-six-eight, being gay is really *great!*” (23). Susanne Bosche's 1983 picturebook *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* includes the words “gay” and “gays” multiple times. One of the few instances of quiet adult humour in the picturebooks is in a throw-away reference in Johnny Valentine's *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, published in 1993. One of the characters notes “finding a good job wasn't easy for a lesbian sorcerer.” 1993 marks a turning point in the picturebooks – the words “gay” and “lesbian” have not appeared in any widely available picturebook since. While it is difficult to prove conclusively why this is so, authors and critics such as Robert McRuer and Jamie Campbell Naidoo point out that the lesbian and gay

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<sup>3</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, picturebooks have no page numbers. I omit “n. pag.” for ease of reading.

picturebook field was spearheaded by the establishment of Alyson Books' Alyson Wonderland imprint for children in 1989 (see Naidoo 49 and 51), but their first books (Newman's *Heather* and Willhoite's *Daddy*) did not receive widespread attention until 1992, when three major conflicts arose over the books (see McRuer 184, and Newman "Heather and Her Critics" 153). These two ground-breaking books went on to be "among the most censored books in school and public libraries" (McRuer 184). It is possible to hypothesise that this strong negative reaction to the books led to greater caution on the part of lesbian and gay picturebook creators.

The available vocabulary for essential LGBT related words has shrunk to almost nothing over the thirty or so years lesbian and gay picturebooks have been published. In its place there is a repetitive vocabulary of euphemisms about love. The phrase "love makes a family," or some variation, has appeared repeatedly since the landmark 1989 publication of Leslea Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies*: "Each family is special. The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other." In addition to *Daddy's Roommate*, quoted above, variations include:

"My mummies said we're a family because we live together and love each other."  
(Elwin and Paulse)

"Families help each other because they are made up of people who *love* you."  
(Aldrich)

[Mommy and Mama Lu] "had so much love they wanted to share it with a baby."  
(Garden)

These phrases do not explain queer sexuality in an accurate or interesting manner. While love is surely an important part of relationships and families, it is an inadequate explanation for a picturebook *about* same-sex relationships. It does not cover the difference that is, indeed, the point of these picturebooks: that two people of the same gender love one another, and this type of love is different from the mainstream. It also teaches ignorance about why normalising LGBT picturebooks are created, as it omits the vocabulary of discrimination and activism.

The effect of this narrowing of language is to create an implied child reader who is incapable of comprehending specific or complex language, and who does not need any specific language around gender and sexuality. It contributes to an understanding of the ideal child as ignorant and asexual. These absences do not respect the ability of actual children to think, or acknowledge the possibilities of current or future non-normative genders or sexualities for implied and actual readers.

### **Absent Bodies**

Given the centrality of the body in queer and feminist theory, it is notable that the body is one of the central absences of the lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample. The absence of bodies, if read through the knowledge/ignorance binary, indicates a reinscription of the definition of the ideal child as asexual. The fervent reinscription of asexual childhood indicates the instability of the binary – it requires constant reinforcement. The inherently disruptive nature of the picturebooks is also apparent, as the bodies of lesbian and gay adults and children *must* appear in the books: the physical bodies of the characters are present on every page. Mommy of Leslea Newman's

*Mommy, Mama, and Me* appears sixteen times in an eighteen-page board book, for instance. Despite this overabundance of bodies, there are several meaningful ways in which bodies are absent in the picturebooks, including the lack of adult/adult physical affection, adult/child physical affection, nudity and information on reproduction.

Adults in the lesbian and gay picturebooks I study rarely show physical affection towards one another. A few early books show some physical contact between gay men: Jenny's two dads snuggle in bed (Bosche), Daddy and his roommate cuddle at several points, and sunscreen each other's backs at the beach (Willhoite). The first edition of Newman's *Heather* includes Mama Jane and Mama Kate hugging several times (all of these images are removed from the later editions). Patricia Polacco's *In Our Mothers' House*, a picturebook published in 2009, contains an unusual amount of physical intimacy between the adult women. They cuddle several times, most notably in the last image of them, "grow[ing] old together." With these few exceptions, the adults in the lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample almost never touch one another, especially in texts published after the early nineties. The absence of bodies reinforces the knowledge/ignorance binary in that it equates LGBT people with sex and with paedophilic attraction, and defines the ideal child in opposition to these things.

There is relatively little physical affection between lesbian or gay adults and fictional children in picturebooks. This lack is not as marked as that between adults, but is still surprisingly prevalent considering the amount of physical contact caring for an actual baby or young child entails. The books published in the early nineties feature the most adult/child contact: Heather's Mama Jane puts a bandaid on her knee (Newman), and Asha gets "a big hug and a kiss" from mum Alice (Elwin and Paulse). In later books

hair-braiding and washing are ways adults physically nurture fictional children. The protagonists of *A Tale of Two Daddies* (Oelschlager), and *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* both have their hair braided (Settingington). Lou of *One Dad* gets a hug from both his dads, and they ruffle his hair (Valentine). One of the few representations in my sample of adults touching fictional children for pleasure rather than nurturing are present in Bobbie Combs' alphabet book and counting book. The adults have children sit in their laps for stories, give them piggy-back rides and hold hands to learn roller skating. These picturebooks are unusual in that they represent lesbian and gay adults and children enjoying physical contact with one another, thus undermining the construction of LGBT adults as sexual predators.

Men and women are allowed different levels of physical interaction with their children in the books. Lesbians are allowed more leeway in their physical affection towards their children. There is a lot of holding and kissing in Patricia Polacco's *In Our Mothers' House*, and also in Newman's board book *Mommy, Mama and Me*. Illustrations of fathers with children tend to have all adult hands clearly visible.

Due to the homophobic conflation of homosexuality and paedophilia, it is unusual to see illustrations of lesbian and gay adults touching children. However, the picturebooks are about families who are made up of people who love one another. One method for dealing with the difficulty of representing non-physical care and affection is the representation of the two mothers or fathers holding either hand of their child, so the three are linked but the lesbian or gay adults have no physical contact with each other. This pose is present in Newman's *Heather* (all three editions), Johnny Valentine's *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*, Andrew R. Aldrich's *How My Family Came to*

*Be*, Nancy Garden's *Molly's Family* (three times), Sarah S. Brannen's *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* and Vanita Oelschlager's *A Tale of Two Daddies*.

The prohibition on physical bodies extends beyond physical affection to include naked bodies. Some early characters have visible physical bodies: Eric and Martin are topless at one point (Bosche), as is Heather (Newman). Daddy's roommate also appears shirtless (Willhoite). The first edition of *Heather* has an illustration of Mama Jane mostly naked at a visit to the "special doctor" – she is artfully draped. Subsequent editions do not contain this image. In books I study that are published after the early nineties all characters are fully clothed, apart from a few instances. Mia of Lindenbaum's *Mini Mia* is depicted mostly naked when she's getting changed to go swimming (and she is watching the other women in the change room avidly). Oelschlager's protagonist is shown topless in the bath while Poppa washes her hair. None of the picturebooks in my sample picture a male child shirtless.

The physical body is also increasingly absent in the lack of information on where these fictional children came from. An exception is found in Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*, the first lesbian or gay picturebook to be published in English. This text, first published in Denmark in 1981, is illustrated with black and white photos by Andreas Hansen. It tells the story of a day in the life of Jenny and her two fathers. The men explain to their daughter that she was born of a heterosexual couple (now divorced), because, as Eric says, "We can love each other in the same ways as anyone else, but we can't have babies. Only women and men can have babies together. You know that!" (49). The most famous – or is it infamous? – explanation of a child's origins in a lesbian or gay



picturebook is the story of Heather's conception. The first edition of Newman's text explains:

Kate and Jane went to see a special doctor together. After the doctor examined Jane to make sure that she was healthy, she put some sperm into Jane's vagina. The sperm swam up into Jane's womb. If there was an egg waiting there, the sperm and the egg would meet, and the baby would start to grow.

The text goes on to explain pregnancy and a midwife-assisted birth in much the same pragmatic, specific language. This text was published in 1989; in retrospect it appears almost inflammatory in its detail. The second and third editions of *Heather* excise the information about Heather's origins. The images of a heavily pregnant Mama Jane in the first edition are also one of the few times a visual image shows the bodies involved in reproduction. Comb's *ABC* has a pregnant woman at the supermarket, and *123* has two women in bed cuddling a newborn baby, with "8: Eight cats" in with them, but these illustrations are unusual.<sup>4</sup>

*Jenny* and *Heather* are remarkable for the specificity and clarity of their description of two ways lesbian and gay people can have children. In my analysis of the sample, I found that since 1989, conception and birth have been addressed only in the vaguest manner, if at all. Many of the later books feature adoption, but emphasise the bureaucratic and legal aspects of the process over the biological. Nancy Garden's *Molly's Family* features one "birth mom" and another mother who "went to a judge and told him [she] wanted [Molly] to be [her] little girl too." In *King and King and Family* a "little girl from the jungle" stows-away in a suitcase during King Lee and King Bertie's honeymoon

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<sup>4</sup> We should also note at this point the lack of nursing bodies.

(de Haan and Nijland). The princes are pictured walled in by “lots of documents and stamps,” making their adoption of Princess Daisy official. Andrew R. Aldrich’s *How My Family Came to Be – Daddy, Papa and Me* also features an image of the fathers dwarfed by “lots and lots of paperwork” (original emphasis). As the title suggests, this text goes into some detail about the adoption process. The baby’s “birth mom was too sick to take care of children,” so the two men go through several meetings with a social worker, including a house inspection, in order to be able to pick up and take home their new baby. However, in the majority of lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample, children simply appear, something like the Princess Daisy yelling “surprise” as she bursts from the Kings’ suitcase. One would hope that the lack of focus on origin stories could be attributed to a shift away from the fact of lesbian and gay families. Might these books have a plot about something other than family structure? Unfortunately, most of the picturebooks are still centrally about the fact of a lesbian or gay family. They therefore omit crucial information about the origins and composition of the family.

Lesbian and gay picturebooks are not alone in children’s literature in treading carefully around nudity, physical affection, and reproduction. Representations of the body have long been a controversial issue in children’s literature. Janice Irvine’s article on sex education is a crucial text in interpreting absences of the body. She writes that the two main assumptions about sex and childhood are

that speech about sex unhealthily stimulates sexual thought and practice among students. This anxious warning—that sex education makes kids go out and have sex—is as old as sex education itself. The second, more recent allegation about sex education is that speaking about sex is sex. (60)

The creators of picturebooks can be seen to be reacting to both of these allegations, but more particularly the second, in which “innocent children are hurt, indeed abused, simply by the act of speaking about sex” (64). As Irvine notes: “since much of the targeted pedagogy is speech about homosexuality, the perpetrator is a familiar figure—the child-molesting homosexual” (69). The effect of the lack of bodies in my sample of lesbian and gay picturebooks is to reinforce this association of child-molestation and homosexuality. The texts also have the effect of reinforcing a concept of childhood in which the ideal child is extremely vulnerable to any information about sexuality, a conceptualisation which ignores actual children’s ability to challenge information, and children’s previous knowledge about non-normative genders and sexualities. As Jen Gilbert argues in “Risking A Relation: Sex Education And Adolescent Development”:

In its address to the most intimate aspects of life—love, loss, vulnerability, power, friendship, aggression—sex education is necessarily entangled in the adolescent’s efforts to construct a self, find love outside the family, enjoy one’s newly adult body. (49)

Gilbert writes of adolescents in this article, and obviously children do not have newly adult bodies, but they do have bodies capable of different kinds of physical pleasure. Her idea can be extrapolated to cover the role of actual children in constructing and understanding their own sexualities, and their place in a range of relationships. In contrast to this construction of a young person with an active role in negotiating their intimate life and development, the picturebooks create an implied reader who is passive, ignorant, asexual and vulnerable. They do not construct a reader who can enjoy or learn from representations of queer bodies without being abused by this exposure.

The picturebooks inherently trouble the adult/child binary as lesbian and gay picturebooks *must show queer bodies*, sometimes thirty-two times in a row. Furthermore, the nature of illustration invites us to look at these bodies; illustrations are designed to make the reader linger. As Nodelman writes, “It is in the nature of pictures that they imply our freedom to enjoy what they depict” (*Words About Pictures* 118). These lesbian and gay bodies are there for us to look at. No matter how fully clothed, discrete and non-affectionate they may be, there are still non-heterosexual bodies on the page, inviting us to look at them. The picturebooks offer us queer bodies for readers’ gaze and enjoyment while simultaneously having the effect of obscuring the implied child readers’ possible pleasure in these bodies.

### **Absences of Difference**

The picturebooks have the effect of reinforcing the knowledge/ignorance binary as they present a startlingly normative picture of lesbian and gay people. In this section I present absences of many kinds of visible and invisible difference, primarily identity-based. These absences work to reinforce the construction of the ideal child as asexual and incapable of handling complex information.

One glaring absence in the picturebooks in my sample is that of bisexual people. I have been unable to find even one character who is identified as such. Even Willhoite’s Daddy of *Daddy’s Roommate*, who was married to a woman and now is in a relationship with a man, is not identified as bisexual. In fact, he is one of the few characters in picturebooks explicitly called “gay.” There is likewise an absence of bisexual symbolism such as the pink, blue and purple flag.

There is also a complete absence of polyamorous families: fictional children may have two mothers or two fathers, but only two. Picturebooks that are not explicitly about polyamorous families, but can be usefully read as such include Pia Lindenbaum's *Else-Marie and Her Seven Little Daddies*, about a little girl with one mother and seven fathers, and Inga Moore's *Six Dinner Sid*, about a cat who successfully negotiates living in six households.

There is a scarcity in my sample of lesbian or gay adults who are not white, though this absence is not total. One of the earliest lesbian and gay picturebooks is Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse's *Asha's Mums*, illustrated in pencil and watercolour by Dawn Lee. This small picturebook, published in 1990, has crowded illustrations, and tells the story of a little girl who is troubled by her classmate's assertion that "it's wrong to have two mommies." Asha's mums talk to their daughter and to her teacher about the situation, and it ends happily. Asha and her mothers are not Caucasian, Asha is taught by a woman of colour, and has friends who appear to be of a range of different ethnic heritages. This picturebook is also unusual as it was written and illustrated by women of colour and published by a feminist press. Johnny Valentine's *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads*, published in 1994, contains an extended metaphor between sexuality and skin colour, treating the topic lightly and humorously.

Among the picturebooks I study there are two books about white adults who adopt babies of different ethnicities. The two women in Patricia Polacco's *In Our Mothers' House* adopt an African-American baby, then an Asian baby, then a white baby. The back cover of Andrew R. Aldrich's picturebook proclaims: "Adoption. Two fathers. Interracial families. *How My Family Came to Be – Daddy, Papa and Me* touches on these

very complex topics at an age-appropriate level.” It is about two white men who adopt an African-American baby. Although the text engages with gender, in the child’s comment that “I have lots of women who help raise me too – like my teachers, my godmother, and my granny,” it fails to address race explicitly.

A notable exception to the whiteness of lesbian and gay picturebooks is Rigoberto Gonzalez’s *Antonio’s Card: La Tarjeta de Antonio*, published in 2005. The picturebook is written and illustrated by experienced Latino artists, and published by San Francisco-based Children’s Book Press, which is described on the copyright page as a “non-profit publisher of multicultural literature for children.” This text is about a multi-cultural family, and has its text written in both Spanish and English. Antonio’s class draws pictures for Mother’s Day cards and he worries about displaying his, as “he doesn’t want to hear the kids laughing at his card” (20). The book is unusual in that the child protagonist experiences a range of emotions, including shame. It is also unusual in Antonio’s level of agency. When he brings his problem to his mother, she doesn’t solve it for him. She discusses the ways in which all people are “a little different from each other,” then says “Well, I’ll leave it up to you, Antonio. You’re old enough now to decide what to do” (18). After a full day’s thought Antonio has a realisation, that he is “so lucky that [his mother’s partner] is part of his family” (30). He decides to display the card.

Picturebooks that feature a number of different families are more likely to represent adults of colour than picturebooks about one family. The lesbian family in Susan Meyers’ board book *Everywhere Babies* is an interracial couple with an African-American baby. Bobbie Combs’ *123* and *ABC* include adults and children of many races.

Desiree Keene and Brian Rappa's cartoon illustrations for *ABC* also include a character with a visible disability: one of the moms eating "I is for ice cream" is in a wheelchair. This character is the only lesbian or gay adult in my sample who does not appear to be fully abled. There is one child in Comb's *123* in a wheelchair, wearing one of "5: Five hats sitting on our heads." This boy is the only child in my sample picturebooks to have a visible disability.

With a few exceptions, the families in lesbian and gay picturebooks live alone in large houses, drive cars, and appear to be middle-class. Some of the early books offer exceptions to this rule. The gay men in Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* walk everywhere, including to the Laundromat, dragging their washing in a toy cart. They patch bicycle inner tubes rather than replacing them, and when they throw a birthday party, it is in the backyard with a vase of flowers from their own lilac bush, and a present wrapped in newspaper. Asha and Heather are both walked to school/play group (Elwin and Paulse; Newman), rather than being driven. Newman's Gloria walks to Gay Pride hand-in-hand with her mothers, and Gloria's Mama Grace carries a packed lunch in her big knapsack (14). These instances offer representations of working-class families.

A different kind of exception to the middle-class world of lesbian and gay picturebooks is de Haan and Nijland's *King Lee and King Bertie*, who live in a castle and keep servants. But on the whole, lesbian and gay families in picturebooks appear to be solidly middle-class. Children's literature critics have pointed out that, historically, most children's literature is problematically white and middle class (see Hunt and Ray 41-42).

In the context of the overwhelming normativity of the people in lesbian and gay picturebooks, these absences are particularly problematic.<sup>5</sup>

I have been discussing primarily identity-based categories, and have waded into the murky waters of categorising people on the basis of their appearance. It is possible that any number of the characters are bisexual but with a same-sex partner, transgender and read as cisgender, polyamorous but only pictured with their primary partner, have a invisible disability, are Latino but are light-skinned, etc. Readers may read against the grain in these ways. However, there are few characters in picturebooks who explicitly fall into these categories. The situation is complicated by the visual nature of picturebooks: the bulk of the information a reader has about characters comes from their physical appearance.

There is also an absence of visibly queer characters in picturebooks. Of course, there is no “one way” to appear queer. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the fact that people who can be easily, even stereotypically, identified as queer are not represented in these picturebooks. The few exceptions to this absence occur, unsurprisingly, in the earlier picturebooks. Daddy’s roommate is pictured at one point wearing only tight blue jeans with a white hankie from a back pocket (Willhoite). His handlebar moustache adds to a sense of visible queerness. Likewise, Heather has a carpenter mother, and Gloria a mechanic mother, both with a soft-butth aesthetic (Newman). The most obvious visible queer is in Willhoite’s *Uncle What-Is-It is Coming*

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<sup>5</sup> There is also a history of representing characters in picturebooks as anthropomorphised animals, in part to avoid questions of race and class. Several lesbian and gay picturebooks attempt this strategy. However, I would argue that, for instance, the gay men in Brannen’s *Uncle Bobby’s Wedding* are clearly white and middle class, despite being drawn as guineapigs.



*to Visit!* The two stereotypes the children are given to explain “gay” are illustrated in flamboyant detail.

A few newer books picture characters with a queer aesthetic. Mini Mia’s darling Uncle Tommy wears a lot of pink, has two earrings in one ear and one in the other, and carefully styled facial hair (Lindenbaum). Both mothers in Patricia Polacca’s *In Our Mothers’ House* are short-haired and dress androgynously. There is even a joke in the text about how, despite never wearing dresses, they don them for their children. Their daughter writes “my heart still skips a beat when I think of the two of them trying so hard to please us in those awkward, sweeping, ridiculous dresses.”

There is a lack of LGBT symbolism in the picturebooks, which would be another way to signify non-normative identities. Newman’s *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* contains the highest amount of queer symbolism of any picturebook: rainbows, pink triangles, women’s symbols. Purchasing and wearing clothing adorned with these symbols is also a significant part of the plot, making *Gloria* unusual in picturebook history. The decorations for Daddy’s wedding include a number of rainbow flags (Willhoite). The only other texts I have identified containing queer symbolism are Comb’s *123* and *ABC*. Desiree Keane and Brian Rappa illustrations for *ABC* feature many rainbows, including “R is for Rainbow,” while Danamarie’s oil paintings for *123*, include, subtly, a small rainbow flag, and a man wearing a hat with a pink triangle. On the whole, however, after the picturebooks from the early nineties, in my sample there is a noticeable absence of visibly queer people in picturebooks, and an absence of queer symbolism.

There is also an absence of politically active adults in the picturebooks. The only adults who engage in LGBT political activism in the picturebooks I studied are Gloria’s

two mothers, who take her to Pride Parade wearing signs that say “Gay nurse healing the earth” and “Gay mechanic healing the planet” (Newman 11-13). After this picturebook, published in 1991, the most politically active queers in picturebooks are those in the car with the “Hate is not a family value” bumper sticker, driving out the illustration for “1: One family going for a ride” (Combs 123). While they feature significant numbers of adults marrying and adopting children, none of the picturebooks address the question of whether these marriages have legal protection, or by what process of activism the adults achieved the right to adopt a child as a lesbian or gay couple.

In addition to their lack of political activism, the lesbian and gay people in the picturebooks in my sample are lacking community. With a few exceptions, they work and socialise exclusively with people who appear to be straight. 123 and *ABC* have some queer adults with queer friends (Combs), but otherwise, with the exception of the protagonists, all of the characters in the picturebooks appear to be heterosexual. This absence is particularly noticeable in the wedding scenes, which are generally a sea of heterosexuality around the brides or grooms. These lesbian and gay people have little or no queer community, and are not invested in advocating for LGBT rights. This life, with “no visible participation in gay (physical, cultural, sartorial) semiotics or community” would, as Sedgwick points out, “for many contemporary gay people, [. . .] be impossible; for a great many, it would seem starvingly impoverished in terms of culture, community, and meaning” (*Tendencies* 156, footnote 5).

Another key way in which the picturebooks fail to deal with difference is in their treatment of homophobia – that is, other people dealing with the difference queer families embody. In general the picturebooks in my sample are absent of homophobia. A notable

exception to this situation is Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*. Part of this long text is a lengthy explanation of homophobia, including the information that people can get "scared or angry" and say cruel things if they aren't properly educated about homosexuals, or "perhaps someone has told them it is wrong" (40).

A similar, but briefer, incident occurs in Newman's *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, another early picturebook. While Gloria and her mothers are marching in the Pride Parade they see protesters holding signs that say "Gays go away" (24). Her mothers explain:

"Some people think Mama Rose and I shouldn't love each other," Mama Grace says. I don't understand. "But you always tell me love is the most important thing of all."

Mama Rose picks me up. "Love *is* the most important thing of all," she says. "Some women love women, some men love men, and some women and men love each other. That's why we march in the parade – so everyone can have a choice." (26)

Bosche's *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* and Newman's *Gloria* offer clear explanations of causes of homophobia, and model different strategies to combat it. Such explicit discussions about homophobia are very unusual in the genre. A more subtle way that the picturebooks occasionally represent homophobia is asides about other absences. In Jeannine Atkins' *A Name On the Quilt* Grandpa does not help the family sew the AIDS memorial quilt panel because "[he] says he doesn't know how to sew." The poignancy of the situation is indicated quietly towards the end of the picturebook, when the family unfurls the completed quilt panel, when Grandma says "Grandpa should have come. He

should have seen this' [. . .] She put her head on Dad's shoulder for a minute, then turned away." This representation of familial homophobia paints a meaningful picture of the complexity and emotional difficulty of dealing with difference.

Generally, homophobia is expressed by the picturebooks by creating an implied child audience who is ignorant of the topic. Molly of Nancy Garden's *Molly's Family* is representative. The plot of the story is very similar to *Heather* and *Asha*: Molly goes to school, and is teased by other children for having two mothers. She is upset, and is comforted by her teacher and mothers, who explain that "there are lots of different kinds of families." Molly then embraces her alternative family. Sharon Wooding's coloured pencil illustrations show us Molly's emotional range: sad and trying not to cry, confused, then happy and loved. Molly's agency in the story is limited to pondering her mothers' words for a morning before accepting them as truth. Her primary role in the story is to act as a sponge for adult messages. Molly's confusion throughout the story is emblematic of the genre. Fictional children are not given room to be angry about homophobia, or sad about other people attacking them, but are allowed to be confused about their family structure so adults can explain the situation to them.

Rather than offering a child-appropriate explanation of homophobia, or modelling responses to the aggressive comments levelled at fictional children with two mothers, the implied child reader is told to turn from this knowledge and submit her or himself to adult protection. The implied child reader learns nothing of the institutional or systematic nature of oppression, or practical self-defence strategies. Instead, she or he learns that homophobia is knowledge of which she or he should be innocent, and that she or he should value this ignorance to meet adult expectations.

The topic of homophobia has a complex place in children's literature. Christine Jenkins' article on young adult novels between 1969 and 1997 memorably lists the fates of fictional gay and lesbian characters, who "have been beaten, shot, gay-bashed, drowned, sexually molested, kidnapped, framed on drug charges, or killed in car accidents" (309). She identifies the characterisation of LGBT people as "targets, scapegoats, and victims" as a result of "oppression based on sexual identity" (309). The punishment of LGBT characters in young adult fiction has become less routine over time. Kenneth Kidd's article for CHLAQ writes of "coming out" novels as the quintessential "young adult issue fiction," and notes approvingly that homophobia has "replaced homosexuality as the designated social problem addressed" ("Sexuality and Children's Literature" 114). However, Thomas Crisp suggests that this shift has not been completely positive. He argues that the presence of homophobia as "issue" has become problematic because "the recurring reliance upon homophobia as a literary mechanism to engender 'realism' in literature simultaneously implies that homophobia is too large an issue to confront and is ultimately bad, but inevitable behavior" (339). He writes that authors may "inadvertently use homophobia in ways that ultimately only work to reinstate heteronormativity" (339).

The picturebooks I study in this dissertation exist in-between these two states: while no lesbian or gay people in the picturebooks are punished in the manner of characters in early LGBT young novels, they are not yet exploring homophobia as an "issue." They tread a neutral path which rarely addresses homosexuality or homophobia directly, and instead is built around absences of information. In terms of the knowledge/ignorance binary, the primary problem with the absence of information about

homophobia in the picturebooks is that it has the effect of reinscribing the ideal child as an ignorant child incapable of understanding the causes of homophobia and incapable of defending her or himself.

When one considers all of these absences of adult difference it becomes clear that people in the lesbian and gay picturebooks I study are incredibly normalised. They are as close to a white, middle-class, heterosexual norm as possible. As Anika Stafford writes, another effect “of the relentless normalization of characters in same-sex relationships is that often families are exemplified for the ways in which they uphold the status quo in all ways except for this one exception” (174). The picturebooks attempt to address the topic of difference while not representing difference in any way. In fact, the erasure of difference is taken to the extent of erasing the personalities of most of the characters. As Naidoo writes, “many LGBTQ children’s books suffer from an agenda that tries to normalise the experience of rainbow families to such an extent that storylines are didactic and characters are not multidimensional” (56). The difference under discussion in the books – that of homosexuality, narrowly defined – is barely legible and vastly over-determined by everything it is not. Ideal childhood innocence is maintained by stripping the picturebooks of their primary content.

The absence of difference in the picturebooks can be read as an attempt to protect specific ignorances around the possibility of non-heteronormative lives, and that such lives contain a range of social positions. The picturebooks are caught in the simultaneous creation and destruction of the knowledge/ignorance binary in their need to represent lesbian and gay adults as worthy and lovable adults without representing them as role-models for their implied readers. The picturebooks offer these people as worthy of

respect and equal treatment, but must not offer these people as someone ideal children may wish to be. No fictional child in the picturebooks ever expresses a desire to be “just like” Daddy or Mama Jane when they grow up. If it is acknowledged that queer people can be different from straight people – look different, be interested in different things – or even be *more* interesting or *more* attractive than those who fit the heterosexual norm, then the text would open a space for an implied reader to be attracted to these options. The picturebooks reinscribe the construction of childhood in terms of its futurity, but also trouble this construction by offering and shutting down queer possibilities for that future.

### **Absences of Non-Normative Genders**

Due to the absence of transgendered adults or children, the picturebooks have the effect of closing down the implied child reader’s awareness of different futures for themselves. Although a number of internet-based picturebooks have been produced, there are currently no picturebooks about trans adults produced by publishing houses. In addition, the cisgendered lesbian and gay adults in picturebooks in my sample are overwhelmingly normatively gendered. With a very few exceptions, the women are feminine and the men are masculine. Likewise, the fictional children in the lesbian and gay picturebooks are overwhelmingly gender-normative. As I discussed in my literature review, the normative gender of the characters may be the condition under which adult sexuality outside heterosexuality may be represented in picturebooks.

Given the lack of picturebooks that explicitly include transgendered adults, I will briefly discuss two books that could be read, against the grain, as representing the experiences of transgendered adults. Verla Kay’s *Rough, Tough Charley* is about an

historical character who could easily and successfully be read as transgendered. Charley presents as male throughout life, and is treated as a man by society. However, Kay, in the text and the afterword, lays heavy emphasis on the idea that Charley was “really a woman” who dressed like a man in order to access male privilege. This argument undermines any trans possibilities of Charley’s life and unnecessarily simplifies and consolidates Charley’s gender identification. Another picturebook that opens then firmly closes transgender possibilities is Eric Carle’s *Mister Seahorse*, which is about the range of ways male sea-creatures care for eggs, often in their own bodies. The text of the picturebook lays a heavy repetitive emphasis on heterosexual coupling: Mr Stickleback cares for the eggs laid by Mrs Stickleback, Mr Tilapia carries the eggs laid by Mrs. Tilapia. Nonetheless, the picturebook could be read as a metaphor for trans male experiences of pregnancy and birth.

Judy Norton’s groundbreaking article on trans children ends on a slightly wistful note: “pending the creation of a substantial body of specifically trans-children’s literature, we can intervene in the reproductive cycle of transphobia through strategies of transreading: intuiting/interpreting the gender of child characters as not necessarily perfectly aligned with their anatomies” (299). While a substantial body of literature is yet to appear, there is at least one picturebook which appears to represent a trans child: *10,000 Dresses*, written by Marcus Ewert and illustrated by Rex Ray in a chunky computer-generated collage style. It was published in 2008 by Seven Stories Press, an independent publishing house with an emphasis on social justice. In this story Bailey dreams of 10,000 different dresses. She is discouraged from her dress-designing ambitions by her parents, and big brother, who say “You’re a boy. Boys don’t wear



dresses!” At the end of the story Bailey befriends an older girl, and together they make beautiful dresses covered in mirrors. The older girl says “You’re the coolest girl I’ve ever met, Bailey!”

*10,000 Dresses* stands out sharply from previous picturebooks about childhood cross-gender identification or behaviour. It is one of the only picturebooks which affirms gender identity over a sexed body. There is a tradition of picturebooks about feminine boys, such as Tomie De Paola’s *Oscar Button is a Sissy* and Charlotte Zolotow’s *William’s Doll*, but this book is quite different. The older books rely on the assumption that the central character will grow out of feminine behaviour and embrace a “true” masculine self. Bailey’s female identity is affirmed throughout the text by using female pronouns and referring to her as a girl. There is no sense that Bailey will or should return to her “true” gender. The ending of the picturebook is particularly positive, as it implies Bailey and her new friend will have an enjoyable ongoing partnership making dresses. She will not “grow out of” her female gender identity or her feminine behaviour. It seems, as Naidoo puts it, *10,000 Dresses* is indeed “the first transgender picture book for children” (45). There is not yet a transgender picturebook for young trans boys. Although there is a long tradition of picturebooks about tomboys, such as *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, I have been unable to find any picturebooks that are about fictional children who were categorised as female at birth but self-identify as male. None of the annotated bibliographies or online sources I consulted have identified such a text.

The picturebooks have the effect of reinscribing the adult/child binary by recreating an implied child reader ignorant of the idea that there are more genders than two, and that there can be movement between those genders. The implied child readers

must not see the possibility of movement or ambiguity in their own gender, and or appreciate the range in other people.<sup>6</sup> This reinscription of a culture of transphobia must also affect actual children who can not see themselves in these texts. At the same time, however, the knowledge/ignorance binary is shown to be unstable: if actual children were naturally innocent of trans possibilities, their idealised ignorance would not need to be guarded so jealously.

### **Just Like: Normalising and Injurious Conduct**

In their absences of language, bodies and difference, the picturebooks have the effect of reinscribing the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries. They reinforce a construction of the ideal child as asexual and unable to deal with complex information. I propose a reading of this reinscription of childhood innocence based on Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*. Butler's analysis of censorship and the performative provides a useful lens through which to analyse the picturebooks. Butler lays out three specific speech acts that attract censorship:

Central to [gay and lesbian] politics are a number of "speech acts" that can be, and have been construed as offensive and, indeed, injurious conduct: *graphic self-representation*, as in Mapplethorpe's photography; *explicit self-declaration*, such as that which takes place in the practise of coming out; and *explicit sexual education*, as in AIDS education. (22)

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<sup>6</sup> I am not arguing that reading books about transgender people would "turn" a child trans. I am arguing that an awareness of the range of gender possibilities would be positive for both trans and cis- gendered children.

If we bring these categories to bear on the picturebooks we can see how these absences play out. Graphic self-representation is absent in the lack of queer bodies and visible difference. Explicit self-declaration is absent in the lack of language, while explicit sexual education is absent in the lack of information on reproduction.

According to Butler, sharing certain types of knowledge, especially on topics such as homosexuality, can be taken as a physical act: “linguistic injury acts like physical injury” (4), and saying “I am a homosexual” can be constituted as a performance, constituting the speech as “homosexual conduct” (107). Sharing knowledge becomes an act, and, as knowledge becomes sexual knowledge, sharing knowledge becomes a sexual act. I argue that imparting information to the ideal child is constructed as injurious conduct which is destructive of the purity of the child’s mind or body. As I discussed in my literature review, adults have strong, often unconscious, highly emotional reasons for desiring childhood innocence. In many ways adults value the innocence of the ideal child above an actual child’s life. Kincaid asks whether “we feel that a defiled child is of no use to us and might as well be dead” (*Erotic Innocence* 17). Taking into account this investment in childhood innocence, it becomes clear why giving an actual child or implied child reader knowledge about sexuality can provoke a violent reaction. Adults value childhood innocence, that is, sexual innocence, that is, ignorance about sexuality. If an actual child or implied child reader is given information about lesbian and gay people, this can be understood as performing a homosexual act on the child, therefore destroying her or his innocence. As adults define the ideal child so furiously according to its innocence, destroying the innocence of an actual child or implied child reader with this knowledge/act means destroying the child.

Another way to think about reinforcing this binary is as a normalising practise. In his classic *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* Michael Warner writes that “the point of being normal is to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict” (60). This description neatly describes the politics of the bulk of the lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample. He argues specifically that this politics of normal is based on disavowing sex, and that its “effect is a kind of expulsion, abjection, and contempt for those more visibly defined by sex” (67). This description fits the lack of bodies, information about reproduction, physical affection and so forth in the picturebooks. The trouble with the politics of normal is that “embracing this standard merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability. It does not seem to be possible to think of oneself as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological” (60). The extent of normalisation in the picturebooks is such that almost no LGBT people would fit its narrow confines: almost all readers must be further down the ladder of respectability. Normalising, using Warner’s definition, can be read to include innocence. In reinforcing the knowledge/ignorance binary, the picturebooks and those discussing them are continuing the normative politics of these texts. The politics of “the normal” correlates with the politics of the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries, which consistently re-affirm the status quo.

The normalising nature of the picturebooks is detrimental to their aesthetic and political qualities. The overwhelming focus on what is not being said makes this body of literature circular and repetitive. The picturebooks demonstrate this circularity and their normalisation in their language of “just like”: “Who’s in a family? The people who love

you the most! Just like in your family” (Skutch); “they’re just like all other dads” (Valentine, *One Dad*); “we play, talk, read, hug and sometimes fight, *just like other families*” (Aldrich, original emphasis); “Roy and Silo took [Tango] for a swim, just like all the other penguin families” (Richardson and Parnell). The picturebooks in my sample display lesbian and gay families as imitations of heterosexual families, rather than demonstrating the joys of growing up in a queer family, and the fun of being a queer adult.

A fear evoked by giving knowledge about homosexuality to implied child readers is that of queer possibilities for the ideal child. The childhood desires adults fear could take two forms: desire to touch, and desire to be. It is as threatening to imagine an ideal or actual child wanting to touch or be touched by a queer body, as it is to imagine a child wanting to inhabit a queer body. Adult investment in the ideal child’s asexuality and innocence requires the implied child reader to remain ignorant of the possibility of desire for the queer body. However, the instability of the adult/child binary is visible in adults’ inability to simply *show* queer bodies interacting with each other, interacting with fictional children, naked, or involved in reproduction. Adults enforce the asexuality and innocence of ideal children by obscuring these bodies. The picturebooks offer no inspiring queer bodies or queer lives, so the implied child reader or actual child may not find any hope for a future outside of the norm. This narrowing of life possibilities for an actual and an implied child reader is a sad consequence of the relentless normalisation and reinscription of the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries in the picturebooks.

The reinscription of the knowledge/ignorance binary that is the effect of these picturebooks is disrespectful of actual children’s abilities to take in and challenge

information about sexuality, and also fails to offer them accurate information about or imaginative possibilities for their own gender or sexuality. As Simon Watney points out in “School’s Out”: “The question is *not* whether or not children are sexual beings, but how adults respond to children’s sexuality, in ways that range from total denial to an untroubled acceptance” (47). These books respond to actual children’s sexuality by denying it totally, and creating an implied reader and ideal child who is innocent and asexual. The implied reader of these texts is not an intellectual or emotional being with her or his own experience; the implied reader is a passive, ignorant and incapable child. In “Rethinking Childhood” Leena Alanen argues that this type of construction is related to the role of adults as the “elite” in our culture:

As a consequence of the viewpoint’s inherent elitism and functionalism the intentions and interests of children as participants in their own socialization are effectively excluded, presumably on the assumption that they more or less converge with those of the elites. This, of course, helps to model children as passive objects and victims of influences external to them, unable and unwilling to resist. (58)

This model of ideal childhood is demeaning to the capabilities of actual children. Alanen suggests instead, that adults “avoid the conventional victimization of children [. . .] granting them instead the status of participants and constructors in the very processes that make their - and our – world” (65). As I will argue in more detail in Chapter 5, picturebooks which granted implied child readers the role of active subjects and participants in the world would better respect and serve actual children’s intellectual, and emotional capabilities.

## **Chapter 4. Innocence Destroyed in Lexington, Massachusetts**

In this chapter I examine a challenge sparked by three picturebooks. The case began in Lexington, Massachusetts in January 2005, when a child brought home from school Robert Skutch's picturebook *Who's In a Family?* By October 2008 thousands of dollars had been spent on legal fees, and two Mormon parents were setting off on a "Protect Marriage State-wide Bus Tour," telling their story of lost childhood innocence. In this chapter I analyse the discourse of the debate about three lesbian and gay picturebooks over these three and a half years. I use an analytical framework of the knowledge/ignorance binary to examine how different sides of the debate conceptualise childhood and sexuality. In this chapter I draw out similarities between the discourse of the challenge and the discourse of the picturebooks. In the final chapter of this dissertation I will discuss this relationship in terms of the ways in which both discourses reinscribe or resist the knowledge/ignorance binary.

I analyse a wide range of media about the case, including newspaper reports, letters to the editor, television and radio interviews, internet position statements, judges' findings, and legislation. I also examine as wide a range of positions as possible, seeking representations of the issues from right-wing or conservative groups such as organisation MassResistance, and Protect Traditional Marriage, alongside left-wing or progressive groups such as Lexington C.A.R.E.S, and queer parents with children at Estabrook Elementary. Finally, I consider the representation of the incident produced by those acting as arbiters, such as Supreme, Federal and Appeals Court Judges.

Of this range of material I ask the questions: How is the knowledge/ignorance binary operating in this discourse? How is it undoing itself? I argue that all sides of this

complex debate make arguments that have the effect of reinscribing the knowledge/ignorance binary, in that they construct the ideal child as innocent, asexual and vulnerable, and knowledge of sexuality as incredibly powerful. I argue that the main topic under debate is the control of children, both ideal and actual. The plaintiffs in the cases seek control over the information flow to their actual children, as they believe the ideal child should be absolutely innocent and vulnerable. The defendants believe ideal children have some intellectual and social defences, but still assume the rights of parents to control actual and ideal children. The instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary is visible in the debate in the repeated reinscription of the innocence of the ideal child, and in the way this “natural” state requires constant protection.

I structure this chapter around themes related to knowledge and ignorance in the discourse of the challenge. After an outline of the key events, I begin with exploring the construction of “the innocent/ignorant child” in the debate, then discuss constructions of the ideal child’s ignorance of homosexuality, then the ideal child’s knowledge of homosexuality. I focus on the pivotal moment of the first contact between the ideal child and the knowledge of homosexuality, which was a key concern in the case. I close by introducing instances in debate that demonstrate the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary.

### **Outline of Key Events and Participants**

The challenge began in “Lexington, a quiet suburb about 10 miles west of Boston” (LeBlanc n. pag.). On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2005 Estabrook Elementary sent five year old Jacob Parker home from school with a “diversity book bag” containing material



intended to promote tolerance. The material inside was suggested reading, rather than mandated (Aiello n. pag.). One of the picturebooks included was *Who's in a Family?* by Robert Skutch. This rather plain text illustrates a range of different animal and human families, including one family with two mothers and one family with two fathers. The picturebook's message is that although "A family can be made up in many different ways," all families comprise "the people who love you the most!" Jacob's parents, Tonia and David Parker, who describe themselves as Judeo-Christian, were horrified by this book. They complained to the school principal, Joni Jay, and to the interim school superintendent, William Hurley ("Timeline of Events" n. pag.). After a meeting with the principal and superintendent there was a widely reported incident in which David Parker was "arrested April 27 and charged with trespassing [. . .] because he wouldn't leave until the school promised to notify him when his son's class discussed homosexuality" (Viser B3). After being arrested and "refusing to post the \$40 bail, he spent the night in jail" ("Kindergarten Same-Sex Talk" n. pag.). On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2005, the controversial Westboro Church held a protest at five Lexington churches, while "a group of about three dozen residents turned their backs [. . .] in silent protest" (Viser B3).

Later that year, when Jacob entered First Grade at Estabrook Elementary, his parents discovered that:

First graders have a "reading centre" in the classroom that serves as a mini-library. The same book, *Who's in a Family*, is in Jacob's reading centre along with an additional book, *Molly's Family* by Nancy Garden, depicting gay and lesbian relationships and gay and lesbian marriage. (*Parker. et al. v. Hurley et al. Compl. and Jury Demand. n. pag.*)

The Parkers were outraged at this discovery, but took no further action at this point.

The second couple, Mormon parents Robb and Robin Wirthlin, join the story on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2006, when “a second grade teacher in Lexington read to her class the fairy tale *King and King*, which tells the story of two princes falling in love” (Lindsay n. pag.). The Wirthlin’s seven year old son, Joey, came home agitated and told his parents about the picturebook. They were shocked and horrified. They exchanged a series of emails and held a meeting with Heather Kramer (Joey’s teacher), and Joni Jay (the Principal), but failed to come to a solution that satisfied the Wirthlins.

The two families joined together, and took their case to the courts. They sued the Town of Lexington, its school board, various administrators (including the superintendent), and Joey’s teacher. One important plank of their case is the Massachusetts “Opt-out” law, which was passed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1997. The implementation of this law was heavily backed by Brian Camenker of the organisation MassResistance (LeBlanc n. pag.). MassResistance is a Christian organisation which has been labelled a hate-group by the Southern Poverty Law Centre (Southern Poverty Law Centre n. pag.). According to their blog, MassResistance’s goals are to: “End judicial tyranny, homosexual ‘marriage’, and homosexual activist recruitment of our children in the public schools! Preserve our Judeo-Christian heritage, the Culture of Life, and free speech!” (Camenker n. pag.). The organisation was heavily involved in campaigning against gay marriage, which was legalised in Massachusetts in 2003. The connection is disputed, but it is alleged that the Wirthlins, at least, were involved with MassResistance (“The Wirthlins And A Certified Hate Group” n. pag.). The journeys of both the Parker and Wirthlin families are recorded in great detail on the MassResistance website, as are

the complex progress of the legal cases. Much of the legal material I cite in this chapter is available on Camenker's online archive; his cataloguing enables a broad audience for this debate.

The opt-out law that Camenker spear-headed states that:

Every city, town, regional school district or vocational school district implementing or maintaining curriculum which primarily involves human sexual education or human sexuality issues shall adopt a policy ensuring parental/guardian notification. Such policy shall afford parents or guardians the flexibility to exempt their children from any portion of said curriculum through written notification to the school principal. No child so exempted shall be penalized by reason of such exemption. (Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 71, § 32A.)

The plaintiffs argued that Estabrook Primary had failed to respect this law. A legal journal summarises the case:

On 27 April 2006, the Parkers and the Wirthlins filed suit in federal court, claiming violations of both federal and state law. Their federal claims were based on their 14th Amendment "liberty" of child rearing and the First Amendment free exercise of religion clause. Their state claims were based on the aforementioned state opt-out statute and the Massachusetts civil rights law. The defendants filed a motion to dismiss the suit.

On 23 February 2007, after holding a hearing on the defendants' motion, the federal court issued a decision that dismissed the plaintiffs' federal claims with

prejudice and their state claims without prejudice, meaning that the parents could seek resolution of their state- law claims in state court. (Zirkel 238)

The decision Judge Wolf issued was “based on earlier court findings that parents do not have a constitutional right to dictate what their children are taught in the public schools” (“Upholding Diversity Lessons” A10). The plaintiffs appealed in January 2008, with similar results. Judge Lynch concluded that she affirmed “the district court’s dismissal with prejudice of plaintiffs’ federal claims and its dismissal without prejudice of the state claims so that they may be reinstated, should plaintiffs choose, in state court” (*Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F.3d 87 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 2008) at 43). Rather than reinstate their claims in state court, in October 2008 the Parkers and Wirthlins approached the U.S. Supreme Court, which “declined to hear *Parker v. Hurley* [ . . . ], upholding the dismissal by federal district and appellate courts of the parental-rights lawsuit originating in Lexington” (Murphy n. pag.). By this time, “the Wirthlins no longer live[d] in Lexington, and Parker [ . . . ] and his wife [had] started home-schooling their children” (Murphy n. pag.).

The legal side of the case ended here, but the Wirthlins continued to share their story. In October 2008 they starred in a campaign advertisement that “warns that if California voters reject Proposition 8—a constitutional amendment that defines marriage as being between a man and woman—local schools could follow Massachusetts’ lead and teach children about gay marriage” (Leal A). The interview is introduced by an actress playing a teacher, who appears to be showing the Wirthlins’ story as part of a classroom lesson. In this clip the Wirthlins brandish a copy of de Haan and Nijland’s *King and King*, and tell the story of Joey’s classroom experience with the book. A newspaper article describes the couple as “part of the out-of-state effort by the Mormon Church,

whose members have contributed millions of dollars to the Yes on 8 war chest, to pass Prop 8” (Aiello n. pag.). The Wirthlins began “travelling through California campaigning for Prop. 8” (Leal A), and appeared in nearly identical advertisements during similar campaigns over marriage amendments in Florida in February 2009, and Maine in November 2009.

### **Innocence/Ignorance**

Both sides of the debate make arguments that reinforce the knowledge/ignorance binary in their construction of the ideal child as innocent. The Judeo-Christian parents and their supporters offer a construction of the ideal child based on extreme innocence and vulnerability. The queer-supportive participants in the discourse provide a less extreme construction, but one still premised on the need to protect childhood innocence. The emphasis on the vigilance needed to protect this innocence indicates the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary: it needs constant reassertion. There is a significant lack of assertion from any side that the ideal child may be interested in, capable of or better off protecting her or his self.

One way the innocence of the ideal child is asserted in the debate is through repeated references to youth. David Parker rarely uses the word “child” without adding “young,” “impressionable” or “tender-aged”:

It is an indoctrination process. I’m talking about *young* children. (Mulvihill n. pag.)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> My emphasis throughout all five quotes.

They are trying to force their own views, views that are controversial in the adult world, upon *young* children. (Llana 2)

[T]he parents do not want to dictate curriculum, but do want to be able to remove their *young* children from classrooms when homosexuality or gay marriage is being discussed. (Lavoie n. pag.)

*Tender-aged* children should not be put in the harmful position where adults in public spaces are sending conflicting moral messages. (Parker, D. n. pag.)

Such attempts to indoctrinate *young impressionable* children into accepting the “morality” of lesbian/homosexual conduct and the “validity” of transgendered expression/identity do not belong in the elementary classroom. (Parker, D. n. pag.)

Likewise, Robb and Robin Wirthlin’s media appearances are noticeable for their emphasis on the youth of the ideal child. As Robb says repeatedly: “This is *so young*. He is *so young*” (“Press Conference” n. pag.). He states “when gay marriage is legalised, it really is *not* just about two people. The social consequences trickle down to the lowest levels of society.” Children, for the Wirthlins, are *so young* that they are the lowest levels of society.

Although the queer-supportive participants in the discourse do not explicitly focus on the youth and innocence of the ideal child, their argument overlaps with the Judeo-

Christian participants in the assertion of the need to protect childhood innocence. Even their direct opponents in the Proposition 8 battle agree on the vulnerability of children:

Cohen: Kate Kendall of the No on 8 campaign says she's saddened to see kids dragged into this political battle, but she says it's easy to see why that's happened.

Ms. Kate Kendall: There is probably no more protective part of human nature than when a parent feels like they need to protect their children. ("Fight Over California" n. pag.)

The website Good As You (GAY) writes about the Prop 8 advertisement in which a teacher introduces the video of the Wirthlins:

Our biggest concern with the video? That a public school teacher would even have a political video like this in her classroom library. Heck, we'd feel that way even if it was an anti-Prop. 8 video. It's a classroom, not a political playing field. ("There's No Class In This Video" n. pag.)

GAY agrees that the ideal child should be protected from politics.

In her decision to dismiss, Judge Lynch devotes several pages to precedents in which the impressionability of childhood was challenged. She generally discusses the ideal child, and notes that "[e]ducators treat this age differential as significant. [. . .] Further, as the plaintiffs sensibly point out, high school students are less responsive to what adults say than are very young elementary school children" (*Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F.3d 87 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 2008) at 27). Lynch affirms previous decisions, concluding that there is "no principled reason why the age of students should be irrelevant" (*ibid* at 27-8). She argues that "the impressionability of young school children" is indeed clear and important

(*ibid* at 27). Although Judge Lynch found against the plaintiffs, her conclusion seems to agree with their views of the ideal child's innocence and vulnerability. While the arbiters in the case and the queer-supportive participants in the debate are less likely to emphasise the concept of innocence and youth, they still assert a need to protect the ideal child from political issues.

The statements of both sides reinforced the knowledge/ignorance binary in their argument the ideal children should not, or even *cannot* understand anything sad, difficult or complex. Their arguments expressed a conception of childhood that is oppositional to thinking. In a press conference for Yes2marriage Robin Wirthlin argues that her actual child was not capable of understanding any difficult material, and in extension, ideal children should not be faced with such issues. Robin says:

Second-grade! This is such a young age! Can't we wait until the kids are a little older? Can't we wait until they're more complex? Y'know, in second grade they're still learning how to sit still and how to raise their hand when they have a question. They don't need to face adult complex social issues. ("Press Conference" n. pag.)

The connection Robin Wirthlin makes between complexity and adulthood is also present in David Parker's statements. He is quoted saying: "They are trying to force their own views, views that are controversial in the adult world, upon young children" (Llana 2). The parents' statements reinforce a conception of the ideal childhood incompatible with ambiguity and complexity.

The Judeo-Christian parents in this debate and their supporters take the adult/child binary to the extreme of arguing that introducing complex adult ideas to the ideal child is



actually damaging to the child. Their views have the effect of constructing the ideal child in opposition not only to knowledge, but to the act of thinking. They argue that exposure to intellectual ambiguity was emotionally distressing to their actual children and would therefore be distressing to the ideal child: “making children bear the burden of conflicting beliefs tears at their sense of security and well-being, since they yearn to please both parents and teachers” (Parker, D. n. pag.). In this extraordinary statement David Parker claims that if the ideal child hears from her or his teacher that homosexuality is unproblematic, and from her or his parents that homosexuality is immoral, the child’s sense of self will be severely damaged. He writes that “tender-aged children should not be put in the harmful position where adults in public spaces are sending conflicting moral messages.” These claims portray a childhood so innocent that the act of *thinking* would tear at a child’s well-being. Parker’s statement also introduces the picture of a childhood so innocent that the ideal child does not *want* to think or have independent knowledge. It is not so much that adults must teach the ideal child to obey, but that this child does so innately. This innate innocent obedience must be constantly protected from outside influence, such as adults who would introduce complex or difficult ideas to a child. The knowledge/ignorance binary must be constantly reinforced to prevent it undoing itself. Innocence must be protected from knowledge.

The idea that the ideal child needs adult control and vigilance in order to enjoy their innocence is more subtly present in the oppositional view. In a letter to the editor two Lexington residents write “Children can’t learn in school unless there’s discipline. And there’s no discipline where there is ostracism and intimidation. Every student, gay or

not, child of gay parents or not, benefits from a school policy that forbids bullying” (Pato and Zeder n. pag.). They argue that the ideal child requires discipline.

In a letter to the editor Sara McGlinchey argues that the ideal child is naturally, unthinkingly accepting of difference, but this natural acceptance must be caught and guarded from a very young age, or it will be corrupted: “Parents and teachers must indeed reach children at the kindergarten age to foster the growth of the kind of acceptance of diversity that most children naturally feel” (n. pag.). She sees ideal childhood innocence as containing some awareness of difference, but one that is entirely vulnerable to outside influence.

The plaintiffs hold an extreme conception of childhood innocence, one in which the ideal child *cannot* think and *does not want* to think about complex topics. Although the defendants, in comparison, are less extreme in their conception of childhood, they still do not, on the whole, consider the ideal children as capable of or interested in thinking about difficult topics. While they consider children as less absolutely ignorant than their right-wing opponents, they do not see them as capable intellectual beings. They agree that discipline and restriction of information are vital to maintaining childhood innocence. They also agree with the right-wing plaintiffs on the degree to which the ideal child is impressionable to adult influence. Both sides hold, to some degree, an understanding of the ideal child as vulnerable, and children as incapable of and unwilling to integrate complex concepts. Neither group considers the idea that children, ideal or actual, may have their own sources of information or their own ability to think critically about complex issues. The natural, innocent, innately ignorant and accepting ideal child is an actively created and defended place of ignorance and inability.

## **Ignorance of Homosexuality**

As I discussed in my literature review, when adults talk about the ideal child destroyed by knowledge, adults tend to mean sexual knowledge, as if childhood is Eden and the inevitable expulsion must be postponed as long as possible. In this debate the knowledge of homosexuality was often opposed to childhood innocence. The binary was revealed as unstable as participants in the debate were forced to acknowledge the ideal child's knowledge of homosexuality in order to offer anti-discriminatory education or to belittle the knowledge that children hold. The question over how much knowledge children have of non-normative genders and sexualities is a central feature in the debate over the Parker/Wirthlin case.

The arguments of the Judeo-Christian adults in the case reinforce childhood ignorance of sexual information. They assume that the ideal child is naturally innocent of homosexuality. They assume that the ideal child is incapable of discovering non-normative gender identities or sexual desires within her or his self, and argue that their actual children and therefore the ideal child should have no contact with any information about any non-normative sexualities or genders, sex outside marriage, or different viewpoints on any of these topics. These assumptions are made apparent in a newspaper article titled "Elementary schools shouldn't be teaching homosexuality," which critiques using lesbian and gay picturebooks in the classroom:

At the high school level, some of this indoctrination might be excused on the grounds that students are old enough to make personal choices and maybe some

of them can define terms like “sexuality” and “gender.” No such excuse can be made for this kind of social indoctrination at the elementary level. (Knight B07)

Knight not only argues that the ideal child *should be* profoundly ignorant about gender and sexuality, he believes she or he *is* inherently ignorant. The force of this belief is emphasised by the fact that he does not feel the need to argue his point, but rather needs only refer sarcastically to the assumption about childhood he shares with his implied audience.

Judge Wolf summed up the position of the plaintiffs in his dismissal of their Federal lawsuit thus:

Plaintiffs [ . . . ] request injunctive relief that would require the defendants to:

- notify the plaintiff parents of any adult initiated classroom discussion of sexuality, gender identity, or forms of marriage until their children are in the seventh grade;
- allow the plaintiff parents to exempt their children from any such discussion;
- permit the plaintiff parents to observe silently and record any such discussion; and
- prohibit “materials graphically depicting homosexual physical contact,” evidently including *King and King*, from being submitted to the students until seventh grade. (*Parker v. Hurley*. 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 12)

Their position involves a surprisingly comprehensive list of knowledge that should be kept from their actual children. Their construction of the ideal childhood they want for their actual children entails an ignorance of any information about sexuality or gender outside a married, heterosexual Christian (white, middle-class) scenario. The extent to which this ignorance requires defending indicates the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary.

Jen Gilbert describes sexuality arriving “like an unwelcome and disruptive guest; it stands in for what is most foreign in the self, and it must be tamed and assimilated if it is not to wreck the self and the social order” (“Ambivalence only?” 233). In this debate the knowledge of homosexuality was the unwelcome and disruptive guest which the Parkers and Wirthlins sought to keep from the door as long as possible. Although they claim they “didn’t want to discuss sexual orientation *yet* with their son” (Lindsay n. pag.), it appears that the plaintiffs wish to keep their actual children ignorant of homosexuality certainly until adolescence, and preferably until adulthood. It is only when it becomes clear that someone else is imminently going to provide children with information about LGBT people, that the Parker/Wirthlins will violate their children’s innocence in order to “get in first.” Their lawyer writes that they “recognize that at some point, their children will be exposed to the knowledge that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts endorses as legal some marriages they believe to be inconsistent with their faith” (*Parker. et al. v. Hurley et al.* Compl. and Jury Demand n. pag.). Their primary concerns appear to be putting off this exposure, and making sure the exposure is done by the correct parties.

The opponents of this view have a more complex argument: the ideal child may have an innocent, adult-given knowledge of homosexuality, or an innocent adult-given knowledge of homophobia. The left-wing discourse constructs knowledge about homosexuality as knowledge that supports children’s future. They construct knowledge of homosexuality as a corrective force to adult-given homophobia, thus positing the provision of knowledge of homosexuality as a tool to return children to a state of pre-homophobic innocence. They construct an ideal childhood that can be returned to innocence through corrective anti-homophobic education. In these understandings the

construction of the ideal child is complex and less absolute than that undertaken by the right-wing commenters, but works to reinscribe the knowledge/ignorance binary as childhood is still understood as profoundly innocent, ignorant and in need of protection.

The primary way queer or queer-supportive people in the debate construct children who have knowledge of homosexuality is as innocents with simple knowledge of their family structure. In a guest commentary for the *Lexington Minuteman*, Carol Rose, Lexington resident and executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, writes with the assumption that the ideal child may have knowledge of her or his own same-sex parents, and therefore homosexuality: “All students deserve to have their families represented in classroom reading materials, and not to have something as fundamental as their basic family structure singled out as being ‘off limits’”(n. pag.). In a letter to the editor a lesbian mother discusses the potential impact on her actual children if Parker has his way:

Imagine having to tell a kindergartner that they are not allowed to talk about what they did with their parents over the weekend? Imagine how terrible that same kindergartner would feel if they were not permitted to draw a picture of their family, because it might upset somebody? I shudder to think of what that would do to any of our children and their sense of feeling good in the world. (Brodner n. pag.)

Like those of the Wirthlins and Parkers, these statements shift between actual children and the ideal child, and they indicate the level of protection childhood innocence requires. Any negative messages can tear at the ideal child’s sense of belonging in the world.

The queer or queer-supportive adults also argue the ideal children may hold knowledge of homosexuality through knowledge of homophobia. This knowledge is adult-initiated, and may be removed by instilling correction information. This correction will return the ideal child to an innocent, pre-homophobic state. Homophobia is treated in queer-supportive discourse as an adult intrusion that threatens children's inherent tolerance. This position is present in a guest commentary in the *Lexington Minuteman* by Meg Soens, a founding member of Lexington C.A.R.E.S., and a lesbian parent with children at Estabrook Elementary. She and her partner "feared that the school would not protect our children from the cruelty that kids can learn from their parents" (Soens n. pag.). This argument relies on the construction that children are too innocent to behave cruelly without adult interference. If the ideal child's innocence is protected she or he will not learn to discriminate, as children are inherently tolerant and accepting in their ignorance.

Vickey Parker offers a more complex construction of the ideal child's knowledge of homophobia in her guest commentary titled "Why Inclusion Matters For All Types Of Families," in the *Lexington Minuteman*. Parker described herself as "a Lexington resident and the chairman of the Estabrook Anti-Bias Committee." In this article Parker claims that children learn first that they can use language to bully other children, and must be taught later that this hurtful language is indeed hurtful: "Children learn early that terms of difference can be used to mock or bully other children, and unless they also learn early that their peers can be hurt by such terms, they feel empowered to use them" (Parker, V. n. pag.). This statement reinforces the ideal child's innocence: Parker writes that children "learn early" to discriminate.

The arguments of queer and queer-supportive adults have the effect of supporting a construction of childhood in which adults must provide information in order for children to unlearn homophobia. These adults understand that actual children may have knowledge of homosexuality, and may share it via, for instance, drawing a picture of their family or talking about what they did over the weekend, but the ideal child is understood as too innocent to educate her or his peers out of discrimination. The correct response to the ideal child expressing information about homosexuality or homophobia is for an adult to intervene and educate the child's peers about bullying. For example, "Joni Jay, principal of Estabrook, noted that elementary-school students often use the word 'gay' as a pejorative term and she suggested that [Lexington C.A.R.E.S.] take steps to support teaching tolerance among children" (McDonald 4). While the left-wing participants in this case accept that children, actual and ideal, may have knowledge about homosexuality or homophobia, they do not accept that the ideal child may share this knowledge. The arguments of both sides of the debate support the knowledge/ignorance binary in that information and knowledge resides with adults, and ignorance with children. The defendants' argument reinforces a construction of the ideal child in which children have some knowledge about their family structure or some knowledge of homophobia, though this information must be given to children by adults. The plaintiffs' arguments offer a construction of childhood that has no knowledge of homosexuality, or only unimportant, weak information. Both sides acknowledge some potential for the ideal child to hold and communicate information about non-normative genders or sexualities, but this potential is small and quickly dismissed. Adults in this debate make statements



that reinforce adults as the bearers and communicators of knowledge about homosexuality, and children as the passive, vulnerable recipients.

The plaintiffs in the case repeatedly use the phrase “adult-initiated discussions of homosexuality,” which would seem to imply that they understand there may be “child-initiated discussions.” They rarely engage with this concept, however, and when they do, they generally belittle the capacity of children to hold or share knowledge. Their lawyer engages with the topic in some detail in his response to the American Civil Liberties Union’s Memorandum Amicus Curiae. He draws a clear distinction between the worth and impact of child-initiated and adult-initiated discussion:

Contrary to defendants’ expressed fears, the plaintiffs recognize that mere “exposure” can come from other children. [. . .] The concept, which the ACLU chooses to ignore, is that the parents are alleging far more than mere exposure. A second grade teacher sitting down and reading a book is a far different circumstance from kids bantering with one another on the playground. (Pls.’ Mem. Opp. Amicus Br. Civil Action No. 06-CV-10751-MLW at 5)

The attorney’s writing is notable for its reinforcement of the ideal child as entirely vulnerable to being “overwhelmed by the respect, adoration, and admiration for a known adult teacher” (*ibid* at 6). A different lawyer for the plaintiffs furthers the understanding that the ideal child can hold only weak and unimportant knowledge by referring to communication between children as “playground banter” (*Parker. et al. v. Hurley et al.* Compl. and Jury Demand n. pag.). These arguments have the effect of reinscribing the knowledge/ignorance binary, but also revealing its instability, as they must acknowledge the ideal child’s knowledge in order to minimise it.

The statements of both sides have the effect of constructing the ideal ignorant child in opposition to knowledge of homosexuality. However, the knowledge/ignorance binary and adult/child binaries are revealed to be undoing themselves because both sides must acknowledge children's knowledge of homosexuality in order to offer remedial anti-discriminatory education or to belittle this knowledge.

### **Knowledge of Homosexuality**

Although it appears that both the plaintiffs and the defendants would prefer that the ideal child have no knowledge (the former) or very little knowledge (the latter) about homosexuality, if the ideal child *must have* information on the topic, the two groups agree that the first information that reaches innocent children will be the most powerful, so it is very important to get your information across before someone else transmits “incorrect information.” They also agree that information about non-normative genders and sexualities is incredibly powerful. Only a small, bland amount is necessary in order to have a dramatic and long-lasting personal effect on the ideal child. This knowledge is also sticky: a small amount of bland information will allow the child access to a much wider range of information. It is the extreme innocence of childhood that enables these arguments, as the ideal child is seen as devoid of intellectual defences. These statements have the effect of enforcing an adult/child construction in which knowledge of homosexuality is incredibly powerful, and the ideal child incredibly blank and vulnerable.

During an National Public Radio broadcast Robin Wirthlin clearly states her need to “get in first” with information about homosexuality: “It makes me think that they are

trying to indoctrinate the children and normalize and affirm homosexuality before the parents have had an opportunity to present a balanced view” (“Teacher, School Sued” n. pag.). This statement indicates the power of the first contact with knowledge about homosexuality.

The plaintiff’s lawyer argues that this first contact is so important that an incorrect application will destroy Christianity:

The burden here is nothing short of an intentional attempt to wipe the plaintiff’s faith away altogether. The obvious and well-pleaded impressionable age of the children, combined with the State’s abject unwillingness to even notify the parents that it intends to indoctrinate on these extremely personal topics virtually ensures that if the State gets its way, the Plaintiffs’ children will not harbor the families’ beliefs. (Pls.’ Mem. Opp. Amicus Br. Civil Action No. 06-CV-10751-MLW at 4)

Claims such as this give a sense of the importance of this first contact. They also evoke “the emotional tumult that is part of any conversation involving sexuality and youth” (Gilbert “Ambivalence only?” 234), and indicate why challenges to these picturebooks can be so tempestuous: there is a great deal at stake.

The anti-gay discourse is more explicit than the pro-gay discourse about the need to provide the correct information *first*. An unusually upfront queer-supportive position is apparent in a letter to the editor saying that “the right time to teach children that it’s OK to be gay is before the church and their parents start teaching them it’s evil. From what I can tell, kindergarten is way too late. Homophobes don’t wait before they teach hate” (Brown n. pag.). A similar perspective appears in an editorial in the *Boston Globe*: “The

earlier most students learn that lesson, the better” (“Upholding Diversity Lessons” A10). Because the ideal child is so blank, the first information that reaches the ideal child is that which sticks.

The arbiters of the case argue that adults must provide the ideal child with correct non-discriminatory education before others have the chance to teach her or him discrimination. Judge Wolf, in his February 2007 dismissal of the case, compares the case with *Brown v. Hot, Sexy and Safer Productions*, 68 F.3d 525 (1st Cir. 1995), and states that the age of the actual children under discussion doesn’t affect his decision:

Nor does the young age of the students in the instant case distinguish *Brown*. [ . . . ]

In *Brown*, the First Circuit did not write anything that suggests that it would have found a parental right to restrict what could be taught to elementary school students when it held that parents had no such right with regard to high school students. See 68 F.3d at 532-34. (*Parker v. Hurley*, 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 21-23)

However, towards the end of this long document, Wolf shifts to discussing the ideal child to suggest that youth and innocence has a vital part to play in inculcating correct values:

As it is difficult to change attitudes and stereotypes after they have developed, it is reasonable for public schools to attempt to teach understanding and respect for gays and lesbians to young students in order to minimize the risk of damaging abuse in school of those who may be perceived to be different. (*ibid* at 31)

He argues that the first knowledge about homosexuality the ideal child is given will be “difficult to change,” so adults must instruct them before the child is given incorrect information from another source. Wolf’s finding indicates an awareness of an ideal or

actual child who may be or may grow up to be queer, which is unusual in the discourse over this case.

Most members of the debate agree that the first information given to children has the greatest impact. This belief aligns with an understanding of the ideal child as innocent, blank and absolutely vulnerable. Children hold almost no knowledge of gender and sexuality: in such an empty landscape information they are given will loom large. The Judeo-Christians, in particular, argue that giving children a very small amount of information will lead to them holding vast amounts of information. They argue that reading a picturebook about a fictional child with two mothers can provide an ideal child with knowledge about all sorts of gender and sexual “perversions.”

The impact of a small amount of information can be seen in the disconnect between the content of the picturebooks and the legal claims made about them. The plaintiffs sought to withhold any “discussion of sexuality, gender identity, or forms of marriage” (*Parker v. Hurley*, 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 12). Snide remarks made in court documents suggest the audacity of the leap that the plaintiffs take when they link the picturebooks with these legal claims. The defendant’s lawyer, John Davis, described the offensive contents of Skutch’s picturebook thus: “Laura and Kyle [live] with two moms, Joyce and Emily, and a poodle named Daisy” (Defs.’ Reply Br. to Pls. Opp’n Mo. Dismiss. No. 27. Civil Action No. 06-10751 MLW. at 18). The Judeo-Christians argue that even a description of fictional children living with two mums and a poodle provides that first vital contact with homosexuality, and that this small amount of information will open the door to a vast amount more. They elide information about same sex headed families with other forms of “sexual perversion”: Jeffrey Denner, the parents’

attorney, said [. . .] his clients would be equally disturbed if their young sons were learning about ‘heterosexual prostitution’ in school” (Price A02).

Another indication of the leap taken between the material in the picturebooks and the discourse of the case is indicated in the constant attention to transgender issues. The Judeo-Christian discourse regularly includes “transgenderism” on their list of topics to which the Parker and Wirthlin children were exposed. For instance, their lawyer added it to his list of vetoed information: “they did not wish to discuss the topic of homosexual marriage or homosexuality and transgenderism with Joshua or Jacob at their current ages” (*Parker. et al. v. Hurley et al.* Compl. and Jury Demand n. pag.). And later:

In order to determine whether their child would receive additional information in school related to homosexuality and transgenderism, the Parkers initiated a dialogue via email with the Principal of the School, Joni Jay, and the Superintendent of Schools, William Hurley. (*ibid* n. pag.)

However, despite this obsessive attention to transgender people, “the defendants dispute that *Who’s In A Family?* or *Molly’s Family* address issues of transgenderism, and certainly the Parkers identify no transgender characters who appear in either book” (Defs.’ Mem. Supp. Dismiss Compl. No. 19. Civil Action No. 06-10751-MLW at 5 footnote 10).

In the Judeo-Christian discourse the fact that Skutch’s *Who’s In A Family?* contains only information about fictional children with two mums or dads doesn’t stop it teaching actual children, and the ideal child about gay marriage, and the fact that none of the picturebooks under discussion contain transgender characters doesn’t stop them teaching children about “transgenderism.” A small amount of knowledge about non-

normative genders and sexualities goes a long way. The strength of this knowledge is in a close binary relationship with the extent and vulnerability of childhood innocence. As the ideal child is so vulnerable and blank, and as the ideal child has so few intellectual defences, the information that Laura and Kyle live with two moms opens the child who hears it to a vast flood of knowledge about gender and sexuality.

The queer-supportive discourse reinforces the potency of information about homosexuality and the vulnerability of childhood, although their views are less extreme and less clearly expressed. The best way to identify their views is to explicate the effect that providing knowledge about homosexuality will have on the ideal child, which is that they can be good participants in civil life. This information is “preparing them for citizenship” (*Parker v. Hurley*, 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 30). This conceptualisation is remarkably future-oriented; “the child remains negatively defined - defined only by what the child is not but is subsequently going to be, and not by what the child presently is” (Alanen 56). Judge Wolf writes that “under the Constitution public schools are entitled to teach anything that is reasonably related to the goals of preparing students to become engaged and productive citizens in our democracy” (*ibid* at 4). In addition to reinforcing the temporal conceptualisation of childhood, he repeats the construction of information on homosexuality as very powerful. A picturebook such as Garden’s *Molly’s Family* has the ability make the ideal child a better citizen. Judge Lynch agrees:

The Supreme Court has often referred to the role of public education in the preparation of students for citizenship. See, e.g., *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 403 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 681- 85 (1986) (upholding ability of schools to prohibit

lewd speech). Given that Massachusetts has recognized gay marriage under its state constitution, it is entirely rational for its schools to educate their students regarding that recognition. (*Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F.3d 87 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 2008) at 16)

The defendants and their supporters agree that knowledge about homosexuality will have a significant impact on the ideal child. This argument reinforces the knowledge/ignorance binary in that the innocence of children makes them very vulnerable to information – only someone with no intellectual defences could be so drastically altered by a small amount of information. This conceptualisation of childhood is focused on adult protection and intervention, and the futurity of children; the ideal child will reach her or his full potential by becoming an ideal citizen.

### **Rights over Children or Children's Rights?**

In this debate, the right of parents over the ideal child was an unchallenged and unexceptional backdrop. ABC *World News Tonight* succinctly explains the primary source of conflict between the different parties: “who should have the final say in a child’s education, the parents or the teachers?” (“Culture Wars” n. pag.). Later in the same program the question is simplified further, assuming that it is parents who should have the final say: “is teaching kids about gays and lesbians tolerance or propaganda? And how much control do parents have over what their children get taught?”

Participants in this debate shift between discussing actual parents and actual children to the broader rights of adults over the ideal child, but no one in this debate disagrees that parents should have rights over children. The participants in the case are arguing over whose definition of innocence is the one mandated for the child. That



parents should be able to control their children was accepted by all sides of the debate.

The queer-supporters write:

Yes, parents have the right to teach their children, and they may have some control over the timing of certain topics. But if they choose to send their children to public school, by doing so they accept the curriculum. (Micholet n. pag.)

Judge Wolf agrees:

Parents do have a fundamental right to raise their children. They are not required to abandon that responsibility to the state. The Parkers and Wirthlins may send their children to a private school that does not seek to foster understandings of homosexuality or same-sex marriage that conflict with their religious beliefs.

They may also educate their children at home. (*Parker v. Hurley*. 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 6)

The Judeo-Christian parents do not assert the right to control children, but rather assume it in their argument that it has been violated:

Parker said Maine's new gay-rights law will lead school officials to believe that it's acceptable to teach that homosexuality is normal. "It goes way beyond civil rights," he said. "It ends up eroding the civil rights of parents. And I am a walking example of that." (Aull and Bell B1)

Parker says in a different interview that "gay marriage is being used as a battering ram against parental rights" (Swift n. pag.). Missing from this debate are the rights of the ideal child to knowledge or information. The lack of willingness to argue that children have rights to knowledge and choices is related to adult understandings of the ideal child as

blank, malleable and incapable of critical thought. One could argue that, according to this discourse, the only right the ideal child has is the right to innocence and protection.

One significant article in this discourse promoted the rights of actual and ideal children: the Memorandum Amicus Curiae Of The American Civil Liberties Union Of Massachusetts, Lexington C.A.R.E.S, Lexington Teachers Association, Massachusetts Teachers Association, Respecting Differences, Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, Human Rights Campaign, And The Human Rights Campaign Foundation. This proposed memorandum was written on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2006 in Support of Defendants' motion to dismiss. It begins thus:

The *amici* listed above [. . .] represent a diverse group of Lexington parents, teachers, and religious and community leaders, as well as civil rights organizations who share common interests in the creation of a safe learning environment for all children, where they may be taught to grapple with a wide variety of ideas and information needed in a complex, democratic, and pluralistic society. (Proposed Mem. Amicus Curiae. No. 23. Civil Action No. 06-CV-10751-MLW. at 1)

This opening sentence offers a provocative understanding of the ideal childhood – one in which children be taught how to deal with complex information. Although this piece creates an actively learning and debating ideal child, the group still reinforces the rights of parents to teach children their own values:

Alternatives exist for parents who wish to limit their children's exposure to ideas which they find offensive, and to educate their children about their chosen religious values and beliefs. These parents are free to supplement their children's

public education with religious programs and training, to instruct their children at home about moral and religious matters, to enrol their children in parochial or religious schools, or even to home school their children. (*ibid* at 2)

However, later in the piece, they argue that children have a right to a broad range of unsanitised information:

If a parent chooses to have his or her child attend the public schools, that child has a right to a broad and high quality public education, not one constrained by individual parental beliefs. (*ibid* at 8)

They argue that children have the right to read and seek out information independently:

Finally, a parental right to demand prior notice of ideas that children are exposed to in public school would also jeopardize longstanding principles about freedom to read and access to materials in school libraries. [ . . . ] As the courts have recognized, in a library, “a student can literally explore the unknown, and discover areas of interest and thought not covered by the prescribed curriculum.... Th[e] student learns that a library is a place to test or expand upon ideas presented to him, in or out of the classroom.” *Right to Read Defense Committee v. School Committee of Chelsea*, 454 F.Supp.703, 715 (D. Mass. 1978), *quoted approvingly in Bd. Of Education, Island Trees Free School Dist. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 869 (1982). (*ibid* at 17-18)

This claim is one of the few times in this discourse that the ideal child was constructed as able to take the ideas presented to her or him by adults and challenge or explore them independently. The Memorandum Amicus Curiae offers an understanding of childhood in which independent thought and research is not only possible – it is a right. Their

emphasis on the role of libraries is apt. As librarians know, “however much these parents and citizens would like libraries to stand *in loco parentis* as guardians of what children and young adults should read, this is clearly not the school or library’s role. Rather the role of these institutions is that of vanguard of the right to read” (Reiman and Greenblatt 259). This role protects children’s intellectual capacity.

This assertion of the ideal child’s right to think and know demonstrates the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary. The binary could further be troubled if actual children in the debate asserted their knowledge. However, voices of actual children were almost entirely absent: no Estabrook Elementary students wrote to the *Lexington Minuteman*, neither Jacob Parker nor Joey Wirthlin participate in television or radio interviews, and children did not write blog posts about how their innocence was stolen by *Molly’s Family* (Garden). There were two significant moments in this discourse in which actual children did speak. One child plays a prominent role in a YesOn8 television broadcast produced by ProtectMarriage during the Proposition 8 debate. The child comes bouncing home from school bearing de Haan and Nijland’s *King and King* and says to her mother, “Mom, guess what I learned in school today? [. . .] I learned how a prince married a prince. [. . .] And I can marry a princess!” (“Yes on 8” n. pag.). The shot freezes on the mother’s horrified face as a voice over says: “Think it can’t happen? It’s already happened.” This popular and widely disseminated campaign piece places a child in a prominent position. However, this child is speaking words written by an adult, not her own – she is arguably an ideal, fictional child. Her role is to be cute and pig-tailed, to visualise and verbalise the innocence that needs protecting.

A more telling instance of a child's voice is found in a 2006 National Public Radio report. It features multiple sound clips of Robin Wirthlin explaining her son's confusion and agitation on receiving the knowledge of homosexuality, and some sound clips of Superintendent Ash discussing the need to "make sure that kids of gay families don't feel like they're being treated differently" ("Teacher, School Sued" n. pag.). It also includes a short interview with "44-year-old Lexington mom Anne Needleman." Needleman claims to be conflicted about the issue, and bashfully professes: "They're just so, you have to accept me. And it's like, you're starting to annoy me in a way. You know what I mean? That sounds really mean, but that's just how I feel about it." She claims that her daughter, Taylor, would also be confused and troubled by knowledge about homosexuality. However, NPR includes an interjection:

Smith: But a minute later six year old Taylor chimes in and says she already knows about kids with two daddies or two mommies.

Ms. Taylor Needleman (Daughter of Ms. A. Needleman): Noah, right?

Ms. A. Needleman: Who's Noah?

Ms. T. Needleman: Remember the Noah from the Kid Stock?

Ms. A. Needleman: Yeah. Noah's moms are married to each other.

Ms. T. Needleman: Yeah.

This actual child literally interrupts a conversation about protecting her idealised innocence by asserting her actual knowledge, thereby demonstrating how the knowledge/ignorance binary does not hold.

## **Conclusion**

The reinscription of the adult/child and knowledge/ignorance binaries relies on denying and restricting the ideal child's abilities to access a range of knowledge, to share it, or to critically challenge it. The binaries refuse any knowledge actual children may have of their own desires, and do not provide tools for dealing with non-normative gender identities or sexualities in a cissexist and heterosexist world. Conceptualising the ideal child as innocent does not respect actual children's ability to take in knowledge from the world around them, to challenge or test this information or to disseminate this knowledge. The knowledge/ignorance binary undervalues children's critical facilities and intelligence. It is, as I discussed in my literature review, a binary which revolves around the desires of adults, rather than actual children.

In the Lexington case, the constant resinscription of the knowledge/ignorance binary refused the ideal child and, subsequently, actual children, the right to seek out and challenge a range of information, the ability to think about complex and important issues, resist bullying or initiate meaningful discussion about non-normative genders or sexualities. It especially refused the possibility of children who have or will grow up to have non-normative genders or sexualities. All of these negations were effects of the reinscription of adult/child power dynamics, and they do not acknowledge the abilities and intellectual capacity of actual children. The conception of the ideal child promoted in the discourse of this debate was one in which children are entirely vulnerable to adult intervention, rather than one in which children have tools to challenge and use the knowledge that they receive from the world.

The emphasis on adults as the bearers of knowledge and the vulnerability of the ideal child leads to intense scrutiny of information about non-normative genders and sexualities. This information comes to bear a huge symbolic burden – it may create a good citizen or destroy Christianity. Due to these high stakes the content, mood and timing of this lesson is a source of anxiety for the participants in this debate. Even those participants who wish the ideal child to have information about homosexuality construct it as very powerful information which must only be delivered in small, carefully timed doses. Mis-application may have dire consequences.

If adults acknowledged the instability of the binary and refused to participate in the construction of the ideal child as innocent then the knowledge of homosexuality would not be such a source of tension. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, actual children have the ability for critical thought and complexity, so interacting with information about non-normative genders or sexualities is just one more piece of information that children can hold, challenge and explore in their lives. If both adults and children could bear and share information then this information about non-normative genders and sexualities would just be one piece of information among many. It would make the sharing of this information a much less fraught activity, which would be better for both adults and children. Acknowledging the instability of the knowledge/ignorance binary would better serve all participants.

## **Chapter 5. The Knowledge/Ignorance Binary in Both Censorship and the Picturebooks**

Lesbian and gay picturebooks are inherently disruptive of adult constructions of childhood as asexual and ignorant in that they are about sexuality and they provide information to their implied child reader. They make apparent the impossibility of the knowledge/ignorance binary because they acknowledge that a child reader, implied or actual, can be interested in sexuality, may have a sexuality (even a non-heterosexual one), and that a child reader can want, need and be capable of sharing information about sexuality. Although the effect of both the picturebooks and those defending them is that of minimising both sexuality and information, the picturebooks are fundamentally about both.

In this section I will build on the previous chapters by discussing the picturebooks and the discourse of the Lexington challenge together. I argue that the effects of the discourses reinforcing knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binaries are negative for both adults and actual children. I propose that the picturebooks and those defending them instead embrace their role as disruptive of the knowledge/ignorance binary.

I will consider the elements of this claim separately. First, I will address the question of whether the picturebooks are about sexuality. I will consider Nodelman's theory of the shadow text of children's literature and the debate in Lexington about the designation of the picturebooks as "primarily concerning human sexuality." Second, I will address the nature of children's literature as didactic, or primarily concerning providing information to children. I will consider children's literature criticism on didacticism and the debate in Lexington over "indoctrination."



## Picturebooks are About Sexuality

In Chapter Three, I argued that the picturebooks reproduce the adult/child binary in their depiction of sexuality. The books address the topic of non-normative sexualities without showing visible difference, physical affection or queer community, and without using specialised vocabulary. The adult construction of ideal childhood innocence means that this information about sexuality must be evacuated of all information and sexuality. Despite these absences, I argue that the picturebooks are certainly about sexuality. Put simply, they must be about sexuality because they are not about anything else. Without an understanding of the context of sexuality, the books don't make any sense.

In his *The Hidden Adult* Perry Nodelman describes this larger context as a “shadow text,” that a “reader can access by reading the actual simple text in the context of the repertoire of previously existing knowledge about life and literature it seems to demand and invite readers to engage” (77). An example of a text defined by the shadow text of homosexuality is *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, written and illustrated by Sarah S. Brannen. Uncle Bobby's favourite pastimes are boating, going to the ballet, taking long walks through rose-scented fields, toasting marshmallows in the fireplace, and playing board games with his young niece. He and his partner, Jamie, aspire to be married and have children. They have family photos of heterosexual couples up in their house (near the open fireplace), and, if the dancing couples at their wedding reception are representative, have no lesbian or gay friends. Brannen's picturebook has some slight narrative tension—will Chloe feel secure in her uncle's affections after he is married?—but not enough to carry the picturebook as a whole. The book's central point is the

message that gay people are friendly, inoffensive and aspire to heterosexual values. This message, and the book itself, would make little sense without a larger context of homophobia. Here we can see how the shadow text of homosexuality and homophobia defines Brannen's text.

*Uncle Bobby's Wedding* demonstrates perfectly the asexual, innocent presentation of homosexuality common to most lesbian and gay picturebooks. Uncle Bobby is so inoffensive he is actually represented as a guineapig. However, despite this blandness, the picturebook was number eight on the American Library Association's list of most frequently challenged books in 2008, the year it was published, and has garnered wide condemnation as an instrument to recruit children. A "powerful conservative voice" for *Human Events* magazine writes on the picturebook, explaining that "since homosexual activists cannot reproduce their own children, recruitment to their cause (especially at a young age, before parents have raised such sensitive and controversial topics with their children) is essential" (Hemenway n. pag.). The shadow text of *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* has obviously over-ridden its innocent asexuality.

Other reasons we can assume that the picturebooks are about sexuality exist outside the text completely. The picturebooks are marketed as about sexuality. They appear in online bibliographies of LGBT books for children and in LGBT bookstores. In chain bookstores they are filed under "Family Issues" rather than "Fiction." The picturebooks were originally published by lesbian and gay publishing houses such as The Gay Men's Press in London, and Alyson Wonderland, which is an imprint of Alyson Publications, a LGBT speciality press. These early picturebooks were often written by people who self-identified as lesbian or gay, such as Leslea Newman. The more recent

picturebooks are published often by mainstream publishing houses, but also by publishers such as Second Story Press, which is “dedicated to publishing feminist-inspired books for adults and young readers” (Second Story), and Two Lives Publishing, which creates books “for children in alternative families” (copyright information on Combs). The more recent books are often written or endorsed by psychiatrists specialising in sexuality.

Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, the authors of *And Tango Makes Three*, are both MDs. Richardson is identified in the jacket biography as “an assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia and Cornell and co-author of *Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid They’d Ask)*.” Vanita Oelschlager’s *A Tale of Two Daddies* contains a positive review on the back cover written by “Steve,” who is identified as “Stephen L. Cosby, M. D. Division Director, Paediatric Psychiatry and Psychology, Akron Children’s Hospital, Akron, Ohio.” These extraordinary details are presumably intended to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the authors. They also have the effect of identifying the books with the topic of sexuality. The extra-textual details of the picturebooks suggest that the picturebooks are about sexuality .

The reactions the books have generated also suggest that the books are about sexuality. The question of whether the books are about sexuality was a key point in the legal discourse in the Lexington case. Massachusetts’s law allows parents to opt out their children from any discussion “which primarily involves human sexual education or human sexuality issues” (Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 71, § 32A). Therefore, the plaintiffs attempted to prove that the picturebooks in question were primarily about human sexuality, and the defendants attempted to prove that they were not. The plaintiffs’

argument relied on an incomplete understanding of sexuality, and the defendants' on an inadequate representation of homophobia and heterosexism.

The plaintiffs' argument defined "human sexuality" purely in terms of behaviour, rather than including identification. This definition coheres with their understanding of homosexuality as an immoral choice rather than an identification, but rather weakens their argument that the books are about sexuality. The problem with their argument plays out primarily in their repeated description of de Haan and Nijland's *King and King* as containing "graphic physical homosexual" content. The final page of the book does picture the two kings kissing, but their mouths are conspicuously covered by a red heart. This kiss was raised consistently when the book was mentioned. The Supreme Court Judge's report has perhaps the most amusing description of it: "Plaintiffs [ . . . ] request injunctive relief that would require the defendants to [ . . . ] prohibit 'materials graphically depicting homosexual physical contact,' evidently including *King and King*, from being submitted to the students until seventh grade" (*Parker v. Hurley* 474 F. Supp. 2d 261 (D. Mass 2007) at 12). The judge appears to be mocking this claim, slightly, but many of the other reports do not. The reports differ as to whether they report that the kings' mouths are covered. Many simply say that "Second-graders at the same school were read a book, *King and King*, about two men who marry each other, with a picture of them kissing" (Frye A14). The defendants responded to this claim at one point by including the illustration of the two men kissing behind the heart as "Exhibit A" in a legal memorandum (Defs.' Mem. Supp. Dismiss Compl. No. 19. Civil Action No. 06-10751-MLW. at 29-30).

While the question of whether or not the picturebook contains “graphic homosexual physical contact” may be easily dismissed, the question of whether or not it primarily concerns human sexuality issues is more complex. The defendants generally argued that “a book like *King and King* does not require parental notification because it has no more to do with human sexuality than *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, or *Cinderella*” (“Teacher, School Sued” n. pag.). They also drew a parallel between presentations of homosexuality and heterosexuality:

The argument that depictions of gay characters constitute sex education or “sexual” content would mean that depictions of families with a husband and wife as parents are also about sexuality education, a plainly absurd notion. The promotion of tolerance, acknowledgement of diversity, and discussion of equal treatment and rights of gay people in society is not “sex education.” *Cf. Colin v. Orange Unified School District*, 83 F. Supp. 2d 1135, 1144-45, 1148 (C.D. Cal. 2000). (Proposed Mem. Amicus Curae. No. 23. Civil Action No. 06-CV-10751-MLW. at 19)

Their argument relies on an erasure of heterosexism and homophobia. The picturebooks have the effect of maintaining ignorance of homophobia, and they erase a history of activism that lead to, for instance, gay marriage becoming legal in Massachusetts, and in the Netherlands, where *King and King* was originally published. Until queer sexualities actually are equally unremarkable as heterosexuality in mainstream culture, a book such as *King and King* will always be more remarkable, and more about sexuality than *Cinderella*. As I have identified, the picturebook is one of the few pieces of media aimed at a child audience about non-normative sexualities, and the incidents that sparked the

court cases were one of the few times that a book about a sexuality other than heterosexuality was read in that Estabrook Elementary classroom. The alignment of the two fairytales is inaccurate, as it fails to acknowledge the ubiquity of heterosexuality, and a heterosexist culture of discrimination against LGBT people.

Regardless of the intentions of the authors and of the presence or absence of explicitly sexual language or images, the picturebooks' extra-textual characterisation and the public response to them mean that they are, *effectively*, about sexuality. These books disrupt understandings of the ideal child as asexual, as they are books intended for an implied child audience that, denuded and bland as they may be, are centrally about sexuality.

### **Picturebooks Provide Information**

The second part of my claim is that, although the effect of the picturebooks and the arguments of those defending them is to obscure or deny the role of the picturebooks as providing information, the picturebooks offer information about sexuality. Doing so disrupts the knowledge/ignorance binary in that it creates an implied reader who wants to have and is capable of holding information. As I argued in Chapter 3, the picturebooks contain very little by way of actual information. They do not contain specific vocabulary, information about homophobia or information about the range of possible queer lives. However, they are, as I established, about sexuality. I argue that, as the books are children's literature, they are inherently pedagogical, and therefore they have the effect of teaching their implied child reader about non-normative genders and sexualities. I will

argue this claim using children's literature theory and an analysis of the topic "indoctrination" in the Lexington case.

In the classic text *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer argue that "Children's literature is almost always didactic: its purpose is to instruct" (198). Their logic is that children "have not lived as long [as adults], and therefore – and this is what really matters – they've had less opportunity to encounter the sorts of experiences that might lead them to obtain knowledge and understanding" (100). A children's text is written by someone with more experience and knowledge for a younger, less knowledgeable, less experienced audience. Therefore, children's literature is inherently educational. The lesbian and gay picturebooks provide information about sexuality to their implied child audience, just by virtue of the fact of having been written by someone with more experience of sexuality, and more contact with people of different sexualities, to someone with less experience.

In *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* John Stephens argues that "Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience" (3). Stephens expands the idea of experience to include moral or social values that must be passed down to the less experienced child reader. Nodelman and Reimer agree, describing this teaching as "making it possible for children to live successfully in a community with others" (97). The lesbian and gay picturebooks attempt to provide socio-cultural values of tolerance, though they are hampered by their inability to name or realistically represent the members of the community which must be tolerated.

As Nodelman points out: "the often proclaimed distaste for the didactic is usually

actually just dismay about the obviously didactic, on the assumption that, ideally, children's literature ought to teach without seeming to do so" (*The Hidden Adult* 158). The development of unobtrusively didactic children's literature has simply driven the message underground. John Stephens argues that an implicit ideology is far more effective than an explicit one: "implicit, and therefore invisible, ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implication that things are simply 'so'" (9). An unspoken ideology adheres to understandings of children as innocent—no information is visible. Paulo Freire argues that "education has politicity, the quality of being political. [. . .] Because education is politicity, it is never neutral. When we try to be neutral [. . .] we support the dominant ideology" (148). The most "neutral" children's literature reinscribes an understanding of the ideal child as asexual and ignorant. Acknowledging that all children's literature is pedagogical, and all pedagogy is ideological leads us look for the implicit, invisible ideologies in children's texts. This process proves the lie that children's literature should be innocent of politics. When it is argued that a children's book is inappropriately political, what is actually being argued is that this book doesn't support the dominant ideology, which is unspoken and unrecognisable in a text. An "inappropriately political" book about the joys of communism merely points to the capitalist agenda of children's books about the joys of consumption.

The question of politics and ideology in children's literature was addressed in the Lexington case primarily through the question of "indoctrination." As one of the lawyers sarcastically pointed out, the "plaintiffs are so enamoured of the term 'indoctrination' that it appears, in one form or another, seven (7) times in their Complaint, and twenty-two (22) times in their Memorandum" (Defs.' Mem. Supp. Dismiss Compl. No. 19. Civil



Action No. 06-10751-MLW. at 4). Judge Lynch engaged with the topic quite seriously, finding that:

On the facts, there is no viable claim of “indoctrination” here. Without suggesting that such showings would suffice to establish a claim of indoctrination, we note the plaintiffs’ children were not forced to read the books on pain of suspension. Nor were they subject to a constant stream of like materials. [. . .] The reading by a teacher of one book, or even three, and even if to a young and impressionable child, does not constitute “indoctrination.” (*Parker v. Hurley*, 514 F.3d 87 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 2008) at 41-42)

Lynch applies a traditional definition of indoctrination to the classroom incidents and finds it doesn’t hold. Judge Wolf, in contrast, takes up the idea that all adult/child interaction is pedagogical. He writes that “‘Indoctrination’ is a pejorative term for ‘teaching.’ Among other things, ‘indoctrination’ is defined as ‘to teach to accept a system of thought uncritically.’ Webster’s New Riverside Dictionary (1984 ed) at 624. It is, obviously, the duty of schools to teach” (*Parker v. Hurley*. 474 F. Supp. 2d 26 (D. Mass 2007) at 26). He claims that adults must teach, and the Judeo-Christians’ emphasis on indoctrination is merely a use of “opprobrious epithets.” Wolf’s argument allows for the inherent power and experience imbalance between adults and children, and acknowledges the pedagogical impact of the picturebooks, although he does not accept the claim of indoctrination.

The picturebooks in my sample, by virtue of being children’s literature, provide information to their implied and actual child readers, and disrupt the knowledge/ignorance and adult/child binary. As I discussed in my introduction, literature

review and previous chapter, childhood innocence is constructed by adults in view of specific knowledges (primarily sexual) of which adults wish to keep the ideal child innocent. In fact, the fundamentalist Judeo-Christians in the Lexington case wished to keep their actual children and the ideal child innocent of all complex knowledge, most knowledge of sexuality and even of the act of thinking. In this situation children's literature offering information about the "complex" topic of non-normative genders and sexualities fundamentally disrupts this understanding of childhood.

### **Picturebooks Provide Information About Sexuality**

In previous chapters I have established that most adults construct the ideal child as innocent (of sexuality) and ignorant (of knowledge about sexuality). In this chapter I have established that the lesbian and gay picturebooks in my sample are about sexuality, and they offer information. Therefore, lesbian and gay picturebooks inherently prove the impossibility of the knowledge/ignorance binary and the adult/child binary. They are a form dedicated to providing information about sexuality to an audience constructed as too innocent to receive it.

The picturebooks show how these binaries implode as the innocent child relies on sexual knowledge for definition. The books demonstrate an awareness, muffled as it is by absence, that the implied child reader and the actual child reader may have a sexuality, a present (not just a future), and an ability to take in and share knowledge. They work to reinforce the knowledge/ignorance binary, but their existence demonstrates that this binary is impossible. Even "constant vigilance" cannot make the ideal child the asexual, ignorant being adults desire, and "[i]t is impossible for any picturebook to be 'innocent'

because implicit and explicit expressions of ideology are present in all children's literature" (Haynes and Murriss 40). Therefore, the knowledge/ignorance binary cannot hold in these books.

### **Conclusion: Queer Picturebooks**

The picturebooks interact with childhood innocence and knowledge about non-normative genders and sexualities in a remarkably similar fashion to that of participants in the Lexington challenge. However, the picturebooks actually destabilise the knowledge/ignorance binary in their basic role as a conduit for information about non-normative genders and sexualities. The normalising, absence-based and innocence-focused effects of both the picturebooks and the discourse of the challenge do not respect the intellect or agency of the actual child. As my discussion of the changing, shifting and overlapping conceptualisations of the child in my introduction explored, "the child" is far more contradictory and changeable than the knowledge/ignorance binary allows.

In Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss's work on doing philosophy with children, they write:

In the wider world and in the spheres of teaching children, training teachers, and childhood studies, the last thirty years have been all about the realisation that children are far more competent than usually given credit for and that they are able to contribute actively to everyday life when asked or permitted to do so.

(166)

As much educational theory attests, actual children are capable of thinking: not only absorbing complex information, but testing and challenging it. Harry Brighouse and

Eamonn Callan both write persuasively on children's rights and the "deeper principle [. . .] that education should aim at enabling people to lead flourishing lives" (Brighouse 15). They discuss the competing rights of parents and children in terms of what a "flourishing life" might entail. Brighouse argues "children have a right to learn about a range of ways of living and to the kind of education that will enable them to reflect on their own way of life in light of these alternatives, and, ultimately, to revise or reject the way of life their parents would pass down to them" (2). Both critics place an emphasis on the ideal child's right and ability to absorb and challenge information from a range of sources, arguing "[t]o be denied a sympathetic understanding of ethical diversity by parents who seek to preserve unswerving identification with the primary culture they favour is to be denied the deliberative raw material for independent thought about the right and the good" (Callan 226). They maintain that the ideal child and actual children must be given the opportunity and means to critique their parents' values, and the information given to them by parents and teachers. Haynes and Murriss agree that it is "vital, *and* in the common interest, for people to learn to think for themselves and approach moral judgments critically and meaningfully" (160, original emphasis). They add that adult cultural constructions of the ideal child can inhibit this process, as "[w]e cannot seriously engage with children in authentic searches for understanding if we have already determined that they lack the authority to speak from their experience or the competence to make choices about which questions to pursue" (155). The knowledge/ignorance binary disrespects and disables actual children in that it conceptualises them as ignorant and incapable of thinking. Therefore,

The path ahead is respect for children: listening and letting them be confident, articulate, independent thinkers; removing obstacles to their full and meaningful participation in everyday life at school; and encouraging their agency in their learning, in their lives, and in their communities. (Haynes and Murriss 228)

Actual children would be better off if childhood were understood as complex, knowledgeable, sexual, thoughtful, and expressive, and if picturebooks were written to meet these needs.

In addition to the more crucial benefits for actual children, if the picturebooks deliberately disrupted the binary it would release pressure from adults to provide the perfect, innocent initial introduction of information about non-normative genders and sexualities. Adults could acknowledge that children already have knowledge about genders and sexualities, and that children have the ability to challenge or modify information. As Jen Gilbert points out, “when children are seen as vulnerable and pure, adults become the source of a dangerous, corrupting sexuality” (“Risking a Relation” 51).

Inscribing the ideal child as ignorant means she or he can’t protect her- of himself, and any information provided by adults must loom large and have significant consequences, so adults must either constantly protect the ideal child from information or wrestle with which pieces of information to provide children at which time. Failure on either count can destroy the ideal child. The exhausting task of constant vigilance over children’s intake of knowledge, and the mandate to provide only the perfect information at the perfect time both seem impossible. Maintaining a construction of childhood as ignorant must surely be a source of adult anxiety over the ability to complete difficult or impossible tasks.

Inscribing the ideal child as asexual means that adults must constantly protect the ideal child from sexuality. Adults may suffer anxiety over the possibility that children are incurring non-normative genders or sexualities. As actual children exist in larger culture, the requirement of keeping the ideal child ignorant of sexuality is an impossible burden, and the attempt to keep children from identifying or naming their own genders or sexualities must be provoke anxiety, and possibly, guilt, if children fail to conform to the heterosexual matrix. The adult desire for childhood asexuality does not benefit adults or children.

As I discussed in chapter 4, there are large and important anxieties that cause our culture to reinscribe the adult/child and knowledge/ignorance binaries. Debate in the Lexington case covered topics such as: the role of education, the place of religion in a secular state, the rights of parents and teachers, the role of the individual and the state, the relationship between art and politics. Other censorship cases raise issues about the best way to represent and respect competing or simply different social and cultural groups in shared space, and questions about national identity. Discussions of sexuality and childhood often raise anxieties about adults' ability to protect children from unwanted sexual contact. There are serious and important reasons why adults might desire to reinscribe adult/child and knowledge/ignorance binaries. Even so, I argue that embracing a position of destabilising the knowledge/ignorance binary would allow adults release from some of the anxiety and guilt around the ideal child. While the reasons why our culture seeks to defend adult/child and knowledge/ignorance binaries are important, paradoxically, doing so does not benefit adults or children.

Refusing the binary would mean adults working with children to help them defend themselves, evaluate information themselves and identify and name their own genders and sexualities. All of these activities would be considerably more pleasurable and less anxiety-producing than seeking to redefine current understandings of childhood. It would also allow creators of picturebooks to play with words and images, and write more interesting, creative picturebooks than are currently available. It would allow picturebook creators to focus on the content and style of their books, rather than on what must not be represented. Rather than shoring up an impossible adult/child binary, adults could enjoy the contradictions and complexities of both adulthood and childhood.

If we acknowledged that the binary doesn't hold, and, in fact, lesbian and gay picturebooks disrupt the binary by their very nature, such books could provide implied and actual child readers with more specific and accurate information about different genders and sexualities. They could also provide a range of information, acknowledging that their intended readers are capable of comparing and rejecting ideas. The picturebooks could offer representations of real difference and otherness. The books could offer information about possible futures for actual child readers, writing for an implied reader who has an ability to try on, then accept or reject different elements of these futures without harm. Such information would respect the intellectual ability of their implied reader and actual children.

A picturebook that disrupted the knowledge/ignorance binary would be a *queer* picturebook, queer as in resisting normalisation and writing about real difference. A queer picturebook could be about confronting homophobia, and could offer conceptualisations of the ways in which Western culture is constructed around

heterosexuality, and different models for dealing with institutionalised inequality. A queer picturebook could be about queers as role models, going to the barber to get your head buzzed “like mummy!” A queer picturebook could about what it feels like when two of your three parents no longer love each other (but still love you); about the experience of learning new pronouns to respect dad’s genderqueer best friend; about deciding whether or not to explain your relationship with your surrogate birth parent to your classmates, about the blessing of growing up in a big, engaged, diverse, political queer community. A queer picturebook would not be innocent, but neither are children.

### **Further Avenues for Research**

I have touched on gender throughout this dissertation, but have been unable to give it the full attention it deserves. Much useful work could be done on the sissy boy, princess boy, pink boy and trans girl picturebooks, which is an increasing body of self-published literature promoting tolerance for feminine behaviour in young boys, often with the subtextual assumption that they will grow up to be gay or transgender. Studies could also be done on the relative absence of tomboy and trans boy picturebooks, and the challenges that have arisen and surely will continue to arise to picturebooks which address non-normative genders.

Comparative studies of the ways in which the knowledge/ignorance binary was enacted and undone in challenges such as the Surrey case in Canada and the Hardings/Playschool case in Australia would provide greater breadth and depth to this study’s analysis of cultural understandings of sexuality and childhood. In future research I would like to explore these and other censorship challenges to see the ways they



engaged with questions of knowledge and ignorance, and which other cultural anxieties were the focus of discussion.

My sample largely comprised U.S.-published picturebooks. I have been unable to give proper attention to the handful of more (often more interesting) European-published picturebooks which have been translated into English. Few as they are, these books are ripe for academic attention. One could also study the vast and rapidly increasing number of self-published, internet-distributed picturebooks about gender and sexuality.

A significant absence in this dissertation is the voices of actual children. A fascinating and important study could be done on how actual children read and respond to these picturebooks, and the ways in which children participate in challenges.

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## **Appendix: Lesbian and Gay Picturebooks, Organised Chronologically**

### **1983**

Bosche, Susanne. *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin*. Photos by Andreas Hansen. Trans.

Louis Mackay. London: Gay Men's, 1983. Trans. of *Mette bor hos Morten og Erik*. Copenhagen, 1981.

### **1989**

Newman, Leslea. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Illus. Diana Souza. LA: Alyson

Wonderland, 1989.

### **1990**

Elwin, Rosamund and Michele Paulse. *Asha's Mums*. Illus. Dawn Lee. Toronto:

Women's, 1990.

Willhoite, Michael. *Daddy's Roommate*. LA: Alyson Wonderland, 1990.

### **1991**

Newman, Leslea. *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*. Illus. Russell Crocker. LA: Alyson

Wonderland, 1991.

Valentine, Johnny. *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans and Other Stories*. Illus. Lynette

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### **1993**

Willhoite, Michael. *Uncle What-Is-It is Coming to Visit!* LA: Alyson Wonderland, 1993.

## **1994**

Newman, Leslea. *Too Far Away to Touch*. Illus. Catherine Stock. NY: Clarion, 1995.

Valentine, Johnny. *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*. Illus. Melody Sarecky.

LA: Alyson Wonderland, 1994.

## **1995**

Skutch, Robert. *Who's in a Family?* Illus. Laura Nienhaus. Berkeley: Tricycle, 1995.

## **1996**

Willhoite, Michael. *Daddy's Wedding*. LA: Alyson Wonderland, 1996.

## **1999**

Atkins, Jeannine. *A Name On The Quilt: A Story of Remembrance*. Illus. Tad Hills. NY:

Aladdin, 1999.

## **2000**

Combs, Bobbie. *123: A Family Counting Book*. Illus. Danamarie Hosler. Ridley Park,

Two Lives, 2000.

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## **2001**

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## **2003**

Aldrich, Andrew R. *How My Family Came to Be – Daddy, Papa and Me*. Illus. Mike Motz. Oakland: New Family, 2003.

## **2004**

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## 2005

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## 2006

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## 2008

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## 2009

- Newman, Leslea. *Daddy, Papa and Me*. Illus. Carol Thompson. Berkeley: Tricycle, 2009.
- . *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Illus. Diana Souza. 20th anniversary ed., LA: Alyson Wonderland, 2009.
- . *Mommy, Mama and Me*. Illus. Carol Thompson. Berkeley: Tricycle, 2009.
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**2010**

Oelschlager, Vanita. *A Tale of Two Daddies*. Illus. Kristin Blackwood and Mike Blanc.

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**2011**

Newman, Leslea. *Donovan's Big Day*. Illus. Mike Dutton. Berkley: Tricycle, 2011.