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An Analysis of the Innovations in Three Recent Gender Nonconforming Picture Books

Abstract

With the rising interest in and representation of LGBTQ+ people, more gender nonconforming picture books are being published and are gaining in popularity. Studies of older gender nonconforming picture books have offered critique on the representations present in those picture books. In this paper the representation of gender nonconforming characters in three recently published (2018 and 2019) picture books will be discussed in relation to the critique given on those earlier gender nonconforming picture books. This is done to see if the three picture books discussed here, *Julian is a Mermaid*, *Prinses Kevin*, and *A House for Everyone* succeeded in bringing something new to the genre of gender nonconforming picture books. The interaction between picture and text is examined and a close reading analysis with a focus on gender is performed for each book in order to assess this. This thesis concludes that all three books, despite some still perpetuating a few issues that were found in previous gender nonconforming picture books, do add new valuable representation to the genre.

Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1 Literature Review.....	7
<i>Definition of Terms used Related to Gender Studies</i>	7
<i>Gender Theory</i>	11
<i>The Topic of Gender and Children</i>	14
<i>Picture Book Theory</i>	16
<i>Other Studies of Gender Nonconforming Picture Books</i>	19
<i>Methodology</i>	20
Chapter 2 <i>Julian is a Mermaid</i>	22
<i>Introduction</i>	22
<i>Picture Walk</i>	23
<i>Illustrations</i>	24
<i>Picture and Text Interaction</i>	26
<i>Gender Analysis</i>	29
<i>Discussion of Julian is a Mermaid in Relation to Critique on Other Gender Nonconforming Picture Books</i>	33
<i>Reviews</i>	34
<i>Conclusion</i>	35
Chapter 3 <i>Prinses Kevin</i>	37
<i>Introduction</i>	37
<i>Picture Walk</i>	38
<i>Illustrations</i>	39
<i>Picture and Text Interaction</i>	40
<i>Gender Analysis</i>	43
<i>Discussion of Prinses Kevin in Relation to Critique on Other Gender Nonconforming Picture Books</i>	46
<i>Conclusion</i>	48
Chapter 4 <i>A House for Everyone</i>	50
<i>Introduction</i>	50
<i>Picture Walk</i>	51
<i>Illustrations</i>	52
<i>Text and Picture Interaction</i>	53
<i>Gender Analysis</i>	56
<i>Discussion of A House for Everyone in Relation to Critique on Other Gender Nonconforming Picture Books</i>	59

<i>Reviews</i>	61
<i>Conclusion</i>	62
Conclusion	64
Works Cited	68

Introduction

Recently, the interest in and representation of gender nonconformity in media has risen. LGBTQ+ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer +) rights are featured more in the news and gender-neutral bathrooms and forms that allow for a third option next to female or male are becoming more common (Bernal; Elias and Colvin; Graham). These small changes in society make life easier for gender nonconforming people. Even though more people are becoming aware of the importance of these inclusivity-based changes, they are also met with hostility (Francis; Moreau) and many steps still need to be taken. The media can have a large influence on this. Furthermore, McInroy and Craig have found that the representation of LGBTQ+ people has a large impact on how they view themselves and how they are treated by society (607). Thus, it is good to see that there is an increasing amount of attention to LGBTQ+ and specifically gender nonconforming characters in the media.

This thesis will focus specifically on the increasing representation of gender nonconforming characters in children's picture books. A few examples of popular gender nonconforming picture books are: *My Princess Boy* (2009), *I am Jazz* (2014), and *10.000 Dresses* (2008). One recent gender nonconforming picture book that has gotten a lot of attention in the last year is Jessica Love's *Julian is a Mermaid*. Love's work won multiple awards; including the Stonewall Book Award and the Klaus Flugge Prize (Flood; "*Julián Is a Mermaid*") and has been translated in over ten languages ("*Julián Is a Mermaid*"). Multiple (children's) publishers have also pledged to include more LGBTQ+ representation in their lists. In the Netherlands the prominent publisher Querido announced in 2019 that it will have a specific imprint in its children's department dedicated to LGBTQ+ representation in YA (Young Adult) literature called

Querido Glow (Verheijen). This exemplifies that even larger mainstream publishers are now increasingly including LGBTQ+ representation.

The public's reaction to this has been quite divided; a large group is very supportive, but many people have reservations about the discussion of gender and sexuality in children's books. The LGBTQ+ community is overall happy to see the increase of representation but does question the quality of said representation because they want their community and identities to be reflected correctly (McInroy and Craig 607). This is very subjective, but a general consensus of gender nonconforming picture book critics is that they want society to grow and recognise more identities and also to include more than just coming out stories in the media (Bittner et al.; Capuzza; Epstein).

These wishes for better representation tie in with some of the critiques that have been given to gender nonconforming picture books in the past. Capuzza and other scholars found that most gender nonconforming picture books only showed a limited amount of gender nonconforming identities, mainly the trans girl or gender nonconforming boy that likes to wear dresses (Bittner et al. 951–953; Capuzza 6; Martin). Additionally, they found that these picture books did not step outside of gender stereotypes, the gender binary, or the coming out narrative (Bittner et al. 948–953; Capuzza 4–9). The question this raises is; whether the more recent gender nonconforming picture books which came out in the past few years have broadened the scope of which identities are represented and what stories are told. This thesis aims to answer that question through analysing three gender nonconforming picture books that came out over the past two years.

The three gender nonconforming picture books that will be discussed are *Julian is a Mermaid*, *Prinses Kevin*, and *A House for Everyone*. These picture books were published in 2018 and 2019 and come from three different Western-democratic

countries (USA, Australia, France). A close reading analysis will be done of each of these picture books. The analysis will first focus on identifying the picture and text interaction of the books and then will turn to gender analysis that is informed by gender and feminist theory. The intersectionality and accessibility of the books will also be discussed. After this, the books are discussed in relation to the critique that was given on previous gender nonconforming picture books in order to see if they were able to step outside of the aspects that were critiqued. Additionally, it will be examined if they add some new, well worked out representation to the genre. Reviews and public reaction will also be discussed, as books never exist in a vacuum and there is an argument to be made that the books do not really come to life until the readers interact with them (the idea that was made influential by *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes).

The first chapter will consist of a literature review that places this thesis within the academic fields of picture book theory and gender theory. It will also briefly discuss the history of children's books and the critique on other gender nonconforming picture books. In the subsequent three chapters the picture and gender analysis of the three books – *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, *Prinses Kevin* by Michaël Escoffier, and *A House for Everyone* by Jo Hirst respectively – will be conducted. In the end, it will be concluded that even though two out of three picture books still contain aspects that were criticized in earlier gender nonconforming picture books, they all provide new representations in the genre and are able to be renewing forces within the genre of gender nonconforming picture books.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

This chapter will give an overview of the academic literature used throughout this thesis. It will position existing research into the representation of gender nonconforming characters in children's books within the fields of gender studies and picture book studies. The chapter will start with an overview of the terms and definitions used in this research. After these have been clarified, the broader field of gender studies and picture book studies will be discussed. Since there has been a lot of development within both fields, this chapter will not provide a detailed overview of these developments but will focus on the key aspects of the theories. It will give a broad outline of the developments that are relevant to this study and explain what academic position this research will take within these fields. For a more comprehensive overview of these two fields of study, see the main comprehensive sources used in this literature review (Buikema and Van der Tuin; Salisbury and Styles). Once the general field of study has been discussed, the focus will shift more specifically to what is relevant to this study. The methodology used throughout this thesis will also be explained in this chapter. The methodology will consist of a close reading content-analysis approach (inspired by that of Martinez and Harmon) which will guide the following chapters.

Definition of Terms used Related to Gender Studies

The language/terminology used to refer to people and concepts is an important part of gender studies. Because of this, and to clarify what is consistently meant by certain terms used in this paper, there will first be explanations and definitions given of some gender-related terms that will be used frequently. Within gender studies, the language and

definitions used to refer to certain concepts have changed over the years. The definitions used here mainly stem from *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture: a Comprehensive Guide to Gender Studies* by Buikema and Van der Tuin, and *The Transgender Handbook* by Bouman and Arcelus. These two handbooks were chosen because of how current they are: they were both published in 2017. In this thesis, the definitions were first chosen from *The Transgender Handbook* since these are all linked to gender-nonconformity and because this handbook provides a convenient list of gender terms specifically targeted to inform families and professionals that encounter trans* people. Additional information was then added from *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture: a Comprehensive Guide to Gender Studies* where necessary.

First, the general term gender will be discussed. Bouman and Arcelus split the term gender into multiple concepts: biology, gender identity, and gender expression. Here, the biology encompasses the “sex chromosomes, anatomy of the reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics” (6). Since (as will be more thoroughly explained later) gender is seen as a performative act and something that is changeable (Butler 519), there is also a distinction made between gender expression and gender identity. Someone’s gender identity is “[t]he psychological identification of oneself or the internal sense of being (the way we feel inside, in our hearts and in our minds) in relation to gender” (Bouman and Arcelus 7). Someone’s gender identity is very personal and can be different from what other people may assume their gender identity is. Gender expression is “[t]he way a person expresses one’s gender identity to others” (Bouman and Arcelus 6). This can be done through many different mediums, including clothing, hairstyle, and behaviour. The gender representation that society expects from gender identities is sometimes referred to as gender roles (Bouman and Arcelus 7). What is important to note here is that many of these gender-expressions and gender

roles are “culturally bound” (Bouman and Arcelus 6–7), which means that it differs from culture to culture what is deemed an appropriate form of expression for someone’s gender identity. This difference is also why it is important to clarify that this thesis will focus solely on the West European and North American views on gender.

Considering gender, there is a discrepancy between Bouman’s and Arcelus’s view and that of Buikema and Van der Tuin. Buikema and Van der Tuin disagree with Bouman and Arcelus’s distinction between sex and gender. Bouman and Arcelus describe sex as something fixed and gender as something changeable (2), while Buikema and Van der Tuin emphasise that this notion is outdated and should be changed. They say that,

The problem with the extremely fruitful distinction between sex and gender is that it maintains the traditional dichotomy between nature and culture. Furthermore, feminist scientists claim that the focus on the changeability of gender can lead to a trivialisation of the important possibilities and limitations of the biological body. Feminists have thus tackled the issue of the problematic differentiations between nature and culture, and between sex and gender. (Buikema and Van der Tuin 39)

Both the body and gender are seen as unfixed and heavily influenced by the gaze of other people. Sex and gender, nature and culture are now thought of “in terms of hybrids and border zones” (Buikema and Van der Tuin 46).

Within the general concept of gender, there are many different gender identities, too many to discuss comprehensively; those most important to this thesis are explained here. There are people that identify within the more commonly known binary genders

of male or female, and people that fall outside of these; the latter are people that identify as non-binary. This is an umbrella term under which “people can identify themselves as gender queer, neutrois, pan-gender, poly-gender, third gender, etc.” (Bouman and Arcelus 8). Gender queer here refers to people that neither identify as completely male nor as completely female. For clear definitions of the other terms mentioned within the umbrella term non-binary, see Bouman and Arcelus (8). Someone’s assigned gender is “the gender that a person is assigned to when they are born, based on the genital appearance” (Bouman and Arcelus 5). Someone who is cisgender is “[a] person whose assigned gender is in line with their gender identity” (Bouman and Arcelus 5). There are also people who identify as transgender or trans: this is an “umbrella term to describe anyone whose gender identity, expression or behaviour is different from the assigned gender at birth” (Bouman and Arcelus 9). They can experience gender dysphoria; “[t]he distress that some transgender people feel due to the discrepancy between their assigned gender at birth and their gender identity” (Bouman and Arcelus 5). Trans describes transgender people, trans* includes transgender people and “all nonconforming (gender queer) groups and includes non-binary people who self-describe or self-identify in a number of ways” (Bouman and Arcelus 9). The term trans* is of crucial importance in this thesis and will recur in the analysis.

Another term that comes up frequently in this thesis is ‘coming out’, Bouman and Arcelus define this as “recognising one's sexual orientation, or gender identity, and being open about it with oneself and with others” (5). It is important to note here that this definition does not only include the more commonly known coming out of sexual orientation but also of gender identity. Thus, this definition can also be used and is used here as referring to coming out as non-cisgender too.

Apart from many different gender identity terms, there is also relevant terminology which refers to different ways of expressing one's gender. First and foremost, with regard to this study, is the concept of gender nonconforming gender expression. This refers to “[a]ny individual whose gender expression is different from what society expects of them, due to their assigned gender at birth” (Bouman and Arcelus 7). Also important is gender variance: “the fact that some people dress and/or behave in ways that are perceived by others as being outside of the cultural and societal gender expressions” (Bouman and Arcelus 7).

These have been the most relevant and important definitions of words used in this thesis referring to gender, and this is also the area in which this research will focus. However, because gender and sexuality have often been linked in the past (Meyer qtd. in Slesaransky-Poe and García 204) it is also important to quickly categorize some words that will be referenced in this paper: heterosexuality (being sexually attracted to someone of the opposite binary gender), homosexuality (being sexually attracted to someone of the same binary gender), bisexuality (being sexually attracted to two genders, most commonly the two binary genders), and queer sexuality (referring to anyone who is not heterosexual). These are only some of the many sexual orientations that exist, but these are the sexualities that are most important for this thesis.

Gender Theory

Having discussed the precise definitions of gender terms that will be used, this thesis can proceed to discuss the theory that will be used in this paper. It is important to note that gender studies started from a feminist point of view, fighting for equal rights for men and women. Feminists are the ones that started to see how the idea that one's gender determines what one can, and cannot do, is problematic. Thus, they started to

regard gender as a construct (Buikema and Van der Tuin 39). Judith Butler coined the idea that gender is actually a performative part of one's identity and that it is not something that is fixed by birth (519–520). Butler has also theorised that performing a gender is a form of survival, that people will sometimes react strongly to those that make it explicit that gender is just an act (in subverting what is thought of as the norm for instance) instead of something fixed. Those exposing gender as an act will often get punished by the community for stepping out of line (Butler 522–527). This explains why many people conform to their respective gender role and why some people will react strongly to people who do not. Since the origin of gender studies in feminism, gender theory has evolved to include many forms of gender and discusses the many issues that are caused by gender inequality, and people rejecting gender identities that fall outside the binary.

Gender theory is currently increasingly concerned with the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality argues that there are many facets to a person, including someone's gender identity, and that all of these should be considered jointly in research and gender studies. This is an important concept throughout this research because even though sexually queer people have slowly become more accepted, gender queer people, and especially non-binary people, are still often excluded from the conversation (Buikema and Van der Tuin 72–74). Intersectionality broadens the conversation to include gender, among other aspects such as race, class, and disability and is thereby able to include a significant amount of people that were excluded before.

One way to talk more about gender and make the differences in gender more visible is through representation. Buikema and Van der Tuin argue that representation “is operative at a concrete as well as at a symbolical level. Language can be a means of making present what was previously absent” (83). This shows that representation is

important because it questions who is seen, but also questions, once new voices are added, how we want them to be addressed and discussed (Buikema and Van der Tuin 83). The importance of how things are represented, ties in with semiotics; how does the signifier present the signified (Buikema and Van der Tuin 83)? This is something that will be thoroughly examined in this research into the representation of gender nonconforming characters. This is particularly important to examine with children's books because research has shown that it is important for children to see themselves reflected in the stories they read because that will make them engage more with the stories (Peksen 159).

Within gender studies it is believed that knowledge is always linked with power, as no one comes from a blank background when presenting and investigating something. One's background will always (subconsciously) influence what is said and what is left out. Everyone has to be careful when producing and presenting knowledge to include as many perspectives as possible and be aware that our own perspective will influence what is found and what is said (Buikema and Van der Tuin 52–58). Because of this, I want to mention my background so that this can be taken into account for the rest of this study. I generally identify and present as my birth-assigned gender of female, and thus do not identify as gender queer. However, I do think it is important to show, and talk about gender queer representation. I also speak from a predominantly white, democratic, Western, country in Europe. I am middle class and identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Being an ally to gender queer people, I felt the need to discuss these subjects. But I am aware that even though I have tried to be as thorough as possible in my research, my research into this subject is not the same as having first-hand experience, which will influence the research presently done here. I am aware that as a non-gender-queer white, person I have a certain power/privilege that others do not

and hope to use this privilege here in a constructive way to help those who do not have this privilege.

The Topic of Gender and Children

Discussing gender in relation to children is always tricky, considering some adults feel that children are too young to have to deal with gender as a concept and want to preserve their ‘innocence’. However, it has been shown that "children are neither naive nor innocent" (Earles 371) in their perception of gender. The age at which gender identity begins to form has been determined to be between three and six years old (Halim et al. 456), which is also the age at which children are "highly motivated to adhere to the gender norms they are learning" (Halim et al. 456). Thus, it seems that even though gender might not be explicitly discussed around young children, they still acquire knowledge of the concept of gender. Halim et al. have found that children across cultures will often go through a phase of appearance rigidity. This means that they will want to wear clothes and express themselves in a way that they think fits their assigned gender. This phase often happens between the ages of two and six with a peak between two and four. It is generally more severe with children assigned as girls than children assigned as boys (Halim et al. 456–457).

Thus, picture books for this age group may be the perfect medium to discuss gender. Especially because picture books help form children's earliest ideas of gender, race and class (Frawley 291). It has been found that gender-stereotypical representation in picture books “negatively affects girls and boys, limiting the scope of acceptable roles and behaviors, and normalizing gender inequalities” (Adams et al. qtd. in Filipovic 311). However, this can be subverted by showing children alternative gender roles and identities, which highlights "the need for exposure to nonstereotypical

literature” (Filipovic 311). Exposing children to more varied representation is already a great aim; however, the way these non-stereotypical gender expressions are represented and read to them matters greatly too.

From an early age, children form a gender ‘schema’, a schema that they use to categorise what fits with what gender (Frawley 292). Frawley found that these schemata do not fully set in until the age of six (293). This means that there is time to show children that there are many different ways of expressing one’s gender and many different gender identities in order for the schemata to include a greater variety of people. Banse et al. have looked into when children are able to spontaneously gender stereotype, and found that "gender stereotype knowledge showed a marked increase between 3 and 7 years, gender stereotype flexibility decreased until the age of 6 years before it started to increase between the ages of 6 and 7 years" (299). This is in line with Frawley’s idea that these set schemata form until the age of six.

Studying the responses of children (of various ages) to picture books with characters that displayed gender non-stereotypical behaviour, Frawley found that the gender schema that children retain can heavily distort the information they receive from picture books. So much so, that they change the entire story and are quite confident that their way of remembering it is correct (291–301). Earles has confirmed this theory and has found that children have particularly more difficulty with representations of men/boys in more traditionally feminine spaces than women/girls in more traditionally masculine spaces (384). This emphasises the need of people who read these non-stereotypical books to children to be aware of this problem and for them to try to have a conversation about it. Especially in educational spaces to make sure that the intended message does indeed come across. Additionally, this is important because, even though stereotype flexibility grows with age, Banse et al. have also found that “stereotype

knowledge and spontaneous gender stereotyping remained constant across age groups" (304). This means that once the stereotype knowledge is built, it does not change, and it influences the spontaneous stereotype impulse. This is a strong consideration to keep in mind when making and reading picture books.

Picture Book Theory

Picture book theory mainly discusses the interplay between text and pictures and how brains process them. There are many different theories and definitions which discuss how pictures and words work together within picture books; Salisbury's and Styles' newly published book offers a good overview of all these theories and the history of the picture book. In this book it is explained that the rise of the picture book is heavily linked to two factors; one is the increased focus on childhood in the eighteenth century, the other is modern improvements in printing techniques which accommodate pictures/illustrations (Salisbury and Styles 10–46).

Susan Manly has also commented on the rise of children's literature in the eighteenth century and has said that the type of children's literature that emerged then was influenced by how Locke and Rousseau saw children (218). She clarifies that the writing that emerged had the aim

To make ideas and current debates available to children, sometimes obliquely, sometimes directly, and encourage them to use their imaginations to empathize with others, stimulating independent, open, and compassionate powers of judgement, and enabling child readers to see and think critically and reflectively. (Manly 221)

This continued into the children's books that came out during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. This was called "the golden age of children's books" (Sainsbury and Styles 18). The children's literature that emerged during the eighteenth century has formed the foundation of current children's books, which mainly was didactic in nature. However, there have always been countering voices saying that children's books should preserve a child's natural hope and vigour (Manly 218). This illustrates the start of the ever-ongoing debate regarding whether children's books should be educational or entertaining. Gender nonconforming picture books in particular are often used in educational spaces regardless of their original aim (Ryan et al. 99).

Overall, the majority of theories concerning the relationship between pictures and words agree that in picture books "words and pictures combine to deliver the overall meaning of the book; neither of them necessarily makes much sense on its own but they work in unison" (Salisbury and Styles 89). Agosto and Sipe (two researchers that have done multiple studies into picture books) describe this combining of words and pictures as 'synergy' (Agosto 268; Sipe 98–99). Agosto describes the picture books that use synergy as "employ[ing] interdependent storytelling" (267). Picture books that neglect to do this are described by Agosto as "employ[ing] parallel storytelling" (267). Agosto says that "[s]ynergy reveals a more meaningful story than the mere summation of the story that the text tells plus the story that the illustrations tell. In interdependent tales, synergy plays the primary storytelling role, and without considering the synergy between words and pictures, a reader cannot discern the book's story" (268). According to Sipe, readers of picture books have to constantly switch back and forth between two different sign systems in order to read both the pictures and the text; whenever one moves from one to the other, the meaning changes; "as we adjust our interpretation of

the pictures in terms of the words, and our interpretation of the- words in terms of the pictures. And, because the meanings of the signs are always shifting ... this oscillation is never-ending. The possibilities of meaning in the word-picture relationship are inexhaustible" (103). The endless possibilities created by this process is what makes picture books so interesting to read.

As mentioned earlier, and confirmed by Martinez and Harmon, there are many different ways in which people have described this relationship between pictures and words. Some scholars have also tried to come up with a categorisation system for picture books (Martinez and Harmon 324). This paper will focus on the categories coined by Agosto. Agosto, after distinguishing between picture books that employ parallel storytelling and ones that employ interdependent storytelling, further categorizes interdependent storytelling into the following two categories: augmentation, and contradiction. Augmentation stands for stories where texts and illustrations "each amplify, extend, and complete the story that the other tells" (269–70). Contradiction, on the other hand, stands for stories where texts and illustrations "present conflicting information" (275). These are the two main categories that interdependent storytelling can fall into. Agosto also describes subcategories which clarify the use of augmentation or contradiction within the stories. Augmentation can be used for irony, humour, intimation, fantastic representation, or transformation (Agosto 270–274). Contradiction can be used for irony, humour, or disclosure (Agosto 275–276). These categories will be employed when analysing the primary sources throughout this thesis.

Other Studies of Gender Nonconforming Picture Books

There are not many studies published on gender nonconforming picture books as of yet. However, Jamie C. Capuzza, a scholar who will be heavily referenced throughout, writes on the genre and says that “academic scholarship on this topic is limited though growing” (3). Capuzza has analysed a multitude of picture books discussing transgender characters, and has identified frequent patterns and flaws. Bittner et al. has done the same but with queer and trans picture books.

These studies found that most transgender picture books do not broaden gender stereotypes (Bittner et al. 953; Capuzza 9), and that they still enforce the gender binary, because “they must choose between feminine or masculine gender identity and expression” (Capuzza 7). Capuzza also found that transgender characters often find their gender identity “isolated among cisgender people” (14). Bittner et al. describe the normal trajectory of a gender nonconforming picture book as follows: “including a coming-out moment, a series of traumatic or violent episodes, and an eventual learning opportunity for a cisgender character (primary or secondary) so the trans individual can be accepted into a given community” (948–949). Both Bittner et al. and Capuzza lament that there are barely any gender nonconforming picture books that show gender nonconforming characters doing everyday activities (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 6). Epstein in their study on picture books which include LGBTQ+ characters has also commented on the lack of diversity present in many of these books, which “implies that it may not be possible to be GLBTQ and something else” (Epstein 296).

Capuzza and others have also identified a subgenre within gender nonconforming picture books, which is the “princess boy” book. Capuzza defines this as follows: “a young boy does not conform to traditional prescriptions of masculinity, he bravely reveals his true identity to others, at which point he finds social and self-

acceptance” (6). This is a type of gender nonconforming book that is very popular, with titles such as *My Princess Boy*, *10.000 Dresses* and *Sparkle Boy* falling into this category. Capuzza thinks that there should be a wider variety out there, especially because these books are also often used in schools. A study, which focussed on how picture books can help teach young children about gender, used *My Princess Boy* and *10.000 Dresses* amongst other books (Ryan et al. 99). It was found that a well led discussion around these books does truly help with teaching children about gender nonconforming behaviour and that "authors and publishers need to keep creating these books" (Ryan et al. 102). Thus, even though there are already quite some books out there that follow the ‘princess boy’ trope, they still serve a function.

Methodology

This thesis will build upon the research done earlier in the fields of gender studies and picture book studies to research the representation of gender nonconforming characters in three recent picture books. Since knowledge is always situated (Buikema and Van der Tuin 52–58), first there will be a short mention of where the books originated. However, all these books occupy a transnational role within society since they "negotiate between and across cultures and languages" (Bradford 21). Due to the fact that they are read in a multitude of languages and a multitude of cultures, especially between (Western) English speaking countries, a transnational perspective is important in this thesis.

After this, the gender representation in the picture books will be analysed through the method of close reading and content analysis. This method is inspired by Martinez and Harmon and the method they used in their study of picture books. This thesis will employ what they have called a picture walk; reading the story only through

the pictures of the book and writing a summary based on that (329). Then the books will be analysed fully through both pictures and text to identify what the pictures add to the narrative. This will be done to be able to categorize the types of interdependent storytelling that the picture books employ. It is important to see that relationship between text and pictures since it was found that children of a younger age will often try to ignore the text while children of an older age will often try to ignore the pictures (Sipe 277). After this, comparable to Martinez and Harmon, there will be a page by page analysis which focuses on the gender representation of non-stereotypical characters.

Based on critique given to previous gender nonconforming picture books, this gender analysis will be used to discuss whether the three picture books analysed here are able to broaden the scope of representation and are innovative within their genre. The chapters will end with discussion on the reception of the picture books to signify the public's response to newer gender nonconforming picture books. Thus, this study will, by using a sample of three picture books and examining critiques on earlier books, show how the gender nonconforming picture book genre is changing and exploring broader and better representation.

Chapter 2

Julian is a Mermaid

Introduction

In this chapter a close reading analysis will be conducted of *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love. This picture book was chosen because it has gained quite some attention and won multiple awards (Flood; “*Julián Is a Mermaid*”), whilst it is rather uncommon for a picture book that features a gender nonconforming character to receive so much attention. It is important to note that the version used in this essay is the UK version published by Walker which is slightly different from the one that was published by Candlewick Press in the US. In the original US version the main characters’ names are a bit different: Julian is Júlían and Nana is Abuela. These name changes signal that in the US version Júlían falls within the Latinx community (Jeminez), whilst in the UK version this is kept more ambiguous. This small change signifies the steps taken by different publishers to make the book work transnationally. Any discrepancies between the use of Julian and Júlían or Nana and Abuela come from quoting reviews that looked at or analysed the US version and not the UK one.

As has been explained above, the method used for this analysis comes primarily from Martinez and Harmon. This chapter starts with a ‘picture walk’ where an interpretive summary will be made purely based on the pictures, which will be followed by a brief analysis of some key illustrations and the overall art-style. Then these pictures and the text will be jointly examined on a page by page basis, after which the interaction between both elements will be classified according to the categorisation system of Agosto. After the function of the pictures and the text has been established, a closer analysis will be made of the gender representation in the story. It will become clear that

Julian is a Mermaid has ambiguity as a theme running throughout, which makes the book more accessible and interpretable for children.

This will result in a discussion of *Julian is a Mermaid* in relation to critique given to other picture books within the genre. This will clarify that the representation present in *Julian is a Mermaid*, through its use of ambiguity, succeeds in not following and not perpetuating many gender stereotypes. This chapter will end with a brief discussion of the public's response to this picture book, in order to illustrate the function of the book in modern society.

Picture Walk

As discussed in the previous chapter, the first stage of analysis will be a picture walk, which is a method used predominantly as a pedagogical tool. However, it was also applied by Martinez and Harmon to decipher the connection between text and pictures (329). Therefore, the picture walk done here is modelled on that of Martinez and Harmon, this implies that it is an interpretative summary of the story based on the pictures alone (329).

Picture books are generally targeted at children between the ages of three and eight (Capuzza 5). However, *Julian is a Mermaid* has very little text and thus, mainly communicates through pictures. As aforementioned, younger children often focus on pictures rather than on text, whilst older children will often try to just read the text and ignore the pictures (Sipe 277). Therefore, the heavy reliance on pictures throughout the book makes it appear targeted towards the younger age spectrum.

Examining only the pictures, the story that emerges could be interpreted as follows; an ethnically ambiguous boy is swimming in a swimming pool with his grandmother, and when they come out of the pool they go onto a subway and there they

both see three women dressed up as mermaids. The protagonist really likes the mermaids; he dreams of being one, and swimming with the fish. Hereafter, the boy and his grandmother continue towards home. When his grandmother goes to take a bath, the boy decides to dress up. At first, it was not completely clear to the reader that he was supposed to be a mermaid but what was clear is that he felt very pretty in his dressed-up state. His grandmother comes back and seems to be angry at the way he dressed himself. She goes away and he starts to question what he has done, but then his grandmother comes back and gives him a necklace to finish off his costume. They then proudly walk together out into the street and no one actually seems to notice or care what the boy is wearing. After walking for a bit, the grandmother shows him that there is a parade full of people dressed up as sea creatures (here it becomes clear to the reader that he is dressed as a mermaid) and tells him to join. The boy seems hesitant at first but in the end, both the grandmother and the little boy join the parade and the boy is happy. The last page shows him swimming with his grandmother again, but all the ladies in the pool and the boy himself are now drawn as mermaids.

Illustrations

The picture book consists of thirty-eight fully coloured illustrated pages of which seventeen also contain (short) text. The illustrations were made on brown paper with gouache, watercolour and ink (Schuit). This choice of paper and medium results in warm-toned and fluid illustrations. Love has said that she ended up using this paper because it fit the characters better and made the pastel colour pallet of this book “really pop” (Love qtd. in Schuit). Love played a lot with the brown undertone of the paper used and lets that undertone peek through in certain areas. The drawings seem a bit raw

with unfinished edges which provides an easy and not too overly perfect feel to the book.

Some of the backgrounds are more abstract, but most of the time it is still distinctly clear what they are supposed to represent. A simple bench and a window with rounded corners represent a subway car (Love n.p); a few steps and a door (without walls or windows surrounding it) represent the front of the house (Love n.p.). Inside, the house is more fully worked out with a window, walls, a rug, plants, and a dressing table but when the interaction between grandmother and Julian is more important than their surroundings, the background of the house disappears into just a few white lines (Love n.p.). The background also tends to disappear when the main character escapes into Julian's own (imaginary) world (Love n.p.). In this way, the background, the warm tones, and the colours used in the illustrations help convey the mood and location of the story.

This thesis will take a closer look at images that can be considered pivotal to the narrative. This will help provide a clearer sense of what it being offered. The pages which this analysis will consider are: that in which Julian sees the mermaids for the first time, in which the grandmother seems angry, and the one in which Julian is afraid to join the parade (Love n.p.). When Julian sees the women dressed as mermaids for the first time, the reader also notices for the first time that the book Julian has been holding in his hands is actually about mermaids (Love n.p.). It is visible in his facial expression that he is in awe of the women (Love n.p.). In the picture where Julian, dressed up, is caught by his grandmother, she seems angry, an emotion which is expressed through her scrunched-up face and her stance that is slightly turned away from Julian (Love n.p.). Julian all of a sudden seems a lot less happy and proud of his costume and is now shocked and scared: his arm that was up before is falling down and

his facial expression is that of hurt and fear. In the spread with the parade, it is clear that there are many different people out there that dress diversely, and Julian's grandmother is inviting Julian to come and join them (Love n.p). However, Julian is hesitantly looking around a corner and is scared to do so, conversely his grandmother looks inviting, as expressed through the hand that she reaches out to him and the relaxed way she is standing. Julian looks hesitant by keeping his body back when he looks around the corner (Love n.p.). The three spreads discussed here show how much is conveyed in the illustrations when examined closely. They show how something as simple as a little outreaching hand or a stance can change the meaning and interpretation of the story.

Picture and Text Interaction

Having conducted the picture walk and analysed the illustrations this thesis will consider the role that the relation between text and picture has in changing the narrative. Firstly, the interaction between image and text overall will be discussed which will illustrate how the summary made during the picture walk changes due to the inclusion of the text. Furthermore, certain pages will be discussed to show how the text and pictures interact specifically on those pages. At the end, the interaction between text and pictures will be categorised into one of the classifications of Agosto which were discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Here is a quick overview of the categories: books either fall within parallel or interdependent storytelling. Interdependent storytelling has two subcategories: augmentation, and contradiction. These two categories further branch into subcategories such as irony, humour, or transformation.

The text that is present in *Julian is a Mermaid* is minimalistic; on most pages there is no text. Love has said that originally the book was supposed to be without text (Love qtd. in Schuit), and, because of this, the summary that came out of the picture walk is consistent with the actual story. In addition to confirming a lot of the aspects which are already present in the pictures, the text adds another dimension to Julian liking mermaids and subsequently dressing up as one. This is striking because, even though Julian is identified as a “boy” in the beginning (Love n.p.) Julian does not say that Julian *wants* to be a mermaid or just *dress like* one, Julian says that Julian *is* one. This changes what is happening, as Julian is not just a boy dressing up for a short time as a fantastical character that Julian wants to look like. Rather Julian is dressing the way that fits Julian’s self-perceived identity.

Examining what the text adds to the pictures, page by page, it becomes clear that it is indeed Julian and Julian’s grandmother on their way back home from swimming. The earlier described fondness Julian has for mermaids is confirmed by the sentence “Julian LOVES mermaids” (Love n.p). Later, when Julian and Nana (grandmother) are walking home, the text confirms that Julian is talking to her, but it also adds the dimension that Julian is still thinking about the mermaids “Nana, did you see the mermaids?” (Love n.p) Julian asks. The pivotal moment where the text adds to the earlier mentioned dimension of Julian actually identifying as a mermaid, is when Julian tells Nana “I am also a mermaid” (Love n.p). This confession is not clear from just the pictures alone (Love n.p.), and it explains why Julian, once inside, decides to change into something that expresses Julian’s self-identified identity more.

The pages where Julian enacts this transformation are only accompanied by the sentence “Julian has an idea” (Love n.p). There is only minimal language added after this when Julian’s grandmother sees Julian and what Julian is wearing. The text makes

the angry expression of Nana ambiguous by her only saying “Oh” (Love n.p). The part where Julian’s grandmother shows that she actually does not disapprove of Julian’s clothing is prefaced by the tender moment of her saying “Come here, honey” (Love n.p). Her calling Julian honey lessens the tension.

On the following page, the text adds the emotion of Julian being hesitant to believe that Nana actually accepts Julian and what Julian is wearing by showing the question “For me, Nana?”, which is followed by the accepting answer of Nana: “For you, Julian” (Love n.p). The awe Julian expresses when seeing the parade is amplified by the text on the following page. “*Mermaids,*’ whispers Julian” (Love n.p). Even though the pictures showed already that Julian was hesitant to join the parade and that Nana is the one encouraging him, the text adds that Nana completely accepts Julian and acknowledges that Julian is a mermaid. To Julian’s whisper of mermaids, she answers “Like you honey. Let’s join them” (Love n.p). This identifies the other mermaids as just like Julian, which is an acceptance of Julian’s self-identification earlier in the book.

Showing this acceptance of not only family, but also the existence of a larger community where Julian feels at home is striking because in many picture books discussing trans* characters, the trans* character is only surrounded by cis-gendered characters and the larger LGBTQ+ community is not mentioned (Capuzza 14). It is important to note however that it is not made fully clear if Julian indeed identifies as part of this LGBTQ+ community, it is left quite open. This will be further discussed in the gender analysis section.

The interaction between the text and the pictures described above demonstrates that even though there is little text in the book, it can be categorised into the augmentative interdependent storytelling category, as formulated by Agosto (269).

More specifically, it falls under the subcategory of transformation: “In transformation, either the text or the illustration adds a deeper meaning to a story that is told primarily through the other of the two media forms” (Agosto 272). Despite the text sometimes solely confirming what is shown in the pictures, it displays transformational interdependent storytelling. It still falls within this category because though the story is mainly told through the pictures, the text expands the story by adding the element of Julian not just dressing up and going to a parade but actually self-identifying as a mermaid. The text also adds Julian’s grandmother fully accepting this identification and bringing Julian together with Julian’s peers.

The text, through mostly short sentences, adds a dimension which makes this picture book not only a representation of a character dressing in a gender-nonconforming way, but also a representation of a trans* character. Trans* is here chosen as identifier since the book actually does not specify what Julian identifies as, besides as a mermaid. The descriptor trans* is the biggest encompassing label meaning “inclusion of all nonconforming (gender queer) groups” (Bouman and Arcelus 9). This means that no matter what Julian identifies as, even if it is a mermaid, as long as it is nonconforming, it is included in this term.

Gender Analysis

In the beginning, Julian is dressed and drawn as a gender stereotypical boy: with short hair, wearing shorts and a shirt. Julian is also identified as a boy on the first page with text (Love n.p.). However, Julian does have long eyelashes and a fuller mouth which is often used in pictures to signal femaleness. Furthermore, when Julian dreams of being a mermaid, Julian is drawn with longer hair and a pastel-coloured mermaid tail which is in line with the West’s idea of how females should present. Thus, even though Julian

is drawn with a male body and identified as a boy at the start, there are characteristics which make Julian's gender more ambiguous. Additionally, Julian is also not referred to as a 'he' after that first page (Love n.p.). This ties in with the ambiguousness of Julian's gender identity described earlier.

Once Julian decides to dress the way Julian feels on the inside, Julian first puts leaves and flowers in Julian's hair which makes Julian look more stereotypically feminine (Love n.p.). This is strengthened by Julian putting on lipstick and making a tail, which could also be interpreted as something skirt-like, from a curtain (Love n.p.). Even though this representation is traditionally considered to be more female, this is not how Julian identifies: Julian identifies as a mermaid (Love n.p.), and therefore, that is what Julian is. This is in line with the idea of self-identification determining gender identity and not how someone presents themselves (see page 8–9 of this paper).

Self-identification only has to do with oneself, but the way someone presents is also partly influenced by how other people react to this presentation (Butler 522). This phenomenon is visible in how Julian feels great when Julian has finished getting dressed and is alone but feels bad and doubts the decision after Julian thinks Nana looked at Julian disapprovingly (Love n.p.). This self-doubt is visualised through a spread where Julian looks at Julian's reflection with a hunched back and a sad face. This scene is significant as mirrors are a reoccurring theme in picture books which feature gender nonconforming characters; "for a gender nonconforming individual, the mirror can assert how one's embodiment is misaligned with gender norms; conversely, it can affirm if and to which degree one's embodiment might meet certain gender norms" (Bittner et al. 951). However, this self-doubt quickly turns back into pride when Julian realises Nana does approve of what Julian is wearing and Julian's stance becomes more open and there is a smile on Julian's face (Love n.p.). This shows the

importance of trans* people feeling accepted by their family. Therefore, Nana's "role in Julián's self-image displays the importance of a supportive family in the development of a child's identity" (Bumgarner 3).

Since intersectionality is such a big analytical matrix within feminist and queer studies it is important to note that Julian and Nana are drawn as ethnically ambiguous. They are also represented as living in a neighbourhood where most characters are drawn as ethnically ambiguous. However, this ambiguity is only there in the UK edition of this book and not the US one; in the US publication the protagonists' names (Julián and Abuela) signify that they are part of the Hispanic community (Jimenez). Typically, people within the Hispanic and Afro-American communities have reported greater difficulty with coming out as part of the LGBTQ+ community and/or trans* community, and there has been some criticism of Love for not acknowledging this (Jimenez). This is especially critiqued because the adversity that a lot of trans* people experience when coming out is in general often not acknowledged in gender nonconforming picture books (Capuzza 13). Conversely, this book does acknowledge this struggle by first making it seem as if Nana does not accept Julian, but it also subverts this stereotype and shows that there can be acceptance of LGBTQ+ and trans* people by the Hispanic community too.

This is not only because of Nana's acceptance towards Julian but also due to the impression a reader could have that the people on the street do not really react to what Julian is wearing (Love n.p), they "simply watch him pass without any indication of judgment" (Bumgarner 5). The people at the parade definitely accept Julian (Love n.p) and that is a very diverse group in multiple ways; including ethnicity. This acceptance is important to illustrate, as in many children's books discussing gender, there is most often a boy wearing something considered to be more female who is shown getting

bullied for it (Bumgarner 5). “Love’s choice to portray the world in a positive way is a message to genderqueer children that their identity is not shameful and never warrants abuse from others” (Bumgarner 6). Furthermore, it is important to note this acceptance and intersectionality because there has been quite some criticism in the past on gender nonconforming picture books failing to include intersectional characters (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 14; Epstein 296).

Since this book is meant for children, it is also essential to discuss how explicitly or ambiguously this topic of gender and self-identification is discussed in *Julian is a Mermaid*. This is important because, as discussed before, adults differ significantly in their opinion on how explicitly gender and identity can be discussed with young children (see page 14–15 of this paper). The book analysed in this chapter is a picture book that gently describes that one can self-identify as whatever befits a person and that people are only what they decide to be. It does not discuss gender explicitly nor does it discuss the LGBTQ+ or trans* community explicitly. Love claims to have done this on purpose, and that she “deliberately do[es]n’t specify in the book how exactly Julián identifies” (Love qtd. in Schuit) because she wanted the narrative to function in a way in which “different children ... [could] read their own story on Julián’s” (Love qtd. in Schuit).

Thus, it is not made clear how Julian chooses to present and identify after the parade. The book does not say Julian identifies as a girl which would put Julian in the transgender label, it keeps identification open and personal to Julian. Love’s narrative is somewhat unique in that it also does not explicitly adhere to the gender binary and keeps that ambiguous as well; the lack of this is something that is often a critique point for other picture books discussing this topic (Bittner et al. 953; Capuzza 7). This book can therefore be used to discuss gender and different identities one can assume within

the spectrum of gender. The book itself however is only explicitly saying that it is okay to be who you are and find the people that will accept you for it without referring to gender.

Discussion of Julian is a Mermaid in Relation to Critique on Other Gender

Nonconforming Picture Books

Some important critiques of other picture books with gender nonconforming characters have already been discussed. *Julian is a Mermaid* succeeds in showing more intersectionality and acceptance than studies have shown is represented in previous gender nonconforming picture books. That it keeps the gender identity more ambiguous has also already briefly been mentioned but will be discussed more in depth here.

This gentleness and ambiguity in discussing this topic is outside the norm for picture books including gender nonconforming characters. Mostly, gender nonconforming picture books have the structure that was discussed earlier: “a coming-out moment, a series of traumatic or violent episodes, and an eventual learning opportunity for a cisgender character” (Bittner et al. 948–949). This is not the case in *Julian is a Mermaid*, whilst Julian does have a coming out moment, there are no “violent episodes” nor a “learning opportunity for a cisgender character” (Bittner et al. 948–949). By doing so *Julian is a Mermaid* defies this usual structure.

The discussion of gender is also conducted in a more implicit manner due to the fact that Julian tells Nana Julian is a mermaid (Love n.p.) and that is not a gender identity that is often discussed. *Julian is a Mermaid* also does not fall into the ‘princess boy’ category discussed in chapter one. As aforementioned, a picture book falls into this category if “a young boy does not conform to traditional prescriptions of masculinity, he bravely reveals his true identity to others, at which point he finds social

and self-acceptance” (Capuzza 6). Princess books often do not discuss gender identity which is something that *Julian is a Mermaid* does. In general, *Julian is a Mermaid* does conform to the genre-specific trope that gender nonconforming or trans* characters can only be displayed in their coming out story and the aftermath of that (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 6; Epstein 294). However, even though *Julian is a Mermaid* does adhere to some things that have been critiqued in previous gender nonconforming picture books, it is also able to subvert many of these and improves the intersectionality and openness of this subject through its use of ambiguity.

Reviews

Overall, this picture book has gotten quite positive reviews despite the taboo breaking subject. Love has said that even though there were some reactions calling it bad and gay propaganda, that “for the most part the reception has been overwhelmingly positive” (Love qtd. in Flood). This was surprising to her and many others but as Bird pointed out in her review of the book, this is not the first picture book that covers the topic of gender nonconforming people but it is “the one [she] ha[s] been waiting for” (Bird). It could be argued that because of its gentle approach towards the subject of self-acceptance and identification, it was able to gain more general acceptance and readership.

What is interesting to note is that there has been some backlash from the trans* community to this book. Most of this debate is summarised in Laura Jimenez’s article “Trans People Aren’t Mythical Creatures” on Booktoss. Even though she describes the book as “beautifully drawn”, saying that there “is a lushness to the images” (Jimenez), she still has some problems with the content. These problems mainly stem from the author of the picture book, Jessica Love. Love is “a White, cis, woman” (Jimenez)

telling the story of a gender nonconforming person of colour. Because of this discrepancy Jimenez and many others felt that she did not accurately display the “struggle so many Latinx LGBTQ people must go through” (Jimenez). She, and many other people in the LGBTQ+ community feel like this is not a book about a gender nonconforming person of colour coming into themselves but a White person “looking AT” (Jimenez) this. Jimenez feels like Love tried to write a story that would be helpful but “that this is simply not her story to write” and that she “laid claim to what was not hers” (Jimenez). Here the question becomes if people are allowed to write on subjects that they have not experienced themselves.

What is difficult here is that this book kept the gender identity of Julian ambiguous on purpose and that many people do seem to connect with it. Despite this, some people within the LGBTQ+ community itself do not think this is good representation. Even though these opinions should not be discredited, this is a subjective topic and research has shown that the opinions on what is good representation can differ within the LGBTQ+ community (McInroy and Craig 614).

Conclusion

In *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love the pictures and text work together in an augmentative interdependent way to tell a gentle story of self-identification and acceptance. The gouache, watercolour and ink illustrations on a craft paper coloured background create a warm setting where a diverse cast is able to flourish and show the story of Julian telling and showing Nana Julian’s true self. The pictures tell the story of a little boy dressing up as a mermaid and going to a parade, the text changes the story to a little mermaid coming out to Nana and finally dressing in a way that makes the mermaid comfortable and proud. Thus, the connection between the text and pictures

can be seen as transformative. However, the gender identification of Julian is purposely kept vague so many people can see themselves in this story. Thus, this is a story with a character falling under the big umbrella term of trans*. The importance of self-identification and acceptance of trans* people is discussed in a way that is gentle and does not confront the subject directly.

Through its use of ambiguity, the book is not subject to many of the critiques that studies found of other gender nonconforming picture books. This is clear in its ability to divert the gender binary and the gender norms. It also includes a reference to a bigger LGBTQ+ community which was found to often be lacking in other picture books discussing LGBTQ+ topics (Capuzza 14). It is thus, clearly, an innovative addition to the genre. Even though there are both positive and negative reactions to this picture book, through its ambiguity and its openness, it is able to speak to a larger audience and tell a tender story of gender expression and identity that resonates with many.

Chapter 3

Prinses Kevin

Introduction

In this chapter, a close reading analysis will be conducted of *Prinses Kevin* by Michaël Escoffier. It is originally a French picture book (*Princesse Kevin*), which revolves around a boy named Kevin who decides he is a princess. The Dutch version was chosen to be examined here since the thesis-writer is based in the Netherlands, where the original French version proved difficult to obtain. An English version of this book came out later in April 2020, after the selection of books was already carried out. The English translation of certain sentences present in this paper are done by the writer of this thesis, based on the Dutch text.

As in the previous chapter, this chapter will begin with a picture walk, followed by an overall assessment of the illustrations. After this, the interaction between text illustration will be analysed; resulting in the categorisation of this interaction into one of the categories coined by Agosto. Additionally, a gender analysis will be conducted that includes an investigation of the protagonist, discusses the fluidity of gender as presented throughout the book, the different ways in which this book can be read, and touches on intersectionality and how accessible it is to a larger audience. Furthermore, the uniqueness of this picture book will be considered through an examination of *Prinses Kevin* in contrast with critique on earlier gender nonconforming picture books.

Since this picture book is less popular than *Julian is Mermaid*, the reviews of *Prinses Kevin* will not be considered separately as there are fewer reviews of the book to reflect upon. However, some opinions discussed in reviews of *Prinses Kevin* are still included in other sections of this chapter. This chapter will end with a conclusion

focused on how this book broadens representation throughout the genre by discussing gender fluidity; despite exhibiting aspects that were critiqued in older gender nonconforming picture books.

Picture Walk

As in the previous chapter, this picture walk is based on Martinez's and Harmon's picture walk (329) and will consist of an interpretative summary of the story made by examining only the pictures.

The first spread shows an angry little boy that does not want to wear any of the stereotypically boy costumes that are all around him on the floor (Escoffier n.p.). The next few pages show how dressing up like a princess instead of as for instance a cowboy actually does make him happy (Escoffier n.p.). Then the boy is walking to school with his dress on and talking to a girl about how girls are allowed to be cowboys, knights, and superheroes (Escoffier n.p.). It is implied here that he is saying that if girls can do that, he can dress like a princess. Once they reach the playground, all the children around him seem to be happily playing but the protagonist is still looking for someone to play with (Escoffier n.p.). He wants to find a knight to finish off his costume but none of the boys dressed as knights want to play with him, and it is clear to the reader that this makes the protagonist unhappy. Then the protagonist, despite laughing at her costume at first, finally becomes friends with a girl in a dragon costume (Escoffier n.p.). After this, all the children are forming a line and tiptoeing onto a stage. Everyone seems happy to do so, all but the protagonist. The tiptoeing hurts him because of the heels he is wearing (Escoffier n.p.). Once the children are inside, they perform a play for their parents, however the main character's dress gets in the way of this and he almost slips and falls (Escoffier n.p.). After the performance, everyone is trying to get a group

picture but the protagonist storms off angrily (Escoffier n.p.). This is because he wants to take his dress off. The girl in the dragon costume helps him with the zipper (Escoffier n.p.), and the protagonist throws the dress carelessly in the box of dress-up clothes (Escoffier n.p.). On the last page he is seen as a mermaid jumping out of the water (Escoffier n.p.). Thus, this story seems to be about a little boy who dresses up as a princess, and since girls can dress up as knights, and cowboys he thinks he should be able to dress like a princess. He loves it at first but in the end, finds it uncomfortable and decides to take the dress off again. However, maybe next time, he will be a mermaid.

Illustrations

Prinses Kevin has twenty-three fully illustrated coloured pages of which fifteen contain text. The illustrations are fairly detailed with individual strands of hair and clear patterns on clothes. Throughout this picture book the colours neon pink, neon yellow, and a dark teal are predominantly featured. All illustrations are hand-drawn with pen and ink.

Now, a selection of illustrations will be examined which may be considered essential to the protagonist's development, together with his (dis)satisfaction regarding what he is wearing. Studying the illustrations on the spread where Kevin looks into the mirror to admire his costume (Escoffier n.p.), he is surrounded by skirts, combs, heels, and makeup. This mimics and subverts the previous spread where he was surrounded by more stereotypically male costumes (Escoffier n.p.). However, unlike on the previous page, he is now standing tall and smiling. His sister is drawn as standing behind the mirror, handing him a necklace, which exemplifies her support of Kevin's costume (Escoffier n.p.). As has been discussed in relation to *Julian is a Mermaid*,

mirrors can have special significance for trans* people in reflecting their gender. Due to this, mirror scenes often feature in gender nonconforming picture books, *Prinses Kevin* is no exception (Bittner et al. 951).

The next spread that is interesting to look at is the one where the other boys refuse to play with Kevin (Escoffier n.p.). The boys that are dressed as knights are all depicted as being angry with Kevin; their mouths are open, but the corners are turned down and their brows are furrowed. Additionally, Kevin is standing alone and looks sad (Escoffier n.p.), which shows that it is the other children that make him feel unhappy about his choice of costume. This admonishing of behaviour by fringe characters is a reoccurring theme within picture books that feature gender nonconforming characters (Bittner et al. 948–949; Capuzza 6; Epstein 295).

Kevin begins to quickly feel uncomfortable in his dress which is illustrated by his being in pain in his heels (Escoffier n.p.). Later he is almost tripping and falling over his dress on stage (Escoffier n.p.), and finally storms away angrily from the group picture (in his dress) (Escoffier n.p.). This change in mood, unlike the previous one, is not caused by other people but is caused by the dress itself. On the last page, Kevin is depicted as happily swimming in water as a mermaid (Escoffier n.p.). This shows that even though the dress might have ended up not being suitable for Kevin, this does not mean that he will now stick to costumes and clothes that fit his societally assigned gender role. The protagonist intends to continue expressing himself in ways that make him happy.

Picture and Text Interaction

Having thoroughly discussed the illustrations, this thesis will now review the text and analyse how they work together. Firstly, the story that emerged from the picture walk

will be discussed and enhanced by an analysis of the text. Furthermore, some pages will be more closely examined to showcase how the two elements work together. This will conclude with categorising the picture and text interaction into one of the categories of Agosto.

Overall, the story that emerged from the picture walk is pretty similar to the one that appears when the text is added to it. It is still about a little boy, Kevin, who dresses up as a princess, finds it fun in the beginning but throughout the day becomes uncomfortable in his dress and decides that he does not want to be a princess anymore. This changeability of one's gender expression is still present in the story; however, the text does make it a bit more complicated because it switches between describing Kevin as *being* a princess and Kevin *dressing up* like one.

In reading a book, it is not only important what the writer intended, but also what the audience takes from it (Barthes 142). This is important in this picture book, as there are two different ways of interpreting this story; one where it is centred around the fluidity of gender expression and one that is centred around the fluidity of gender identity *and* expression. It can be read in both those ways and puts focus on the idea that gender is a performative act and that how one expresses one's gender is a choice (Butler 519–520).

The book opens with the sentence “Kevin is een prinses” (Kevin is a princess) (Escoffier n.p.), thus, here he seems to self-identify as a princess. However, on the next page he refers to him wearing a princess dress as dressing up and says that “Als je je verkleedt, moet je toch juist iemand anders worden?” (Escoffier n.p.), saying that if you are playing dress-up you have to become someone else. This seems to contradict the previous page and even a few sentences earlier on the same page (Escoffier n.p.). However, this could be read as actually enforcing the changeability of gender identity

and/or expression and that one's gender expression is always partly like dressing up (Butler 527). It is quite rare for a picture book that discusses gender nonconformity to depict gender as a fluid concept (Capuzza 11). The fluidity of gender identity is not often discussed and because of this people could just read the book as talking about gender expression. However, a reader could also choose to read it as discussing the fluidity of gender identity, which adds another dimension to the story. This will be further discussed in the gender analysis section.

Upon zooming in on some specific pages to investigate the interaction between text and illustration more closely, it becomes clear that the text besides often confirming what is already shown, also adds new information sporadically. When Kevin is pictured as talking about girls in more stereotypically manly costumes, the text makes explicit what was already implied by the picture: namely that it is fine “als meisjes uit zijn klas zich verkleden als cowboys of ridders” (Escoffier n.p.) so then why can Kevin not dress as a princess? On the page where the boys dressed as knights are pictured as not wanting to play with Kevin, the text first confirms this: “niemand van de ridders [wil] hem een hand ... geven” (Escoffier n.p.). Nevertheless, it also adds some of Kevin's inner dialogue to this event showing that he thinks that the boys are cowards for not playing with him (Escoffier n.p.).

Even though most of the text present in *Prinses Kevin* confirms or mimics what is already shown by the illustrations, the text provides new information about Kevin's inner thoughts and makes explicit some of the implied messages visible in the illustrations. Thereby making the reader omniscient. When read within the frame of discussing gender identity in addition to gender expression, it adds the dimension of gender identity similarly to *Julian is a Mermaid*. When read as adding this dimension, it employs interdependent storytelling according to the categories from Agosto (269).

The subcategory in which it falls then is the transformative augmentative category: “[i]n transformation, either the text or the illustration adds a deeper meaning to a story” (Agosto 272) because the text adds the self-identification of Kevin and the omniscient position of the reader.

However, when it is read as only discussing gender expression, the interaction between text and picture would be a bit more difficult to categorize. Namely, the discussion of fluid gender expression is already clear from only the pictures. Thus, this could then fall into the category of “parallel storytelling” (Agosto 267). Nevertheless, it could also still fall into the transformative augmentative interdependent storytelling category of Agosto because, even though the text is not actually needed to convey the story, it does still add the dimension of what Kevin is thinking. This categorisation of the interaction between text and pictures depends heavily on the interpretation of the reader and the importance that the reader places on an omniscient position.

Gender Analysis

From either possible angle of analysis and reading, *Prinses Kevin* always discusses the fluidity of at least one aspect of gender. Throughout the book, Kevin is still referred to as he, which is also why this is the pronoun used in this paper. However, *Prinses Kevin* does show an example of a person who is fluid in gender expression and possibly also in gender identity. A gender fluid person is “[a] person whose gender identity varies over time” (Bouman and Arcelus 7). This means that Kevin can identify as a princess one day, and a mermaid the other. However, even though the fluidity in Kevin’s gender expression is made explicit by what he is wearing, the fluidity in Kevin’s identity is not actually explicitly mentioned, there are no different pronouns used and Kevin never says he is gender fluid, but readers could derive this gender

fluidity from the fact that he first says he is a princess and later says he will be mermaid (Escoffier n.p.).

A spread that is interesting to investigate in context to the fluidity of Kevin's gender expression (and identity) is the one where Julia (the girl in the dragon costume) helps Kevin to get out of his dress (Escoffier n.p.). This is displayed as an act of kindness by a friend who accepts Kevin, as Julia said she liked his dress earlier (Escoffier n.p.). However, whilst helping Kevin with the dress she says that he still has a lot to learn before he can be a *real* princess (Escoffier n.p.). This comment discredits Kevin's gender expression and, if read that way, also his gender identity and makes her the expert because she is a girl. This might be because Kevin is not fixed in his expression (and identity) as a princess and since that is uncommon, Julia is portrayed as now discrediting this in order for it to still be fixed to her. A review of *Princess Kevin* argues that this sentence "keeps Kevin from self-expression" ("*PRINCESS KEVIN*") and thus that even though it is framed as helpful, Julia is actually not helpful at all and that the book is "[i]nsensitive and unwelcoming" ("*PRINCESS KEVIN*"). However, even though this might not be the most sensitive book, it does discuss a subject, that of (partial) gender fluidity which is often glossed over or denied in other gender nonconforming picture books because they make the characters "choose between feminine or masculine gender identity and expression" (Capuzza 7).

Since people are multifaceted, it is important to also consider the intersectionality of the characters present in *Prinses Kevin*. Kevin is presented as white, as is the only other named character, Julia. Since there are many more characters present in *Prinses Kevin* than for instance in *Julian is a Mermaid*, there is a larger opportunity to show a wider variety of diverse characters. Kevin's class has children with multiple different skin tones, indicating a multicultural class. However, Kevin does not interact

with any of the children who have a darker complexion. Furthermore, there are also some children present with varying weight. Whilst, there is an attempt made to show the diversity that is present in the world there are still some facets in which *Prinses Kevin* could improve in this regard. This is especially important because the “lack of diversity implies that it may not be possible to be GLBTQ and something else” (Epstein 296).

Considering the accessibility of this picture book for children is important because adults have different opinions on what is appropriate for children to know and discuss regarding gender (see page 14–15 of this paper). Even though the gender nonconforming gender expression is made more explicit with the drawings, the fluid gender identity is more implicit. Because the book can be read in two ways, the accessibility is higher than when it would explicitly discuss gender identity. This more implicit discussion of fluid gender identity causes the book to be more accessible for parents who do not think gender identity should be discussed yet with young children. However, this implicitness also has the consequence that it could be read as Kevin going through ‘just a phase’ of wanting to dress like a princess. This could be seen as detrimental to the trans* community because it discredits the existence of non-cisgender identities.

When examining some of the reviews of *Prinses Kevin* that were written by ‘mom bloggers’, it is clear that this might indeed be how this book is often read. Miriam Hart, focuses on the idea that Kevin is a boy “dat zich graag wil verkleden als prinses” (Hart), and when she makes the comparison between Kevin and her own sons she actually refers to them wearing dresses and nail polish as their “roze fase” (translated as pink phase) (Hart). Even though this is detrimental to specifically the trans community, the general discussion of boys being able to dress and express themselves

the way they want to is still a discussion that is worth having which *Prinses Kevin* does effectively.

Discussion of Prinses Kevin in Relation to Critique on Other Gender Nonconforming Picture Books

It is quite uncommon for a gender nonconforming picture book to illustrate fluidity in gender expression and identity, often such books “must choose between feminine or masculine gender identity and expression” (Capuzza 7). *Prinses Kevin* is refreshing in that it does not do this, in a context in which “the notion that gender is a stable construct” (Capuzza 11) is still upheld even by gender nonconforming picture books. Not every part of *Prinses Kevin* is quite so forward thinking. This because it does fit with the sub-genre of the ‘princess boy’ books. This type of book is fairly common within the genre of gender nonconforming picture books with titles such as *My Princess Boy*, and *Sparkle Boy*. Even though it was already critiqued in older gender nonconforming books (Capuzza 7), *Prinses Kevin* still fails to confront the gender binary by not presenting a wider range of gender options than boy and girl. It also perpetuates gender stereotypes by identifying dresses as for girls and. Furthermore, it does not introduce the fact that there is a larger LGBTQ+ community (Bittner et al. 954; Capuzza 6–14).

Before Kevin wears a princess dress and identifies as a princess, Kevin is portrayed as a stereotypical boy. On the first page, when Kevin is introduced, he is pictured as having short brown hair, wearing stereotypically male clothes: a green and yellow sweater, jeans and sneakers, and he is angry (Escoffier n.p.). The next time Kevin is portrayed as angry is once he is over being a princess and wants to get out of the dress. This reaction is one that is more often linked to males. The princess dress

Kevin is wearing is stereotypically girly with the bright pink colour, frills, and poofy shoulders (Escoffier n.p.). Once Kevin is in the dress, he also portrays a larger range of emotions including sadness which is an emotion that is more often portrayed by female characters in picture books and is often even misremembered by children as anger if displayed by a male figure (Frawley 301).

Even though Kevin is breaking gender norms by dressing and/or identifying as a princess for a day, his behaviour and appearance conform with gender stereotypes of a girl once he is (or is dressed as) a princess, and that of a boy when he is not. The critique on older picture books makes clear that is not uncommon for picture books with gender nonconforming characters to do this (Bittner et al. 953; Capuzza 9). Especially because “conceptualizing gender as a fixed binary retains a conventional understanding of gender even while offering an alternative and may thus be more palatable to audiences” (Lemish qtd. In Capuzza 10), but it would have been interesting to see a wider range of what behaviour and clothes can be worn by a boy and what can be worn by a princess.

However, unlike Kevin, there are some characters in the book that do subvert gender stereotypes. Julia’s father is described as being a good cook (Escoffier n.p.) which subverts the stereotype that it is often the mother that cooks. Conversely, he is described as not being good at making costumes (Escoffier n.p.), which is something that would fit the gender norm of a man. There is also a girl in the background that is drawn as wearing a pirate costume and playing football (Escoffier n.p.), which are things that are commonly associated with boys. However, she does have long hair and pink boots on, which fit in with the gender norms of a girl. These two minor characters show that people are not confined by gender stereotypes and that there is a wide variety of men and women out there which may adhere to some gender norms but not all.

In *Prinses Kevin* the driving force for the plot is that Kevin decides to wear a dress and identify as a princess to school one day. This means that, just like most other gender nonconforming picture books, this picture book does not show a trans* boy doing everyday life activities that cis people do, or at least that “is not what drives the plot” (Capuzza 6). The fact that many gender nonconforming picture books do not step out of this coming out narrative is a large critique point of multiple studies (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 6; Epstein 294). If *Prinses Kevin* would have stepped outside of this that would have been a huge addition to the genre. However, the fact that *Prinses Kevin* openly talks about the fluidity of gender expression and implicitly of that of gender identity is already something that broadens the scope of the gender nonconforming picture book genre.

Conclusion

Even though the dominant reading of *Prinses Kevin* falls within the category of a “princess boy” book and fails to discuss many dimensions of gender, the fact that it discusses the topic of gender fluidity makes it a valuable book to the genre. The brightly coloured pen and ink illustrations mainly tell a story that has been told before, that of a ‘princess boy’ (Capuzza 6); however, it truly deviates from this subgenre in its inclusion of gender fluidity. It is also interesting that there are two different ways of reading *Prinses Kevin* since the discussion of the fluidity of gender identity is more implied than that of the fluidity of gender expression. This results in the book appealing to a larger audience.

Prinses Kevin upholds the gender binary, gender stereotypes and the idea that the only story to be told about gender nonconforming people is that of their struggle to come out. Thus, there are aspects of the book that could have been improved upon.

However, its discussion of gender nonconformity enriches the genre of gender nonconforming picture books with the representation of gender fluidity.

Chapter 4

A House for Everyone

Introduction

This chapter will discuss and analyse the gender nonconforming picture book *A House for Everyone* by Jo Hirst. It was published in 2018 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, a publisher from the United Kingdom. However, Hirst is originally Australian and thus this book has mostly been discussed in Australian media and is written from an Australian perspective.

Similar to the previous two books that were discussed, a close reading analysis will be conducted with a focus on gender, after the text and picture interaction has been investigated and categorised. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the book in relation to the critique on other gender nonconforming picture books and what the public thought of the book, as in the analysis of the other narratives. This is done to help assess whether *A House for Everyone* is able to be innovative within the space of gender nonconforming picture books and whether it improves upon previous representation present in the genre. What is interesting to note here is that this picture book has more of an explicitly stated educational purpose than the previous two, and that it has a larger cast of gender nonconforming characters, both of which add another dimension to this discussion. This ultimately demonstrates that *A House for Everyone* is more explicit in its discussion of gender which can cause more divisiveness with readers, but it is also refreshing in its inclusion of multiple gender expressions and identities without enforcing gender stereotypes.

Picture Walk

Consistent with the previous two chapters, this picture walk will be an interpretative summary of the story of the book (here *A House for Everyone*) based on solely the pictures present in the book.

The first page of Hirst's book shows multiple children playing on a playground with a multicoloured slide and swings (Hirst n.p.). On the next spread, five children are depicted with various skin tones and ambiguous genders playing together, making a tree house out of branches, stones, and flowers. After this general introduction, the next five spreads all focus on one child in particular and show one page of how they contribute to building the treehouse, and one page presenting what that particular child enjoys doing. All these introductory spreads showcase the diversity in ethnicity in these characters and keep their genders ambiguous. The first of these introductory spreads displays a child gathering sticks for the tree house and running through a field (Hirst n.p.). The next spread shows a child building the treehouse with the sticks on one page and building Legos at home on the other (Hirst n.p.). The third child that is introduced is shown on one page as dancing around surrounded by flowers, and on the other page as playing basketball with friends (Hirst n.p.). The next spread introduces a child first carrying a rock for the treehouse, and then displayed trying on a different dress in front of a mirror (Hirst n.p.). The last child that is introduced is making a welcome sign in front of the treehouse on one page and jumping on a couch on the other (Hirst n.p.).

After the five children that built the treehouse have been introduced, there is a spread with the finished treehouse on it (Hirst n.p.). The spread after this reverts back to the five children and displays them playing together in different combinations doing a variety of activities. The next spread is the first time that children other than the main five are also present, which shows different children together enjoying the treehouse

the five children built (Hirst n.p.). However, the last page once again focuses on the five main characters and presents them together playing on the monkey bars (Hirst n.p.). The story that emerges from these pictures seems to be that a group of five children built a treehouse together for all the children to use and that everyone is happy to play together, no matter what skin tone they have or gender they are.

Illustrations

A House for Everyone consists of twenty fully coloured and illustrated pages of which nineteen contain text as well. The last three pages contain only text apart from some small illustrations that already appeared earlier in the book. Naomi Bardoff, who created the illustrations for the book, unfortunately, has not made any comments on her method or medium. However, on her blog (Bardoff) she displays works that were made in a variety of media, including digital drawing, which can be presumed to be the medium used for this picture book. She used mainly warm tones that are found in nature since the children are mostly pictured playing outside. She used smaller and finer brushstrokes for the characters and larger, broader brush strokes for the background. This results in a more detailed visual representation of the children and a slightly more abstract one for the background.

Now, two illustrations will be considered closely which exemplify the book's diversity and inclusivity. The first spread to be discussed is the spread at the beginning where the five main characters are all shown together gathering materials and building the treehouse (Hirst n.p.). This page shows that the children are all happy to work together and that they each have a specific task (Hirst n.p.). Seeing all the characters together here, it is clear that they are a diverse ethnic group, and all of the main characters are drawn as gender ambiguous. This is done through the combination of

their clothes, hair, and the activity they are engaged in; a child with short hair that is carrying a big rock is wearing a dress (Hirst n.p.), a child with a jersey on and long hair is playing basketball (Hirst n.p.).

Additionally, the spread where the treehouse is finished, and other children are gathering inside (Hirst n.p.) is also key to the narrative. This page shows even more diversity in skin tones and garments that the children wear. This shows that the five main characters are glad to play and share with other children and that those children in their turn are happy to play with them. This spread indicates that the treehouse is complete and is bringing all the children together.

Text and Picture Interaction

The story that emerged from the picture walk will now be compared to the story that comes from reading the picture and text together; which will show that the text changes the story quite significantly. It will be explained that the text adds to the didactic dimension of *A House for Everyone* and clarifies the ambiguous genders of the characters displayed in the illustrations. Finally, the interaction between text and illustration will be categorised into one of the picture and text categorisations of Agosto (269).

The story that the pictures tell is, in essence, the same as when the text is added to it. It is still about a group of children that build a treehouse together and play with each other regardless of how different they are. However, the gender ambiguity of the characters is disambiguated. The text in the introductions also explicitly states what gender identity and expression the children have and shows that these are not necessarily the same as what would be expected from their gender roles. All the children have very different gender nonconforming gender identities and expressions.

This added dimension shows that they are not only different in the way they dress and their skin-tones but also in gender, and that they still play together regardless of that.

The text also contributes to the didactic element of this book by including three pages in the back with extra context and explanation for adults. Furthermore, all the characters that are introduced, also serve an educational purpose, explaining something about gender. For instance, the first character that is introduced (Ivy) indicates that gender identity and gender expression are two completely different dimensions of one's identity. "Ivy is a girl. She likes to have her hair cut really short. Her favourite clothes are shorts and a T-shirt" (Hirst n.p.). The next character that is introduced (Alex) displays the insight that gender is a spectrum instead of a binary: "Alex does not feel like 'just' a boy or 'just' a girl" (Hirst n.p.) thus indicating that there are other options as well.

This usage of text to signify something important about gender continues with the introduction of Sam. Sam shows that people can possess characteristics that fit both male and female gender stereotypes: "Sam is a boy. He loves to wear his hair long. His favourite sport is basketball" (Hirst n.p.). The fourth character that is introduced (Jackson) explicitly indicates that "[d]resses are not just for girls. Clothes are for everyone. We can all wear the clothes that we like" (Hirst n.p.). The last character introduction (Tom), introduces the idea that someone can transition from one gender to another. "Tom is a boy. When he was born everyone thought he was a girl. ... When he grew up he told everyone he was a boy." (Hirst n.p.). All these different aspects of gender that are addressed through these introductions will be further discussed in the gender analysis section of this chapter.

Besides the explanations surrounding gender, the text on these introductory pages also confirm what tasks the characters are doing, whilst also adding why. Here

the text showcases that each child participating in building the treehouse was given a task based on their interests and strengths. For instance, Ivy has the task of gathering sticks because “[s]he is the fastest runner in our group” (Hirst n.p.) and can run around to search for them. Meanwhile Alex is the one in charge of building the treehouse because “Alex loves to build” (Hirst n.p.).

Most of the text of the book is at the three educational pages at very end, namely the “notes for grown-ups” (Hirst n.p.). Here, the book is described as “an easy way to show children the difference between gender identity and gender expression”, and “a useful tool for helping break down some of the gender stereotypes” (Hirst n.p.). These quotes make clear the (explicit) educational purpose of this book. However, this part will not be included in the picture and text interaction analysis. This is because there are barely any pictures on these pages, and they feature outside of the narrative arc. They were also only added afterwards when the author found that adults needed them to understand the book: “the pronouns alone were not enough to explain who the children were, and what their gender identity was. I added some ‘notes for grown-ups’” (“Growing up Transgender”).

The text and picture interaction of this picture book falls into the transformative augmentative interdependent storytelling category. This means that “either the text or the illustration adds a deeper meaning to a story” (Agosto 272). The story of acceptance and friendship is mainly told through the pictures, but the text adds the educational and gender dimensions. The text disambiguates the gender-ambiguous illustrations of the main characters making those gender expressions and identities explicit. It confirms that each child has a specific task to do and signifies that they all work on their own strengths to build the treehouse. The text is able to clarify the pictures and give the book its didactic purpose.

Gender Analysis

Considering the manner in which this book discusses gender, it is noticeable that it is very different from the other two books discussed previously. Unlike the previous two books, there are multiple gender identities and expressions explicitly discussed. The didactic and more explicit values of this book might cause it to be less accessible to the general population. However, it should be noted that most gender nonconforming picture books are used in educational settings regardless of whether they explicitly aim to be or not. This can be seen in the study done by Ryan, Patraw, and Bendar where a teacher used multiple gender nonconforming picture books that were not explicitly educational to teach her class about gender.

The main feature in which this book is very different from the other two discussed is that it talks about the subject of gender more explicitly. It is also the only one that is explicitly didactic in aim. It tackles multiple misconceptions about gender and explains a variety of identities and expressions. Due to the more detailed introductions of the five main characters, *A House for Everyone* displays a larger range of gender identities and expressions, and through that, explains the difference between the two. As has been explained in chapter one, gender identity is “[t]he psychological identification of oneself or the internal sense of being (the way we feel inside, in our hearts and in our minds) in relation to gender” (Bouman and Arcelus 7), and gender expression is “[t]he way a person expresses one’s gender identity to others” (Bouman and Arcelus 6). Both these concepts are also explained similarly in the “notes for grown-ups” (Hirst n.p.) section of *A House for Everyone*.

However, even the story itself is able to show the difference between these two concepts. Hirst did this through showing characters that identify in varying ways and

addressing the clothes that they like to wear. Sometimes the clothing choices match with their gender identity's gender norms and sometimes they do not. Ivy identifies as a girl but enjoys wearing "shorts and a T-shirt" (Hirst n.p.), while Jackson is a boy but "loves to wear dresses" (Hirst n.p.). These two characters display the difference between gender identity and gender expression through still identifying as cisgender but wearing clothes that fit the opposite's gender norms. Jackson is also described as "very, very strong" (Hirst n.p.), this, additionally, shows that the interests of a person do not need to match up with the gender norms of their gender expression. The same is true for Sam, a boy who likes to wear his hair long and decorates the treehouse with flowers, but at the same times enjoys playing basketball (Hirst n.p.). The love of one does not cancel out the other, and by including the transgender boy Tom and the nonbinary child Alex, Hirst opens up the conversation of gender identity (Hirst n.p.).

The other children discussed so far all have gender nonconforming gender expressions but do not have a non-cisgender identity. Tom shows that gender identity is also something that a person can control themselves, that they get to choose. The spectrum of gender identity is also further broadened by the introduction of Alex (Hirst n.p.). Together they signify that gender identity is not only a choice but also a spectrum and something that is not necessarily fixed. They also explain the importance of pronouns and how a person can pick what they want to be called. Alex specifically want to be called "Alex or they" (Hirst n.p.) and Tom, after he "told everyone he was a boy" is now called "'he' and 'Tom'" (Hirst n.p.). The five different gender expressions and identities that are shown in this book open up the conversation on gender in a variety of ways.

Considering intersectionality, Hirst clearly succeeded in including a diverse cast of characters. There is a large number of characters within *A House for Everyone* and

there is diversity in not only the gender identity and expression of these characters but also in the skin-tones and interests. The heritage of the characters is not specified but there are multiple different skin-tones present in the book. There is, however, no diversity present when it comes to weight or ableness. But since the main aim of intersectionality is showcasing that people are multifaceted it could be argued that Hirst did succeed in that. She created characters where their gender is only one small facet of them by also showing their hobbies and displaying the children playing with their favourite toys (Hirst n.p.). Alex, for instance, is not only non-binary but also loves building (Hirst n.p.). The inclusion of multiple different skin-tones and interests signifies that there are multiple dimensions to the characters that make them intersectional. Something that is often lacking in gender nonconforming picture books (Epstein 296).

When examining the accessibility of this picture book, it becomes important to discuss some of the history of picture books in general. As has been discussed in chapter one, children's books started mainly as educational tools (Manly 221). Nowadays there are also many children's books out there which have entertainment as their main purpose. However, often some didactic message is still embedded in these books or they are taken outside of their general aim and used in a didactic way by adults. *A House for Everyone* is the first book discussed here that is explicitly educational in purpose, however, most gender nonconforming picture books have been used in classrooms regardless of their intent (Ryan et al. 99). So, in this sense *A House for Everyone* is not that different from the other two picture books discussed previously when it comes to accessibility for schools and the effect of the book. It could even be considered more accessible for school environments since there is a "lesson plan" included in the book (Hirst n.p.).

Contemplating the accessibility to parents, this changes. Since *A House for Everyone* is more explicit and didactic in its discussion of gender, it might be less accessible for parents. Not every adult feels comfortable with discussing gender explicitly with their children (because of its perceived link to sex, see chapter one of this paper). Thus, the openness of this book about this topic might deter some parents, and because of its more educational intent the entertainment value of the book is also less pronounced. The self-proclaimed “simple story” (Hirst n.p.) of *A House for Everyone* might cause only people that are already interested in this topic to pick it up, instead of enticing new readership of gender nonconforming picture books. However, because of its earlier mentioned educational intent and the very clear explanations of terms and discussion topics and the inclusion of a lesson plan (Hirst n.p.), it might be more easily used in schools and other educational environments than picture books that are less explicit in their discussion of gender.

Discussion of A House for Everyone in Relation to Critique on Other Gender

Nonconforming Picture Books

A House for Everyone does not only stand out from the two gender nonconforming picture books discussed earlier in this paper but based on critique of older picture books, from gender nonconforming picture books as a whole. It is able to discuss gender in a manner that subverts stereotypes in more ways than one and represents identities that are often forgotten within media.

This picture book does not follow the general structure that is present in other gender nonconforming picture books which normally centre around a coming-out moment (Bittner et al. 948–949). There is no coming out moment, no adversity to be overcome, and no learning moment for a cis character in the book (Hirst n.p.), and there

are no explicit characters mentioned that are gender conforming at all. Neither does it conform to the trope of the ‘princess boy’ books within the gender nonconforming genre. This is because multiple different characters are introduced in this book and because all of them have already established their gender. Thus, there is no reason for a boy to be struggling with their gender expression, a prerequisite for the ‘princess boy’ books according to Capuzza (6). As has been mentioned before, *A House for Everyone* also breaks down the gender binary by including Alex as one of the main characters (Hirst n.p.). This is different from most gender nonconforming picture books that mostly still enforce the idea that there are only two genders to choose from (Capuzza 7).

A House for Everyone, through showing a mix of gender identities, expressions, and interests that fit both male and female gender norms, does not perpetuate gender stereotypes. These were all aspects that were critiqued as missing from older gender nonconforming picture books (Bittner et al. 953; Capuzza 9). Bittner et al. have even argued that it is one of the only picture books they found that “creates a world where what a person wears does not have to be central to how they wish to be understood” (954). It is even able to discuss the importance of pronouns, a facet of the LGBTQ+ community that is often overlooked (Capuzza 12). The book also succeeds in not only showing one trans* person surrounded by only cis people. This was a critique given to other gender nonconforming picture books (Capuzza 14). Actually, as mentioned before, there are no explicit cis characters at all. By introducing a larger cast of gender nonconforming characters Hirst shows that many people fall within the LGBTQ+ community. The larger LGBTQ+ community is not explicitly spoken about, but the five children do form their own diverse community. This diversity is something Epstein has noted before that is sorely lacking in the genre overall (296).

A House for Everyone especially stands out because coming out is not the main driving force of this book. In *A House for Everyone* gender nonconforming children are shown playing, just like gender conforming children would. Whilst their gender is important for the educational part of the book, the general plot still stands without that dimension, namely, that diverse children can all play together (Hirst n.p.). Thus, *A House for Everyone* does something that many gender nonconforming picture books fail to do, including *Julian is a Mermaid* and *Prinses Kevin*, namely, showing “transgender characters doing what cisgender characters do” (Capuzza 6). This picture book shows that trans* children are just like cis children and should be able to develop and play in the same manner.

Reviews

There are not many reviews available of this book but some of them do include a short interview with Jo Hirst. Most reviews concur that *A House for Everyone* is different from other gender nonconforming picture books. They say that most gender nonconforming picture books only focus on gender expression (“Review: *A House for Everyone*”) but that Hirst was able to break out of that mould and discuss gender identity as well. This is seen as especially well done because she is also able to discuss both these topics without falling into the gender stereotypes that many of the other picture books do. This was her aim as well: she wanted to discuss the difference between gender expression and gender identity but also clarify that “no one is tied down to any stereotypes” (Hirst qtd. in “Review: *A House For Everyone*”). Miller, the writer of the blog “Raise Them Righteous”, described the book as “[r]efreshingly inclusive” and in “Review: *A House For Everyone*” it is described as “a welcome breath of fresh air”. This shows that the uniqueness of this picture book lies in how it can discuss both

gender identity and expression (unlike *Prinses Kevin* for instance or other ‘princess boy’ books), which is appreciated by the audience.

Furthermore, some reviews also state that Hirst succeeded in creating an effective teaching tool with this book, that it “is a great resource for parents, teachers and librarians looking for gender inclusive material to teach their children” (Campoverde). Miller also concurred that it would be an asset to “school and personal libraries”. Thus, showing that the aim of the book, that of being “a useful tool for helping to break down some of the gender stereotypes” (Hirst n.p.) is met. Hirst did also mention in an interview that there has been some backlash to the book from parental groups and describes the influence of that as it being “an uphill battle to get support in the face of backlash from transphobic conservatives and media” (Hirst qtd. in “Review: *A House For Everyone*”). This confirms the earlier assumption that it would be a more divisive book because of the more explicit discussion of gender and might reach fewer parents because of that. However, it does seem to be accepted by the trans* community and hopefully will be used in more schools to discuss and teach about gender.

Conclusion

Although it is more focused on education and more explicitly discusses gender, *A House for Everyone* is a “breath of fresh air” (“Review: *A House For Everyone*”) within the genre of gender nonconforming picture books. It succeeds through its simple but unique narrative that is diverse and inclusive. It might not attract as many parents because of its explicitness and the focus on didactic value instead of entertainment. However, it is an easy and effective teaching tool for schools, so it might reach a bigger audience in that way. It also steps out of the general narrative of coming out and subverts gender stereotypes whilst including an educational discussion of both gender

expression and gender identity. The lack of stories which do not revolve around coming out is something that has often been critiqued within this genre (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 6; Epstein 294). Furthermore, this book includes much-needed representation for gender expressions that are often underrepresented like non-binary people and trans men. Thus, *A House for Everyone* expands the gender nonconforming picture book genre with its innovative diversity and inclusion.

Conclusion

With the increasing interest in and representation of LGBTQ+ people in (popular) media, the question of what that representation looks like is becoming more pressing. Gender nonconforming representation is even more important to look at when it comes to children's picture books since their intended audience is young and impressionable and is still in the age that their gender stereotypes are not fixed yet (Frawley 293). The three picture books discussed here (*Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, *Prinses Kevin* by Michaël Escoffier, and *A House for Everyone* by Jo Hirst) all tell a story of (a) gender nonconforming character(s) through transformative interdependent storytelling. The illustrations all have different styles and their stories diverge as well, but they all broaden the genre of gender nonconforming picture books.

Having considered three current gender nonconforming picture books in relation to the critique that older gender nonconforming picture books received, it is clear that two out of three books discussed, to various degrees, still perpetrate problematic traits. This is especially the case with *Prinses Kevin*. It falls into the category of the 'princess boy' book (Capuzza 6), a type of gender nonconforming picture book that is very popular with titles such as *My Princess Boy* and *Sparkle Boy*. *Princess Kevin* also enforces the gender binary and gender stereotypes by identifying (pink frilly) dresses as for girls and knight costumes as (normally) for boys. This is enforced by Kevin displaying more sadness when wearing a dress and anger when he is not (Hirst n.p.). As has been mentioned previously, it is quite common for gender nonconforming picture books to do so because "conceptualizing gender as a fixed binary retains a conventional understanding of gender even while offering an alternative and may thus be more palatable to audiences" (Lemish qtd. In Capuzza 10). It should be mentioned again that some other minor characters in *Prinses Kevin* do defy

gender stereotypes. The book is not very diverse in its characters and also adheres to the trope that a gender nonconforming person is alone, surrounded by cis people (Capuzza 14). Additionally, *Prinses Kevin's* plot, like most gender nonconforming picture books (Bittner et al. 962; Capuzza 6; Epstein 294), revolves around coming out. However, that is *Julian is a Mermaid's* only issue and *A House for Everyone* is actually able to address all issues flagged by Capuzza, Bittner et al. and Epstein in older gender nonconforming picture books.

Despite two of the books still failing to address problems raised with previous gender nonconforming picture books, all three picture books discussed here also address some of the issues that were raised. *Julian is a Mermaid* has a diverse cast of characters and through its use of ambiguity discusses gender identity and represents an intersectional trans* person. Its ambiguity also helps with not specifying gender as a binary and in not conforming to gender norms; both critiques of previous gender nonconforming picture books (Bittner et al. 953; Capuzza 7–9). It also hints at the larger LGBTQ+ community by showing the mermaid parade (Hirst n.p.). This larger community is often left out of other gender nonconforming picture books (Capuzza 14). *Prinses Kevin* explicitly talks about gender expression but implicitly also discusses gender identity.

There are multiple ways to read *Prinses Kevin* and despite its many flaws it is able to discuss a topic that is not often discussed in gender nonconforming picture books, namely that of gender fluidity. If it is read as only talking about gender expression it shows the fluidity of gender expression, if it is read as discussing gender identity in addition to that, it discusses the fluidity of gender identity and expression. Most reviews seem to focus on the gender expression part, but it is interesting that it could be read differently as well.

A House for Everyone is the most innovative of the three picture books discussed in this thesis. It steps outside the bounds of previously critiqued aspects of the genre and is able to discuss many facets of gender in a short and comprehensive manner. It discusses both gender expression and gender identity in a manner that veers away from gender norms and the gender binary. It also tells a story of multiple gender nonconforming characters instead of just one surrounded by gender conforming people, as well as showing that a story including gender nonconforming characters can be told without centring on coming out. It also includes representation of a gender non-binary person and a trans male, two identities that are not often represented in media (Hirst qtd. in “Review: *A House For Everyone*”).

Overall, the three gender nonconforming picture books *Julian is a Mermaid*, *Prinses Kevin*, and *A House for Everyone* succeed in broadening the scope of people that are represented in the gender nonconforming picture book genre. Even though they might still contain some aspects that have been critiqued, they do also subvert and counteract many of these issues. Previous gender nonconforming picture books paved the way for these newer picture books and enabled them to speak more broadly and openly about gender nonconform characters. However, the new books show that the new gender nonconforming picture books coming out now have evolved past many of the stereotypes and limited representation that were present in the previous gender nonconforming picture books.

This research is limited since it only discusses a small fraction of the genre and was not able to fully go into the controversies that sparked around these types of books. More research is warranted on how gender nonconforming picture books are received and read. Particularly due to the fact that this can heavily influence what children take away from them, as can be seen by the explicit focus on the teacher’s role in the research

of Ryan et al. It is important that more research is done regarding representation in gender nonconforming picture books, since this representation can have a large influence on how gender nonconforming people are viewed and how they view themselves (Capuzza 1; McInroy and Craig 607). However, this research has aimed to open up discussion about this topic and to show that since there is more attention surrounding this topic now, a more detailed look should also be taken at the types of representation present in this genre.

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