Victoria University

Sarah Mokrzycki

Out of sight: the censoring of family diversity in picture books

Abstract:

Family diversity has long been censored, silenced, and ignored in Australian picture books. Despite its long running representation in books for older readers, the concept of exploring family diversity at picture book level remains nothing short of radical. Of the little available, much comes in the form of issue-driven books and from specialist presses overseas, presenting a distinct gap in Australian children's literature. The contentious history of diversity in children's books creates added issues in the struggle for representation, and diverse stories (and diverse authors) face ongoing challenges. Furthermore, public outrage at the 'shunning' of nuclear families, as well as society's distorted understanding of what constitutes diversity, present further complications in the advocating for family-diverse stories. This essay will examine what it means to be a family, the issues surrounding family diversity in picture books, and why such books deserve to be championed.

Biographical note:

Sarah Mokrzycki is a PhD candidate at Victoria University. Her PhD by creative project examines the importance of family diversity in Australian picture books. Sarah was a Top Ten finalist at the Asia-Pacific final of the 2018 Three Minute Thesis competition, and has presented her research domestically and internationally.

Key words:

Picture books – diversity – family – gender – identity – culture – bodies – children's literature

Family diversity has long been censored, silenced, and ignored in Australian picture books. Despite its long running representation in books for older readers, the concept of exploring family diversity at picture book level remains nothing short of radical. Of the little available, much comes in the form of issue-driven books and from specialist presses overseas, presenting a distinct gap in Australian children's literature. The contentious history of diversity in children's books creates added issues in the struggle for representation, and diverse stories (and diverse authors) face ongoing challenges. Furthermore, public outrage at the 'shunning' of nuclear families, as well as society's distorted understanding of what constitutes diversity, present further complications in the advocating for family-diverse stories. This essay will examine what it means to be a family, the issues surrounding family diversity in picture books, and why such books deserve to be championed.

I was first introduced to the concept of family diversity in picture books when I became a foster carer in 2014. I learned through training, and in my personal experiences as a carer, that the majority of children that enter out-of-home care (foster and kinship care with other relatives) every year in Australia are under the age of five (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, all but two of the children I have cared for fell into this age range. Caring for foster children presented me with the unique challenge of finding books my children could identify with. Thus began my research into diverse family representations (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) in picture books.

What started as a search for foster-friendly books soon turned into a much broader examination of families in picture books. I realised that not only are foster families invisible in picture books, but most other family types are too (where are the step and blended families? The single and same-sex parent families?). Further to this, family dynamics, as well as family structures, are equally underrepresented (where are the non-white and multiracial families? The families journeying through disease or disorders?). The possibilities were endless and, I discovered, very rarely explored, and this continued disregard for family diversity belies the reality of modern family life.

There are many different ways to make a family, and many different lifestyles and circumstances a child might be raised in. There were, for example, 1.1 million children in Australia with a biological parent living elsewhere as of 2013 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). There are stepfamilies, blended families, single parent families, foster families … the list goes on. However, the traditional or nuclear family model remains the staple of family representation in picture books. The Australian government labels this particular family type (defined as a two-parent family with biological/adopted children) as 'intact'(Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'intact' as 'Not damaged or impaired in any way*'* (2019). The inference is that all other family types – step, blended, single parent and so on – are not 'intact' families. Furthermore, unlike all other family labels, the 'intact' label refers to a specific societal value rather than the family's structure. This is problematic, as such labelling explicitly positions 'intact' families as superior to all others, and presents a specific (and limited) perception of what makes a family complete. This societal bias goes a long way to explaining a particular phenomenon in

children's literature: that while family diversity has long been established in children's and young adult novels, the same cannot be said for picture books.

Family representation in Australian picture books is overwhelmingly traditional; not just 'intact', but specifically white, middle class, with both biological parents, a (frequently blonde) male child protagonist, and characters conforming to traditional gender roles. The 'intact' label doesn't specify the gender or sexuality of parents, and allows for adopted children, but this remains the prevailing way 'intact' families are presented. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, 'intact' refers to this conventional representation. Any and all families that differ from this can be considered (at least to some degree) diverse. This includes other family structures, like foster, step, single parent and blended families, but also the representation of characters – such as protagonists of colour, multiracial and non-white families, LGBTQI family members, and characters with disabilities.

All forms of diverse family representation are covered by one – or more – of four topics: structure, culture, identity, and body. Structure refers to how the family is constructed (e.g. single parent or stepfamily); culture refers to the ethnicity and heritage of the family as a whole and/or specific family members, and may include customs, traditions, and language (e.g. multiracial or bilingual family); identity refers to how family members personally identify in terms of gender and sexuality (e.g. lesbian parents or trans child); body refers to the physical, mental, educational and developmental differences of family members (e.g. hearing impaired parent or autistic child).

Diverse family representations (at least in terms of structure) can be seen throughout children's literature, from as far back as the Grimm's fairy tales. The most well-known phrase regarding children's literature is, surely, 'Once upon a time'. So begins many of the most beloved fairy tales, which in turn have been retold and reimagined countless times over. As well as their famous beginning, many fairy tales shared similar characteristics in regard to archetype: there was the inevitable passive and weak-willed father, the virtuous child and, of course, the wicked stepmother. All of these elements are explored in the Brothers Grimm's *Cinderella* (1812).

In the story, Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters (who are selfish, spoilt, and cruel) torment Cinderella. So much we know from all later adaptations of this story. However, the Grimm version includes something the later versions do not – a living father. In all later reimaginings of the story, Cinderella's father has died, leaving the wicked stepmother and 'ugly' stepsisters (who were beautiful in the Grimm version) to be as wicked and cruel as they please. In the Grimm's story, the father is present for all of Cinderella's abuse but is a passive participant in the story, an almost non-character, whose demise in later versions makes sense if for no other reason than he simply doesn't do anything – least of all parenting. The father in *Hansel and Gretel* (1857) is similarly useless: although he loves his children he agrees to his new wife's plan to lure them deep into the forest to die. In both stories, the weak-willed father is presented as blameless in the abuse of his biological children. Interestingly, as this essay will explore, the representation of fathers as passive 'non characters' is common throughout picture books today.

Family diversity in fairy tales was generally regarded as wholly negative, and was often the cause of problems in children's stories, as with both *Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Stepmothers were evil, fathers were useless and step and half siblings were spoilt and selfish. Wicked stepmothers reigned over fairy tales with their commanding control over their husbands and relentless cruelty to their stepchildren. This representation was so influential that, years later, film and television would take up the mantle of perpetuating this negative stereotype (1993's *Stepmonster* is a classic example of this); indeed, the 'wicked stepmother' is still associated with stepfamilies to this day. The use of wicked or evil stepmothers throughout fairy tales highlights a trope frequently used in children's literature: that families are either intact and happy, or diverse and doomed.

At the same time wicked stepmothers wielded terrifying command over their fairy tale families, children's novels were exploring family diversity in a different way – through the common use of orphaned children. Children's literature in the 19th and early 20th centuries was practically defined by orphaned protagonists. Indeed, some of the most well-known children's literary heroes are orphans, such as Charles Dickens' titular Oliver Twist. Such representation can be seen as a product of the time. For example, the spread of disease and high death rates (of both children and parents) during Dickens' time meant many children were orphaned or abandoned. A penchant for orphaned protagonists, then, seems unsurprising. Orphaned protagonists also provided a pragmatic means with which to dispose of parental figures (who might otherwise get in the way of the child's adventure), and the 'classic orphan story' paved the way for modern children's book heroines and heroes.

The 'doing away' of parental figures has long been a staple in children's literature. It is a useful trope to ensure the child protagonist can go about their adventures unhindered, or with minimal adult interference. Furthermore, the changing concept of family – and a greater acknowledgment of its diversity – has given rise to more diverse representations in children's literature (Reynolds 2010). These changes generated a shift from the conventional 'home-journey-home' plot originally found in children's literature (Nodelman & Reimer 2003) to a common 'home-journey-new home' meta-plot that consists of three parts: 'the failed home, the journey, and the construction of a new home' (Wilson 2009: 120).

This type of story structure lends itself to more diverse storytelling and family representations, while shattering long held perceptions of the superiority of intact families. This meta-plot can be found in many iconic children's books, such as Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988). In *Matilda*, the titular character lives in a traditionally intact family, but is emotionally abused and neglected by her parents (part 1: failed home). Matilda plays pranks on her parents and develops a newfound power of telekinesis, which she uses to get justice for herself and others (part 2: journey). At the end of the novel she is taken in by her kindly and supportive teacher, Miss Honey (part 3: new home).

The history of family diversity (whether negative or not) in children's literature shows that the concept of non-intact families is nothing new. However, picture book families remain overwhelmingly traditional. This begs the question: why the reluctance for

family diversity in picture books? This is not simply a matter of family diversity being too difficult or complicated a topic to explain in picture books. Family diversity has been explored and very successfully so in this format. *Love Makes a Family* (Beer 2018), although not the only family-diverse picture book to be published in Australia, marks a progressive change in family representation. The book showcases a variety of families, a different one on each double-page spread, but there are no mums, no dads – no labelling of any kind. Instead, the story focusses on what truly makes a family – love – and the family dynamics are played out entirely in the illustrations.

For picture books, the lack of non-intact families and the prevalence of white, heterosexual and non-disabled characters in intact (and other) family representations is a concern with far reaching consequences. Research shows an undeniable link between the educational and emotional development of children and their ability to relate to book characters. This ability is a vital tool that engages young children with literature. It connects them to the world, validates their personal experiences and helps forge a lifelong love of reading (Perez 1984; Mankiw and Strasser 2013; Bland and Gann 2013; Hollander 2004).

As well as being the first introduction to the world of literature that children have – and, by extension, the greater world around them – picture books offer a valuable tool for children to see themselves reflected back at them. The ongoing lack of 'reflected' family types in picture books presents not only a gap in available literature, but also highlights a greater societal concern of exclusion. Through the censoring, conscious or unconscious, of family diversity, we are silencing the voices and experiences of children from diverse families. As Newman (1997) writes: 'What messages are you giving to all children, when you pretend there is only one type of family, and render the rest invisible?'

This is not to say that there are no family-diverse picture books available. However, there are a myriad of problems and complications in the publishing of such books. Firstly, family-diverse picture books tend to be confined to what is known in publishing as 'issue books'– books that are issue driven rather than story driven; explanations rather than narratives. Secondly, inaccuracies and stereotypes are an ongoing issue in diverse family representations, meaning stories can be counterproductive or even unwittingly insensitive. Thirdly, Australian booksellers rely heavily on international publishers for diverse family lists, and this further contributes to the underrepresentation of diverse Australian families in picture books.

Issue books, while often limited in mainstream appeal, serve a valuable purpose. The books are regularly used by professionals like clinicians and social workers to assist children going through trauma or changes. In the case of issue books focussed on families, common themes include divorce, the death of a parent, or entering foster care. While issue books can inform and enlighten readers about family diversity, their issue-driven nature means they have a limited audience. *Kids Need to be Safe: A Book for Children in Foster Care* (Nelson 2005) is a prime example of this. The book was published by American press Free Spirit Publishing, which specialises in issue and self-help books for children of all ages. In it, an illustration shows a family in squalid conditions. A parent sits at a table, head in hand, a can of beer in front of them. A

teenage girl sits on a windowsill, head bowed, next to an overflowing rubbish bin. A crying toddler stands in the middle of the dirty room in nothing but a nappy, looking towards the parent (who is turned away from them) with their mouth open in a scream. It's a haunting image. In the accompanying text, it explains that sometimes parents are unable to take care of their children.

I do not mean to disparage this book in any way. Taken for what it is – an issue book created specifically for children entering care – it is a useful tool for foster care agencies and carers. As distressing as the book may seem to the general or mainstream public, its content is easily identifiable for many children in the foster system. It is not, however, (not that it tries to be) a story appropriate for bedtime reading, or reading by non-foster families. The constraints of issue books highlighted in this example show the importance of story-driven books for diverse families.

There are various techniques picture book creators can use to ensure and highlight diversity. I have broadly divided these techniques into three methods: Issue (like the example above), Combination, and Illustration. Combination books are story driven and use a combination of text and illustration to convey diversity. For example, *One Photo* (Watkins 2016) tells the story of the passing of a parent from a child's perspective, using both creative writing and illustration to convey this message. Illustration books are also story driven, but showcase diversity entirely within their illustrations. This allows the text to focus on the story and leaves the specifications of the diversity presented for the reader to decide and interpret. This is seen in *Over the River and Through the Wood* (Ashman 2015). The story, while about spending time with family, does not specify family dynamics within the text. Instead, this is shown exclusively through the illustrations: there is a traditional 'intact' family, a multiracial heteronormative family, a multiracial same-sex parented family, and a foster or adoptive family (made clear through the physical differences between the parents – white with red hair – and their twin daughters – Asian with black hair).

There is a need for more Combination and Illustration method books, but also a concurrent need for understanding and sensitivity regarding family diversity in order for such books to be successful. Unfortunately, a common pitfall for story driven books is inaccuracy and stereotyping. The Australian published *Just the Way We Are* (Shirvington 2015) presents a new family type on each double-page spread – including a foster family. As a carer I was thrilled to see my children represented, but upon closer inspection I realised the book would be inappropriate for them. The text explains, from a child's perspective, how they live in a foster family and call their carers 'Mum' and 'Dad'. Those in fostering will understand the issue inherent here: carers are strongly discouraged from using parenting labels, as foster care, by its nature, is meant to be temporary. Had the double-page spread been about adoption the text would have been accurate and entirely appropriate. For children in care and their foster families, however, the text is problematic and potentially triggering.

The stereotyping of characters and families is an ongoing concern in diverse family representation. For example, research has found that both the family structure and family dynamics of multiracial families in picture books largely perpetuate negative stereotypes. Multiracial families live in urban areas and struggle financially, while

mixed-race protagonists are depicted in either single parent families or with no biological parents (Chaudhri and Teale qtd in White 2015). Such cultural stereotyping is common throughout the history of children's literature, but is by no means limited to books from the past.

'The happy slave' is an unusual and distressing trope added to modern American published picture books. Books like *A Fine Dessert* (Jenkins 2015) and the now recalled *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Ganeshram 2016) both depict slaves making food for their white masters. In both depictions, the realities of slavery are completely ignored, and instead show the slaves smiling throughout. The former, in a grotesque mix of saccharine illustration and unnerving text, shows the slave mother and daughter happily eating together in a closet, the door open halfway so the reader can see them. The accompanying text reads:

> After waiting table at supper – where the master and his family ate turtle soup, roast turkey, corn cakes and sweet potatoes – they spooned the blackberry fool into yellow dishes and served it. Later, the girl and her mother hid in the closet and licked the bowl clean together. Mmmmm. Mmmmm. Mmmmm. What a fine dessert! (Jenkins 2015).

The happy illustrations belie the foreboding reference to 'hiding' in the closet. The combination of superficial text and dismissive illustration removes any possibility of opening up a dialogue about the realities of slavery, while perpetuating a sugar-coated and diluted view of slavery to the reader. Both *A Birthday Cake* and *A Fine Dessert* are, ironically, examples of family diversity in picture books. However, while they present diverse families, much like *Just the Way We Are*, their misrepresentation also serves to censor them.

The issues inherent in these books are unconscious; however, there are also very deliberate acts of censorship in family-diverse books. The American published *Julian is a mermaid* (Love 2018) presents a family diverse in culture (Latinx), sexuality (gender questioning), and structure (single grandparent household). The original American text includes two Spanish words, *Abuela* and *Mijo*. In the context of the story, and with accompanying full-page illustrations, the reader can easily interpret the meaning of these words (and if not, can easily look them up, presenting an excellent opportunity for learning). However, in Australian and UK published versions of the book, the two Spanish words were replaced with 'Nanna' and 'Honey'. This not only robs the reader of experiencing a different language, but also censors the extent to which another culture is shown. Books are a means in which readers can expand their minds as well as their imaginations. The censorship of language achieves the opposite, instead closing the child's mind to new experiences and understanding, thus forcing ignorance.

There is a small (but growing) range of family-diverse picture books in Australia, but booksellers rely heavily on international publishers (most commonly from the UK and USA). As the examples above show, this comes with its own set of issues. Much of what is available is from specialist presses (like the aforementioned Free Spirit) or independent publishers. The overreliance on international publishers presents problems for diverse Australian families. Cultural and social differences between countries – however nuanced – mean that families are hard-pressed to find stories that truly speak

to their experiences. Examples of this can be found throughout international representations.

The UK published *Starting School* (J & A Ahlberg 1988) showcases family diversity in both structure and culture. It is a story-driven picture book that follows a group of children on their first year of primary school together. In the story, the children put their coats in the cloakroom and the teacher collects their 'dinner' (lunch) money. There are also illustrations of hot meals the children eat at 'dinner time', as well as terms like 'crisps'. The different vocabulary and experiences in the book provide a window for an Australian audience to see some of the differences that exist between Australian and UK lifestyles. However, what is missing when booksellers rely on international publishers for family-diverse stories is the ability for Australian children to have mirrors into their own lived experiences.

Dr Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the world to the concept of windows and mirrors in her article, 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors'. It was written in reference to the continuing lack of representation of people of colour in children's books. However, its message resonates throughout all areas of diversity in children's literature:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created … When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back at us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (2015: 1)

Importantly, Bishop discusses how such reflected experiences provide a means of self-affirmation, and suggests that readers will seek out mirrors in books (Ibid.). As such, there is a real need for Australian picture books for children from diverse families. As the World of Difference Institute explains: 'Books are mirrors in which children can see themselves. When they are represented in the literature we read, they can see themselves as valuable and worthy of notice' (qtd in Mankiw & Strasser 2013: 85).

One of the more pertinent issues surrounding diverse family representation in picture books is the prevalence of some families over others. It is still exceedingly rare, for example, for picture books to feature non-white or multiracial families (whether presented as 'intact' or not). Bishop's work on windows and mirrors is nearly thirty years old, but still as pertinent as ever today. In the UK, a recent study showed that while 32.1 per cent of UK school children were BAME (Black, Asian, minority ethnic), only 4 per cent of the 9,115 children's books published in 2017 featured BAME characters, and only 1 per cent had a BAME main character. Furthermore, a quarter of the books 'only featured diversity in their background casts' (Flood 2018). What is particularly interesting about these figures is that while Australian booksellers source much of their family-diverse picture books from the UK, family diversity (particularly in regards to cultural representation) is also a prevailing issue in UK children's publishing.

As well as issues of cultural representation, the default picture book family disregards other diverse characteristics. For example, disability and body diversity – whether physical, mental, educational, or developmental – is rarely explored. This is highlighted in the final double-page spread of the UK published *The Covers of My Book Are Too Far Apart* (French 2017). The illustration shows different characters standing outside their front doors. The first, a young person of colour, says, 'There are hardly any people in books who look like me!'(np) This sentiment is then echoed by a girl in a hijab, then a boy in a wheelchair. It is then conversely (and humorously) countered by a robot that proclaims, 'There are quite a lot that look like me'. A boy with two dads then says, 'Families in books don't look like my family' and, finally, a vision-impaired child with a guide dog simultaneously closes the narrative and sums up the issue: 'We need to speak to the people who make books.'(np)

French uses a robot among the human characters in these final pages to make a point about representation, highlighting how it is more common to see non-human characters than it is to see diverse human characters in picture books. While French shows two forms of body diversity in her final spread, as well as another child using a wheelchair and a group of dyslexic children earlier in her book, this type of representation in highly uncommon in picture books. Teachers and academics have found that body diversity, like those shown in French's book, is largely absent from picture books and examples are difficult to find (Pennell, Wollak & Koppenhaver 2018).

Similarly, LGBTQI and gender nonconforming characters are rarely represented in picture books. When they are, their presence is often met with hostility. Furthermore, the inclusion of such characters is often thanks to people directly impacted by the absence of representation. This was the case for the American published *Heather has Two Mommies* (Newman 1989/2016), one of the first picture books to present a lesbian couple with a child (Peel 2015). *Heather* was created by lesbian writer Leslea Newman to address the absence of same-sex parents in children's books. The idea for *Heather* arose from an encounter Newman had with another lesbian mother regarding the mother's inability to find children's books that reflected her family (Newman 1997). The route to publication for *Heather* was not an easy one, as Newman explains:

> I sent *Heather* [to] over fifty publishers. Children's book presses told me to try lesbian publishers. Lesbian publishers told me to try children's book presses. When a whole year had gone by with no luck, a friend and I decided to publish the book ourselves. (Ibid.)

Since its original publication in 1989, the book has been met with a constant stream of criticism and censorship, including protests, book burnings, and no less than 42 attempts to have the book removed from schools and libraries (Hetter 2015). Despite this, *Heather* remains one of the most famous LGBTQI picture books, and an updated version was released in 2015.

The longevity and success of *Heather* belies its criticisms and demonstrates the importance and demand for diversity in children's literature. Simultaneously, the book's self-published beginnings demonstrate the challenges diverse books face in an overwhelmingly conventional picture book market; and, despite thirty years since

Heather's original publication, these challenges are still prevalent today. The American published *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell 2005), a far more recent addition to same-sex parenting in picture books, tells the true story of two male penguins who raise a chick together at Central Park Zoo. The book has featured on the American Library Association's 'Top ten most challenged book list' eight times from 2006 – 2017 for depicting same-sex parents, and is 'one of the most challenged books of all time' (Dawson 2018).

Australia has seen an increase in the publishing of family-diverse picture books like *Love Makes a Family* in recent years. However, diverse representation continues to be a radical shift from the conservative norm, and diverse families struggle for mainstream representation. Progression largely comes from independent publishers passionate about addressing gaps in available literature, and writers with a personal connection to the subject matter (as was the case with *Heather*). A more recent Australian example is *Gus the Asparagus* (Hobson 2015), a story about a child with autism, created by two women whose sons are on the spectrum. It was also published by the book's writer, Kaylene Hobson, through her (no longer active) independent press, Dragon Tales Publishing.

As well as an ongoing reluctance to explore diverse characters in picture books, gender stereotypes are a common issue plaguing family representation. A study of 200 picture books showed that mothers were overwhelmingly presented in caring parenting roles, as compared to fathers; in fact, not a single father in the sample was shown kissing or feeding a baby (Anderson & Hamilton 2005). This presents a real concern for children exposed to such gendered and stereotyped parental roles, as the portrayal of parents in children's books 'has a correlated effect on how children develop attitudes and expectations about parents' (Anderson & Hamilton 2005: 148).

Stereotypes and regressive gender representations are not limited to parental figures, but extend to child protagonists as well. A study of 30 award winning books from 1984-1994 showed that *beautiful* was the most common adjective used to describe female characters. The list also included *frightened*, *worthy*, *sweet*, *dear*, *kind*, *scared*, and *weak*. Conversely, the male list included *horrible*, *fierce*, *terrible*, *furious*, *proud*, *great*, and *brave* (Narahara 1998: 8). Female protagonists are far more likely to be nurturers in children's books, while male protagonists have lives 'filled with adventure' (Ibid.: 10). Think of favourite protagonists like Max from *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963/2012), Spot the dog, Peter Rabbit and Hairy MacLary. Even the very hungry caterpillar is referred to as a 'he'. Much like white, intact families, 'he' is the default pronoun in picture books – and indeed, throughout children's literature.

Despite Narahara's study being 20 years old, research shows there has been very little progress made in regards to gender representation – in fact, a study of picture books published in 2017 found that gender imbalances were more prevalent in recently published books than in older ones (Tilley 2018). This ongoing issue then presents readers with the problem of gendered books. In April 2019, I examined the 240 bestselling picture books at Australian book retailer Dymocks: an almost 50/50 mix of modern and classic stories published since the 1960s (with the majority of the top 100 published in the past five years). Almost every female-led book, regardless of

publication date, was conventionally gendered – right down to the pinks and purples that dominated the book covers. The list included four recently published dolly dress-up books (of fairies, princesses, fashion designers, and ballerinas), *Claris, the Chicest Mouse in Paris* (Hess 2018) about a fashionista mouse, *Josephine Wants to Dance* (French 2016) in which Josephine wears a pink tutu – in fact, three books showed the female protagonists in tutus on the cover – and *Fancy Nancy* (O'Connor 2009) in which Nancy wears a tiara and high-heeled shoes.

The Dymocks book list showed an unsurprising overrepresentation of male-dominated books, and while the list included a limited amount of female-led books with protagonists breaking traditional gender boundaries, such as *Ada Twist, Scientist* (Beaty 2016), this was the exception rather than the rule. It should be noted that there is nothing wrong with pink-covered books and tutu-wearing protagonists; nor is there anything wrong with books celebrating traditional femininity. However, when there is such little variety in female-led stories the lack of diversity becomes a problem, particularly when female protagonists are only shown as 'ambitious' (the adjective used to describe several of the aforementioned protagonists) within the confines of traditional women's interests – like fashion, dancing, and dress up.

While male protagonists have far more adventures than female protagonists, male protagonists are also far more common. A study of the top 100 Australian picture books published in 2017 showed it was more common for a book to have no lead character than a female lead character (Tilley 2018). Characters with speaking parts were also much more likely to be male, and 31 of the books had all male characters. while only six had all female characters. In the case of animal representation, male characters were overwhelmingly predatory and female characters domestic. Conversely, but perhaps not surprisingly considering the prevalence of traditional gender roles for parents, in cases of single parent family representation it was nearly twice as likely for the parent to be a mother than a father. In Australian published books single parents were still far less common than couples, but in UK published books mothers were actually more likely to be a single parent than part of a couple (Tilley 2018). Such a finding goes a long way to explaining Australia's reliance on international publishers for family-diverse books.

A common obstruction in the progression of family diversity in picture books is the public backlash that often accompanies any suggestion of greater representation. I published an article for *The Conversation* (2019) that listed eight family-diverse picture books recently published in Australia. It was soon flooded with angry comments – most of which were removed by the moderators. People were incensed that single parent families were being 'promoted' when children should be raised in traditional two-parent homes; that children's books were becoming a political tool to further the 'agenda' of the LGBTQI community – and so forth.

Similarly, the comments section of a (now removed) *NT Times* article about *My Family Doesn't Look Like Your Family* (Stoltenkamp 2019), an Australian self-published picture book that showcases family diversity, was swiftly overrun with hostility and aggression. There was a furious reaction to the so-called 'shunning' of the nuclear family – as the article itself referred to it. In reality, the book in question is a counting book ('There are 10 in my family … how many people in your family?'), and like *Love*

Makes a Family, it also refrains from labels so children can put their own spin (and attach their own experiences) to the story.

Clearly, a greater understanding of diversity is needed. Diversity is not an attack on traditional values, and more diverse books in no way implies the exclusion of traditional stories. Diversity, at its core, is not about excluding anyone, but about including everyone. In response to authors and children's literature academics encouraging diversity in books, the backlash is severe and always predictable: 'But there's already a book about [insert diversity type here].' While this may be true, one book or even a handful does not constitute diversity. However, with the publication of more family-diverse picture books in recent years (and the promise of more to come), there is hope on the horizon for picture book families that deal more in diversity and less in conventional roles and stereotypes.

There has certainly been a noticeable shift in the thinking of some of the most important gatekeepers of Australian picture books. In speaking to librarians and children's booksellers, all noted that in the past two years there have been active discussions about the importance for more diversity (in all its forms) in picture books. Independent children's bookstores like The Younger Sun, in Victoria, and Rabble Books and Games, in Western Australia, are leading this charge. It is heartening to see people and organisations advocating for diversity in a field still rife with stringent opposition.

It is well known that picture books play a significant role in the lives of children. As such, the benefits of representation cannot be undervalued. Simply put: representation matters. Recognising the lack of family diversity in picture books is certainly a step forward, but a multitude of issues – from Australia's reliance on international publishers and the continued use of gender stereotypes to the prevailing white representation of families – show the ongoing need to properly address this gap in Australian children's literature. It is time we progressed our thinking about diversity. The radical way in which family diversity is conveyed, and the push to censor its representation, shows an ongoing dismissal of diverse families, not just in literature but in society. The people that swarm to online comments sections to rail against diversity and its assault on the traditional family really needn't worry: there will never be a shortage of traditional families in picture books. However, I argue that diverse families deserve a place on the shelf as well.

List of works cited

Ahlberg, Janet & Allan 1988 *Starting school* London: Puffin Books

Anderson, David & Mykol Hamilton 2005 'Gender role stereotyping of parents in children's picture books: the invisible father' *Sex roles* 52 (3–4), 145–151

Ashman, Linda 2015 *Over the river and through the wood* New York: Stirling Children's Books

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015 '4442.0 – Family characteristics and transitions, Australia, 2012-2013' Australian Bureau of Statistics, at https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4442.0 (accessed 20 August 2018)

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017 *Australia's welfare 2017* Canberra: AIHW

Beaty, Andrea 2016 *Ada Twist, scientist* New York: ABRAMS

Beer, Sophie 2018 *Love makes a family* Melbourne: Hardie Grant Egmont

Bishop, Rudine 1990 'Mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors' *Reading is fundamental*, at https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf (accessed 20 August 2018)

Bland, Carol & Gann, Linda 2013 'From standing out to being just one of the gang: guidelines for selecting inclusive picture books' *Childhood education* 89 (4), 254–259

Dahl, Roald 1988 *Matilda* London: Jonathan Cape

Dawson, Juno 2018 'From Lolita to Winnie-the-Pooh: Juno Dawson on the best banned books' *The Guardian*, at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/23/from-pornography-to-winnie-the-pooh-juno-dawson-picks-books-that-were-banned (accessed 18 January 2019)

Flood, Alison 2018 'Only 1% of children's books have BAME main characters – UK study' *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/17/only-1-of-uk-childrens-books-feature-main-characters-of-colour (accessed 20 August 2018)

French, Jackie 2016 *Josephine wants to dance* Sydney: Harper Collins

French, Vivian 2017 *The covers of my book are too far apart* Edinburgh: Barrington Stoke Ltd

Hess, Megan 2018 *Claris, the chicest mouse in Paris* Melbourne: Hardie Grant Egmont

Ganeshram, Ramin 2016 *A birthday cake for George Washington* New York: Scholastic

Grimm, Jacob & Wilhelm (1812) trans Dee L Ashliman 2006 *Cinderella*, at https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm021.html (accessed 20 August 2018)

Grimm, Jacob & Wilhelm (1857) trans Dee L Ashliman 2002 *Hansel and Gretel*, inhttp://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm015.html (accessed 20 August 2018)

Hetter, Katia 2015 '"Heather has two mommies" comes out again' *CNN* 24 March, at https://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/24/living/feat-heather-has-two-mommies-leslea-newman/index.html (accessed 5 July 2018)

Hobson, Kaylene 2015 *Gus the asparagus* Brisbane: Dragon Tales Publishing

Hollander, Sharon 2004 'Inclusion literature: ideas for teachers and teacher educators' *Electronic journal for inclusive education* 1 (8) Summer, 1–11

Jenkins, Emily 2015 *A fine dessert* New York: Schwartz & Wade

Love, Jessica 2018 *Julian is a mermaid* Massachusetts: Candlewick Press

Mankiw, Sue & Janis Strasser 2013 'Tender topics: exploring sensitive issues with pre-k through first grade children through read-alouds' *Young Children* 68 (1) Spring, 84–89

Mokrzycki, Sarah 2019 'Eight Australian picture books that celebrate family diversity' *The Conversation*, at https://theconversation.com/eight-australian-picture-books-that-celebrate-family-diversity-109429 (accessed 9 January 2019)

Narahara, May 1998 *Gender stereotypes in children's picture books* Long Beach: University of California

Nelson, Julie 2005 *Kids need to be safe: a book for children in foster care* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing

Newman, Leslea 1997 'Heather and her critics' *Horn Book Magazine* 73 (2) at https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=heather-and-her-critics (accessed 4 October 2017)

Newman, Leslea 2016 *Heather has two mommies* Massachusetts: Candlewick Press

Nodelman, Perry & Mavis Reimer 2003 *The pleasures of children's literature* 2nd edn Boston: Allyn and Bacon

O'Connor, Jane 2009 *Fancy Nancy* Sydney: Harper Collins

Oxford English Dictionary 2019 'Intact' Oxford: Oxford University Press at https://www.lexico.com/en/english (accessed 4 October 2017)

Peel, Katie 2015 'An interview with Leslea Newman: a punchy new Heather, Dolly Parton, and Orange is the Black' *Journal of lesbian studies* 4 (19), 470–483

Pennell, Ashley, Barbara Wollak & David Koppenhaver 2018 'Respectful representations of disability in picture books' *The reading teacher* 71 (3), 1–9

Perez, Samuel 1984 'Promote identifying with characters for motivation in reading stories' *Reading horizons* 24 (2) Summer, 141–144

Reynolds, Kimberley 2010 'Changing families in children's fiction' in MO Grenby & A Immel (eds) *Cambridge companion to children's literature* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 193–208

Richardson, Justin & Peter Parnell 2005 *And Tango makes three* New York: Simon & Schuster

Sendak, Maurice 2012 *Where the wild things are* New York: Harper Collins

Shirvington, Jessica 2015 *Just the way we are* Sydney: Harper Collins

Stanford Jeremy 1993 *Stepmonster* [VHS] Concorde-New Horizons

Stoltenkamp, Tenielle 2019 *My family doesn't look like your family* There There Co.

Tilley, Cristen 2018 'Book week: analysis of bestsellers suggests kids' bookshelves are on a lean' *ABC News*, at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-22/kids-book-top-100-analysis/10042904 (accessed 18 January 2019)

Watkins, Ross 2016 *One photo* Melbourne: Penguin Random House

White, Lindsey 2015 'Impact of children's literature on family structures and children's perceptions of family' *Education Masters* Paper 320

Wilson, Melissa 2009 *Constructions of childhood found in award-winning children's literature* [Thesis] Arizona: The University of Arizona