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*An Evolution in a Revolution:
 The evolution and change of homosexuality in children's literature over the past twenty
 years*

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

~ Leslea Newman, Heather Has Two Mommies

“I don’t understand you. Every prince in these parts is married. Every one of them but you! When I was your age, I’d been married twice already.” By evening, all that talking had made the prince dizzy. “Very well, Mother. I’ll marry. I must say, though, I’ve never cared much for princesses.”

~ Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland, King & King

A gay prince is a far cry from artificial insemination.

Heather Has Two Mommies and King and King are two books taken from two very different times. Each book represents a very different time during the evolution of homosexuality in children’s books, but looking at these excerpts and at these texts allows us to understand the journey that this subject has taken through children’s books in the short time the subject has been in publication.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, picture books addressing homosexuality have been introduced and become more prominent in the world of children’s literature. With the progression of the Gay Rights Movement since the 1970’s (Spence, 336), the creation of laws protecting homosexuals and the increase of children growing up in same sex households, literature geared towards the acceptance of homosexuals has begun to acquire a particular importance. Homosexuality has revolutionized the world of children’s literature, constantly challenging in different ways all children’s understanding of the concept of family.

This paper will look at five different and important published books over the last twenty years that addresses homosexuality in children’s literature in order to fully understand the road this concept has taken. A picture book is defined as “[a] highly illustrated work[s] of various degrees of difficulty which are directed to an audience agreed from approximately four to eleven (Spence, 335).” This essay will look at three

different aspects in which a children's story is conveyed, text, story line, and illustrations, in order to compare and contrast these five different books.

In order to understand the importance of the theme itself in children's literature, one must be able to understand its journey. These stories help children with gay parents and family members foster an identity (Pizurie, 1), but they also help children who are unaware of homosexuality develop tolerance and understanding (Graham, 1). The change in the way homosexuality has been and is presented in picture books is especially important because it changes the way that children (and sometimes the adults that read the books to them) view homosexuality itself. The evolution that has occurred in these types of books not only reflect the importance educators, authors and parents place on these types of books, but the tactics that are taken to appeal to a certain audience for the last twenty years. Through looking at this progression in children's literature, one can begin to understand the importance this subject holds in the lives of many children, and can therefore insure their placement in libraries, curriculums, and homes in the future.

Heather Has Two Mommies

In Heather has Two Mommies, Newman tells the tale of Heather's life with her two moms, Jane and Kate. The story details how young Heather comes to terms with her family's place in the world.

For the first picture book addressing homosexuality, this book takes some major risks, while at the same time, remaining relatively safe. The text in Newman's book is relatively long and detailed. Told in the third person with thirty-one pages and three plus sentences on a page, Newman makes the text incredibly challenging for a young child, including such concepts as artificial insemination.

In terms of storyline, Heather's tale is pretty lengthy. Each small story is intricately detailed as to fully grasp Heather's situation. Although addressing homosexuality in children's picture books was extremely new for the time period, in comparison to more recently written children's books, the story itself falls flat. Its purpose is to show how Heather's life is extremely mundane, which, lends itself mostly to judgmental adults, not young children.

The pictures within the book are even less engaging. The black and white pictures have a graffiti-like quality, with the only color gracing the cover of the book. The depictions of Heather's "mommies" depict what modern day society has deemed as "lesbians." One of Heather's moms totes a "No Nukes" t-shirt, and the women themselves seem very masculine and not typical for what one might consider a mother. With most children used to colorful pictures, this aspect of the book again provides another challenge for a young reader.

Children's books dealing with homosexuality have come a long way since Heather has Two Mommies. These types of children's stories that inform and preach

have died out with the progression of these books. Even those who once celebrated the existence of Heather Has Two Mommies have now changed their thoughts on the book. ““The general population recoils in horror from Heather’s in-your-face political correctness (Pizurie, 1),” writes reviewer Dian J. Pizurie of Lesbian Review of Books. Even author Leslea Newman told Newsday that the “inclusion of the book in [a] curriculum ““must [be] a mistake’ (Guttman, 5).”

Since Heather has Two Mommies, Leslea Newman has gone on to publish many different kinds of children’s books, all dealing with the theme of homosexuality. Her books seem to differ from her introductory tale, with colorful, bright pictures some not even outwardly dealing with homosexuality, such as her recently published book, The Boy Who Cried Fabulous.

Heather has Two Mommies broke the much needed silence for homosexuality as a theme in children’s literature. Although in comparison with the literature presented today, Heather has Two Mommies seems dull, rough and preachy, however, the book allowed other authors a work in which to compare.

Daddy’s Roommate

In 1991, a year after Heather has Two Mommies was published, the same publishing company, Alyson Wonderland, published Daddy’s Roommate by Michael Willhoite. In the tale, the narrator tells his audience that since his parent’s divorce last year, his father has been living with Frank, who is no different than any other father. The narrator accepts and promotes his current family situation, and loves Frank just as much as his mother or father. “The point is that Frank is just as nice to the book’s small narrator as Daddy is (Decter, 3).”

This story seems to follow in the same manner as Heather Has Two Mommies, except with less words and more colorful pictures. The text is probably the most harmless part of the book itself. With one sentence per page, it is relatively easy for a child of any age to understand. The words themselves are also easily relatable to children, due to their simplicity and conciseness. Whether the children will care to understand the book itself is a different matter.

The storyline itself lends itself to any child’s experience. No difficult concepts to grasp, the audience is told that Daddy and Frank love each other, and their love does not get in the way of any of the narrator’s daily activities, such as baseball, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, doing homework, etc.. Children can easily relate to this story because the child spells out the situation in plain terms and no gigantic leaps in time are made. Much like Heather Has Two Mommies, Daddy’s Roommate has no new or exciting concepts to grasp. No dragons, princesses, witches, or trips to the zoo. The ultimate goal of the audience is to understand that the narrator’s life is just as boring as having two heterosexual parents. The concept is uninteresting to children, who are used to bright colorful pictures.

The only major difference between Heather has two Mommies and Daddy's Roommate is the realism in the stories themselves. Whereas Heather appears to live perfectly with her two mommies, the narrator in Willhoite's tale admits that life with Daddy and Frank is not always pleasant. The two fight sometimes, but they almost always reconcile.

The pictures themselves, although bright and colorful, can also be interpreted as suggestive and stereotypical. The narrator's father and his lover "are so low-key as to remain innocuous (Weir, 5)". Both are Caucasian, bronze, medium build with effeminate features. The narrator's father and lover are not suggestive towards the narrator himself, he almost seems to separate the two when ever he is with them. It is only when the two are shaving together and frequenting the beach together where even the most liberal might find qualms with the depictions. In terms of stereotyping, both adults have strange poses differing from the other characters in the book, posed almost like models. Daddy's roommate wears a theatre t-shirt in one scene where the two are cleaning together and the trio hugs a piano singing songs in a different scene.

Most critics of children's books find Daddy's Roommate lacking charisma and vigor. "Willhoite's...writing takes the radical step of showing that homosexuality can be dull (Weir, 5)." Although many find the book itself charming, the world of homosexuality in children's literature has moved on to bigger and better stories. "The story here is not profound (Pizurie, 2)."

Michael Willhoite, like Leslea Newman, went on from Daddy's Roommate to write several other books for Alyson Wonderland. Although many critics agree that Willhoite's story contains a more digestible tale of homosexuality, it lacked luster. Although both books are considered household names for children's books that deal with gay themes, and paved the way for more modern children's books addressing homosexuality. Although the world identifies these books most commonly being the "gay" children's books, the literary culture has provided and accepted more exciting books dealing with homosexuality.

Zack's Story

There are very few picture books that chronicle the lives children that are living with same sex parents. Zack's Story, written by Keith Elliot Greenberg and published in 1996, is about eleven year old Zack, living in New Jersey with his same sex parents, Margie and his biological mother. We learn about life with Zack, visiting his relatives, doing his homework, visiting Boston, attending a gay pride parade, we even learn about the arrival of Zack's baby sister. The whole story is wrapped up in the message that same-sex parenting is a wonderful thing for a child to have, and same sex parenting is just as good as conventional parenting.

One would view this picture book as more of a scientific approach to same-sex parenting. Zack is a real person whereas in all the other picture books, the characters are fictionalized. However, this approach carries through to the writing as well. Zack's voice,

told in the first person, seems forced and manipulated, almost as if the author had scripted Zack's words himself. The text also is not very lively. It explains all the basic words the audience needs to understand and has a glossary in the back. Children would possibly be bored by the language, even more so than Heather Has Two Mommies, but possibly entertained by its first person narrative.

The storyline itself is also pretty mundane. We learn about Zack's everyday life, except that unlike Heather and the narrator in Daddy's Roommate, Zack is a real person. The author wants to convey that Zack is just as normal and boring as any other kid, he just happens to have same sex parents.

The pictures are, again, not very interesting either. They are all photographs of Zack playing games, hanging out with his family, posing for candid and goofy pictures. It is all pretty normal, and I am sure that students do not really want to read about a normal child. The author is going against what many might believe about Zack's childhood, that because Zack is raised by homosexuals, he is corrupt and defunct in everything he does. In truth, akin to Heather Has Two Mommies this is a book more for children and adults who don't see homosexuality as "normal", not for those who are learning about it for the first time.

Critics who reviewed this book (and there are not many) are not delighted. Like its predecessors, Zack's Story tells of Zack's happy and humble life, but does little to entertain its audience. Reviewers, however, do not tend to necessarily like the book, they praise its existence due to lack of positive material that exists that addresses homosexuals. "With positive nonfiction portraits of family structures like Zack's almost nonexistent for middle readers, this will be of value till something a little less preachy comes along (Booklist Online)."

In a similar manner to Heather Has Two Mommies and Daddy's Roommate, Zack's Story sets out to inform its audience, rather than entertain. Although the author humanizes the concept of same-sex parenting by using an actual child of same-sex parents, this too provides a basis for other authors writing about this crucial subject.

Lucy goes to the Country

This book, published in 1998, has a more laid back approach to homosexuality. Lucy the cat, who lives with two gay men, tells us about her trips to the country with her caretakers, and one trip in particular, which she gets into some mischief. The issue of homosexuality, although addressed, is told in a very different way in this colorful, bright and different type of children's book.

Author and illustrator Joseph Kennedy and John Canemaker write about their own love through the life of their cat. Although the text for the book itself is very detailed and lengthy on each page, the words themselves are not difficult to understand or tackle. The text lends itself to making the story interesting and intriguing for the reader to read.

We are transformed, through the storyline for the book, from the city to the country, from the mundane home life to the exciting party life. Lucy's is curious, cute and excited, allowing the audience to become more engaged. The word "homosexual" or "homosexuality" is not even mentioned in the book itself. Lucy just lives with her "big guys", making the book even more active for a child. Since homosexuality is not addressed, a child might then ask the adult reading it, "What's a big guy?" or "Why are those men holding each other that way?" or "Why are they sleeping in the same bed?" It allows the adult or parent figure in the child's life to address their concept of homosexuality, rather than be provided with a definition.

The pictures themselves are equally as wonderful as the story: lush, colorful and intricate. A child would be incredibly engaged looking at the pictures while the adult is reading the book. The pictures are spread out instead of close together, allowing a child to really take in each picture. Plus, as a bonus, at the corner of every page there is a picture of Lucy catching a butterfly or falling on her face, and the beginning of the book tells the child to flip through the book to "see Lucy move".

The whole book itself reflects an incredible amount of time, effort and love. Although particularly enjoyable for young readers, many adults take a different approach to this book. Many believe that the book, although enjoyable, does little to help youngsters to understand homosexuality. "This picture book promotes tolerance for gay people by putting them into the background of a caper starring a saucy cat named Lucy (Publishers Weekly)." They believe although homosexuality is addressed in this tale, it should be more prominently addressed, as in the manner of Heather Has Two Mommies, but with a little more spunk.

Lucy goes to the Country allows children to learn about homosexuality without being given a definition. They see what a new type of love is, and they can be open and question those adults who surround them for further information. Although addressing homosexuality in an innocuous way, this book moves on from making homosexuality seem normal, by detailing Lucy's exciting life with her Big Guys.

King and King

Published in 2002, King and King is a fairy tale for a new generation. The Mother of a prince in a castle "far, far away" is tired of ruling and decides to find a suitable princess for her son. After parading countless women in front of him, and the prince rejecting all of them, he is awestruck after meeting Princess Madeline's brother, and decides that he is his one true love. They are married at once and live happily ever after, and the queen is at last happy because she finally gets to retire.

Quirky, spunky and a new type of children's book, King and King is relatively different from all other children's book dealing with homosexuality. The text itself is very simplistic, ranging from a couple of words to many words on each page. No huge concepts are addressed allowing children to sit back, relax and enjoy the story.

The storyline itself is very creative and fun to read. It is a different type of fairy tale than children are used to. Although formulaic, like most other children's fairy tales, the ending is different and simple. Not difficult for a child to understand or idolize, like children do with many other stories.

The pictures make the book different from many other books on homosexuality. They are bright and colorful in reds and purples, with pieces that seem cut out from magazines and other books. Although not as bright as Lucy goes to the Country, the layout of the pictures on each page will intrigue and inspire children to pay attention and cognitively understand the tale while they are reading (or being read).

All in all, critics react to King and King in different ways. Some regarded it as a "welcome change" and an "outstanding debut" (Tarr, 2) while others regarded the "alterna-tale [as] not the fairest of them all (Publishers Weekly Online)." Although I believe the story to be more engaging than Daddy's Roommate or Heather Has Two Mommies, others find the story to fall flat and remain unimportant in the evolution of homosexuality in children's literature.

Although stylistically, King and King greatly differs from its predecessors, many believe that not everyone lives happily ever after, especially not as happy as those seem to in the story itself. However, in the progression of books, we are able to see the vast distinction between Heather Has Two Mommies and King and King, the past, present and future of books addressing this topic.

Conclusion

So, why is it important for us, as readers, to see the evolution of homosexuality in children's literature? Why are these books important, on the whole, for children to read? With statisticians reporting that 10% of first graders will grow up and identify with being homosexual (Decter, 21), and a recent poll showing that 4 in 10 students know someone who is gay, children need to begin learning about homosexuality at a younger age (Garden, 2). Recognizing gay families and adults is developmentally appropriate for first through sixth graders, according to Piaget, as children begin to transition to understand another's point of view (Graham, 1). Beyond this point, children begin to form opinions and ideas that may not be as accepting as they grow older. Without these books, which promote acceptance and diversity, society remains ignorant to a growing number of people in the world, and in turn must deal with the hatred and violence that will follow.

In looking at the evolution of these books, we can see the future. We can see where they have been, and where they are going, and how they will affect children in the future. In looking at Heather Has Two Mommies, Daddy's Roommate, Zack's Story, Lucy goes to the Country and King and King in terms of text, storyline and illustrations, we are able to see the change in how the subject matter has been addressed in children's books, and hopefully, the journey they will begin to take in their future.

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