

THE SCANDAL OF THE COMMONPLACE: The strangeness of best-selling picturebooks

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Asked to discuss controversial picturebooks, I felt stymied by my lack of a sense of what qualities a book has to possess in order to be assigned to that category. Isn't what a reader finds controversial a matter of individual taste, so that any and all books might strike somebody as distressing or disturbing? On the other hand, though, I had a strong sense of which books have aroused the least controversy: the ones that appear most often on best-seller lists and that large numbers of people like and recommend to each other. Assuming that controversy arises when a book diverges from the characteristics of such books, I decided to identify a list of current picturebook best-sellers and take a closer look at what happens in them, what they might seem to have in common, and how controversy might emerge from divergences from their shared features. Rather than defining a norm, however, my exploration reveals the surprising oddity of the books we most take for granted—why they might become controversial if they were not so widely assumed to be harmless.

What is controversial about children's picturebooks? Just about everything. Children's literature as a whole is a category built on restrictions; special books for children would not exist if adults did not believe that children want or need to know less about their world than there actually is, and so children's literature as a whole is, almost by definition, a literature defined by what it leaves out. Inevitably, however, different adults have different ideas about what needs to be left out, and as a result, just about any book is likely to seem challenging or unsettling and be deemed unsuitable for young readers by somebody somewhere. What is controversial is in the eye of the beholder, and different eyes manage to be upset by different aspects of different books.

Nevertheless, I suspect that most adults would agree that, even though the books being discussed in this volume are quite different from each other, they are indeed ones that are likely to be widely contested—ones that deserve the label "controversial." Indeed, it is their difference from each other—and from the many other children's picturebooks that seem less likely to be so generally perceived as unsettling—that identifies the books under discussion here as deserving of that label. The books being written about here are not merely controversial to some people who love wolves because they have bad wolves in them, or controversial to some people who enjoy childhood exuberance because they take it for granted that children should be seen and not heard, or controversial to some people who believe children are in a certain

developmental stage because they use difficult language. They are distinct enough to convey a more general aura of what I want to call “controversiality” to a much larger group of adult readers.

But then the distinctive difference that underpins that controversiality, gives rise to another important question: just what it is that they are different from? They are most different, clearly, from picturebooks that are not so obviously controversial—the ones that strike most people as quite conventional and acceptable even though the occasional adult might be distressed by some aspects of them. While there are those who might have reasons for finding Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham*, or Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s *The Gruffalo*, or Dorothy Kunhardt’s *Pat the Bunny*, unsuitable for sharing with children, the wide popularity and massive sales of books like these make it clear that most people interested in children’s books take them to be harmless. The continuing popularity of these books suggests that they represent widely held expectations about what is appropriate for children—the expectations that more obviously controversial books defy.

It occurred to me, then, that I might develop some further understanding of controversial books as a group by taking a closer look at the kinds of conventional books that more obviously controversial books excite controversy by varying from. What specific mainstream conventions do the controversial books under discussion in this volume not represent or confirm?

A group of uncontroversial books

In order to try to figure that out, I developed a list of clearly conventional and therefore, presumably, generally acceptable and therefore generally non-controversial picturebooks to take a closer look at—ideally, ones that represent current mainstream views of what is acceptable in children’s picturebooks. I did so through the highly unscientific process of Googling lists of best-selling picturebooks on one specific day. The day I chose was 13 October 2013. I decided to focus my attention on English-language books produced in countries with sizeable populations and mainstream children’s publishing industries—the United Kingdom and the USA. I looked at a variety of best-seller lists: the daily lists of best-selling children’s books at Amazon.com and the Barnes and Noble website in the United States, as well as Amazon’s more specific list of best-selling picturebooks for specific ages from 0 to 12 and Barnes and Noble’s list of best-sellers for various ages 0 to 12; the bestsellers at the Amazon.co.uk and Waterstones websites in the United Kingdom; the lists of Children’s Picturebooks Best Sellers provided by the New York Times and by Publishers Weekly; and The Bookseller’s best-sellers for pre-school for Saturday, 2 October—the closest I could find to a picturebook list. Together, these sources listed a large number of different books; but many titles appeared on more than one list—many of them, in fact transcending national tastes by being identified as best-sellers in both the United States and the

United Kingdom.

In the end, I felt fairly comfortable in choosing twelve books that were unquestionably popular, unquestionably sold in large numbers, and likely therefore to be representative of what most adult book buyers feel most comfortable with when they choose picturebooks for children. These are the books:

Mark Baker and Neville Astley's *The Story of Peppa Pig*

Drew Daywalt's *The Day the Crayons Quit*

Kimberly and James Dean's *Pete the Cat and the Magic Sunglasses*

Anna Dewdney's *Llama Llama and the Bully Goat*

Sherri Duskey Rinker's *Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site*

Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *Room on the Broom*

Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *Tabby McTat*

Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *The Snail and the Whale*

Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *Superworm*

Timothy Knapman and Sarah Warburton's *Dinosaurs in the Supermarket*

Axel Scheffler's Pip and Posy: *The Super Scooter*

Mo Willems's *I'm a Frog*.

Presences and absences

After developing this list, my first response was to notice the overwhelming presence of Julia Donaldson and illustrator Axel Scheffler, who together account for almost half the books. Not only that, but also one of Donaldson and Scheffler's books, *Room on the Broom*, occupied both the first and second position on the Publishers Weekly list, in different editions. Donaldson and Scheffler clearly have their fingers on the pulse of children's book buyers, and a closer look at why that might be is in order.

But before I take that look, I need to say a little more about the list. I have to admit that in arriving at it, I did cheat a little. There were some titles prominently listed that I decided to ignore:

- First, I chose not to include the picturebook that topped the Amazon lists: a Kindle edition of Aaron Shepherd's *The Legend of Lightning Larry*. I did so because it seemed likely that the price for the Kindle edition that day— \$0.01—was the incentive for the sales; that suspicion was confirmed when I returned to the lists some months later and saw that *Lightning Larry* was missing, while the twelve titles I had chosen were still prominently featured. While I found *Lightning Larry*, a story of a gunman who shoots love into the hearts of his enemies, mildly amusing, I suspect I did so because of my knowledge of the conventions of the old western movies and TV shows that it takes for granted and builds on—a body of knowledge today's young picturebook readers are unlikely to possess. In other words: it was just odd enough in its implied repertoire of readerly knowledge to seem unlike the twelve books I settled on, which rarely reference matters so currently esoteric.

- Second, because I did my survey in October, the lists included many books specifically related to Halloween. These seemed unlikely to remain best-sellers after the holiday passed, so I left them out; I note, however, that this timing might also be a factor in the sales of Donaldson and Scheffler's *Room on the Broom*, whose protagonist is a witch.
- Third, there were also a few oddities that did not seem to relate to what I wanted to learn, so I omitted them: the *One Direction Ultimate Gift Set*, consisting of a teddy bear and a paperback called *One Direction: The Ultimate Fan Book*, and *Despicable Me 2: Make a Minion Sticker Book*. Indeed, I ignored a number of sticker books that seemed more like toys than reading experiences.
- Finally, a number of the books on the lists were familiar titles that have been around for some time: Eric Carle's *Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*, Dorothy Kunhardt's *Pat the Bunny*, Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* I chose not to include them because I thought it might be more revealing to concentrate on newer books with shorter histories—books that might best represent the contemporary situation and that were not old enough to be purchased mainly because an adult had fond memories of them from childhood.

Popular and controversial?

Nevertheless, the presence of these books on the lists made me aware of another issue: among the older books were Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever* and Margaret Wise Brown's *Runaway Bunny*, perennial best-sellers that have also been perennially controversial. The presence of these books on the lists seemed to be a serious challenge to my assumptions here. If popular books can also be controversial, then the two are not in fact separate and opposite categories. I had to acknowledge a suspicion that I would not have to dig very deep to find people upset by *Goodnight Moon* (ageist? promotes animistic thought?) or *The Hungry Caterpillar* (misleading nutritional information? promotes the mutilation of books?). Controversy is in the eye of the beholder. I could not actually use these popular books to determine what controversial books varied from because all books are at least potentially controversial.

And yet: if reader's comments on online bookstores are anything to go by, the twelve books I ended up with do not in fact seem to excite all that much controversy. Indeed, in light of the well-known fractiousness of anonymous online commentators, they are surprisingly uncontroversial. Most of the readers who commented on the twelve books on Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites are very praising of them and have awarded them five stars. Indeed, a number of the books have been awarded almost nothing but four or five stars. For instance, 231 Amazon.com readers gave Donaldson's *Room on the Broom* five stars, ten others four stars, and three others three stars; of the three who gave it one star, one did not like the price and two did so as an objection to some passages in the edition they received being different from what they were used to, for, as well as changes from British idiom to American equivalents (hair plaits

become braids, and chips become fries), some editions eliminate the dragon's wish to eat the witch with fries and replaces it with a bland suggestion that she "looks like a good supper." Meanwhile, on Amazon.co.uk, 427 readers gave the book five stars, twenty gave four stars, nine gave two or three stars, and just one gave one star. The two stars were from readers who disliked the American words in a specific edition they received, and the one star from a reader who expected a CD and received a book. In other words, none of these readers had any objections to the events or characters or thematic implications of this book.

By and large, those who ranked the other eleven books have the same sort of response: nothing but enthusiasm. The one minor exception relates to *The Day the Crayons Quit*; while the response to this book is generally praising, with 447 Amazon.com five-star reviews and 47 four-star ones, there are as many as thirty one-star ones, most of them accusing the book of being either whiny or boring. The only Amazon.co.uk one-star review also calls the book boring, while thirty reviewers give it five stars and five four stars. But for most people, at any rate, there seems to be something about all twelve of my selections that separates them from the kinds of books that are more usually identified as challenging or controversial.

Shared characteristics of popular picturebook stories

So then why do these popular picturebooks not excite controversy? One possible explanation is the extent to which they conform to widespread mainstream ideas about what a children's picturebook usually is or ought to be.

- As in so many other books, all the characters in these books are humanized animals or objects. Many of them wear human clothing, live in recognizably human houses, and play in human playgrounds or attend schools. Some of the ones who do not occupy human homes nevertheless interact with and have English-language conversations with humans.
- Many of these characters seem to stand in for children, and occupy settings or have experiences of the sort readers tend to associate with childhood.
- The pictures in all of them represent the characters as simplified cartoons, often with clearly marked outlines, in bright cheerful colours, against fairly empty backgrounds, and with a scarcity of shadows.
- The texts tend to be short and often feature patterned language, with many repetitions or rhymes.
- The stories often imply the kinds of lessons that adults like to share with children: the wisdom of adults (*Peppa* and *Llama Llama*); avoiding sadness and looking for the good in every day (*Pete the Cat*); the ability of small creatures to band together to defeat a more powerful enemy (*Superworm*, *Room on the Broom*, and perhaps *The Snail on the Whale*) or the wisdom of getting an adult to deal with one (*Llama Llama*); celebrating the pleasures of pretending and creativity (*I'm a Frog*, *Crayons*, and, perhaps *Dinosaurs*); the

ability of unlike creatures to become friends and the virtues of friendship (*Snail and the Whale* and *Tabby McTat*); the virtue of kindness and the wrongness of being aggressive and self-seeking (*Pip and Posy* and *Llama Llama*); accepting the inevitability of bedtime and gracefully giving in to it (*Goodnight, Goodnight*). As these aspects suggest, these books are not unlike thousands upon thousands of undistinguished picturebooks and other stories produced for children across the decades; I suspect that most adults who work with picturebooks could offer many examples of other books with similar traits.

Popularity as a shield against controversy

But there is one way in which these twelve do stand out. They are, indeed, widely popular. They are best-sellers. Is it possible that as well as being best-sellers because they are acceptable, they are acceptable because they are best-sellers? Or in other words: might the very fact of their popularity be what encourages new purchasers to believe these books are good choices for children? The very concept of best-seller lists engages (or encourages) a widespread assumption that certain books must be worth reading simply because so many people like them. Nor is it incidental that five of my twelve books are by a pair of creators with a history of being best-sellers, and that five more of them are representatives of series that have existed for some time: *Pete the Cat*, *Peppa Pig*, *Llama Llama*, and the elephant and pig from *I'm a Frog* have appeared in a number of other books, while fairly new characters *Pip and Posy* reveal the value of multiple appearances as an incentive to new buyers by starring in seven other recently published books. Logic might suggest that if so many adults feel these books are safe and so many children have experienced them and apparently, liked them and not been harmed by them—and if so few Amazon readers have negative things to say about them—then they must be safely non-toxic. Their very popularity might then be an invitation not to pay close attention to them—not to be too worried about their potential deleterious effects on child readers, as, in my experience, most adults often do when confronted with a new children's picturebook.

If popularity does work that way, then perhaps closer attention might reveal aspects of these books that are just as unsettling and as potentially controversial as books more likely to arouse that sort of scrutiny. Consider, for instance, the books by Donaldson and Scheffler. My copies of two of these came with a gold sticker announcing that they are “by the creators of *The Gruffalo*,” and the back cover of the third says that the authors are “the award-winning creators of *The Gruffalo*.” Furthermore, a sticker on the cover of *Pip and Posy* identifies it as being “by the illustrator of *The Gruffalo*.” The publishers clearly believe that these connections to that earlier book are an incentive to encourage purchases. It is, presumably, a familiar book, and again, therefore, a safe one. Indeed, Wikipedia informs me that *The Gruffalo* is familiar enough to have sold over three and a half million copies in various editions worldwide in the 15 short years since it appeared in 1999. While 251 of 271 Amazon.com readers and 502 of 561

Amazon.co.uk readers have awarded it five stars, fewer than thirty readers on both sites gave it anything below four stars. Indeed, one of the few negative reviewers identifies *The Gruffalo* as exactly the kind of best-seller I am discussing here: “*The Gruffalo* is a perfect example of the tipping point of hype—a spirited but basically average book whose fame happened to reach critical mass and has bathed us in a self-perpetuating supernova of books fuelling plush toys fuelling bookends fuelling jigsaws fuelling more books, for the decade and more since” (Holmeister “Hol”).

A few of the other negative reviews focus on a particularly telling aspect of *The Gruffalo* and its similarities to Maurice Sendak’s 1963 classic *Where the Wild Things Are*. As one reviewer says, “I can’t help the feeling of ‘Miss she’s copying my work’ I get when I read this” (humptydumpty). *The Gruffalo* does indeed share key elements with *Wild Things*, including a title character who looks very much like one of the Wild Things, a repeated use of the same adjective to describe the beast’s “terrible tusks” and “terrible claws” and “terrible teeth in his terrible jaws,” and some uncertainty about whether or not the monster depicted is a figment of the child protagonist’s imagination; for it is certainly possible to suppose that the actual beast who emerges after a mouse invents him continues to be a projection of his own uncertainty.

I find the similarity of the two books interesting in the light of my concerns here because of the history of the reception of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Upon first publication, it was both highly praised and a cause of wide controversy, much of it centring on the extent to which the depictions of the Wild Things might frighten children. In my early years as an instructor in university-level children’s literature courses, many of my students had that response to it. But as the decades passed, the intensity of that negative response diluted. The book became less controversial—in part, I suspect, because ongoing fame and sales made it seem less likely to be dangerous, in part because its success led to the publication of many other books about monsters by other authors, the existence of which made its basic premise seem much less unusual and therefore much less obviously distressing. Of the relatively few negative reviews of *Wild Things* by Amazon readers, very few worry about the book scaring children, and focus their concern instead on the obnoxiousness of the book’s hero and the inappropriateness of its values. By the time *The Gruffalo* appeared, what was surprising about it was certainly not the mere presence of a monster; and what offended its few unhappy readers was not its oddity and potential to scare but rather its similarity to what was so familiar.

At any rate, the success of *The Gruffalo* might well inhibit negative responses to the other books by Donaldson and Scheffler—for how likely is it that the authors of such a successful and therefore, surely, harmless book would go on to produce harmful ones? It is no coincidence that the much-lauded *Room on the Broom* not only features a protagonist who is a stereotypically scary witch with a wart on her nose, but also, a scary fire-breathing dragon. Then for all his powers, Superworm remains a conventionally repulsive worm, and both he and the witch on the broom are

frighteningly threatened with being eaten. Tabby McTat frighteningly loses his best friend long enough to marry and have a family, the whale in *Whale and the Snail* frighteningly nearly dies, and Scheffler's Posy frighteningly falls off the scooter and bloodies her knee. Yet adult readers do not seem concerned about the possibility of these elements distressing child readers. Donaldson and Scheffler are popular enough to be safe.

What lies beneath

If the safety of Donaldson and Scheffler deflects attention from elements like the ones I have just mentioned, elements that would be quite likely to elicit negative responses from at least some adults if present in less widely known books, then what else might the best-selling status of these best-selling picturebooks be hiding? What other secrets does the popularity of my twelve best-sellers deflect attention from? They clearly need a closer and more consciously critical reading.

That responses to these texts depend on what they seem to be inviting readers to take for granted might be made clear by my own first response to *The Story of Peppa Pig*. For a best-selling book, it struck me as being a surprisingly absurdist text. The plot seemed to move randomly amongst a number of unconnected elements—a new house, a gardening lesson, a lost toy, a wish to jump in muddy puddles—without ever settling on or developing any of them. The apparently absurdist disconnection of these elements was confirmed for me by the decidedly cubistic depictions of the characters, each of whom always appears with two eyes facing forward and a snout protruding from one side of his or her head. But then I discovered what, innocent that I am, I had not been aware of: the book I was reading related to a pre-existing series of widely popular TV cartoons. Not only would the cubistic characters be merely expectable to the many young readers already familiar with the cartoons (the series has TV audiences in many countries, and some Peppa Pig episodes on YouTube have well over three million viewers) but what seemed so bizarrely complex and disjointed to me is in fact just a series of references to the individual plots of many separate episodes of the TV series, reminders for viewers of stories they already know and would not therefore think odd at all.

More often, however, what hides the strangeness of these texts is not a lack of knowledge of a text's specific history. It is a familiarity with the conventions of children's literature more generally. As I tried to see these books with fresh eyes, I realized that everything and anything that most adults see as conventional and expectable in these and other children's books might well be unsettling if it were not so familiar.

Characters: animals as humans

Consider, to begin with, the kinds of characters the twelve books share: animals or objects who behave like human beings. Stories for children that feature animals in human situations go back as far as Aesop. They are so central to unconsidered mainstream assumptions about children's literature that, asked to make up their own story for children, most of the university students I taught over many decades made up ones about talking animals. But if we forget that history for a moment, we might become aware of just how very odd such stories are. We tend to believe that young children are egocentric readers, interpreting stories as being significantly about themselves. Why, then, not depict them as themselves, rather than tell stories about animals who act like them? Do we imagine that children already think of themselves as something like humanized animals, not quite yet the fully human beings that adults are—more like puppies or kittens than adults are? If so, should not that idea be at least a little controversial? Or alternately, do we wish to delude young readers by giving them messages about their own behaviour disguised as stories about creatures apparently unlike themselves? Might we be offering them a story about a llama who has to deal with a goat who bullies as a way of hiding the fact that we want to tell them how to deal with a human bully in their own lives? If so, ought not that attempt to deceive and mislead be at least a little controversial?

Human clothing and human tools

The general strangeness of the part-human part-animal beings in so many picturebooks is compounded by specific absurdities that result from the depiction of such characters. As I read *Llama Llama* and *Peppa Pig*, I found myself wondering about how creatures with hooves such as llamas and pigs managed to get their human clothing on and off: how would they or their equally ungulate parents handle buttons? Or how does *Pete the Cat* manage to get onto and push his skateboard? And what holds up the earpieces of the sunglasses he wears, perched below his ears? And why, if he is wearing shoes in the earlier book, *I Love My White Shoes* (Litwin & James, 1999), is he not wearing anything else? Alternately, in *Pip and Posy*, if the characters wear ordinarily human children clothes, why do they not wear shoes? And why, if both Elephant and Piggie are unclothed in *I'm a Frog*, does Elephant nevertheless wear human spectacles (again, perched below his ears)? While my own experience of humanized animal characters led me to miss these strange and unsettling details until I considered the pictures more closely, I have to wonder if they might not confuse (or intrigue) young members of the inexperienced intended audience.

Human speech, human lifestyles

In books where the animals do not wear clothes or manipulate human objects, there are other oddities. In *Dinosaurs in the Supermarket*, *Superworm*, and *Room on the Broom*,

the animals communicate with each other in what is presented as English, and in *The Snail and the Whale*, the snail communicates with humans in written English words. Where did it learn to write? The letter-writing crayons in *The Day the Crayons Quit* raise a similar question and there are also questions about the crayons' lifestyle, as there are about the construction machines in *Goodnight, Goodnight*. If these creatures are human enough to have human emotions, then what are we to make of their almost complete absence of a life outside their jobs? The crayons and trucks appear to have no families, no homes outside their workplace, no hobbies, no possessions. They appear to be living out their lives as something like slaves. Is it not just a tad imperialistic and tyrannical—and controversial—that these books ask us to take their characters' lonely servitude more or less for granted?

Human registers of difference: class, gender, race

But then, of course, I am forgetting the extent to which these characters represent aspects of human existence—that they are not merely animals and objects afflicted with human consciousness, but also, allegorical representations of actual human beings. Even then, however, they tend to depict human existence in potentially controversial ways. In the books which depict animals in human clothing, the animals tend to live exclusively normative middle-class suburban lives. They live in pleasant semi-rural communities with lots of green space. They wear contemporary children's clothing— although, since half the characters in *Pip and Posy* wear trousers and half skirts, it seems safe to assume that the pants-wearers are all male. It becomes clear, in fact, that the lives of these characters are so normative as to represent the norm as an ideal. While there is a playground in *Pip and Posy*, it sits on a huge expanse of green lawn interspersed here and there with abundantly blooming garden plots, and the paths through the lawn lead right up to the doors of the houses. There appear to be no cars or roads, so that the entire neighbourhood sits inside a sort of park. In a similarly park-like world in *Peppa Pig*, the houses are completely surrounded by lawns and each sits atop its own small yet elevating hill, and the family car drives over the lush green lawns on an invisible road with no other traffic in view. In both these books, furthermore, the houses are few and far between, the world primarily a bucolic park. In environments like these, the apparent gender division comes to seem ideally normative also. The apparently always-skirted girls of *Pip and Posy* are readily identifiable as female, as, it seems, they should be. In *Peppa Pig*, similarly, Peppa and her mother's outfits have the outlines of skirts, while those of her father and brother do not. Furthermore, the one other human child beside the male human protagonist wearing a sweater and jeans in *Dinosaurs* has bare legs, suggesting there is a dress under her raincoat.

Tabby McTat, the other book that prominently features humans is a somewhat different matter. It takes place in a distinctly urban version of London, and the settings include

not just an elegant square with a gated park and the Thames Bankside with the dome of St. Paul's in the distance, but also, a bridge under which live what appears to be a group of homeless people. They are, however, almost the only ones of the many people the book depicts who are not smiling; for despite homelessness, this London is a decidedly happy place. Throughout the book, furthermore, the smiling crowds who listen to buskers and shop in outdoor markets contain people with significantly darker complexions than most of the others. Some wear burqas and other traditional Arabic garb, and the family that adopts Tabby McTat are two women who might well be a lesbian couple. Nevertheless, the couple live in a comfortable middle-class house, and they and most of the human beings depicted throughout the book have white faces—as do most of the conventionally dressed supermarket customers in *Dinosaurs*, including the protagonist, and most of the humans in *Snail and the Whale*. The impression created is that people of colour form part of the background of the lives of mainstream white people—like, presumably, most young readers? The focus on mainstream white middle-class lives as the ones that implied readers are being invited to recognize and, presumably, identify with, becomes controversial only in relation to the many young readers too poor or of other racial or ethnic backgrounds to actually see something like their own lives in the books. For them, the books are a representation of what their authors take for granted as not only normal but also desirable—the presumed utopia of a white middle-class lifestyle that implied readers are invited to identify with and that real readers can then see their own lives as acceptably like or perhaps unfortunately unlike.

The presence of characters of various races in *Tabby McTat* raises the issue of the ways in which the animal characters in books like *Pip and Posy*, *Llama Llama, I'm a Frog*, and *Pete the Cat* might be read as representing various races and ethnicities. In a real world fraught with questions of racial and ethnic tolerance and identity, the mixed groups of animals of other species that make up the cast in these books and many others are easily and often understood as representations of an ideally multicultural world. In the playground of *Pip and Posy*, a frog, a cat, a mouse, and a rabbit all play happily together. In the playground of *Llama Llama*, a llama, a kitten, a sheep, a rhinoceros, and a giraffe all play together, all happily except for the bully goat, who must then be made to reform and join the happy community. An elephant and a pig are friends in *I'm a Frog*, and Pete the Cat's friends include a frog, a squirrel, a turtle, and an owl. And while only members of Peppa's family appear in *The Story of Peppa Pig*, other books about Peppa reveals her friendships with rabbits and other animals.

If the intention of these books is to illustrate racial harmony, most of them do so in a peculiar way: by representing only one (or two, if they are siblings) of each of the species depicted. The exception is *Pip and Posy*, which includes a number of rabbits and a couple of cats amongst its children. But the other books all ignore the real reasons why multicultural societies are difficult for most of their members: the fact that some

are members of minority groups, outnumbered by a more powerful larger group, while a lot of others are not.

In books like *Peppa Pig*, and *Llama Llama*, which depict the young animals' parents, the parents are of the same species. There is, in other words, none of what used to be called miscegenation: the marriage and interbreeding of people of what are identified as different races. If Peppa's parents are both pigs and Llama's mother and, as revealed in other books in the series, father, are also llamas, then another oddity becomes apparent: the mere fact that each of the animals is identifiably of one specific species. There are no creatures in these books who are half-llama, half-goat (although I note that the main character of Donaldson and Scheffler's *Gruffalo* books is indeed such a creature—and identified therefore as being monstrous). If these books do mean to represent a multicultural society, they do so in terms of very restrictive ideas about how the cultures might relate to each other—ideas that surely ought to be controversial?

While not depicting parents, the books which describe animals without human clothing tend to follow the same one-of-each-kind pattern. Pete the Cat meets one toad, one squirrel, one turtle, and one owl. The companions the witch finds room for on her broom are one cat, one dog, one generic bird, and one frog; meanwhile, one squirrel, one owl, and one ant appear in the background. Here Donaldson and Scheffler are following a pattern established in *The Gruffalo*, which features one mouse, one fox called Fox, one owl called Owl, and one snake called Snake, the names confirming their uniqueness: a snake is not likely to be called Snake unless he is, somehow, the only snake there is. While other snails do appear in the background, *The Snail and the Whale* features one snail and one whale. *Superworm* is something of an exception, since the plot centrally involves little beings joining together to defeat a big enemy, there are a number of toads and bees and snails and centipedes; but the central characters are one worm, one crow, and one lizard. Nevertheless, there is also a sense here that smaller creatures are generally not as likely to be unique as larger ones are; and just as there are many insects here, there are also a lot of small snails in *The Snail and the Whale*. If we read these creatures as being depictions of racially marked human beings, might there be a hint of a suggestion that less visible groups of humans are less fully human than representatives of larger groups? Perhaps.

Individuality

It is possible of course, that the predominant pattern of one-animal-of-each-kind in these books might not relate to race or ethnicity at all, but be instead a matter of depicting the individuality of individual beings. It is true that the animals of *Llama Llama* share their species with the parents who come to pick them up from school, and that Peppa's parents are also pigs, but that might be mainly a matter of family resemblance, not racial purity. But while the books might be read as celebrating the uniqueness of

individual personalities, I suspect most adult readers, aware of an ongoing need to educate young readers about tolerance, would find it hard not to identify the characters' species with ideas of race and ethnicity (and in any case, if their animal characteristics represent their individuality, why are they recognizable as certain specific kinds of animals—as characteristic types?). At any rate, the fact that the same set of characters might represent either racial difference or individual uniqueness suggests how strongly their assumptions about race relate to ideas about essential difference: races are somehow as unlike as we like to believe individual people are. I find that controversial.

In the books about inanimate objects, the insistence on the uniqueness of each character might suggest a clearer relationship to questions of unique personality. Each construction truck described in *Goodnight, Goodnight* is the only one of its kind in the book, and each crayon in *The Day the Crayons Quit* is also a unique representation of its kind—although the books also make it clear that the kinds are important by insisting that these unique examples do each belong to a specific type; and their appearance together in the same crayon box or construction site does almost automatically suggest a vision of racial harmony. Furthermore, in a book in which each crayon has a different problem to complain about, there do seem to be racial overtones being slyly suggested when it turns out that the problem of the peach-coloured crayon is that it has been stripped of its wrapping and is now, it says, “naked,” thus evoking its connection to fleshiness: a subtle reminder, perhaps, that before 1962, what are now “Peach” Crayolas were called “Flesh”? If so, this text intriguingly raises the controversial issue of what colour flesh might be, and in the mere fact of implying a connection between a naked crayon and the colour peach evokes an assumption that naked flesh is most typically peach-like—what we most often identify as white.

Animals as humans: the descent in cuteness

The possibility that the crayon has a race suggests another potentially controversial aspect in relation to all of the humanized non-human characters in these books— that in making animals act like humans, we invite young readers to think of animals in unrealistically human ways—ways that might well have a negative effect on the members of their species in the real world. The constant and predominant depiction of animals acting like humans in these books might be helping to create attitudes that cause thoughtless humans to put themselves in danger in relation to real animals in the wild, in situations that inevitably end up in creating trouble for those animals that respond by acting naturally.

The depiction of animals as human has two other effects that apply equally to the depiction of humans as animals. First, the resulting creatures are strange enough to be funny. Second, they are funny enough—and apparently, therefore, harmless enough—to be what we usually call cute. As bright, simplified, colourful cartoons, most of these

books invite a response that focuses on their humour. Despite, or because of, the familiarity of such pictures, the depiction of a cat in sunglasses or a llama in a pair of overalls is incongruous enough that, even if it is conventional and familiar, it is more likely to elicit giggles than terror. In all these books, I think, the characters are figures of fun, absurd enough and silly enough in their combinations of human and other traits to have been rendered relatively harmless. A construction machine that gets sleepy and shuts its eyes is far less intimidating than a huge, powerful, real construction machine exuding gas fumes while looming above one's head. Dinosaurs are incongruous enough in a supermarket to create a slapstick situation that ignores their prehistoric savagery and the potential danger they once caused each other. Even a supposedly malevolent lizard has his malevolence undermined by the absurdity of his having a human-type hat on.

As a result, I think, the lizard in a hat or the sleepy-eyed construction truck invite the kind of response that identifies them as cute. Sianne Ngai (2005) identifies “the formal properties associated with cuteness” as “smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy”—properties displayed by many of the characters in these twelve books, sometimes in terms of the soft, simple depictions of otherwise complex organisms and objects, sometimes metaphorically, as in the implied pliancy of creatures who appear to be blind to the oddity of their looking like animals and acting like humans. Ngai suggests that, “in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle” (2005: 816). Daniel Harris (2000) agrees: “The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are” (2000: 6). Both animals who act like humans and humans who look like animals are inherently cute enough to be diminished and disempowered versions of both the humans and the animals they depict.

The desirability of powerlessness

Some of the themes of these twelve books echo either the desirability or the inevitability of vulnerability, cuteness, and disempowerment. In celebrating the ability of relatively helpless enemies to band together to defeat a more powerful enemy, as happens in *Superworm* and *Room on the Broom* and also to some extent in *Llama Llama* and *The Snail and the Whale*, these books confirm the inevitability of the smaller creature’s relative individual powerlessness. The frequent reiteration of this theme implies some adult anxiety both about the fragility of their smaller young and the ability of those frail creatures to protect themselves either individually or as a group—as if repeating that small beings can triumph by working together might somehow end up making it true. The anxious undertone of wishfulfilment is echoed in the owl’s insistence in *Pete the Cat* that one does not need magic sunglasses to get past bad

moods, one only has to “remember to look for the good in every day.” Inviting young readers to ignore what actually might upset them seems rather convenient for adults who then do not have to deal with the actual experiences that make for upset and despair. In these books generally, as the adult teacher suggests in *Llama Llama*, “being mean is not allowed”—nor are other negative actions and emotions. I am tempted to suggest an equally negative resonance in what presents itself as a celebration of creativity in *The Day the Crayons Quit*, *Dinosaurs in the Supermarket*, *Room on a Broom*, *Superworm*, and *I’m a Frog*. What saves the day in *Broom* and *Superworm* is unrealistically successful—it is not clear why a silly-looking imaginary beast scares the dragon in *Broom*, or how a spider’s web can be tough enough to fly a fairly large lizard in *Superworm*—and so there is again a whiff of anxiety; and the celebration of pretending in *I’m a Frog* is somewhat undercut by how cute and silly it makes the pretenders seem. The adults’ discovery in *Dinosaurs* that the creatures they have assumed to be imaginary are real seems to me to be a particularly anxious moment of wish-fulfilment, for it flies in the face of good sense altogether. How can there be dinosaurs in the supermarket if dinosaurs are extinct? And if these creatures are actual living dinosaurs, why are they so small and so much more harmless in their antics than their real forebears once were? Implying that something so clearly imaginary is not, is an attempt to celebrate a supposedly childlike exuberance that reveals its untenability in a way that diminishes it.

The scandal of the commonplace

Having tried to look past my sense that the books I have considered are merely conventional, I have discovered a range of ways in which they seem to be very odd indeed—ways in which they ought to be more controversial. But the fact remains: they are not in fact, seen as controversial. I have to ask why. The best answer to that question that I can think of is that they represent what we do in fact usually take for granted, both about what children’s literature is and ought to be and what child readers are and ought to be. They do not unsettle because they show us what we already take to be true—what we view as merely ordinary, merely conventional. They express mainstream ideologies so widespread that most people agree to them without even being aware of having made the choice of doing so. They seem incontrovertible—anything but alarming. Indeed, that lack of alarm might be the most significant response that the books and the discourse about popularity surrounding them engender. Like much of what ideological mechanisms hide from our conscious awareness, what we most take for granted about these books might actually be unsettling enough for us to have good reasons for preferring to be unaware of it. As I have shown, it might well be scandalous. Its insistence on middle-class utopias and childlike animals might represent a response to, and a deliberate refusal to engage honestly with, the less savoury aspects both of children and of the world they live in. As

Jacqueline Rose (1984) suggested some decades ago in *The Case of Peter Pan*, and as I explore in some detail in my book *The Hidden Adult* (Nodelman, 2008), the cheery world of texts like these might represent ways in which we are unwilling to be honest with children about the true complexity and difficulty of the world we are asking them to share with us. It might represent our need for them to believe that the world we have invited them into is a better place and they themselves more able to bear it than we might fear is actually the case. In any case, the scandal hidden in the conventional might open a doorway to understanding how very much our perceptions of the surprising or inappropriate in less conventional books relate to our unconsidered ideas about what is ordinary and acceptable—ideas that are based in convention and therefore might well be changed. Working toward making more adults—and more children—aware of the strangeness of the books we tend to take for granted might well allow us all to be more accepting of the less conventional books we more easily find so strange.

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