Picturebooks: Children's Mental Health Misrepresentations

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The topic of children's mental health has been avoided for centuries, because of the deep-rooted beliefs about children's purity and innocence. Philosopher John Locke advocated that children were born a 'blank slate' that needed to be carefully imprinted upon through their education (*Understanding Childhood* 82). Jean-Jacques Rousseau expanded upon this idea by stating that children are, "(n)aive and yet unworldly, [and] the child was, in Rousseau's view, susceptible to the corruptions that emanate from the social world" (Rousseau qtd. in James and James 68). Presently, the innocent-child perspective encourages the assumption that children cannot suffer from anxiety and depression. Consequently, open discussions with children about mental health are frowned upon, as these conversations could 'ruin children's innocence'. It is only natural for this ingrained belief to extend into present-day children's literature. Through personally conducting a case study on nine mental health-promoting picturebooks, three levels of emotional distance can be identified from the child reader. This disconnection reinstills the romantic-child belief that children are incapable of having

mental illnesses. My picturebook case study argues that representing mental illness as an outside being offers the least emotional distance. This divide is furthered through representing emotions as objects. Overall, the most abstract form is emotional representation through colour. I contend that some picturebook creators, who objectify or personify emotions, are both promoting mental health awareness and informing the younger generation about coping strategies. On the other hand, I will also argue that the romantic child belief is still entrenched within these books, and the use of abstract language instead of explicit language often hinders children's 'real world' application.

Emotional Distance through an Outside Being Representative

Within my case study, the most immediate form of emotional distance when representing mental health are picturebooks that depict an outside being as a representative of emotion. Eva Eland's *When Sadness is at Your Door* (hereafter called *Sadness)* portrays a blue presence to embody the child's personal sadness. This blue character provides an outside identity for the child character, and 'protects' the child reader through providing emotional detachment by externalizing the emotion. *Sadness* should be commended for the interwoven display of practical coping mechanisms. The child character leads their sadness into activities like walking, drawing, and is

even encouraged to talk with their sadness. Eland succeeds in teaching the reader to 'guide' their emotions, and this empowers children to pursue autonomy within their mental health. In relation to this, in his book *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, David Lewis discusses how picturebook theory can infer meaning as face, use, or as custom. Lewis states "[w]e do not have to think about it ...We simply read off it's meaning in the act of recognition" (Lewis 127). This indicates that meaning can be subjective, and more specifically that adults and children may see the character of 'Sadness' differently. A child may understand Sadness to be as real as any other fictional character, whereas an adult may more clearly see Eland's authorial intention. Instead of understanding that Sadness is an extension of the protagonist, the child reader may misunderstand the initial disconnection of the two. Consequently, the child reader may disconnect themself in the same way that the book detaches Sadness and the main character. Furthermore, in analyzing the text's illustrations, we see Sadness enact the action of crying. Alternatively, the child character never cries which further separates Sadness from the protagonist. The author further confuses the concept as the child is illustrated to be 'consumed' by Sadness. Eland states, "[s]ometimes it feels like you have become sadness yourself" (Eland 9). To 'become sadness yourself' enacts the most intense form of sadness, and

within adult language we would address this as depression. Eland slips into the romantic child idealism, as the picturebook uses the word 'sadness' as a blanketed term for 'depression', and as a result creates emotional distance between the emotion and the child.

In *The Color Thief,* Polly Peters, Andrew Fusek Peters, and illustrator Karin Littlewood, explore the effects that a parent struggling with depression may pose upon their child. The book not only brings awareness to parental depression, but informs the child reader that healing takes time. On the other hand, *The Color Thief* furthers the stigma that depression is an adult issue, and consequently remains in accordance with the 'romantic child' ideal. Eland's *Sadness* better addresses the child's individual 'sadness', whereas *The Color Thief* places the child reader at an even further emotional distance. The protective nature of the book manifests itself through the father character taking on depression, and the child's emotions being viewed as inconsequential. Additionally, similar to *Sadness*, depression is protected through the use of abstract descriptions. This is highlighted within the author's personification of the outside world, "Soon everyday became a sad day for dad. He only saw the sun sulking, the clouds frowning, rain crying…outside the trees stood silently shaking their heads" (Peters and Peters 5). An adult reader would understand that the father's depression is

linked to pessimism, but the use of personification may confuse the child reader even further. The use of abstract language within *The Color Thief* highlights the protective nature of the ingrained 'romantic child' belief.

As well, *The Color Thief* fails to provide children with enough clarity of what depression is, and how to cope with others' and one's own. One may argue that the father is exemplifying positive self-preservation tactics for the child by attending therapy, and talking to a professional about his condition. On the other hand, the child is left to deal with their own feelings, and is placed in the 'caregiver role', "I gave him hugs…he put them in a box", "I made a cup of tea for him, and he said it tasted good…I asked Dad if he wanted to go for a little walk. He said yes and I held his hand" (Peters and Peters 12). Even though it is important for children to learn sympathy, they should not be held responsible for their parents' coping mechanisms. The child in the story states "I felt lonely. There was a heavy feeling inside me and I missed my dad…"(Peters and Peters 14). Unfortunately, the book never gives a tangible way for the child to cope with their own feelings of loneliness and sadness. Instead, the child is emotionally abandoned, and left to constantly wrestle with the father's cause for depression: "I thought I had done something wrong, but he reassured me that I hadn't" (Peters and Peters 8). The authorial choice, of creating

the father's depression to be ambiguous, leaves the child with a feeling of responsibility for the father's mental illness. Ironically, the child adopts the expectation to play the 'caregiver role', but is perceived to be too innocent to address his own feelings.

The Color Thief rejects fragmentation within postmodernity, as the text "ties the unanswered ends" of the father and child relationship (Lewis 89). Most noticeably, Peters and Peters end the book with "[m]y dad was back. He smiled and the colors were bright all around us" (Peters and Peters 22). It is crucial for children to understand that depression does not simply 'vanish' when colours become 'bright' for a time. Furthermore, the phrase 'my dad was back' assumes that the father was not present when his actions communicated his depression. Conversely, in attempting to simplify the father's lack of emotional 'presence', it may confuse the reader to think that any sense of emotional distance means 'disappearance'. *The Color Thief* fixates on educating children about parental depression by encouraging them to be caregivers, but the text fails to provide children with coping mechanisms for their own mental health.

Picturebook writers and illustrators use animals as symbolic human voices to 'protect' children. Around 600 BCE, animal fables were employed as concealed messages for hidden

protests (Samuelson). Today, animals are still used within literary coded communication but are utilized as children's emotional protection barriers. Cori Doerrfeld's *The Rabbit Listened* presents the demolition of a child's building block project and the animals who attempt to comfort him. The child's sadness is felt by himself, which brings awareness and importance to children's feelings. Alternatively, every animal also represents human behavior, but most are illustrative of insensitivity, and they consequently 'make the situation worse'. Through this unwanted animal behaviour, young readers are supposed to identify that the Rabbit's listening is the best way to address an emotional situation. In addition, child readers are expected to apply these strategies when they feel upset, or to support another distressed individual. The story provides practical applications, but potentially veils the Rabbit's positive actions from the child reader by using animal representation.

Similarly, Dr. Suess' *My Many Colored Days* uses the same animal characterization, but additionally displays emotions through colours,"Then come my black days. Mad. And loud. I howl. I growl at every cloud" (Suess 23). Suess' concept of choosing animals to represent emotions is flawed because animals can experience all emotions. While using animal representation is interesting from a literary point of view, Suess never gives any practical applications for children to live by in

dealing with these different emotions. In both Seuss' and Doerrfeld's texts, if the child viewer is not pursuing the concealed meaning, it is difficult to decode the intended animal representation. In choosing an animal to act as a human, the child reader is placed at a further distance from the emotionality they are learning. The choice of characterizing an animal representative, in an effort to protect, may cause the intended meaning to be lost to the young reader altogether.

Emotional Distance through Emotions' Objectification

By using objects to symbolize depression, the representation of children's emotions is even more removed from the reader. Objects have no 'life' within them, and are even less comparable to children's mental health than an 'outside being'. In *Whimsy's Heavy Things*, Julia Kraulis voices depression through circular, heavy objects. Whimsy attempts to hide and relocate these 'burdens', but they ultimately make their way back into her life. She learns that she must 'break down' each object, and create something beautiful in order to be 'free'. Additionally, the coping strategy of 'breaking down complex emotions' is also very abstract and not tangible enough for children to implement. For example, *Whimsy's Heavy Things* finishes with the words "[a]nd she (Whimsy) kept the pieces of the last heavy thing as a reminder not to get weighed down by

heavy things. Because Whimsy discovered that heavy things are just light things in disguise" (Kraulis 18). Here children's emotions are overtly simplified, showing the belief that children's feelings are not as complex as adults' feelings and thus is another example of the romantic child belief. The story simplifies the emotions of the child in a demeaning manner. If children are told that the core of their depression is a simple fix, we are reinstilling the idea that children are not susceptible to having mental health disorders. In an attempt to conceptualize children's depression, objects only push the child reader further from mental health education.

Emotional Distance through use of Colour

The most abstract concept is to constitute children's emotions as a colour. Inadvertently, each book within the case study followed this notion. All of the texts identified sadness and depression to follow the same blue, grey, and black colour scheme, and in some cases, colour may take away from any straightforward interpretation. *The Color Thief* follows this palette through illustrations, but dually expresses these ideas through imagery. Authorial intent is evident through the contrasting phrases: "My dad's life was full of color" and "[h]e said all the colors were gone. Someone had stolen them away; just taken them one by one" (Peters and Peters 2-7). Similarly,

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan follows the same contrasting theme; that what seems grey and black coloured can be made 'vibrant' and colourful again "... suddenly there it is right in front of you bright and vivid quietly waiting" (Tan 28). Tan's text echoes the idea that children's emotions are not complex and can be suddenly fixed. *The Red Tree* is abstract in it's use of illustrations and verbiage, which potentially deters his intended meaning. Tied to this, Suess states in *My Many Colored Days,* "On Bright Red Days how good it feels to kick my heels" (Suess 6). The illustration depicts a smiling red horse in a green background which confuses the phrase even further. Furthermore, Lewis addresses that "…the ways in which readers and viewers use the illustrations substantially affects how they understand them and what they are doing" (Lewis 132). This corresponds with Suess' use of colour, as a child may misinterpret the author's intended use of colour. Even though colour is widely used in picturebooks to convey emotion, it detaches and confuses the child reader even further.

The personification and objectification of children's emotions is progressing children's mental health awareness, but this method tends to confuse children and take away from the potential education aspect. The embodiment of a child's emotion through an outside entity still discredits the child from their personal feelings. Not only is young peoples' mental health

belittled in comparison to an adult, but the intention to protect the child reader may induce misunderstood meaning. The symbolization of children's depression, through the use of objects, takes away the 'living' representation and demeans the child's complex emotions. Finally, colour is the furthest portrayal of children's emotions, and consequently disconnects and muddles understanding for a young reader. Instead of fixating on comparing children's mental health to another being, object, or colour, our society should support and allow young individuals to write their own stories.

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