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Families and Social Roles in Queer Children's Literature

Queer literature has been around since antiquity, providing insight into the nature of homosexual relationships and their meaning. It is a broad field that both shapes and is shaped by the mainstream culture in which it exists. This research paper lies within the subgenre of queer children's literature whose audience is much younger than for whom most of the broader genre's stories are written. There is still much debate about what should be shared about homosexuality with people in this age range.

Queer children's literature is therefore, still radical in many parts of North America. For example, one story in the analysis of this paper, King & King was the subject of a lawsuit against a Massachusetts public school administration in 2005. Books in this subgenre are aimed at children ages 6 to 12 years old, ranging from about 1st to 5th grade. They are illustrated, written, and published in a professional manner; without careful reading, a person may miss their queer content.

It is important to note the context in which the stories in the analysis exist. The first commercially available queer children's book, Jenny lives with Eric and Martin by Susanne Bosche, was first translated from Dutch into the English-language in 1981. Since then only a couple of titles have been published, predominately by small, specialty presses. These titles include Heather Has Two Mommies in 1989 and Daddy's Roommate in 1991. It is thus, an interesting time in queer children's literature. The last decade has

seen the number of works published more than double, signaling their wider acceptance in North American society.

Each new story brings with it a unique message. Many of the stories are true and do not intend to espouse any ideological movement but rather simply express the lives of their authors. However, there are themes which run parallel among the plots of these stories. I argue in specific, that contemporary queer children's literature depicts queer characters as seeking the same life outcomes that their heteronormative counterparts do, especially in terms of forming their own families and to taking on meaningful roles in society.

It will be necessary to first explore what it means to have a heteronormative family in North America before being able to make a comparison. A traditional heteronormative family has been nuclear, which has been defined to include two heterosexual parents and their children. This type of household has been single-earner and work has been divided according to gender roles. In the past few decades however, this has changed.

Today, there is no "typical" family form (Lamanna & Riedmann, 18). There are many childless couples, single-parents, cohabitations and extended family members living together. It is no longer possible to say the "traditional" family is common. The US Census Bureau elaborates that in recent years approximately 23% percent of households are still traditional (nuclear), while about 29% percent of households are married and without children, and nearly 9% percent of households are single-parent headed (Lamanna & Riedmann, 5). Family researchers Lamanna & Riedmann go on to state however, that when children are present, "two married parents are the norm." (p. 15)

Marriage is still, in fact, a major life-decision that is very important to the majority of North Americans. It usually involves selecting someone with whom to become emotionally and sexually intimate and, often, with whom to raise children according to Lamanna & Riedmann (p. 208). Although many North Americans will marry in their lifetimes, divorce and economic concerns have recently contributed to a propagation of non-nuclear family structures. These new structures have become a sign of changing social roles for members both inside and outside the family.

Social roles were traditionally divided along gender norms as previously discussed. However, since the women's rights movement in the 1960's women are expected to find employment outside the home and most families are now dual-earners. Employment is thus a necessity that precipitates taking on some form of social roles for most people in contemporary North America. Now, that we have defined the average North American family, let's analyze the stories.

The first children's tale to consider is In Our Mother's House by Patricia Polacco. Polacco tells the story of a lesbian couple Marmee and Meema who live in Berkeley, California and their efforts to form a family. The premise of the story is that the couple lives in a sort of union, probably civil, and is monogamous and committed. The narrator eventually explains upon their passing, "Will, Millie and I place them together in a green hillside overlooking the bay very near the place where they pledged their love to each other so many years ago." (Polacco, 25). The reader thus infers that the couple made a formal commitment before the story began. As previously discussed, this is similar to heterosexual couples that predominately marry or cohabit before having children. In this

way, the foundation for later parenting in the story was the same as in heteronormative families.

Marmee, who is a paramedic, and Meema, who is a pediatrician, then begin to adopt children in the story. The adoptees include Will, Millie and the narrator. These children grow up in a household where cooking, chores and childcare are shared tasks between the partners. In this household both mothers pursue professional careers and, despite inherent time considerations, they make an effort to bring the whole family together including dancing, going out on Halloween, playing with puppies, and even building a tree-house named the “Thistle House”.

Marmee and Meema also try to strengthen their relationships with their extended family and the local community. The children grow up and eventually move out of their mother’s home and begin their own careers as an engineer, physician and fashion designer. They also begin their own families with whom they share the traditions learned growing up with Marmee and Meema. It is clear that each partner in this story shared a desire to form a family and this was even passed onto their children. This provides evidence that the family desired similar life outcomes to the average heterosexual family in North America.

Each partner in this story also valued giving back to society. The lady’s professions were both in public service, specifically in medical care; but, they also donated their time and energy when there was no monetary incentive. For example, the family participated in the Woolsey Street block party and made a miniature golf course for other children to enjoy. The couple also demonstrated their awareness of their desire to improve society by adopting international children which, as was recounted, very difficult. They gave these

diverse children their love and support, although it presented additional challenges. In this way, the partners both desired life outcomes similar to heterosexual families in their society.

The second story And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell is rather different from the first. It is the anthropomorphic tale of two gay penguins that live in Central Park Zoo in New York City. The story begins when two adolescent penguins, named Roy and Silo, begin to notice each other during adolescence. They begin to spend more time together bowing, walking, singing and swimming like other heterosexual couples do at this age. In time however, Roy and Silo build a nest together and their keeper, Mr. Gramzay thinks they are in love. The couple tries to have a baby penguin but can't, so Mr. Gramzay inserts an egg into their nest. Together, the couple eventually gives birth to Tango. The public comes to see their penguin family and interpret them to be a heterosexual penguin family as they can not discern that Roy and Silo are both males.

This story is an allegory of the challenges gay couples face in forming a family. Roy and Silo represent humans in their desire to commit and become intimate with each other. Penguins usually do this by building nests and producing an egg which the couple takes turn sitting upon; with the help of Mr. Gramzay this becomes possible. They then hatch a baby penguin and take care of it together for a limited period of time. This is what Roy and Silo, and in allegory it represents their desire to form a family. This provides further evidence for the thesis that they desire the same life outcomes that their heterosexual penguin counterparts do.

The third story, King & King by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland is a fairy tale about a prince whose mother wants him to marry in order to retire from running the kingdom.

The problem is that the prince does not like princesses. He accepts that he must take on his social role as a king, but also expresses that he wants to form his own family. The queen is annoyed and calls in princesses anyway from Austria, Texas, Greenland and Mumbai. Each one tries to impress the prince but he only has eyes for the brother of Princess Madeleine. Prince Lee and our prince rapidly fall in love and marry, and then the queen retires.

This royal story does not much differ from a non-queer version. The prince understands his duty to the kingdom but has difficulty finding a suitable suitor. What is unique about this story is how the queen reluctantly and indirectly supports his desire to marry another prince. She accepts his choice of Prince Lee for example, and turns over the kingdom to the couple. This story demonstrates both the prince and his families desire for him to form a family and take on his royal role.

The fourth story, Donovan's Big Day by Leslea Newman is surprisingly, not about Donovan. It is about his mothers' wedding and the many preparations that their children and extended family make for them. To this end, the narrative follows Donovan from time his Grandpa wakes him up, until he departs with Aunt Jennifer's wedding rings in Uncle Gregory's car. Later, both extended families watch Donovan walk down the aisle after his cousin Sienna to the altar, where he presents his Mommy and Mama with their rings. This completes the ceremony and both ladies are wed in front of their kin.

Gay marriage became legal in North America in the last decade. Thus, the topic of this story, which is the marriage of Donovan's parents, is rather novel. It is evident that both parents are committed to raising Donovan as are their extended family to their goal of marriage. Each partner thus seeks to form a family through marriage.

In conclusion, these stories explore how queer protagonists express their values including to have a family and to take on social roles similar to those of their heteronormative counterparts in North America. Each story included the additional challenges that queer families faced in reaching their desired life outcomes. However, they also highlighted how they are as equally meaningful to the characters as to heterosexual families in the contemporary age. This laid bare the author's cumulative argument that both queer and straight orientations actually share these common values.

How will this affect the greater North American society? It will hopefully foment acknowledgment that queer children and their families have important roles to play in society the same as heteronormative families do. The existence of these many new queer children's books may lead us to consider that with reduced censure, social rebuke against homosexuality is likely on the decline. This openness to new dialogues about queer equality will hopefully enlighten the next generation of children reading within this subgenre.

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