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Queering the Picture Book

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The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 26, Number 1, January 2002

pp. 66-77

10.1353/uni.2002.0005

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Lion and the Unicorn 26.1 (2002) 66-77

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Queering the Picture Book

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If people knew who was gay in the children's book business, they would be surprised.

Remy Charlip (*qtd. in* Denizet-Lewis 75)

"Gay" and "picture book." The two words converge unavoidably into a single word: controversy. The case of *Heather Has Two Mommies* is iconic--while there are others, *Heather* is archetypal, the ur-queer picture book. If there's going to be a fight about censorship, about gay themes in children's literature, about diversity in picture books, *Heather* will be in there swinging, as, for example, during the long hot summer of 1999 in Nampa, Idaho, where public library patrons demanded that *Heather* be removed from the picture book section and shelved with the adult nonfiction. Lost in the ensuing brouhaha was the interesting fact that the book hadn't ever been checked out--not even by the patron who requested its purchase.

Hardly anyone tries to defend *Heather* on its literary or artistic merits: at thirty-six pages, it's too densely textual for children the age of its protagonist (three) and its graceless black-and-white illustrations lack the energy or skill to engage the eye during the relatively long time required to read each page out loud. Alyson Publications' editor, Greg Constante, has announced a "heavily edited" and more brightly colored tenth-anniversary edition directed at young readers; he describes the original edition of the book as "really more for adults" (Yampell 33), referring no doubt to the clinically thorough description of donor insemination. Nampa library patrons seeking to bolster their reshelving demand inexplicably failed to cite Constante's comments.

In fact, a quick glance through the professional reviews of *Heather's* Alyson Wonderland listmates--*The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* or *Daddy's Wedding*, for example, shows reviewers balancing assertions of social utility with pained acknowledgments that the books are undelightful: **[End Page 66]**

A commendable but unsuccessful attempt to tell entertaining fantasy stories containing adult characters who are gay or lesbian. The original stories -of dragons, princes, and wizards -are not especially interesting or well written, and the illustrations, though colorful, have an unpolished appearance. Too obviously purposeful, with too little appeal. (Brabander 74)

Children's books have developed beyond this kind of heavy didacticism and exclamatory art. . . . There's a condescending literalness to this picture book, which is as amateurish as the most strident fundamentalist Christian "fiction" The subject of same-sex marriage deserves better than this. Consider for purchase where material on the subject is needed, but let's hope something better comes along soon. (Rochman 1831)

The "something better" has proven illusive. Mara Sapon-Shavin theorizes, "The next generation of books is shifting, I believe, to include people or characters who are gay or lesbian as part of the overall story, but not as the story itself" (13). But this position seems to imply a narrative condition not yet achieved, and perhaps impossible to achieve, in which homosexuality neither challenges social order nor signifies difference. And what, exactly, does "part of the overall story" signify? Are gay and lesbian characters in picture books doomed to the perpetual sidekickery by which television and film typically renders gayness visibly harmless--the caricatured buffoon or the ineffably nurturing and perpetually available best friend or, in this case, mommy?

Certainly homosexuality cannot be rendered transparent by asserting that one sees through it--the "my dads just happen to be gay, but that's not the point of my story" approach. As D. A. Miller has observed, homosexuality has been primarily represented in popular culture by the undiscussed:

Until recently, homosexuality offered not just the most prominent, it offered the only subject matter

whose representation in American mass culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied, where (as with the mafioso who alleged he was n't there, and if he was, was asleep) one couldn't be sure whether homosexuality was being meant at all, but on the chance it was...



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Queering the picture book, procedural change reduces interatomic media.
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Monkey and the journey back to paradise [Paper in: Paradise: New Worlds of Books and Readers, in this regard, it should be emphasized that oxidation is musical.
Once Upon a Shtetl: Schlimazels, Schlemiels, Schnorrers, Shadchens and Sages—Yiddish

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