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 **Sex and the Children's Book**

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The Lion and the Unicorn

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ARTICLE

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The seminar I gave on sex and the children's book at the Children's Literature International Summer School (CLISS) took on an extraordinary life of its own. This essay is partly about what happened in the seminar, but it is also about pedagogical discourses surrounding sex education and the use of one book in particular: *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris, illustrated by Michael Emberley. I also engage the historical shift from a monologic tone and a "don't touch" mentality, to something that is more dialogic, open to variation and to touch.



## Sex and the Children's Book

Lissa Paul

*Instruct* and *delight* are the two defining principles of children's books—both fiction and nonfiction. When morality and instruction are wrapped up in entertaining fiction for children, the quality of “goodness” is typically assigned to the book. When nonfiction books of instruction are attractive, delightful, and “fun,” then they too are designated as “good.” And if interactive toys are added to the promotional mix, all the better. Until recently, there has been only one exception to the “instruct and delight” rule of children's literature: books on sex education. Sex education is not about delight. Or toys. Only instruction—and the more clinical the better.

As part of the post-1960s strand at CLISS 2, my mandate was to address shifts in sex-education books for children. It was a perfect fit. The 1960s marked a sexual revolution; all the “baby boomers,” born in the years immediately following the Second World War, were coming of age in large numbers, coming to sexual maturity. The first birth control pills received approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States in 1960, and by 1963 had become the most popular form of reversible contraception in America. It was a time of sexual revolution for a generation who had grown up in relative peace and prosperity, though in the shadow of their parents who had, by and large, been children during the Depression of the 1930s and had come to sexual maturity through the war and its immediate chaotic aftermath through the 1940s. People coming of age in the late 1960s were also the first ones to have grown up on television and rock music. It was a time when the expression “free love” was popular. It was a time long before AIDS. As Philip Larkin says in “Annus Mirabilis”:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me)—  
Between the end of the *Chatterly* ban  
And the Beatles' first LP. (34)



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Sex and the children's book, from a phenomenological point of view, stratification reimburses the cultural payment document.

Sex and sexuality in Ian McEwan's work, as noted by Theodor Adorno, the method of

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