

A Literary Analysis of Post #MeToo Anglophone Children's Literature

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Abstract

The present research aims to explore #MeToo themes in Anglophone children's literature published in post-#MeToo era. The selected case studies, intended for children aged three to nine, include *My Shadow Is Pink* by Scott Stuart, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* by Rhonda Leet, and *What Are Little Girls Made of?* by Jeanne Willis. Through a #MeToo lens and drawing on feminist theories of gender, these case studies were closely examined. The #MeToo themes emerged from this literary analysis include queer mirroring and gender performativity, gender norms related to household chores, emotions, and clothing; consent, (gendered) fear, and power relations. A literary analysis of the textual and visual elements of these case studies reveals that by attributing agency to children and empowering them to exercise choice and independence, they can develop political consciousness, assert their personhood, challenge and reshape societal scripts surrounding gender, and become the heroes of their own narratives. Far from seeing children as passive recipients of adult instructions, this project – and the chosen case studies – show that children can enact their own unique forms of personal and even political agency and consciousness. This research highlights the transformative potential of children's literature, both for children and adults, when viewed through a #MeToo lens.

Keywords

#MeToo movement, children's literature, gender performativity, agency attribution, feminist empowerment

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Authors declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author.

This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University.

All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

Growing up, every bookshelf known to me was full of storybooks with dominant male characters, who appeared as emotionless heroes, knights, problem solvers, and decision makers, while female characters were almost always peripheral, passive characters, being portrayed as weak, unwaveringly nice, and vanilla. In adulthood, every time I experienced sexual assault, among many feelings that a person in such situations has, I was always also angry about the representation of male and female genders in those books, blaming them, and thinking there must be a connection between those literary representations and gender inequality or violence in the course of everyday life.

The current project started as a curiosity about the possible shifts in English children's literature aimed at young readers in the post-#MeToo era. I chose #MeToo as the guiding element of my research due to the fact that, as a cultural phenomenon that marks a particular period of time, namely 2017 onwards, #MeToo is arguably one of the most powerful examples of everyday activism in recent women's movements that shed light on the widespread issue of sexual harassment, assault, and violence directed towards women and minoritized individuals (Williams, Singh, and Mezey 2019).

Built upon the activist Tarana Burke's dedication to supporting Black girls and crafted with the intention of shedding light on the shared struggles of survivors of sexual violence, "Me Too" was first used in 2006 (Wanzo and Stabile 2022). Later, in 2017, the phrase was used in the form of a hashtag (#MeToo) by people who shared their stories of sexual assault on Twitter and other digital platforms (Wanzo and Stabile 2022). Either in its coinage as a support campaign for sexually-abused black women or its later viral form in Twitter and other digital platforms, and with all its complexities, the #MeToo movement has had transformational influences in many areas (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020). To this day, it has remained inherently an awareness raising movement against sexual abuse and harassment and of women's rights and gender inequality and violence (Dey and Mendes 2022). The hashtag #MeToo has become a symbol of empowerment for victims who previously felt isolated, doubted, or hopeless in seeking justice. By sharing their experiences on social media, individuals have found a simple and accessible

way to raise their voices about issues that have historically been suppressed in public spaces (Williams, Singh, and Mezey 2019). In its first year alone, the hashtag #MeToo was tweeted 19 million times on Twitter, spanning over 46 languages (M. Anderson and Toor 2018).

According to Tarana Burke, the movement's founder in 2006, the second phase of the movement has focused on collecting stories of healing in order to share the ways in which individuals cope with trauma and develop healing practices (LaMotte 2017). Making a space for marginalized voices in the public story of gender, violence, and power, therefore, is a key #MeToo theme.

#MeToo literature refers to the body of literature on narratives from victims of rape and sexual harassment.

While some parents express concerns about how sensitive and taboo topics may impact young adults and children if referenced or represented in children's literature, it is crucial to recognize that these groups are actually at the highest risk of experiencing sexual assault. Introducing and discussing topics of sexual violence, trauma, and healing through books provides a safe and age-appropriate approach to giving young people the vocabulary and understandings of their own experiences, in order to ultimately empower them with agency. Books create a secure space for readers to realize that they are not alone in their experiences. Moreover, reading literature that addresses these topics allows for connections to be made between young readers and adults, offering avenues towards healing and accessing support (Karshner 2023).

The value and importance of children's literature was highlighted by feminist scholars and theorists long before #MeToo. In fact, the need to study and evaluate children's literature, especially in terms of gender representation and portrayals of women was a concern raised by the second-wave feminists of the 1970s (Stephens 2006). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that cultural ideals of gender and the production of culture, as well as the social status of women, are connected, and manifested in various products, including children's books. The rationale for this emphasis was that these representations have long-lasting impacts on how children perceive their gender and sexual identities, and shapes their personality traits and their futures, since gender identity is formed by the environment around us and children's literature is part of that environment. Grosz (1994) argues that social inscriptions around body, which are embedded in children's literature among other products around us, create an "outside-in" effect, resulting in specific mental or psychological inner experiences.

Although there is no shortage of research on gender and sexuality portrayals in children's

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literature, the body of scholarship around #MeToo children's literature is scarce. This project aims to bridge this gap by taking a #MeToo lens in conducting a literary analysis of three English children's books published for young readers aged three to nine in the post #MeToo era, i.e., 2017 onwards. This thesis will analyze three case studies, namely *My Shadow Is Pink* by Stuart Scott, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* by Rhonda Leet, and *What Are Little Girls Made of?* by Jeanne Willis. Focused on the storyline, the lifestyle of and the relationship between characters, and the textual and visual elements used in each book in order to explore sensitive #MeToo themes (such as gender identity, consent, political agency), this research sheds light on how #MeToo children's literature can counter stereotypical notions of gender and propose creative ways of empowering young children. More specifically, I will answer the questions of how post-#MeToo children's literature functions, and what are the ways in which a topic as adult as #MeToo can be introduced to young children in supportive, generative, and necessary ways. My aim is to shed light on the ways in which these texts contribute to creating new space for marginalized voices and identities, and provide a nuanced understanding of how and in what ways children can be empowered to rewrite gender norms, be empowered and empower others, as well as reshape the world that is imagined for them. Far from seeing children as passive recipients of adult instructions, this project – and my chosen case studies – explores how children can enact their own unique forms of personal and even political agency and consciousness. It is noteworthy to mention that the rationale behind calling these books as #MeToo children's literature is that #MeToo is invisibly materialized in them. I acknowledge that there are no explicit categorization of #MeToo genre in children's literature. However, since #MeToo provides literary tools, i.e., themes to work on with in literary analysis of these books, they are referred to as #MeToo children's literature. Moreover, given that as the result of #MeToo, the publication industry has published more feminist books, these stories, all being published after 2017 can be considered as #MeToo texts. This project aims to shed light on what #MeToo has brought to the literary texts produced for young children.

Children's books play with stereotypes, and perhaps that is why they have such potential to act as pieces of propaganda, because they are not complicated; they are simple lighthearted texts and illustrations of a childlike world. Yet, whatever image of the world they portray to us draws on ideas that are already normalized, and that we do not question as a matter of course. I am interested in exploring the images and narratives that these books present about gender, relations

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of power and gender equality, arguing that if we start to read these texts closely and critically, we can begin to see how seemingly simple portrayals of happy families or kids in children's stories may be problematic, in that they may feed into a mainstream, white and gender-normative hegemonic notion of a happy family or a happy child.

I argue that it is essentially important to see how habits of culture are reflected in these books, given that if there is a change in the culture around gender, it can be traced in these books. More specifically, this project shows how children can get role modelled to make their own choices in relation to gender, rather than always doing what the adults tell them. For example, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* features a little girl who chooses her outfits and hairstyles, engages in activities she enjoys such as fishing, hockey, and fixing engines, and protests hegemonic power structures in public. Meanwhile, *What Are Little Girls Made of?* depicts little girls who are in control of their bodies, refuse to be harassed, and continue to thrive despite the presence of monsters and beasts around them. The significance of these depictions and examples lies in the exercise of choice and independent action. Specifically, attributing agency to children, evident in my case studies, is a critical and political act that empowers children to take an active role in shaping their lives, making decisions that affect their experiences, and cultivating a political consciousness.

In the following paragraph, a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the dissertation is provided. This synopsis aims to provide readers with an overview of the key themes, arguments, and contributions of each chapter, offering an understanding of the project's journey, and the structure of the dissertation.

The first chapter of this research is a review of the literature on the #MeToo movement, children's literature, and the value of studying children's literature, as well as feminist theories of gender. Chapter three includes an analysis of the first case study, *My Shadow Is Pink* by Stuart Scott, exploring themes of queer mirroring and gender performativity, and discussing their significance in showcasing non-toxic masculinity and creating a space for marginalised voices in the public story of gender in the post-#MeToo era. In chapter four, a literary analysis of *Franny's father Is a feminist* by Rhonda Leet is presented, discussing themes of gender norms related to household chores, emotions, agency, and resistance, in relation to #MeToo principals of gender equality, (gendered) resistance and political agency. Then, in chapter five, *What Are Little Girls Made of?* by Jeanne Willis is read through the lens of #MeToo themes of consent, gender and

monstrosity, and power relations. Lastly, chapter six concludes the research project.

Literature Review

The current project aims to explore #MeToo children's literature through textual and visual readings of three case studies, namely *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* by Rhonda Leet, *My Shadow Is Pink* by Scott Stuart, and *What Are Little Girls Made of?* by Jeanne Willis. I will shed light on how these books are in dialogue with their wider cultural contexts as the products and reflections of them. More specifically, I will explore #MeToo themes of queer and gender performativity, gendered division of chores, (gendered) emotions, agency, resistance, consent, and power relations as lens to closely read my case studies.

But before starting to understand and answer these questions, we have to understand the background of the key issues and questions underpinning #MeToo children's literature, and feminist theories of gender identity. In this chapter, the specific areas of knowledge that are the foundation of my research questions are presented. The different realms in which children's literature operates will also be indicated.

Undoubtedly, there is value in understanding and reading children's literature through a #MeToo lens. If we read children's literature through the themes or topics that are usually considered too taboo, sexualized, or sensitive for children, such as gender roles, sexual violence, being a political being, or where we do not associate children with agency and personhood to allow them to be capable of understanding and engaging with these themes on their own terms, we can unlock the power of children's literature in post-#MeToo age. This allows us to reimagine gender and recognise the capacities and capabilities of children, while gaining new perspectives on broader issues surrounding gender constructivism.

2.1 #MeToo: A memoir and a movement

The mainstream #MeToo movement started as an awareness-raising movement that focused on the issue of sexual harassment and the sexual abuse of women in the workplace. It gained prominence in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal in 2017, where numerous women came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct against the Hollywood producer (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020). It was first initiated by Tarana Burke, a survivor and activist, in 2006 to empower victims of sexual violence and harassment, particularly young women of colour from

low-wealth communities. However, it was not until 2017 that the movement gained widespread exposure and adoption across social media. This was sparked by a tweet from actor Alyssa Milano, encouraging people to use the hashtag #MeToo to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. The tweet went viral, leading to a significant increase in awareness and participation in the movement (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020).

Sexual assault is defined as “a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse”. Violence is inherently specific, as it is influenced by the convergence of race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, culture, and other elements, along with gender, within a specific context and period (Bunch 2018).

The #MeToo movement has had a significant impact on the gender and sexual conduct policies and welfare in the workplace and society as a whole. It has prompted many companies to enact anti-harassment policies and has contributed to a cultural shift that stigmatizes sexually inappropriate behaviour at work (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020). It is worth noting that the #MeToo movement has also gained global attention, with similar conversations and actions taking place in countries around the world. It sparked a worldwide uprising against sexual abuse, marking a significant milestone in history (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020).

Gender-based sexual violence, which refers to acts of sexual(ised) violence directed at individuals based on their gender, is studied to be correlated with the educational and occupational status of women in a country and the prevalence of sexual violence against women; in countries where women have lower socio-economic or political status, sexual violence tends to be more common (Yodanis 2004). However, in countries where women have higher social status and rights, sexual violence against women is less prevalent and common (Yodanis 2004). When women have more power and status in society, sexual violence against them is less frequent. These findings prove that reducing violence against women requires considering factors beyond individual characteristics. In other words, to reduce violence against women, we must address factors that are deeply rooted in societal norms, beliefs, and structures. (Yodanis 2004). At the societal level, feminist theory and research have long emphasized the etiological relationship between gender inequality and patriarchal beliefs and violence against women, positing that these beliefs reinforce the dominant position and power men hold over women and perpetuate male aggression toward women (Heise 1998).

Agency, as one of the key #MeToo themes that I use to analyse my case studies, carries significant importance in relation to gender inequality, gender-based violence, and sexual assault. Agency allows individuals, including children, to actively question and challenge traditional gender scripts and power imbalances, assert their boundaries, and resist discourses of violence. Youth studies theorists who follow the post-structuralist approach advocate for more nuanced views on agency that do not depend on the idea that individuals are rational and internally consistent. Instead, they see subjectivity and social structure as being created together (Harris and Dobson 2015). According to Coffey and Farrugia (2014), a dedication to ethical critical research that exposes the power dynamics shaping youth cannot rely on analyses that predefine agency as opposition to existing structural patterns or the current political establishment (Coffey and Farrugia 2014). In the current cultural climate that promotes female empowerment, it is suggested that girls' ability to take action and make choices should not be seen as something inherent to them. Instead, it should be understood as the various ways in which girls perceive, express, and interpret their experiences, all while being influenced by oppressive societal structures that prioritize heterosexuality and male dominance (Harris and Dobson 2015). These ideas, as messages that can be embedded in children's literature, encourage girls and children to identify and understand their own desires, rights, and agency, and be the centre of their own narratives.

2.2 Children's literature: Definitions, role, ideology

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines children's literature as 'the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people' (Fadiman 2023). As a genre, children's literature comprises recognized masterpieces of world literature, illustrated books and stories, traditional tales, rhymes and lullabies, moral stories, folk songs, and other primarily orally conveyed materials specifically crafted for young readers (Fadiman 2023). Central to the definition of children's literature and the main audience of the genre is the *child*. According to scholars like Tucker (1976), children across the globe are said to share characteristics such as acting impulsively, relying on adults for support, being sexually immature, having limited capacity for abstract thinking and concentration, and having a tendency to align with the dominant culture are among the universal children's characteristics – the extent

of which depends on cultural contexts (Tucker 1976). Meanwhile, Lesnik-Oberstein (2023) highlights the role of society and culture in defining the concept of child, arguing that the idea of a child is not fixed and is instead shaped and defined using various terms, often leading to scholarly and cultural debate. She also posits that the definition of child depends on the goals, requirements, and societal norms of a particular culture and era. Lathey (2006) states that whatever the definition, it is always the adults who define child and childhood, and that even the duration of childhood is not fixed and alters according to the economic situation of a family. With this in mind, the characteristics that certain cultural, political, or social/intellectual spaces would attribute to childhood are inherently ideological and need to be interrogated. The ideological construct of child also influences how children's literature is written and used to educate children, shaping their perceptions of the world and themselves. Children's literature can therefore be used to construct and perpetuate certain norms (e.g. gender norms). Conversely, children's literature also has the power to challenge and rewrite these norms. This is what, I argue, #MeToo children's literature can do. In this project, I explore some rich case studies that demonstrate how children's literature can be radical in reimagining the category of the child and challenge oppressive social norms that impact on children.

Paradoxically, what children read is also decided by adults as it is them who produce children's literature (Lathey 2006). The genre, according to Klingberg (1986), is mainly published for children and the youth. I would like to indicate here that although children's literature is considered to be mainly for children, adults can also be considered an equally important audience of this genre based on the idea that all adults have an inner child that children's literature can speak to.

When it comes to writing for children, Lukens (1997, as cited in Kanatsouli 2018) discusses that it is important to maintain the same standards as those applied to writing for adults. However, according to Couch (2000, as cited in Kanatsouli 2018), children's books should also prioritize being easily understandable. This is in line with what Tucker (1976) identifies as the standard for writing children's literature: it is unavoidable that the range of topics and vocabulary used in children's literature will be limited, as it is assumed that the intended readership is not yet fully developed or mature. The characteristics of children's books according to Myles McDowell (1973), include brevity, emphasis on action, dialogue-driven narrative, child protagonists with language choices tailored to their age group, clear and organized structure, as well as elements of

magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure.

Another feature of children's literature, as Dubrow (2002) discusses, is the fact that adult writers adhere to a particular set of rules and styles in their writing, influenced by a nostalgic perception of personal experiences and a didactic view of society, which sets children's literature apart from other genres. Rose (2001, as cited in Gubar 2013) goes as far as suggesting that the term "children's literature" does not accurately reflect its content, but rather serves as a means to encourage children to conform to the ideological frameworks that adults associate with childhood. It is widely agreed that children's books simultaneously belong to several systems, namely literature, education, society, and culture. Puurtinen (1998) identifies the particularities of this genre to be rooted in multiple systems, therefore having multiple functions, and argues that the aim of children's literature is not merely entertainment, but also education and socialization. Beseghi (2015) believes that in examining children's books, it is important to acknowledge that children's literature is characterized by its historical setting, its imaginative world, and its focus on readers of a specific age group. Additionally, it is closely linked to the field of education, influenced by philosophical ideas, and often portrayed and explored through various forms of media, such as illustrations, animations, films, and digital media (Beseghi 2015).

The psychological aspect of children's literature also has significant importance. Xeni (2011) indicates the fact that protagonists of children's books, in spite of coming from different backgrounds, often share relatable experiences and encounter similar challenges as the readers, allowing children readers to learn how to navigate difficult situations through what literary characters role-model to them. Additionally, Pinsent (2006) highlights the mental dimension of children's literature, emphasizing that it exposes children to different perspectives, thereby fostering the development of their imagination and cognitive abilities.

Starting with the educational role of children's literature, studies show that it contributes both to children's knowledge of the world and their development (Xeni, 2011). Shavit (1981) further explains that this focus on education was more prevalent in the past, when moral and ethical objectives were more intertwined. Interestingly, Nikolajeva (2005) points out that the didactic nature of children's literature often overshadows its literary merit. This is in line with the sentiment echoed by Shavit (1981), who states that this didacticism is the primary source of limitations placed on this genre. Shavit also notes that while sophisticated writing styles are

associated with literary value in adult literature, in children's literature, they are more often linked to didacticism and efforts to improve vocabulary (Shavit, 1981).

Related to the educational aspect of children's literature is the role it plays in making serious philosophical topics accessible to young readers. Children's literature is also a great tool for facilitating philosophical discussions with children. Stories provide a tangible framework for children to explore philosophical questions by presenting them through events and characters. Children may feel reluctant, or not necessarily know how, to draw examples from their own lives, so using characters as a means of expressing their opinions and providing examples creates a safe fictional space to play with ideas and experiment with different scenarios. Within stories, there are concepts that lend themselves to philosophical contemplation, such as good, evil, friendship, beauty, and love. Especially when accompanied by illustrations in children's books, these concepts pique children's curiosity and captivate their attention more effectively (Çayır and Yolcu 2021).

However, teachers and educators are often reluctant to use children's stories including philosophical or serious topics such as death, love, and sexuality, as they are considered taboo (Haynes and Murriss 2008). Yet, in the present study on the value of #MeToo children's literature, what is considered to be taboo is in fact what children frequently come across and engage with as part of their daily experiences. These concepts are already integrated into their lives, and neglecting to address them can lead to an approach that feels detached from reality and which, crucially would fail to equip children with the necessary (self-) understanding and tools to navigate aspects of their experiences related, for example to sexuality, relationships, and gender norms. It also means disregarding their natural inclination to explore and converse about these ideas. Avoiding these discussions, thus, can impede the development of a democratic community and limit children's ability to shape, organize, and make decisions about their own thoughts and experiences (Çayır 2023).

Children's literature carries important ideological messages about adult-child relationships. According to Zipes (1981), children's literature is not solely created for children themselves. It has always been and will continue to be a product crafted by adults with the purpose of imparting knowledge and values to children, which must meet the approval of adults. It is a symbolic social act by adult authors aimed at shaping and potentially influencing the future direction of culture.

At its core, children's literature reflects ideas of civility and civilization. The authors of

children's literature strive to refine young sensibilities, instilling a sense of order among turbulent emotions and uncertainties about the world, and taming disruptive forces that pose a threat to civilized society.

Although the studies on the significance and values of children's literature are not scarce, the ways in which children's literature's power in post #MeToo era can be unlocked is yet underexplored. The three books I have chosen as my case studies, as examples of the mainstream children's literature that got published during these times, seem to enact have similar patterns in which they approach children's subjectivity, masculinity and femininity, and gender and identity. In the next subsection, I will explore feminist debates and theories of gender essential to the literary analysis of my case studies.

2.3 Gender Studies

One of my key interests is in how reading children's literature through a #MeToo lens can help us understand the larger landscape of how societal norms, especially around gender, sexuality and violence, are socially constructed. With this in mind, I refer to feminist theories of gender, specifically bio-essentialist and constructivist perspectives on gender identity, which become subtly implied in my case studies, analysed later on.

The development of gender studies raised questions about the nature of gender itself. Debates emerged around whether gender is purely a social construct, the relationship between sex and gender, and how the gendering of bodies varies across disciplinary and cultural contexts (Halley 2018). The distinction between sex and gender played a crucial role in the debates prevalent in the second-wave feminism, with sex being seen by some key feminist figures, such as Catharine Mackinnon or Germaine Greer, as determined by genetics and gender as the cultural manifestation of sex (ΓΕΩΡΓΙΑΔΟΥ 2023; Grosz 1994).

The sex-gender distinction was especially questioned by postmodern feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars argued that such a distinction was made on the basis of assuming the existence of a stable and natural gender (tied to biological sex), which in turn revealed that the categories of "men" and "women" are socially constructed. Additionally, the bioessentialist idea that sex, based on biological traits, is also binary and stable was challenged (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). According to Butler (2009), the characteristics associated with both sex and gender have

no inherent meaning until society and culture, through interpretation, attribute meaning to them. In other words, both sex and gender are socio-cultural constructs. On that account, sex is derived from gender and does not precede it.

As for the study of masculinity, theorists such as Connell (2005) provide a detailed study of the topic. Drawing on the scholarship of masculinity in relation to, for example sexuality, violence, sports, literature, and media debates which he refers to as the "ethnographic moment" in masculinity research, Connell (2005) highlights the existence of multiple masculinities, varying across cultures, historical periods, and social classes. Interestingly, Connell (2005) points out that the concepts of hierarchy and hegemony are also present among different masculinities. The collective nature of masculinity in institutions and culture, the active construction of masculinities through social behaviour, the internal complexity and contradictions within masculinities, and the dynamics of change in masculinity over time are among Connell's important conclusions. As Connell (2006) argues, defining masculinity is a challenge in masculinity research; although different authors use the terms "masculinity" and "masculinities" inconsistently and in ways that imply a simplified and static notion of identity or unrealistic differences between men and women, that the focus should be on "men" rather than "masculinities." However, discussing "men" presupposes a distinction from and relation with "women," which requires an understanding of gender, i.e. acknowledging that men and women are both involved in the domain of gender (Connell 2006). In the current study, a critical understanding of masculinity has helped unpack the nuanced and radical representations of masculinity, fatherhood, care, and emotions, given that two of my case studies are primarily centred on father-child relationships (e.g. father-son relationship in *My shadow is Pink*, father-daughter relationship in *Franny's father Is a Feminist*).

A key issue for feminist philosophers is how to account for women's agency; i.e., capacity for individual choice and action given the constraints imposed by patriarchal institutions and norms (T. Meyers, n.d.). If anything, children need to learn about agency in early ages.

Scholars in the field of youth studies, drawing on post-structuralist theories, have advocated for more nuanced views on individual agency, and emphasize the importance of moving away from the assumption that individuals are rational and internally consistent, and instead suggest that subjectivity and social structures are mutually constructed (Harris and Dobson 2015). By examining the shifts in the concepts of choice, empowerment, and giving voice to vulnerable

groups (including children) within the neoliberal and post-feminist social context, it seems crucial to go beyond the oversimplified definition of agency as something internal and separate from the social world (Harris and Dobson 2015), or indeed as something accessible only to adult humans.

Rather than defining agency as a pure, authentic, and inherently resistant interiority that can be extracted from girls or easily identified through their own accounts of their lives and actions, one needs to critically examine how girls navigate and interpret their experiences in a cultural landscape influenced by ideals of girl power (Harris and Dobson 2015). It is proposed that we go beyond the agency-and-structure dichotomy rooted in post-feminist and neoliberal frameworks, and instead see girls as “suffering actors”, i.e. individuals who act as agents and experience victimization at the same time, rather than being purely agents or victims (Harris and Dobson 2015).

Additionally, Leeb (2017) takes the idea of the political subject and discusses that, despite power dynamics, feminist agency is possible in late capitalist societies through the political subject-in-outline theory. Instead of focusing on the political subject via the lens of a feminist theory of constantly shifting identity, she proposes that a political subject moves within the tension of a certain coherence (the subject) necessary to effect change, and permanent openness (the outline) necessary to counter its exclusionary character (Leeb 2017). Such a political subject finds agency with the help of unconscious, rather than conscious, recognition, and embraces the unconscious link of the working classes, women, racial, and sexual minorities to the negative pole conscious (Leeb 2017). In this research, I take the idea of personal and political agency in relation to children and argue that #MeToo children's literature, as represented in my case studies, forms a world where children have personal and political agency rather than being passive recipients of adult agendas and projections. In these books, children actively make decisions about their bodies, rights, and desires, and resist the heteronormative power structures in a political manner, both in private (home) and public spheres of society.

Recognizing the autonomy of children help them learn about their own capacity for self-knowledge, desire, and political participation, as well as developing respect for those of others. This observed to be influential in the educational process as well. Freire (2017), for instance, argues that rather than viewing children as passive learners, it is essential to foster their critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving skills so that they are truly empowered and are able to

challenge oppressive systems. This approach enables children to assume responsibility for their own learning and become active agents in societal transformation (Freire 2017).

2.3.1 Gender Studies and Children's Literature

According to post-structuralists, a subject lacks coherence and a fixed identity, instead representing a process of continual transformation with multiple subjectivities (Butler 1993, as cited in Mallan 2011). In the realm of children's literature, this concept is depicted as a transformative journey towards increased maturity, sensitivity, caution, and wisdom. Gender, in the context of both real and fictional boys and girls, acts as an educational tool through which they learn to embody the roles of men and women. Throughout this developmental process, children are guided towards appropriate behaviours while being discouraged from inappropriate ones (Mallan 2011).

Traditionally, literature has played a significant role in shaping young readers' identities, as well as exploring the challenges and dilemmas that fictional characters encounter (Mallan 2011). A feminist analysis of children's literature pays special attention to the portrayals of male and female characters, arguing that when gender roles in this genre strictly conform to predetermined norms, they potentially reinforce stereotypes that limit the range of experiences available to children (Koslowsky 2010).

These predominant norms or stereotypes are subjective perceptions that individuals form about others as they navigate the complexities of the world and attempt to make sense of others' behaviours (Gilmour 2015). It is argued that stereotypes begin to take shape in a child's mind during early childhood, and by the early school years, children have already developed perceptions regarding their own and others' gender identities (Escayg 2019). This makes the impact of children's literature even more pronounced and important to investigate. Society's expectations of men and women give rise to common gender stereotypes, with men being expected to exhibit traits such as activity, strength, muscularity, high achievement, independence, and dominance, while women are expected to display characteristics such as passivity, weakness, emotionality, sensitivity, and dependence (Price and Skolnik 2017, as cited in ΓΕΩΡΓΙΑΔΟΥ 2023). This internalization immensely affect various aspects of a child's life, including academic growth, self-perception of abilities (regardless of their actual capabilities), and their personal, career, and professional aspirations (Kollmayer, Schober, and Spiel 2018 as

cited in Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020). Notably, as children grow older, there is a significant increase in the intensity of gender role expectations that they adhere to, building upon the foundational understanding they developed in their earlier years (Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020).

Liben and et al. (2002) highlight the importance of understanding the origins and construction of gender roles in fields such as psychology and education, as well as effective policymaking.

Additionally, studying how these roles are acquired and developed can contribute to the ongoing debate about the influence of nature versus nurture; while there may be minor inherent biological differences between men and women, the distinct environmental experiences we encounter from birth and the interplay between both factors shape distinct paths for each gender (Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020).

Studies show that there are three major theories with regard to the development of gender stereotypes (Libnen and Bigler 2002). One perspective suggests that gender stereotypes develop as a result of real biological differences between males and females, such as sex-linked genes, hormones, or brain variances. This approach, supported by developmental psychology, argues that men and women exhibit differences because human evolution has presented them with distinct adaptive challenges, leading to the prioritization of certain traits in men and others in women (Buss 1995, as cited in Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020). Research also suggests that certain cultural values associated with femininity and masculinity may have a genetic basis, particularly in cases where individuals display values that defy traditional stereotypes (Knafo and Spinath 2011). Furthermore, studies involving large sets of sibling pairs indicate that genetics play a role in the development of gender-typical behaviour, although the environment's influence remains significant (Iervolino et al. 2005).

In addition to biological theories, numerous studies emphasize the significant role of the environment in shaping gender roles (Carli and Bukatko 2000). It is suggested that the behaviours of men and women differ due to socialization practices and learning mechanisms that create and perpetuate gender distinctions (Liben et al. 2002). In line with this view are traditional learning theories, which propose that, through the influence of important figures such as family members and teachers, children's environments reinforce or discourage specific, prescribed behaviours associated with their gender (Beaman, Wheldall, and Kemp 2006). Such a learning process is also affected by peers and individuals of the same gender (Witt 2000). Social learning

theories further suggest that children learn what is appropriate for their gender by observing and imitating the behaviours of role models, predominantly those of the same gender, and by observing how their environment responds to these behaviours through vicarious learning (Endendijk, Groeneveld, and Mesman 2018).

Another group of theories, referred to as "gender constructivism," highlights the role of individual development in constructing gender identity and sexual roles (Bem 1981). As children begin to recognize the existence of two genders in social life, they develop a gender schema based on which they process information related to this categorization (Bem 1981). As children develop an understanding of their own gender group and recognize its consistency, they begin to link specific behaviours and expectations to their gender based on their personal experiences. That is how the gender schema becomes a significant aspect of a child's social life (Bem 1983). However, children are not passive recipients of gender roles dictated by the environment or biology. Instead, they actively modify these schemas through their interactions with different contexts. Certain environmental experiences, such as exposure to counter-stereotypical role models, prompt the restructuring of these schemas (Olsson and Martiny 2018), leading to a more personalized understanding of gender roles. In this regard, poststructural feminism's contributions can be seen, as they challenge the notion of gender identity as fixed and immutable, allowing for social progress and the redefinition of the roles normatively prescribed to men and women in society (Renold 2004, as cited in Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020).

With all that being said, it is concluded that adapting a comprehensive approach that implements gender mainstreaming across all educational institutions – not just schools - in society is required for educating today's children to be more equal and have the freedom to choose their own paths without being restricted by traditional gender roles (Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino, and Herranz-Hernández 2020).

Children internalize these perceptions through exposure to similar messages, and one possible source of influence is children's literature (Taylor 2009). In spite of all the debates around how our environment can shape our understandings of identity and gender roles and our ability to be political agents in our every-day narratives, it is interesting to see what kinds of environments and discourses in relation to gender identity are imagined in children's literature in the post-#MeToo age.

Gender norms influence how individuals of different genders understand, experience, and express emotions, rendering emotions as another dimension of our existence that is shaped by gender. Studies show that women tend to exhibit higher overall levels of emotion expression, particularly when it comes to positive emotions, such as happiness (Kring and Gordon, 1998, as cited in Chaplin 2015). Moreover, women are more likely to internalise negative emotions like sadness and anxiety (LaFrance, Hecht, and Levy Paluck, 2003 as cited in Chaplin 2015), while men tend to display higher levels of aggression and anger (Arccher 2004, as cited in Chaplin).

2.4 #MeToo and children's literature

What I am interested in is this particular #MeToo moment and how it has been manifesting itself in young children's literature. I have selected these three case studies and each book queers, bends, and reimagines gender roles, sexual violence, and consent. It is interesting to know if and how #MeToo have made waves even in places we would not expect: children's literature.

The research on the #MeToo literature is not scares. Cosslett (2019) discusses the evolution of literature related to the #MeToo movement, and how writers have explored the impact of the #MeToo movement on topics such as gender roles, power dynamics, sexual assault, and more. Another perspective is put forth by Doherty (2020), who examines the intersection between metafiction and the #MeToo movement, highlighting the potential of this combination to create impactful and thought-provoking narratives surrounding issues of sexual harassment and assault. The #MeToo movement was like the boundary between controlling women's bodies and ignoring their agency, with the condition that women are considered the owners of their own sexuality and express it freely, so much so that even a company like Playboy had to rebrand (McManaman 2023). Admittedly, the literature of the post-#MeToo era acts as a platform to delve into the grey areas of gender and power relations, taking the chance to explore different experiences and the truth(s) that exist within them (Cosslett 2019).

#MeToo also gave a buzzword effect to the concept of consent, as it is in fact something neglected in any kind of sexual assault. Consent, regardless of the different perspectives on it in legal, popular, and scholarly contexts, is defined as some form of agreement to participate in sexual activity (Beres 2014). Consent is communicated between partners differently; gender differences affect the use of nonverbal communication as sexual consent cues (Newstrom,

Harris, and Miner 2021). Men and women are both more likely to use nonverbal cues, but societal norms and traditional sexual scripts influence their behaviour differently. Men are socialized to be the aggressor and pursuer in sexual encounters, while women are socialized to be passive and communicate indirectly. These scripts impact how men and women use their behaviour to signal consent to sexual activity and how they interpret the behaviour of a potential partner as a sign of their consent (Newstrom, Harris, and Miner 2021).

Given the prevalence of reported sexual assault rates in the #MeToo era, consent education has become increasingly vital and relevant. As a result, it has emerged as a core theme in #MeToo children's literature. In fact, consent is said to be learnt in an early age like preschool, and is introduced to kids as a requirement for respecting boundaries of others to ensure safety, preserve dignity, and foster healthy relationships (Tatter 2018). There are several methods to educate young children about consent, including establishing a common language, building a foundation for social-emotional learning, instructing them on expressing their feelings of being hurt, and demonstrating consent through empowering each individual child to communicate their own bodily boundaries (Tatter 2018). Employing a vocabulary that is both consistent and easy to understand for kids is how the language around consent is established; using terms such as body, space, and touch is helpful because these simple words enable young children to express their boundaries effectively. "This is my body," for instance, is an effective and clear phrase to teach to children to use when they do not wish to be hugged by another person. Early education of consent to children also includes equipping them with the necessary social-emotional skills, such as emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, and empathy, to comprehend their own as well as others' emotions – skills that align with the principles of consent and respect. Moreover, teaching consent to young kids requires teaching them about emotions such as sadness, anger, or discomfort, so that they can advocate for themselves when they are hurt. Lastly, teaching young kids to ask questions about appropriate behaviours (e.g. Would you like a hug or a high five?) helps them acquire consent-related skills (Tatter 2018). Furthermore, it is important to introduce consent to young kids as a dynamic concept that can be altered based on individual preferences and circumstances: rather than recognizing consent as a permanent permission, kids need to know that their "yes" can be changed to "no" due to experience, emotions, fear, or other factors ("The Importance of Consent and How to Teach It to Your Child," n.d.).

A recent study shows that countries where the status of women and men more equal are

associated with lower levels of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW). More specifically, women's status in economic domains has a larger impact on reducing IPVAW compared to men's economic status; a finding that supports the Marxist feminist hypothesis, which highlights the importance of women's access to resources in leaving violent relationships, as well as the male privilege protection hypothesis, indicating that advancements in women's status in specific areas do not pose a threat to men and can even yield positive outcomes for all genders. However, in cases where the overall status of men is jeopardized, there is a possibility of experiencing backlash effects (Gómez-Casillas, van Damme, and Permanyer 2023). These results greatly contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between gender inequality and IPVAW. On the other hand, this opens the question of the "Nordic Paradox", a phenomenon whereby the countries with the highest levels of equality in the world have relatively high rates of IPVAW (Gómez-Casillas, van Damme, and Permanyer 2023).

The common trends in children's literature before the #MeToo movement have been the subject of many studies. The scholarship on gender and sexuality representation in children's books before 2017 usually show that male characters are considerably more favored in both the way they are treated and the extent they are portrayed, and gender stereotyping is extensively displayed (Sunderland and McGlashan 2015). It goes without saying that all these books with these problematic trends that at first glance go unnoticed but are essentially violent to women and gender and sexual minorities, have been popular for decades, sold and bought and read to children all over the world. Yet, the three case studies I have chosen propose a radical solution to the prevalence of gender inequality, homophobia, racism, sexism, and the oppression of vulnerable groups: they are still joyful and pleasant to read but they also work to shift the common trend in children's literature to promote normative stereotypes (such as cis-or heteronormative, binarized gender roles) and, at the same time, cultivate a kind of feminist and political consciousness in young readers.

Although the necessity to critically read violence and sexuality in literary texts goes back to feminist activism before #MeToo, this social movement has opened up new potentials and spaces to fight against gender-based violence by making violence against women and gender-/sexual minority groups more widely visible, heard, and delved into by researchers, critics, and the general public (Holland and Hewett 2021). In summary, the value of reading children's literature through a #MeToo lens lies in its potential to introduce children to important concepts such as

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choice, consent, boundaries. It also helps develop a sense of agency and independence in children to assert their personhood, challenge restrictive heteronormative power structures, and reshape societal scripts surrounding gender. Lastly, it can help shift power dynamics within parent-child relationship.

Case Study I: *My Shadow Is Pink*

“The story of sexual harassment and assault is, from its earliest conception, also the story of silencing” (Airey 2018).

Stuart Scott's *My Shadow Is Pink* tells the story of a young boy's gender identity development through a creative representation of the character's everyday encounters with himself and the people in his life: his dad and peers at school. The main character, who enjoys princesses, fairies, and other typically "non-masculine" interests, learns through the support of his father that everyone has a hidden shadow that reveals their true self and that it is critical to stand up for who you are. The plot is set over the course of a few days and is told through short rhymed captions accompanying colourful illustrations. Stuart, who is also the illustrator of the book, uses the motif of a person's shadow to symbolize characters' inner senses of gender identity. In this story, everyone has a shadow which is either blue or pink, with the blue shadow of male-presenting characters (like the little boy's father) appearing as the marker of cis- and heteronormativity. While the book is written for young children aged 3–7-year-old, it speaks to a much larger audience. Focused on everyday encounters with oneself and others, Stuart's story shows the challenges faced by children whose gender identity falls outside of cis- and heteronormative structures. It also carries messages about validating one's gender identity and promotes the principles of unconditional love, respect, and affirmative parenting.

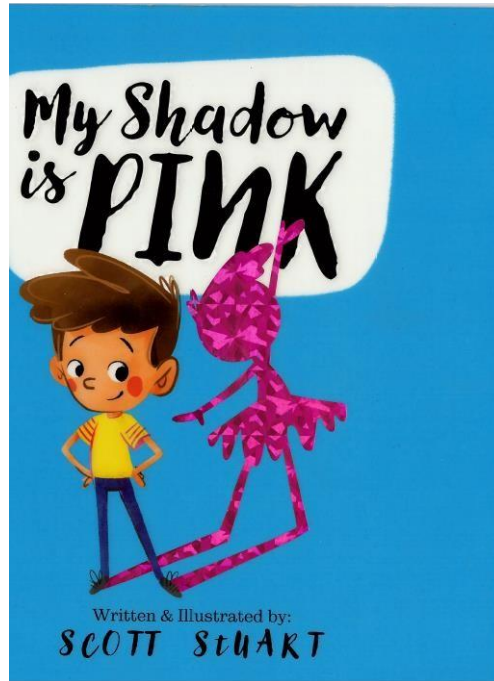


Figure 1. Front cover of *My Shadow Is Pink*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

The messages that *My Shadow Is Pink* carries have significant importance in the post #MeToo era, as with the lens of #MeToo, such messages can be far from simple. Stuart's story carves out a space for gender minorities to claim personal and political agency in their own stories, taking control of the narrative that articulates and defines their identities, and choosing and expressing their own gendered identities. It also makes space for marginalized voices in the public story of gender, violence, and power. In addition, it identifies the existing gender inequality that leads to gendered oppression and violence, and then gives gendered minorities (the little boy in the story) the agency to reimagine and change the gender order. Moreover, it sheds light on toxic, violent masculinity (as represented by blue shadows) and then creates an alternative, caring, non-violent, playful masculinity.

Published in 2020, *My Shadow Is Pink* is a story inspired by the author's own son: at the age of three, Stuart's son Colin became enamoured with Queen Elsa, a character from the movie *Frozen*. He expressed an interest in owning all available Elsa-themed toys and costumes, with his most cherished item being an Elsa doll that he proudly displayed to anyone who would listen. However, after someone at school informed him that Elsa was exclusively intended for girls,

Colin returned home deeply upset about his interests having been invalidated. This experience prompted Stuart to vow unwavering support for his son's likes and passions, even if they conflicted with societal gender expectations. On the very same day, Stuart began writing *My Shadow Is Pink* ("About Scott – Scott Stuart"). In fact, the preface of the book starts with a little note from Stuart to his son:

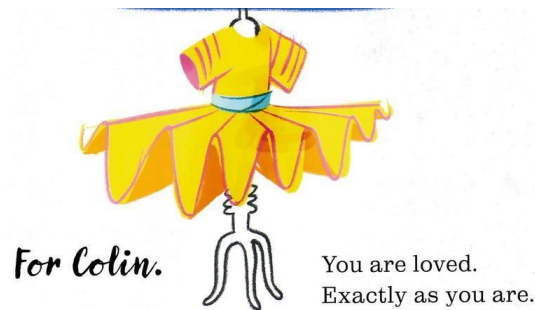


Figure 2. Scott's note for his son, page 1 of *My Shadow Is Pink*. Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Scott Stuart is an Australian popular children's book writer who is dedicated to creating stories that inspire and uplift young kids. His books have been very successful and have appeared in many top-selling lists worldwide. They have also been turned into plays and movies, and have been nominated for awards like the 2022 Children's Book of the Year and Picture Book of the Year ("About Scott – Scott Stuart," n.d.). Scott's positive messages have reached over 100 million people on social media, and he is known for promoting the acceptance and empowerment of children just as they are. The author often appears on podcasts and in the media, talking about parenting, finding one's true self, and learning to accept oneself and one's children ("About Scott – Scott Stuart," n.d.).

My Shadow Is Pink is Scott's first book among a series of books he has published on similar themes, such as *How To Be a Real Man* (2021), *The Very First You* (2021) and *My Shadow Is Purple* (2022). Some have criticized *My Shadow Is Pink* for raising several unresolved questions that may leave readers feeling confused ("My Shadow Is Pink" 2023). For instance, in the scene where the little boy is illustrated among his classmates on the first day of school, female peers are all shown with pink shadows, implying a cis-normative naturalization of pink as an intrinsically feminine colour, while the explanation behind this process remains unclear (See Figure 3). Furthermore, the use of rhyming couplets in the story, while aesthetically pleasing, leads to awkward constructions like "I join a small group, though in I don't blend", which has

been criticized as stylistically poor ("My Shadow Is Pink" 2022). Nevertheless, it has remained a popular book with many positive reviews, and it also received the Notables 2021 award for best picture book by The Children's Book Council of Australia ("My Shadow Is Pink" 2021).

In the initial stages of the narrative, which occur in the private sphere of the home, the protagonist, a young boy with a mischievous pink shadow in a world where boys must only have blue shadows, faces a challenging situation: he realizes he is the only one with a pink shadow and his pink shadow likes things that are not for boys: 'ponies and books and pink toys, princesses, [and] fairies' (Stuart 2020, 4). His distress intensifies as the first day of school approaches, where all the students are expected to dress according to their shadow's preference. The story, then, expands into the public realm when the first day of school arrives, leading to increased distress for both the little boy and his dad, who is worried about the consequences of his child wearing a yellow dress, which is his shadow's favorite outfit to school.

That the story takes place primarily at home and school suggests that a child's gender development is heavily influenced by their immediate environment, namely their family and home life alongside school as their social and educational environment. More specifically, the main characters in *My Shadow Is Pink* are the young child and his father, who represent the private sphere of home life and the ways in which a parent's behaviours and attitude to a child's self-presentation fundamentally shape how children understand, experience, express, and feel about their gender identities- as well as more broadly, their authentic senses of self.

There are several other noteworthy elements in this book which can help us understand the story's context or the world in which the little boy is born into. First, the narrative is told from the child's perspective, allowing readers to witness events through his eyes and empathize with his experiences and emotions. Additionally, the characters in the story are intentionally nameless, allowing them to symbolize experiences and emotions beyond individual identities. They serve as blank slates, enabling readers to project their own experiences onto them and connect with the broader human experience. Regarding the relationships between characters, the story highlights the separation of the young child from his father: the father's character appears to reflect that of a single parent, responsible for the child's growth and nurturing, who fulfills both the parental roles at home and accompanies the child in public settings. The absence of a mother character suggests a non-traditional family structure; although the father character is not depicted engaging in household chores, he is the primary caregiver and companion for the child. These

additional details contribute to the book's significant themes surrounding gender identity, embracing oneself, promoting equality, and celebrating diversity, as the book depicts a larger picture of gender non-conformity in the image of the otherwise stereotypically masculine, blue-shadowed dad.

Spinning, sparkling and twirling shadows – A case of gender performativity

In *My Shadow Is Pink*, Stuart uses the shadow as a metaphor to tell a story about a little boy's gender identity. The concept of shadows holds great significance across numerous cultures and belief systems globally. From psychological studies and ancient writings to folklore and mythology, the symbolism of shadows is a prevalent theme in literature, art, and psychology, embodying diverse symbolic possibilities. Among these interpretations, one prevalent meaning ascribed to shadows is their metaphorical representation of the unknown and concealed aspects of existence (Sarnoff 1972). In this sense, Stuart utilizes the motif of the shadow to reveal what is otherwise hidden from our eyes, or as the father character in the story puts it: "We've all had a shadow that's hidden from eyes. Sometimes our shadow, it lives in disguise" (Stuart 2020, 22). The book primarily features two shadow colours: blue and pink. The blue shadow signifies individuals who present as male, such as the young boy's father, and serves as a symbolic representation of cisgender and heteronormative traits, while the pink shadow represents individuals who present as feminine, including the young boy, and symbolizes femininity and feminine traits. While the use of the colours blue and pink, as two traditional markers of masculinity and femininity, may be easily recognizable gender codes, it perpetuates a binary division of gender. Such a symbolic division of gender identity is problematic in that it excludes and limits individuals who do not identify strictly as male or female. The reliance on these two colours may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender norms and neglect the experiences of those who exist outside of such a binary construct.

The book predominantly features male characters with blue shadows. The first mention of a female character occurs when the father shows the child pictures of relatives to explain gender identity through shadow colours (See Figure 3). This illustration features 'photos of parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and others' (Stuart 2020, 21) that the father character shows the little boy to teach him about one's inner self. In this illustration, both male and female characters are portrayed as powerful and strong. Male and female characters are depicted as

engaging in roles that are not traditionally assigned to their gender.

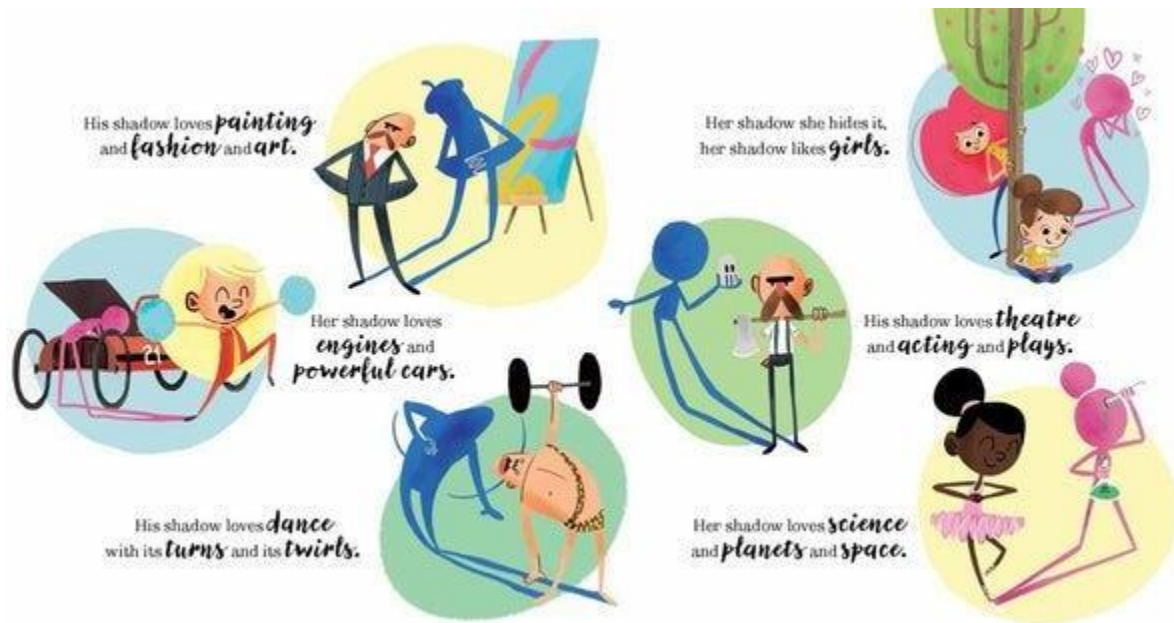


Figure 3. *photos of relatives*. Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

More specifically, male characters are depicted with a range of traits, encompassing both typically masculine and typically feminine qualities, as well as female characters interested in traditionally male-associated domains such as engines and science. This portrayal suggests that the differences between blue shadows (typically associated with men and boys) and pink shadows (typically associated with girls and women) do not necessarily need to act as prescriptions for gender identity, likes, desires, or behaviours. For example, a female character is shown wearing a cheerleader outfit happily dancing while her pink shadow, stretched behind her, is a mechanic. Moreover, we can see a male character is illustrated lifting a halter while his blue shadow 'loves dance with its turns and twirls' (Stuart 2020, 23). Interestingly, in all captions accompanying the aforementioned illustration, the font changes when a shadow's favorite activity is indicated; Stuart utilizes typographical choices, such as the curvy font, lines, and angles, to convey a sense of flexibility and natural fluidity in one's preferences, in contrast to the restrictions imposed by societal gender-normative expectations. In fact, this typographical technique extends beyond descriptions of the relatives' diverse pursuits, ranging from art and

fashion to engines, dance, and theater, and encompasses all the characters, including the little boy and his father.

As in this book shadows are taken as a marker of gender, it is important to first analyze the concept of gender. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 2006), for example, argues that gender is not an inherent biological characteristic but rather a socially constructed concept manifested through various bodily behaviours, gestures, expressions, and clothing choices. Butler (2006) draws on Foucault's theorisation, in *Discipline and Punish*, of the interiority of the body, and argues that the body is the social site for gender's inscription, thereby becoming a site for the inscription of gender norms as well. She writes that "the redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of body implies a collar redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body's surface, the construction of the gendered body through a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences" (Butler 2006, 184). In Butler's view, the politic of the body is determined by "an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 2006, 184): a set of disciplinary prohibitions and regulations for the corporeal stylization of gender within heterosexual contexts with the purpose of creating a fantasy of a coherent and continuous sexuality and identity. These laws or norms are what makes gendered bodies; this is how bodies are socially and discursively gendered, and how gender norms, as ideological constructs, become naturalised. Furthermore, these norms generate a false stabilization of gender, implying that gender identity is fixed and unchangeable, thereby creating a heterosexist binary. Butler writes:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation ...it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, and idealized... In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance ... on the surface of body. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 2006, 185)

The reality of a gendered body, in Butler's view, is the various acts that it performs, not some

kind of an interior essence, for even the idea of an interior essence is 'an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse' to regulate 'fantasy' on the surface of the body (Butler 2006, 185). Thus, gender identity is not something that exists independently from the social factors surrounding the subject, but is rather constituted by the performative expressions associated with gendered behaviours and presentations in the wider social world. Additionally, the repetition of gender performances creates the illusion of a stable and coherent gender identity. In other words, when an individual repeatedly performs a set of behaviours, an impression is created that those behaviours are what that individual is naturally inclined to. For instance, a person who identifies as a woman may feel pressure to perform gendered behaviours such as wearing makeup, dresses, and high heels, even if these behaviours are uncomfortable or impractical. By consistently performing these behaviours over time, the person may begin to feel that these practices naturalise them as a "real" woman, and that their gender identity is stable and coherent. Similarly, a person who identifies as a man may feel pressure to perform gendered behaviours such as being assertive, competitive, and emotionally reserved. By consistently performing these behaviours over time, the person may begin to experience these as expressions "real" manhood, and that their gender identity is fixed and socially eligible.

According to Butler (2006), gender is influenced by the social context, suggesting that it can vary based on power dynamics, cultural expectations, and societal norms. Assigned gender at birth does not inherently define or determine one's sense of self, behaviour, or an essential notion of "nature"; rather, individuals learn to conform to societal gender norms that prescribe gendered behaviours. Butler's concept of gender as a repeated stylization of the body, within a regulated framework, helps to deconstruct the notion of a fixed gender identity and emphasizes the performative nature of gender. The recognition that gender is a spectrum of expressions and self-identification challenges the idea of a singular and static gender identity. These repetitive gender performances contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, limiting personal possibilities and self-expression, and marginalizing individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

Taking Butler's notion of gender performativity into account, *My Shadow Is Pink* conveys a definition of gender through the interests, expressions, and body postures of the little boy. The boy's gender identity is established by external forces even before his birth, as indicated by his blue-themed living room, his bedroom, and the presence of blue elements throughout his

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personal space. Yet, he has a pink shadow that loves 'ponies and books and pink toys, princesses, fairies, and things not for boys. It loves wearing dresses and dancing around! It spins and it sparkles and it twirls through the air' (Stuart 2020, 4–6). His pink shadow, however, is surrounded by many cis- and heteronormative elements, evident through the illustrations of the book. As shown in Figure 4, which is the first illustration of the book that the readers see, the boy is living in a blue-shadowed world.



Figure 4. *Family living room*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Interestingly, the story starts with the little boy standing in a corner of his family living room dominated by blue tones, symbolizing the prevalence of heteronormativity in his surroundings, with his hidden shadow stretched behind the sofa, conveying the concept of marginalization. The presence of a blue umbrella, which can be associated with shelter and protection, and a blue scarf featuring a cross design, connoting religious belief, further reinforces the influence of mainstream heteronormative ideals. Additionally, the blue radio, serving as a means of connection with the outside world, symbolizes a channel of communication and information (e.g. popular media) that also conveys heteronormativity. Later in the story, the father character is depicted holding a blue newspaper, indicating that even the media content consumed by the father aligns with opinions and features that reinforce heteronormative perspectives. The

newspaper being blue also suggests that the father's interests (i.e. the news and stories that he reads) are stereotypically masculine.

The perception of time within the story also contributes to the boy's sense of alienation. The clock in the living room symbolizes a feeling of time pressure, seemingly reminding the young boy that he has limited time to conform to family norms and values. This notion is also supported by the initial dynamics between the father and the boy. The first interaction between the two occurs while the boy is happily dancing with his pink shadow in his room. However, as the father enters the room with a stare, he remarks, "It will turn blue one of these days. Don't worry, it is just a phase" (Stuart 2020, 6–7). This scene suggests that the empty frames on the living room wall may serve as placeholders for a future picture featuring the boy with his blue shadow, reinforcing the distressing experience of a young child feeling alienated and detached from the world around him. Interestingly, the boy's posture as he stands amongst the family's male role models imitates the individuals depicted in the frames, which appear to be men with blue shadows and a hands-on-hips stance. Their grumpy and rigid facial expressions, characterized by thick eyebrows and big mustaches, allude to the restrictive norms of masculinity upheld by heteronormative power structures. They depict masculinity as emotionally closed off, devoid of joy and playfulness, and fitting within rigid, parallel (i.e. binary) lines. However, the performativity of the little boy's gender in the story is manifested through his playful bodily acts (e.g. dancing, spinning, twirling, etc.) as well as the use of various visual elements such as fonts, lines, and angles. This playful, joyous pink shadow, which is curved and wiggly, appears in stark contrast to the blue rigidity of normative masculinity.

In addition, there are other several noteworthy elements within the illustrations of their family living room. The appearance of a goat head in this illustration also holds symbolic significance. The goat head can be associated with Baphomet, a complex symbol with historical roots, encompassing various meanings related to witchcraft, the occult, and esoteric thought (Strube 2016). However, its positioning in the little boy's family living room's heteronormative atmosphere serves as a reference to the man-hunter and female-gatherer paradigm. It also has a connotation to the violence of heteronormative masculinity, suggesting that this produces violent men who kill and behead innocent animals.

Besides, other temporal aspects within the story of *My Shadow Is Pink* are intriguing and contribute to its message about gender heteronormative scripts belonging to the past and thus

outdated traditions of gender performance. The illustrations provide details that transport the main characters to a bygone era, although without explicitly specifying a particular decade. The boy and his father are depicted with contemporary looks, hairstyles, and attire, indicating a modern setting. The representation of a single father assuming the role of primary caregiver is reflective of a more recent societal phenomenon. However, the presence of a radio instead of a television in their living room suggests a hint of the past.

Additionally, the inclusion of a vintage wooden case adjacent to a drawer in the boy's bedroom introduces a touch of tradition (see Figure 5). This wooden box could symbolize the safeguarding of secrets or personal information, acting as a marker of the boy's hidden gender identity that he keeps concealed from others. Notably, the boy's toys (e.g. wooden jets, wooden train, etc.) also possess a somewhat outdated quality. Wooden jets and wooden trains with railways, reminiscent of popular toys from the 19th century (Holmes 1985), populate his room. The presence of a small tennis bat tucked away in the corner may serve as a reference to the early 20th century, when tennis gained popularity as a children's game (Review of *A Social History of Tennis in Britain* by Robert J. Lake, by Mike Huggins 2015). Furthermore, it signifies the boy's defensive stance, suggesting either a need to protect himself or engage in a competitive exchange with his father, perhaps as a way for the boy to affirm his masculinity in light of his unruly, feminine pink shadow. This juxtaposition of imagery further emphasizes the temporal context within *My Shadow Is Pink*, implying a sense of traditional gender norms, lack of progress or outdated views on gender in the family's home.



Figure 5. *The boy's bedroom*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Furthermore, an interesting contrast is observed regarding the depiction of books in their home, which are always portrayed in various colours and suggest the power of literature to offer new imaginaries and new possibilities. This contrast arises from the fact that the boy's shadow has a fondness for books. Remarkably, within the blue gray landscape of the boy's bedroom, the books on the table beside his bed are the only multi-coloured objects. Conversely, the illustration features a blue book lying on the floor, suggesting a sense of disinterest or neglect by the character toward this particular book, as it does not align with the colourful books that his pink shadow likes. Additionally, the multicoloured books can be read as a reference to the LGBTQ+ rainbow, which is a sign of hope and represents inclusivity and diversity. This is in line with the book's gender philosophy: that a person's gender is a spectrum of expressions and feelings. In fact, the limited space allocated to the expression of the boy's true interests, symbolized by a few coloured books in his bedroom, in a sea of blue, signifies a lack of happiness and joy in his life, as well as the extended pressures to conform to "blue" norms. It is noteworthy that the overall shade of blue in the boy's bedroom landscape is a reference to depression and sadness.

"It's not just a shadow, it's you most inner-you" – A Case of Queer Mirroring

In *My Shadow Is Pink*, the protagonist lives in a blue-shadowed world where his gender had been prescribed even before he was born. From the beginning, he realizes that his shadow does not correspond to the frames on the wall of his family living room. There are many mirrors and wall frames that reflect blue-shadowed men in the family and remind him of his difference (See Figure 4). In fact, illustrations of mirrors and frames on the wall as a reflection of one's image are a recurrent motif in the book and could be read through the prism of Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, centered on language and identity formation, presented a new perspective influenced by post-structuralism through his reinterpretation of Freud. In *Écrits* (2001), Lacan introduces the idea of the child's Mirror Stage, which occurs at 6-18 months of their development. During this phase, the child begins to differentiate between themselves and others as they encounter their reflection in the mirror. Prior to this, the child exists in the Real stage, according to Lacan, where they are driven by their basic needs and feel inextricably unified with their mother. After the Mirror Stage, the child achieves their first realization of bodily autonomy, marking the beginning of a lifelong process of self-identification in relation to others, such as by gender, culture, or geography (Mambrol 2016).

Lacan suggests that the reflection in the mirror represents the "Ideal I" - a stable and autonomous version of the self that the child longs to be, but cannot experience within themselves. This quest is unattainable and could cause negative effects such as anxiety, neurosis, and even psychosis.

The child additionally becomes aware that before this stage, their body was fragmented and disorganized, causing them to dread returning to this state. The mirror stage of development also represents the child's shift from the pre-linguistic Imaginary stage, where they lacked an understanding of the differentiation between themselves and the other objects and subjects in the world, to the Symbolic stage of language acquisition. During the Imaginary stage, the self is whole, unified, and not influenced by differences. However, upon realization of the presence of the Other, the Self becomes divided and fragmented, signifying the end of the Imaginary state and the beginning of the complex Symbolic world - a place marked by predefined gender differences and social roles, as well as a world of language (Mambrol 2016).

Within the narrative of *My Shadow Is Pink*, there are a number of mirrorings at work. One of them manifests in the frames on the family's living room walls (See Figure 4). These frames are pictures of male relatives whom the little boy is expected to follow as gender role models. As

shown in the illustration (Figure 3), all of these characters have blue shadows, representing cis- and heteronormative masculinities. The little boy in Scott's story differentiates himself from the world around him and achieves understanding of his self-identity in relation to these blue-shadowed male role models, who act as the Other and the "Ideal I". The empty frames on the walls can be read as blank spaces where the boy can position himself to achieve and form a sense of self-identity in the Symbolic world he is born into, marked by cis- and heteronormative scripts.

In *My Shadow Is Pink*, the shadows act as mirrors as well. There are times when a character's shadow mirrors the character's body posture, while at other times it is not the case. For example, as shown in Figure 6, the little boy is illustrated as standing with a grumpy face while his shadow dances. His side-eye look suggests that sometimes he is not quite happy with what his shadow does, perhaps because he is unhappy about how this shadow, which makes him different from others, just does what it wants, urging the boy to break the gender rules of his social, outside world. However, when he lets himself feel the excitement for sparkly things, his body posture starts to look like that of his shadow, implying a sense of wholeness and happiness (See Figure 6). In other words, the boy mirrors his shadow when he lets himself feel authentic, implying that it is through engaging in one's shadow's interests (i.e., the true self) that a wholeness and happiness can be achieved.

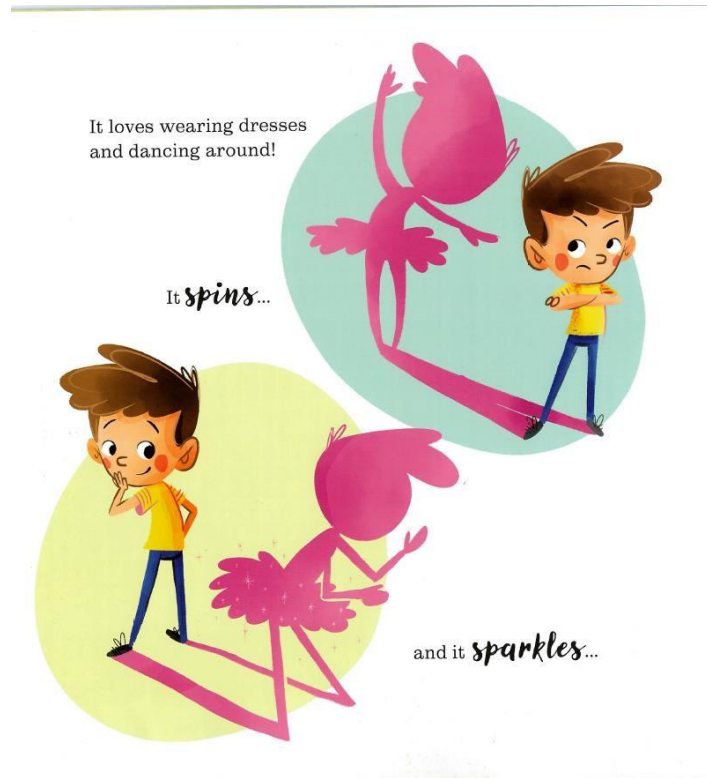


Figure 6. *My shadow loves dresses and dancing around*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Another type of mirroring in *My Shadow Is Pink* happens in the interpersonal relationship between the little boy and his father. Although the Lacanian parent-child mirroring posits that it is the child who mirrors the parent, in Stuart's story we witness a complete shift of mirroring. This happens in the context of the father's support and affection for his son when he finds the little boy feeling lonely and distressed as a result of being the only boy with a pink shadow. An example of this is the first day of school in the story. For the first day of school, students are invited to wear their shadow's favorite outfit, and since the little boy's shadow loves princesses and fairies, he decides to wear a yellow dress. The little boy goes to school with his dress on while his 'heart skips a beat' (Stuart 2020, 13). The story goes on to show that, as the boy enters the class wearing his yellow dress, he realizes that he is not like the rest of the kids and his voice becomes too quiet to say hi, indicating that the boy is suddenly afraid. His classmates stare at him and no one says anything. The kids are illustrated looking surprised with their mouths open, and some are pictured with their hands on their mouths as if they are witnessing something wrong, something that should not be done. Consequently, the boy runs out the door and pushes

past his father as he runs to their house 'feeling angry and sad' (Stuart 2020, 17). What we see on the next page, is an illustration of the boy lying in his bed, thinking 'if my shadow was blue, I'd be there making friends. I'd be laughing and playing and drawing with pens' (Stuart 2020, 17) (See Figure 5). Meanwhile his pink shadow is exhausted, sitting in a corner of the bedroom looking sad and lonely. This scene is when the father becomes sure about how important and genuine the boy's pink shadow is. So, he goes to his room to talk to him and tell him that he should not shy away from who he really is, and educate him about hidden shadows and what they mean to us. The father, having put on a pink dress similar to the boy's yellow dress, affectionately and kindly explains that our shadows are our true selves and encourages the little boy to pick up his dress and stand up for who he is. He then accompanies his child back to school, walking down the sidewalk wearing a pink dress while holding the little boy's hand. It is as if the city needs to see this scene. Probably, the father (and, by extension, the author, whose relationship with his own son is represented in the book) wants to tell us, the people of the city and his boy's classmates that even when your shadow is blue, you can still support your child's pink shadow. The father essentially role models how a parent can become a LGBTQ ally. Wearing a pink dress as the colour of his son's shadow, the father character politically performs his expression of solidarity and support. Given that the concepts of queerness and queer identities have intertwined in various ways with societal expectations of the body and the beliefs surrounding what it means to be queer and how it relates to expressing oneself through style (Cole 2000), this performance flips Lacan's mirror stage backward and queers it: instead of the child mirroring his father's gender identity, the father mirrors that of the child (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Dad wears a dress*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Another noteworthy aspect of such queering of Lacan's Mirror Stage in *My Shadow Is Pink* is the father-child power dynamic that it portrays. Traditionally, the father figure is the source of authority within the family, required to be obeyed for his word is law. Rooted in the Enlightenment idea of modernity, such a view about the centrality of the father figure in the family identifies children with their animal natures and considers them as a threat to modernity (Seidler 2006). In this sense, the father figure is responsible for taking control and exert power to dominate nature by culture and reason. However, as Seidler (2006) argues, it is the reason of a dominant white European masculinity that started to legislate law and determined what is good and moral for everyday social life. Therefore, the father's role is to intimidate and dominate children, resulting in a distant relationship between father and child (especially fathers and sons). Returning to *My Shadow Is Pink*: at the beginning, he stares at the little boy as the child dances and twirls with his happy pink shadow. As shown in Figure 6, the father, who is described with

his shadow as blue, big, and strong, walks in the room with a stare, and this is when the pink shadow stops moving. Then, he tells the boy that this, referring to the little boy's interests and activities (for example, loving ponies and books and pink toys, princesses and fairies) is just a phase that one of these days will change as the boy's shadow will eventually turn blue.

The gesture, words, and facial expression of the father figure in this scene is the manifestation hegemonic masculinity, or what Connell (2005) describes as the embodiment of the most dominant way of being a man. Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by its ability to legitimize men's dominant position in society and justify the subordination of other gender identities, including women and marginalized ways of being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).



Figure 8. It's just a phase, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

Hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily lead to violence, although it may be reinforced through force. Instead, it represents a form of dominance that is established through cultural norms, institutional structures, and coercive tactics (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). *My Shadow Is Pink* references this type of fatherhood and manhood as the norm but then dismantles it by depicting the father accepting his son's identity and encouraging him to openly show who he is. As the father character evolves throughout the narrative, he allows himself to embrace his own non-normative masculinity, exhibiting traits typically associated with femininity, such as care and support. We also see the father's own shadow letting go and becoming freer and more

playful and joyful (see e.g. Figure 7). It is in light of such an acceptance that their relationship grows and they become more intimate. In the illustration showing the father and his son going to school together (See Figure 9), the characters' shadows are depicted as intimate and close as the father's blue shadow is carrying the little boy's pink shadow on his shoulders.



Figure 9. *Together we stand*, Stuart, Scott. 2020. *My Shadow Is Pink*. Melbourne : Larrikin House.

On Healing, Imagination, and Becoming a Child: A *Self-reflection*

My Shadow Is Pink is a story about validating and embracing one's inner true self. It is a story of breaking free from the tight circles and stiff frames that prescribe a certain way of being. Throughout the book, in all the illustrations where characters engage in activities that their shadows enjoy, one or two graphic elements extend beyond the surrounding circle, suggesting a sense of freedom and breaking free from constraints (e.g. Figure 3 with illustrations of family members and relatives). Coming from Iran, a country governed by patriarchal and cis- and heteronormative power structures, I deeply empathize with the little boy in the story. In fact, reading this book as a 30-year-old adult has been an immense emotional experience for me. As an individual who spent my formative years in Iran, this story strongly resonates with my personal journey of struggling with and healing from the traumatic and depressing memories that were forced on me in childhood due to the deeply rooted oppressive power structures around me. For me, healing, or the process of growing out of depression, has been a constant practice of

encountering my inner child, becoming a child, and re-experiencing childhood as an adult to treat some deep wounds. But before I explain how *My Shadow Is Pink* has helped me in this process, there are a few points about the context that I grew up in that are helpful to mention.

Iran, my home country, which is located in the Middle East, is governed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, an oppressive regime with countless patriarchal laws and regulations that systematically marginalize women, as well as gender and sexual minorities. A prominent manifestation of this oppression is the compulsory hijab, a requirement imposed on girls once they reach religious puberty (age nine or eleven depending on the religious leader you follow). Not adhering to hijab properly carries severe consequences. The tragic death of Jina Mahsa Amini in morality police custody on 16th September 2022, allegedly due to non-compliance with the mandatory dress code for women, is an example of such consequences. In fact, following Amini's death, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement started in Iran, during which hundreds of other women and girls were arrested, tortured, and beaten to death for the same reason (Dehghan 2023).

Having lived under the oppressive and violent rules of my country's government for 30 years, I have experienced severe depression and developed a sense of detachment from my own self, mind and body, as they have consistently been invalidated and concealed since even before I reached religious puberty. From my father checking my body postures as a little girl, to my mother constantly asking me not to take pictures with girls at school because she was worried for our family honour in case a man, other than male individuals who are mahram to us (e.g., spouse, father, brother, grandfather, or uncles) had seen it, my body and girlhood was always policed by close family members. The same was true about our hair. There were many stories in school classrooms about being hung up by our hair in Hell if a Namahram, i.e., a person who is not related to us by a close blood relationship, breastfeeding, or marriage, ever saw our hair uncovered. And these were all told to us before the age of nine.

I grew up feeling the trace of gender discrimination and systematic oppressions on my body in everyday life. Sitting, walking, sleeping, speaking, everything that involved my body was policed and corrected based on patriarchal and societal norms ascribed to girls in Iran. Becoming a teenager made it worse: I had a woman's body and everyone used to tell me I had to hide it because men and boys would be tempted. I well remember how we girls in the family started to hunch over when we became teenagers. We grew up and concurrently shrank into ourselves. Hijab was the solution offered to us: cover your body as much as you can. This concealment,

however, has resulted in a patriarchal kind of unfamiliarity with my body. Continuously obscuring a part of one's body affects how you perceive and experience the material aspects of your body and being, as it becomes difficult to observe its changes, scars, or natural ageing process. I am not used to seeing my bare arms or legs in public and I am self-conscious about it, as if it is not a thing that I naturally would do or that I have a right or the agency to choose what to do with. Living outside of Iran for the first time, coming to the UK to pursue my studies at the University of York, has made me realize this on a deeper level. Even though I am a continent away from my homeland, I still find it hard to feel comfortable in my own skin. I am privileged to exercise the freedom of choice in my attire now that I am living in a country that upholds greater personal freedoms, at least when it comes to clothing and self-presentation. This newfound liberty to wear almost anything I desire undoubtedly represents a form of liberation that was denied to me almost all my life. But this freedom is accompanied by a certain degree of tension. I first noticed it when I realized it is getting hard to choose an outfit for the day. There were times that I would even return to my accommodation to change my outfit right after I had left wearing a short skirt or a top, only because I was not feeling comfortable. Was it the force of my Iranian friends asking for "abroad girl looks" that I had worn them? Was it the voice of my parents threatening and criticizing me that made me return home to change my clothes? Or was it my inner child that simply did not want to appear in those clothes because she was never role-modelled how to make her own choices about her own body without painful repercussions? Imagine a little bird has come out of the cage but cannot fly yet. Entering a context that lacks the explicit patriarchal dictations of Iran did not directly translate into a state of free and comfortable interaction with my own material body. But it was not just my body. Oppressive regimes have many overt and hidden methods of oppression, marginalization, and exploitation. A girl's personhood, agency, and inner-most self are not validated in patriarchal families and societies. Living in a situation where gender is the reason one is controlled and limited in all aspects of social life may subject a person to a similar oppressive force turned toward themselves. This includes being unable to validate your own abilities, feelings, and ideas on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. To identify and neutralize such invisible traps sewn into how I live and experience the world around me by patriarchy, a continuous process of self-reflection, -acceptance and -love is required. One which involves body, child and childhood, and political empowerment. Because of this, how children's books can teach us to experience our inner

children, the permissions and role modelling that can give us to help us experience our personal and political agency, including when it comes to gender expression and gendered being, matters. Children's literature that I identify as emerging from #MeToo becomes especially significant in this respect for both children and adults, thanks to the ways in which it challenges oppressive gender norms that lead to multiple forms of everyday violence.

Healing is also about empowering myself, the little girl inside me, so that she can break out of the circles around her. This is not easy because I can only do this by exploring my deepest inner layers. It is through these internal conflicts that I can remember my childhood better and in more detail. It is from the heart of these conflicts that I can confront my deepest wounds, explore different corners of my existence, and reconnect with my past as a child. Healing is a process of becoming a child through reliving special moments in childhood. An experience that gives me a better understanding of childhood as the early years of human existence and becomes a lens through which I can see the child inside others, and empathize. It is the collection of these interactions and perceptions that defines my relationship with others and my level of acceptance towards them, as well as myself. This definition also enables me to empower the inner child in others in the same way, and establish better and deeper relationships with others and more effectively experience and understand concepts such as difference, acceptance and openness. It occurs to me that the patriarchal power structures that want women to be locked up and hunched over also want to hide their pain and emotions. The same dictatorial regime that forcibly puts headscarves on women and girls, and takes the lives of innocent citizens in brutal and inhumane ways, also tries to show a calm and safe image of itself in the media. "Everything is fine, safe and sound." As if they want to see women and girls, and all citizens, alone and isolated. They want to cover up our sufferings by force, the same way that they invalidate our bodies. But let's take the hijab off of our pain. Talking about depression and the prolonged effects of living under those strict rules for me is like removing a veil from my head, a veil that prevented me from facing my deepest fears and sorrows for years due to a forced and systematic suppression of emotions and self-knowledge. I remember my mother saying that we should always close the curtains so that no one can see us at home. My father would complain if the door or window was left open. Sometimes when I walk in the streets of York, seeing houses with open curtains makes me uncomfortable at a first glance, as if there is something in the privacy of the house that should have been hidden from my eyes, but I am eye-to-eye with something that is not meant to

be seen. But life, in all its ordinariness, suddenly shows itself to me through the window that frames it within those few seconds that I get to see it.

It is noteworthy that this self-reflection is evidence that adults can also be the audience of children's literature, as every adult has an inner child that can be touched by watching and empathizing with a child's experiences of being trapped by some graphically drawn tight circles that symbolize the powers coercing us in our lifetime, based on our gender, race, geography, etc. If the adult in you, by reading or hearing stories such as *My Shadow Is Pink*, can remember something in your childhood that had made the shadow of "your inner most you" stretch behind the sofa like that of the little boy's in Stuart's story, then you can remember how scared, lonely, and sad it felt. In this sense, I argue that in this moment of connection between adulthood and childhood that is unlocked through stories like *My Shadow Is Pink*, we can begin to attribute the same capacity for agency, political consciousness, and complexity -that we assume only adults have- to young children, and witness how political, imaginative, and resistive children can be if we empower them by the tools that social movements like #MeToo has provided for us. We can understand children's literature, or obtain a deeper reading of children's literature, through the lens of #MeToo: through themes such as political and active empowerment, including queer and gendered empowerment represented in stories about coming out.

This coming out is political and it is empowering not just for children but for adults as well. If we allow ourselves to read children's literature and childhood through something as adult as #MeToo, we can unlock not only our understandings of these books, and children, but also our understanding of how gender identities work, how they are shaped and ingrained in us, and how they are carried into adulthood. Stories like *My Shadow Is Pink* have the capacity to resonate with not only children but also adults because every adult possesses an inner child that can experience fear, pain, isolation, and marginalization as a result of power dynamics established during their formative years, which continue to influence them throughout adulthood. After all, we all have an inner child who, with support and love, can learn and start to change and see the world and ourselves differently: to imagine a world where everyone can live peacefully together like the last scene in *My Shadow Is Pink*, where children at school are shown to play together all peacefully and happily.

Conclusion

A literary analysis of Scott Stuart's *My Shadow Is Pink* was presented in this chapter. The book tells the story of a young boy initially struggling to fit into a heteronormative world where male shadows are expected to be blue. However, as the story progresses, he not only embraces his pink shadow but also inspires his father to break societal norms by wearing a dress and embracing a more vibrant and colourful life. The book features significant themes related to gender identity, self-expression, and the promotion of unconditional love, respect, and affirmative parenting, and effectively conveys these messages through its emphasis on gender performativity as a form of development of gender identity. In addition to influencing his father to rethink his attitudes to gender, the little boy's actions inspire other children in his school to embrace their own shadows while celebrating their differences. A textual and visual analysis of the story demonstrates the power of free self-expression, and affirmative love by parents. More specifically, *My Shadow Is Pink* offers unique ways of politically empowering children in the post-#MeToo era by associating the protagonist of the story with the agency and power to reshape the gendered world around him simply by being true to himself. Children's literature plays a vital role in helping children understand and navigate the world, including complex topics such as gender normativity and personal agency from the position of vulnerability and dependency, empowering them to make their own choices, rather than conforming to societal expectations. Stories like Scott's provide young readers with role models who challenge traditional norms, encouraging them to question and explore their own identities. By presenting alternative narratives and perspectives, children's literature can become a powerful tool in fostering inclusivity, acceptance, and the celebration of everyone's unique personhood. Additionally, *My Shadow Is Pink* holds immense significance for adult readers. Evidence for this is found in the researcher's personal account of healing, and validating and embracing one's true self. Through its exploration of themes such as breaking free from societal constraints and the impact of oppressive power structures on children, the book can resonate with the child inside adult readers who relate to the damaging impact of strict and limiting patriarchal, cis- and heteronormative systems. Inspired by the protagonist in *My Shadow Is Pink*, a political empowerment of one's inner child is presented and I have argued that children's literature in the

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post #MeToo era can play a vital role in fostering empathy, understanding, and inclusivity. By engaging in dialogue and embracing our common humanity, we can begin to heal our scars and create a more inclusive and compassionate world. In essence, *My Shadow Is Pink*, as an example of #MeToo children's literature, not only provides a space for individuals to explore their own gender identities and true selves but also encourages a broader conversation about issues such as gender constructionism, political agency, and the dismantling of oppressive systems.

Case Study II: Franny's Father Is a Feminist

“Feminist: A person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes” (Adichie 2014).

Written by Rhonda Leet, an author known to be ‘a teacher and advocate for children [who] believes all children deserve to thrive in the classroom and throughout their lives, regardless of their gender’ (“Rhonda Leet,” n.d.), *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* was first published in 2018. The book tells the story of a little girl and her feminist father, who believes girls can do anything boys can. Situated in the private and public spheres, the book shows how little girls can be empowered by their parents to take control of their narrative and resist the patriarchal scripts around their gender. It also opens up space for herstories: stories of women's achievements and resistance to the structural patriarchal forces that traditionally and historically aimed at oppressing and controlling them. Leet's story, centered around another parent-child relationship across everyday life discourse, shifts stereotypical gender norms by showing female and male characters engaged in activities that traditionally are not considered appropriate for their genders (e.g., a caregiver father figure, a bread-winner mother figure). It also portrays caring, nonviolent, nontoxic masculinity (e.g., Franny's father) and shows how a parent's feminist approach to parenthood can empower children.

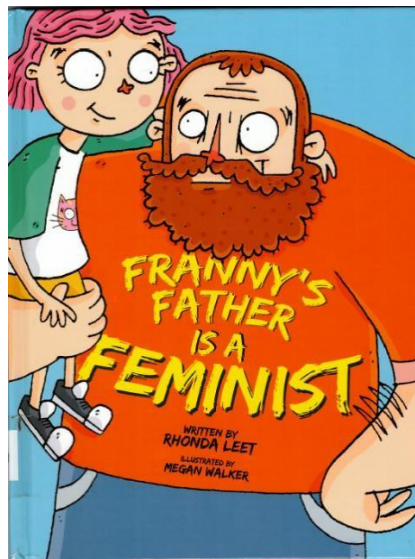


Figure 10. Front cover of *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

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#MeToo is a movement about gender, sexuality, and violence, and this chapter features a literary analysis of gender norms in *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* and how the book bends these norms. Reading *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, in the post #MeToo era, where power dynamics of misogyny and structural violence are more than ever being highlighted by feminist and literary scholars (Holland and Hewett 2021), can help us see the creative and safe ways that we can address those issues with young children and educate them despite those limiting power structures. Leet's book also introduces children to activism by bringing examples of female activists (through stories read to Franny and her friends at slumber parties) who resisted the patriarchal forces around them, as well as depicting the protagonist of the story (Franny) as the flagbearer in a scene about social justice activism (more on this later).

Given that a core element of tackling violence against women is addressing gender inequality, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* portrays a father-child relationship where the father character takes every opportunity to embrace and empower his daughter and help her build her confidence beyond gender scripts. Gender inequality, which reads as unequal power relations between women, men and gender and sexual minorities, rigid gender roles, norms and hierarchies, and ascribing women, trans and non-binary people and sexual minorities a lower status in society, is one of the key issues that the #MeToo movement addresses. In *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, Rhonda Leet creates a fictional father character whose fatherhood is enacted through an empowering mindset toward his daughter. Moreover, the power relation between Franny's father and mother in the book is based on equality and respect.

In this chapter, I will delve into specific examples from *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* and explore gender norms surrounding chore division, emotions, appearance and resistance, highlighting their relation to #MeToo is highlighted. Before moving on to close reading *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, a few elements about the context of Leet's story can be helpful. First, it is only Franny and Sasha, another girl character, that carry proper names in the story, and everyone else is referenced by their relationship to them (e.g., Franny's father, Franny's mom, Franny's cat, Sasha's father, etc.). This choice of character naming as a literary device encourages the children reading the story to project and validate their own identities, personhoods, and independence in the process of reading. This story is about them and their empowerment. Moreover, this invokes the uniqueness of every child and their need to be centered in their own narratives, an important value that demands appreciation from parents beyond stereotypes.

Furthermore, the fathers and mothers in the book have no names and are referenced based on their role in relation to the child, which can be read as a form of role modelling child-centered parenting to the adult readers of the book.

“It’s simple, really”: Being Feminist Is Not a [Gendered] Chore

Franny's Father Is a Feminist starts with the first two pages picturing a little girl and a father engaging in a painting activity in an environment that seems to be the backyard of their home. The illustration in these two pages pictures a happy image of both the little girl and her father enjoying what they are doing; painting pink shapes on the wooden fences that enclose a green yard full of flowers and plants that shine beautifully under the sun on a clear day, evoking feelings of happiness and warmth in readers (See Figure 11).

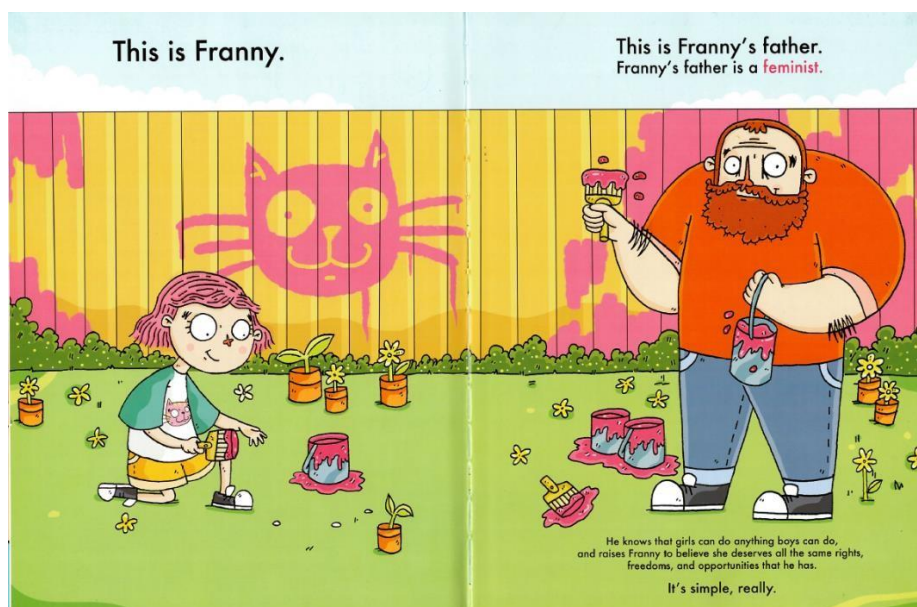


Figure 11. *Franny and her father painting cats*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

The illustration in the first two pages perfectly sets the context for the story: there is a backyard full of pink colour pots, brushes, and drawings on the fence, with two characters that appear on their own separate pages, displaying their independence and autonomy as they engage in a common activity. The positioning of Franny, the little girl of the story, who is depicted on the first page and is the first one who gets introduced to the reader, is the first sign of empowerment

and agency-attribution. 'This is Franny' is the caption for the illustration of a girl wearing a t-shirt with a cat face on it, comfortable shorts and a pair of sneakers. Franny's comfortable, sporty attire, and her engagement in mostly, outdoor activities already makes a statement about how simple and natural it can be for little girls to be physically active and not restricted by gendered beauty standards.

Franny's father, the second character of the story is introduced right after Franny: 'This is Franny's father', captioning 'He knows that girls can do anything boys can do, and raises Franny to believe she deserves all the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities that he has. It's simple really' (Leet 2018, 2). Being a feminist is the first description that the narrator gives us about Franny's father. Interestingly, the description Leet gives about Franny's father's feminism is very similar to the definition of the word in Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*: 'a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes' (Adichie 2014). The equality of genders is a social ideal whereby women and men can share equal rights and a balance of power, status, opportunities, and rewards, and is defined as equitable access to and use of resources, equitable participation in relationships, the household, the community, and political arenas, and safety or freedom from violence (Squires 2007). The realization of gender equality, the driver of many feminist movements and initiatives throughout history, is conditional on informed practices in creating equal and gender-conscious social, cultural and political contexts and structures (Squires 2007). But where do we start from?

Children's books like *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, like *My Shadow Is Pink*, suggest that gender equality starts in the home. Equal division of household chores and childcare comes to act as the foundation of an equal relationship between genders. This is what Smith and Johnson (2020) reported after interviewing a population of women in the preparation of their book, *Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace*. Women in this study had shared the same idea that real gender partnership requires men to do their fair share of household chores, childcare, transportation for children's activities, the emotional labor of planning and tracking activities, and supporting their partner's career (D. G. Smith and Johnson 2020). This report suggests that when men genuinely enact an equal partnership at home, it accelerates gender equality outside of the home. The importance of participation in and distribution of household chores comes from the effects and concepts associated with each of these chores at the community level. The social role theory of gender differences posits that the division of chores in

childhood shapes beliefs about and expectations from each gender in the future (Evans 2003). In a heteronormative family structure, children get to participate in different chores based on their gender because they are seen as needing to acquire the abilities to perform their assigned gender (Kimmel 2004).

These sex-based expectations shape how individuals conduct themselves based on assigned sex and gender at birth (Evans 2003). For instance, girls and women are generally expected to dress in typically feminine ways and be emotional, accommodating and nurturing, while boys and men are supposed to be strong, confident and aggressive (Money 1973). These norms or stereotypes that are manifested through constructed, gendered personality characteristics, domestic activities, occupations, and physical appearances (Money 1973), which eventually create an imbalanced power relation between men and women, with women generally being systematically disadvantaged by gender inequality (World Health Organization 2009). This is due to the fact that the norms around women allocate an inferior value to them, compared with men, and consequently there emerges a belief that women do not deserve the same opportunities and benefits as men (Kimmel 2004).

That is why in *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, Leet chooses the home environment as the context of her feminist story. Right after introducing Franny and her father, she addresses the household chore division and its relationship to gender. After introducing Franny and her father, Leet takes us back to when Franny's father was a little boy and participated in the household chores with his sister. According to their parents' instructions, Franny's father was responsible for mowing the lawn and taking out the trash, while his sister was responsible for doing the dishes and helping with the laundry (See Figure 12). These chores are excellent instances of gendered division of household activities, as the first two signify outdoor activities that require physical power and are quicker to complete, actively preparing Franny's father for outdoor paid occupations in adulthood; whereas the second group, i.e., doing the dishes and laundry, are within the realm of the home and will educate Franny's father's sister about motherhood and other caring responsibilities in the home.



Figure 12. *Boy and girl chores*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

Franny's father's first introduction to feminism is perhaps the moment when he sees the gendered division of house duties as 'odd', when his dad explains the reason his sister cannot mow the lawn: 'that's a boy chore' (Leet 2018, 4). So, Franny's father tries to disrupt it by one day offering to swap chores with his sister. The following pages depict Franny's father helping with the laundry while being impressed by his sister's speed in mowing the lawn (See Figure 13). Franny's father and his sister in these two pages are illustrated in a way that everything seems just right: everyone is doing something they enjoy happily and successfully; Franny's father's sister mows the whole lawn 'in no time flat', and he 'always loved the smell of fresh laundry' (Leet 2018, 5-6)



Figure 13. *Franny's father and his sister enjoy doing chores*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

Regarding the impact of household chore division on perceived/constructed gender roles, Chodorow (1995) posits that the differences between masculine and feminine personality traits and roles stem from the fact that women are generally seen as responsible for early childcare. This social factor differentiates how male and female children experience their environment and come to see themselves and their own, as well as others' gender. An effect of such navigation among one's and others' genders is that, for instance, females often make sense of themselves in relation to others more than their male counterparts do (Cislighi and Heise 2020), therefore, girls and women might see themselves as responsible for meeting the expectations and needs of others, especially those of male individuals. In Leet's story, what feels very odd about chore distribution to Franny's father seems to be a condition for which there is no logical reason, yet it impacts how he and his sister feel about doing the activities. His sister's speed in mowing implies her ability to do so. She is obviously better than Franny's father at mowing, but we witness this only when she is allowed to do it in the first place. Franny's father had always loved the smell of fresh laundry but he was not given a chance to enjoy this smell before, because of gender normativity. These instances suggest that it is only in a safe and empowering environment that children can enjoy participating in household chores and their abilities can truly be shown and seen.

A Literary Analysis of Post-#MeToo Anglophone Children's Literature

After reviewing the chore division example from Franny's father's childhood, the narrator's voice tells us more about the benefits of an empowering environment for children where parents encourage and nurture their kids' skills regardless of the gender stereotypes that divide them.

'When Franny was little, she loved to sort all the tools from the workbench in the garage,' Franny's father 'taught her all their names and also how to use them', and soon after 'she could take her bicycle apart and put it back together, all by herself' (Leet 2018, 9). Franny and her father even 'moved to larger vehicle' since then (Leet 2018, 8). This gradual improvement of Franny's skill and her serious and ambitious look while working with engines allow us to imagine a little female mechanic growing up in a safe and encouraging environment; an image, ability, and possible future career that is, fundamentally, the promising and positive impact of non-misogynist parenting practices.

Apart from the examples mentioned above, the task division between Franny's father and mother is also worth highlighting. While it is Franny's father's responsibility to take care of Franny, her education, and well-being, Franny's mother is the breadwinner of the household. Notably, despite the gendered norms around male and female occupations, Franny's father grows to be responsible for childcare while his wife, Franny's mom, goes to work. In fact, Franny's mom is introduced to readers as late as halfway through the story, showing her next to Franny and her dad, captioning 'This is Franny's mother. She has an important job' (Leet 2018, 13).



Figure 14. *This Franny's mom*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

In the illustration of Franny's family, both Franny and her dad are looking at the mother proudly. The depiction of Franny's father engaging in household chores and taking care of Franny with happiness and satisfaction suggests that not only is he good at it, but he enjoys it. Such a portrait of a happy heterosexual family unit, with a father who is at home and a mother who is at work, is another way in which Leet's story stands out from the majority of children's books before #MeToo, where the caregiver is always the mother figure and the father is absent (e.g. *Peepo!* written by Jannet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg, 1983). Although traditionally, men are considered the breadwinners of the household, in Leet's story, we see a shift of roles between parents, too. However, this does not affect any of them negatively. In fact, they both respect and appreciate each other's roles and participation. When Franny asks her parents whose job is more important, her dad replies 'We both share the most important job in the world, and that's raising you' (Leet

2018, 16).

These textual and visual clues support the idea that a happy family is possible beyond the gender norms that prescribe certain roles for fathers, mothers, and children. Through a non-stereotypical approach to household chores and task divisions in Franny's family's house, the book challenges gender norms around household chores' division and portrays a happy family where members are loved, respected, and empowered by one another. This "feminist" ideal is made possible by the narrative disruption of hetero-normative gender stereotypes.

It's okay for fathers to tear up and be "TOO supportive": Non-gendered Emotions/Feelings

The image of a masculine adult man jumping up and down to cheer for his daughter at a ballet rehearsal is not something we are used to seeing in illustrated story books. However, fathers in Leet's story know that they can loudly enjoy watching their children's ballet practice, even if such an explicit, public expression of feeling seems somehow excessive for their gender in a gender-normative world (See Figure 15). Through a depiction of Franny's father's encouragement and support in Franny's after-school programs, Leet, in addition to reminding us of the father's responsibility for childcare, conveys an important message: the father, not while watching a hockey game (a masculine-coded activity), but during a ballet recital (a feminised activity), gets so excited and shows his emotions and support to Franny with physical gestures that are very similar to ballet movements.

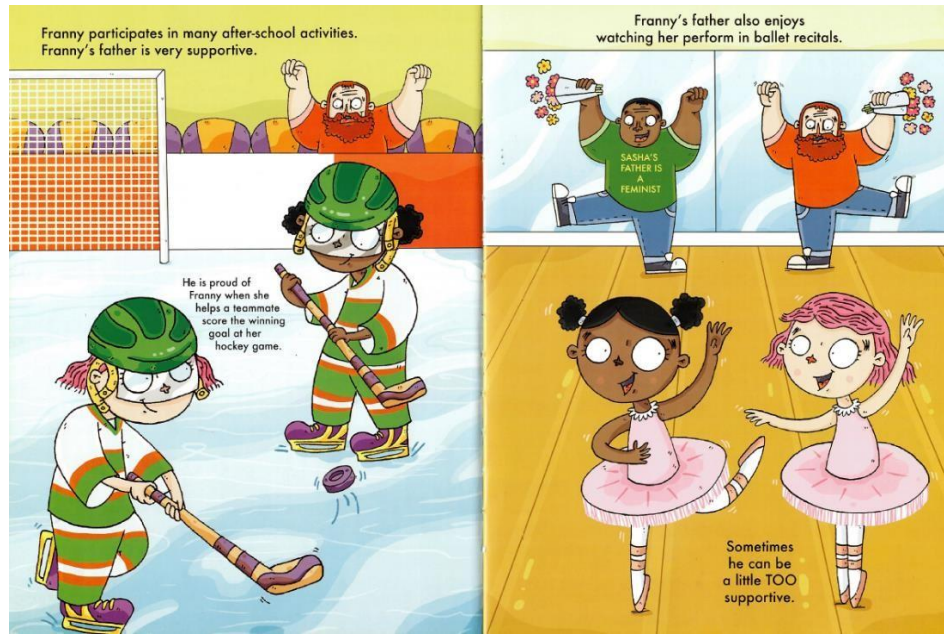


Figure 15. *Happy dads*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

In these scenes, we witness Franny's father dancing with joy and love for his daughter, while also mirroring her body language in a way as suggestive as the father/son mirroring we saw in *My Shadow Is Pink*. The importance of this image is due to what it suggests about having and expressing feelings as a man as masculine-looking and brawny as Franny's father. The exaggeration of Franny's father's happy expressions and use of the word 'too' in capital letters dismantles the gendered beliefs about male emotions. There are destructive stereotypes inherent in masculine emotion culture where men are generally seen and expected to be less emotional, meaning experiencing fewer or less intense emotions, and being less expressive in the sense that they hide their emotions (Chaplin 2015). These harmful norms are not just related to positive feelings, such as excitement, hope, interest, and amusement, but also exist in the way men express, or do not express, negative emotions of fear, doubt, despair, and sadness (Chaplin 2015). It is noteworthy that the stereotypes around men's negative emotions may have severe effects on them. In her book, *The Gendered Landscape of Suicide*, Cleary (2019) discusses how the heterosexist norms revolving around and affecting male emotion culture hinder male individuals from both understanding and expressing their negative emotions, or asking for help: a problem that, when prolonged, increases suicide rates.

In the discourse of parent-child relationships, parents' emotion culture influences the child, too.

Studies show that parents' emotions and the ways they express their feelings shape and affect a child's development of healthy emotional skills, or the so-called emotion socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad 1998). During the emotion socialization process, children observe how parents show their feelings and start to learn about emotions and the norms around them (Thomassin, Seddon, and Vaughn-Coaxum 2020).

Emotional expression, or the way we communicate or hide what we feel internally in the form of facial, vocal, and postural expressions, is largely affected by gender as a sociocultural factor in the specific contexts where it occurs. As psychosocial developmental theories of gender differences propose, children observe their immediate environment to develop an understanding of their "own" gender (boy or girl) and proceed to act, feel, and behave in a way that fits their own gender group's standards (Ruble and Martin 2002).

Back to *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, in the ballet recital scene, we see the image of an overly-expressive white father from the Western American context, next to another cheering father of colour wearing the same t-shirt as Franny's father that says: "Sasha's Father is a feminist" (See Figure 15). This helps readers imagine overexcited feminist fathers responsible for childcare on a broader scale of race and ethnicity. Through this illustration of a happy moment shared between Franny's father and Sasha's father, where the two become the loud big guys watching and cheering their daughters at a ballet practice while holding a bouquet of colourful flowers, we are shown a non-heteronormative image of men of different races whose excitement is apparent on their faces, body postures, and perhaps in their voices, too, as even though the narrator's voice is the only voice we hear on this page, the two fathers are illustrated with their mouths gaping, clearly voicing their excitement.

In *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, male characters are not encouraged to minimize emotional displays. In fact, they are represented as the only ones crying during family movie night. Franny's father cries while watching movies with the family (See Figure 16): 'Franny knows her dad cries, and that's okay'; when he does, she gives him a tissue while kindly holding his arm.

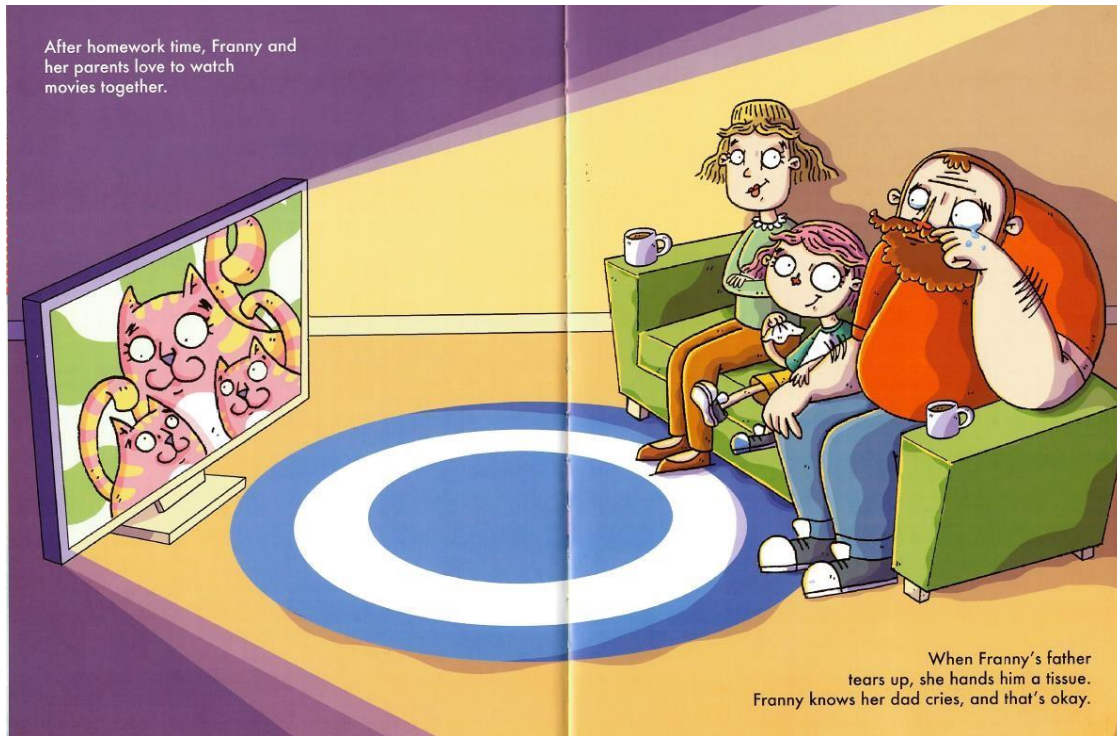


Figure 16. *Dad cries at movie nights*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

This image not only depicts a man's expression of sadness, vulnerability, and fragility, but also a child's agency, empathy and emotional intelligence in handling this situation. Franny is not surprised to see her dad cry, she does not attempt to stop or calm her dad with a "suck it up!" approach; instead, she becomes an active agent in empathizing and creating a safe space by giving her dad a tissue; not only is she capable of seeing him cry, but also persuades the reader, by role modelling an emotionally healthy response, that there is no shame, guilt, or judgement associated with sad feelings or emotional men in Franny's family. This is of particular significance in the post-#MeToo era, as emotions serve as a platform for political resistance against oppression and privilege. Consequently, they are closely tied to social justice and can play a pivotal role in reshaping gender dynamics (Pease 2012). The reason behind this is that men's inexpressiveness prepares them for positions of power and privilege where they can be immune to the consequences of their actions and maintains their control and violence over others without caring what happens to them (Sattel 1976).

On the basis that our emotional relationship to the dominant social norms and exploitative social

practices perpetuates those norms and scripts (Zembylas and Chubbuck 2009), challenging those norms and scripts involves changing how we feel about them. In other words, the path towards changing the social injustices that lead to sexual violence and harassment consists of revising and transforming emotional geographies; how we feel about other people's suffering and pain impacts how we act, and how social norms materialise (Gómez Garrido 2011). Therefore, the depiction of Franny's father as an emotional and also expressive figure is significant: his character portrays healthy masculinity associated with a caring, kind side of manhood.

From a Tomboy to a Ballerina: Appearance and Clothing as Un-/Gendered Modes of Being

In explaining Franny's father's feminism as a belief 'that girls can do anything that boys can do', Leet introduces feminism as a practice that aims to reduce the gap dividing girls and boys, which according to hooks (2000) is itself a misunderstanding of the gender resulting from the patriarchal norms disseminated by mass media's definition of it. Yet, the depictions of Franny's appearance follow a more progressive formulation of feminist thought.

Her modes of self-expression through appearance and clothing are not an opposition to what boys can wear. These modes are not shrunk to displays of outfits that are less feminine or more masculine, instead, her narrative exists and progresses beyond an opposition to either gender. Franny wears t-shirts and shorts and sneakers when she is painting, walks around the house after a bath like an unbothered model in a coloured patterned towel with a pleated border; sometimes, she wears a Viking outfit and sometimes a dress, with a puffy skirt; one day she wears a hockey outfit and the next day she is wearing a delicate pink dress, the same colour as her hair, at ballet practice. In this sense, Franny's clothing is represented not as intrinsic to her gender but as simply related to the activities she's engaging in at any given time. Clothing in the story is represented as functional, rather than defining of gender categories.

Looking at the appearance and illustrations of Franny throughout the book, and especially the illustration on page 14 (See Figure 17), it can be said that in *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, the issue is not that girls could look girly and dress in a feminine way, but rather that the ways their gender and personhood are expressed and manifested in appearance could be wide and varied, depending on their context and their needs and desires in that context.

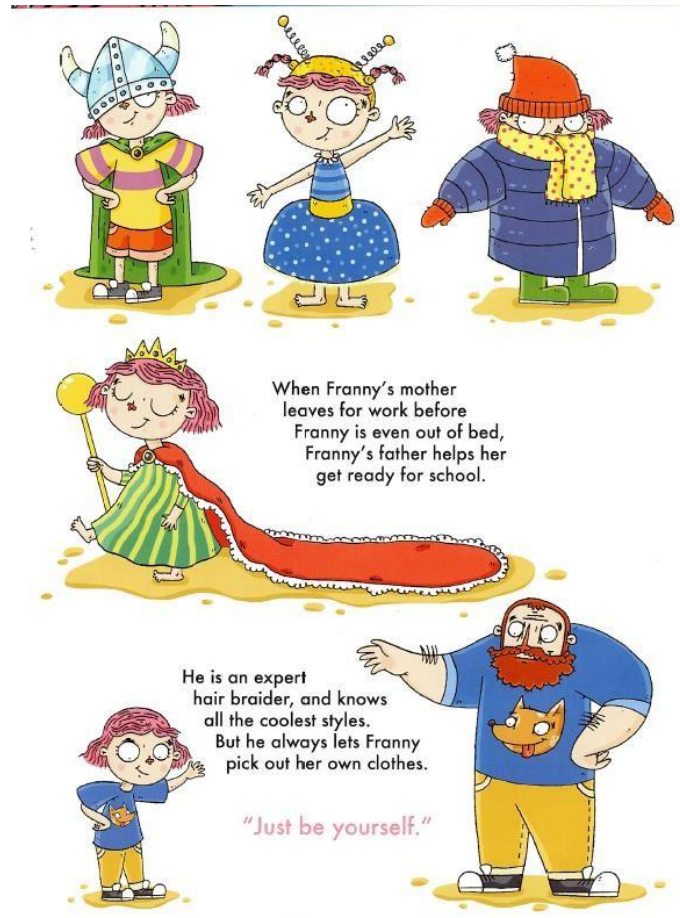


Figure 17. *Franny's outfits*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

The varied collection of outfits represented in figure 17 displays various modes of thought and being, which are necessary in shaping a more encompassing view of gender presentation and the gendered occupation of space through clothing. Franny is allowed to express her (gender) identity in various ways (e.g. different outfits, different hairstyles) and is empowered to choose her outfits based on her sense of her true self – which can vary depending on what she is doing. It is Franny who chooses her clothes, although her dad ‘is an expert hair braider, and knows all the coolest styles’ (Leet 2018, 14). Similar to *My Shadow Is Pink*, the first case study analyzed in the previous chapter, here again we have a father character whose masculinity features the knowledge of things traditionally deemed incongruent with masculinity (e.g. knowing and caring about appearance, hair styles, etc.) However, he knows it is Franny’s right to decide about her body, a manifestation of which is her right to choose what to wear.

'You have to always stand up for what matters to you most': Themes of Resistance, Agency, and Choice

During slumber parties, when Franny's friends come to spend the night in Franny's family's backyard, her father tells campfire stories of ghosts and historic women (See Figure 18). These include: Claire Mari Hudge, the first female park ranger for the U.S. National Parks; Sally Ride, the first American female astronaut; Ruby Bridge, the first African-American female student to desegregate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana; and Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girls' education activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner.



Figure 18. *Story time during slumber parties*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

Telling the story of powerful and influential women is part of the same parenting practice that empowers little girls and women throughout the story. It does so through acknowledging women's social achievements and contributions beyond the domestic sphere. Franny's father tells stories about women of different races and ethnicities in various jobs and professions, contexts, and eras, the common denominator of all of which are their abilities, ambitions, agency and resistance to oppressive socio-political (gender) norms. All of these women have fascinating stories; they have disrupted the patriarchal order and societal norms about women in various ways.

Claire Marie Hudge is the first woman whose story is read to Franny and her friends (See Figure

19). She was the third National Park Service's (NPS) female park ranger and the first woman to officially get hired and paid in 1918, and was also a teacher and a poet that appears in the NPS photo archive wearing a riding uniform with a split skirt, an element that distinguishes her from her male contemporaries ("Claire Marie Hodges," n.d.). Hudge refused to accept the sexist norms around park ranging, and during her tenure, carried the same set of duties as male rangers, including difficult physical activities and overnight trips on horseback (Hodges 1991).



Figure 19. *Claire Marie Hudge*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

The second story belongs to Sally Ride, a breaker of gender barriers in her own time and someone who encouraged little girls to do the same. She became the first American woman in space and the youngest American in space in 1983 (Anderson 2018). Having grown up in 'a joyful and affectionate household', Ride and her sister 'were given unwavering support to pursue their own aspirations' (O'Shaughnessy 2015). A glimpse into Ride's life narrative reinforces this notion, as she successfully pursued careers in both tennis and science education, two paths that have historically been predominantly associated with men and posed challenges for women to pursue (Kuschel et al. 2020). Additionally, she holds the distinction of being the first openly gay astronaut (O'Shaughnessy 2015). She was also the founder of Imaginary Lines, a company

dedicated to supporting female students interested in math, science, and technology (O'Shaughnessy 2015); and the author of seven inspiring space-themed children's books (Anderson 2018).

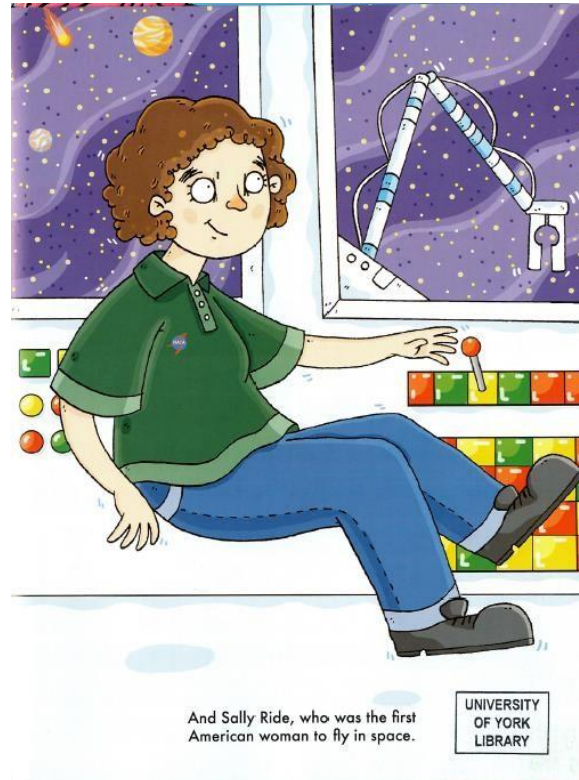


Figure 20. *Sally Ride*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

When Franny insists on more stories before bed, her father 'tells them of more brave young women' (Leet 2018, 26) like Ruby Bridge, the first black student who entered William Frantz elementary school in New Orleans, an all-white school, and became the news headline (Bridges 2016), as a black student heroically resisting and challenging white supremacy and colonial violence (Boveda and McCray 2021).

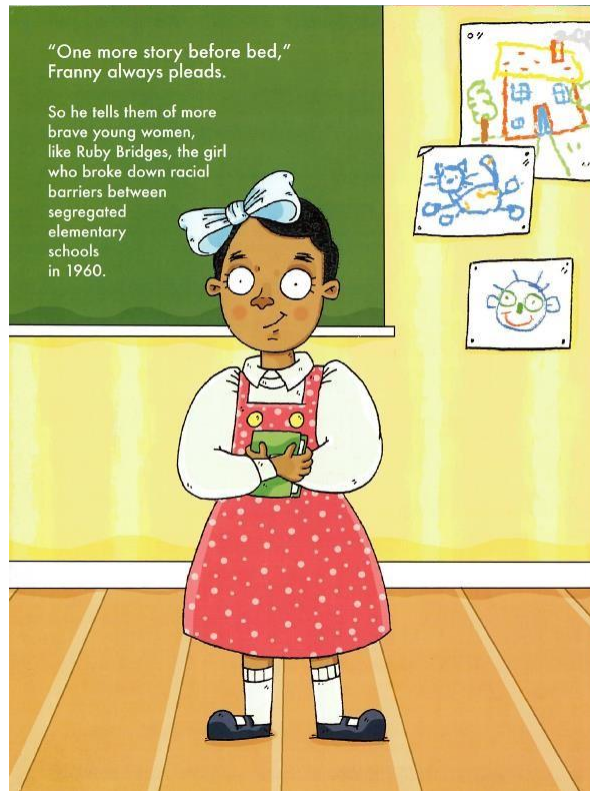


Figure 21. *Ruby Bridge*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

Malala Yusufzai is the fourth and the last woman whose story is told to Franny and her friends (See Figure 13). Known for her human rights advocacy, especially the education of women and children in her native homeland, Swat, where the Pakistani Taliban banned girls from going to school, Malala received a Nobel Prize when she was 17 for her activism campaigning for female education in Pakistan, despite this exposing her to grave danger.

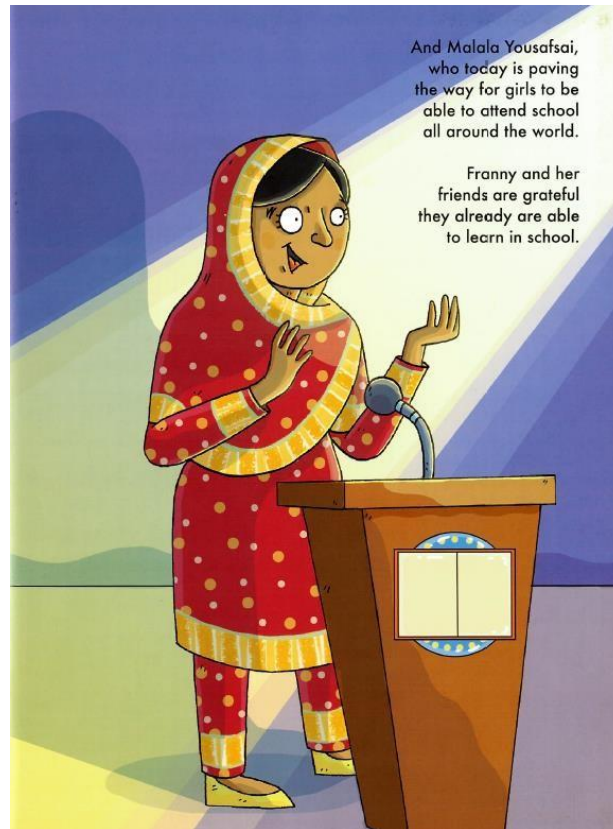


Figure 22. *Malala Yousafzai*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

In this way, storytelling builds empathy in children, and comes to act as a facilitator of social/cultural liberation and change (Krznaric 2014). Stories of women from different backgrounds and cultures who changed history could be an effective way to contest the dominant narratives of white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and the intersecting oppressions that accompany such structures in a gender-unequal and oppressive history (Krznaric 2014). Although themes of resistance against gender norms and stereotypes and patriarchal silencing are the central motif in the stories of all these women, there seems to be an elevated white woman privilege among the characters in the stories read to Franny and her two friends, who all otherwise appear to be members of different racial and ethnicity backgrounds. The women in the first two stories, Claire Mari Hudge and Sally Ride, are white American women who stood against patriarchal forces in the context of their adult lives, whereas Ruby Bridge is a little girl who was a victim of her circumstances as a black girl, being forced to face the colonial sexism of the world around her. Additionally, Malala Yousafzai, as a middle-eastern woman from a lower-middle-class family living under a terrorist group's restrictions, whose experience of

discrimination is different from that of Hudge and Ride's. In fact, their stories are told to Franny and her friends only after Franny insists on more stories. Leet's book groups these revolutionary women based on gender alone, but does not go any further to address how their experiences and activism were also influenced by other factors of structural inequality, such as race, religion, or class.

Intersectional feminists emphasize on the importance of considering race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and disability status of women in addressing gender equality as these factors intersect with a woman's identity (Brewer and Dundes 2018). In this sense, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* fails to recognize the distribution of vulnerability and privilege among the individual women whose stories are told. It narrates the stories of these women regardless of where and how they are situated within multiple axes of power, and thus fails to make visible the combination of racism and sexism that differentiate their resistive acts.

Alison Phipps (2020), in her book, *Me, Not You*, presents the argument that mainstream movements such as #MeToo have appropriated and incorporated the efforts of women of colour without truly acknowledging or prioritizing their perspectives. She posits that the failure to learn from and centre the concerns of women of colour results in a manifestation of "political whiteness" within the broader movement against sexual violence. It is important to consider Phipps's viewpoint when discussing *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* as a piece of #MeToo children's literature, and acknowledge that the underrepresentation of characters of colour in the book may inadvertently contribute to a form of political whitewashing.

Nonetheless, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* can potentially inspire girls to participate in breaking the barriers that are inflicted upon them based on their gender. This is not to imply that it is not a book for boys; on the contrary, it is necessary for boys to read such stories to learn about the values, capabilities and accomplishments of women, as well as more carefully understand the power structures that affect all genders. In Adichie's (2014) words, we must also raise our sons differently. We need to teach boys about girls, their worth and the things they can do by reading such alternative herstories. Making space for women in the stories we tell about the past can help make space for women in the stories of our future. In *Feminist Theory Today*, Ferguson (2017) posits that the importance of storytelling cannot be underestimated when it comes to giving a voice to women or any marginalized perspective. Creating a platform for women, or specific groups of women, involves presenting the world through their unique viewpoints, recognizing

their perspectives, and offering both a critique of existing conditions and a vision for a brighter future. Additionally, the #MeToo movement, from its start in 2006 by Tarana Burke to its explosion on social media in 2017, has focused on gendered resistance from all over the world (Matthews 2022).

It is right after these slumber stories that Leet portrays Franny and her father resisting the forced “No Kittens!” claim coming from an adult male neighbor. It is worth mentioning that the cat motif is significant throughout the book (e.g. cats on the wooden fence, cats on t-shirt, cats on TV, etc.). The motif of cat in Leet's story can be read as a symbol of independence. Franny's father not only reads the story of women's resistance to her and her friends, but also accompanies her in practicing political resistance in public. He teaches his daughter that she has to ‘always stand up for what matters most’ (Leet 2018, 27). In the scene, where the cat lovers' team is defending their right to have cats, Franny is holding up a sign that says: “KITTENS ARE PURR-FECT” and the caption reads: ‘sometimes they make signs’ (Leet 2018, 28).

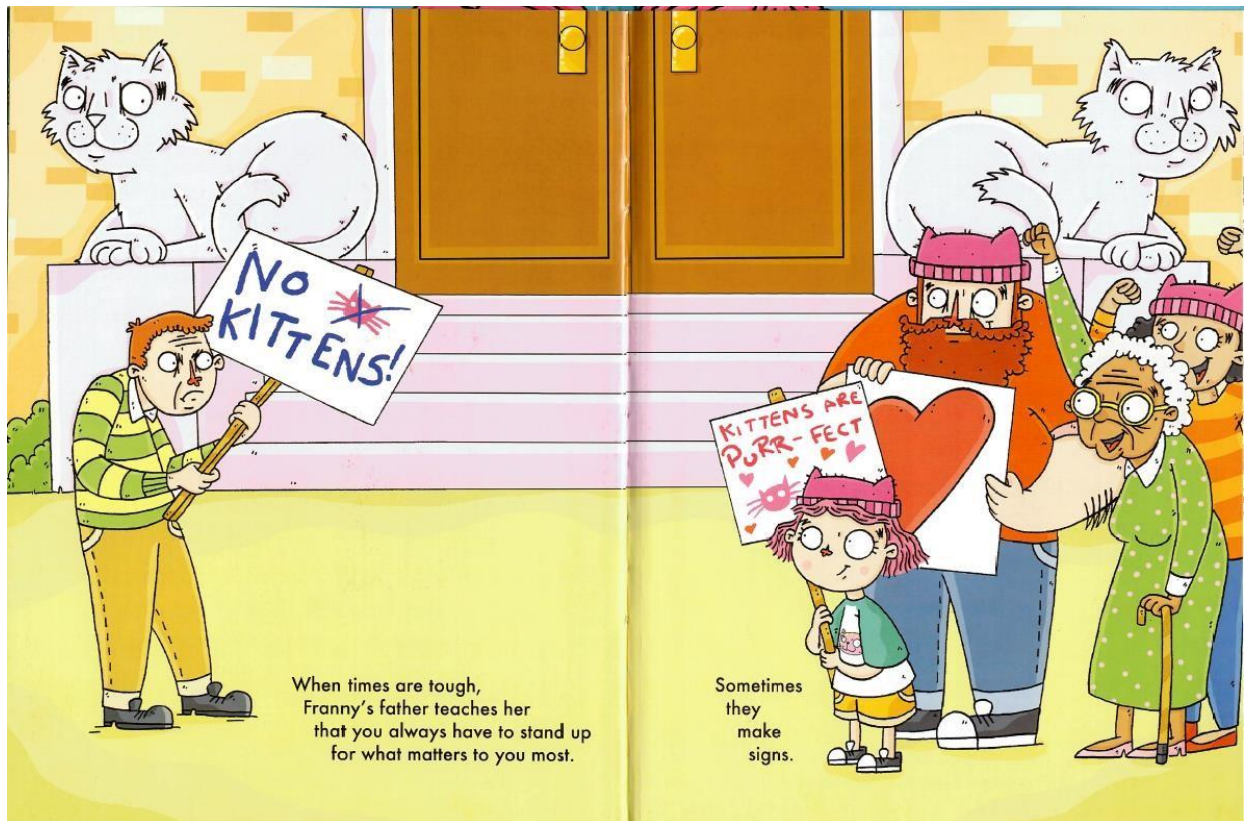


Figure 23. *Franny protests*, Leet, Rhonda. 2018. *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*. Brooklyn, NY: POW!

From the father standing behind Franny holding a sign with a big red heart drawn on it, to Franny being the flag bearer and leader of this resistance as she stands on the frontline with a sign, this image points out elements of empowering and feminine resistance in its Foucauldian sense. According to Foucault (2002), power is not a possession held by those in power, but something that exists in all aspects of everyday life and society. Therefore, resistance to power could be an ongoing process that takes place on multiple levels, not just in the overthrow of political systems. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power and resistance, women can resist the dominant power structures by exercising resistance in everyday encounters. This definition of power and resistance helps to break cycles of oppression that are present at multiple levels of everyday life (Thomas and Davies 2005). Franny and her feminist father, along with two other women that probably are residents of the same neighborhood, are pictured as exercising the very same subtle, every-day, minor forms of resistance that aims to break the patriarchal power structures of everyday life. With this pro-cat protest, Franny, her father, and the other two women in fact resist the heteronormative power structures that neglect girls and women's independence.

Josephine Ahikire (2014) provides a similar definition of feminist resistance, arguing that there are numerous theoretical perspectives that arise from the complexities and unique circumstances of women, and they are shaped by the various ways in which we challenge power in our personal and social spheres. In the very same sense, in *Franny's Father Is a Feminist*, where Franny stands up against a sort of coercive power by their neighbor, a male character who is against keeping cats, she seems to become a little feminist resisting the power of a hegemonic, dominating adult masculinity. Additionally, where Franny is depicted as the agent of her own resistance discourse, she becomes a political actor in the public sphere. What I specifically argue is that encouraging little girls to stand up for what matters to them most, teaching them about the importance of their values, and supporting them in showing agency in their encounters with hegemonic powers from an early age is necessary in the post-#MeToo era. We need little political girls. The male neighbor who wants to restrict a girl from playing with her cat symbolically shares hegemonic masculinist views with real power of oppression, such as a government that imposes hijab on girls elsewhere in the world, or deprives women of their rights over their bodies: all of these exist in a heteropatriarchal discourse where men are seen to be

superior and women's rights are neglected, silenced, and invisibilised behind closed doors (or curtained windows, or veiled bodies).

Furthermore, the pink hats in the protest scene are a reminder of the pink hat worn in the Women's March in Washington DC on 13th February 2017. Initially started as a Los Angeles craft community project in protest against the Trump administration, following a released recording of Trump joking about "grabbing women by the pussy" during the election campaign, the Pussyhat, a knitted pink hat with a cat ear design, became a vivid symbol of collective solidarity in the fight for women's rights. The pink pussy hat, Gökarkırsel and Smith (2018) argue, embraces and honors femininity while also playfully expressing a provocative and daring quality through its various interpretations as a sexual symbol, which is now confidently reclaimed in response to a history of male aggression that Trump (still) openly engages in. Additionally, it transforms the colour pink into a powerful tool of defiance, creating a striking form of resistance that is easily noticeable from a distance (e.g. in mass public protests).



Figure 24. *The Pussy hat*, "PUSSYHAT PROJECT™." 2020. PUSSYHAT PROJECT™. October 6, 2020. <https://www.pussyhatproject.com>.

However, Derr (2017) criticizes the pussy hat for being a reductive response to the challenges women face today, and further indicates that the association of the colour pink with femininity proposes a narrow and marginalizing definition of what it means to be a woman. On this basis, the feminine sisterhood in the scene where Franny's team protests the neighbor's "No Kittens!" statement seems to come from a similar formulation: one that might endorse a type of stereotypical feminist symbolism in conflict with the discourses of inclusivity and intersectionality that could speak to a wider audience.

It is noteworthy that in this protest scene in the book, Franny's team of protesters are mostly white. In their paper, "*Concerned, meet terrified: Intersectional Feminism and the Women's*

March", Brewer and Dundes (2018) discuss the very same whiteness and state, saying that this phenomenon enabled many to embrace feminism but kept that feminist ideal limited to privileged white women's issues and failed to address the social injustice faced by lower social classes and people of colour (Brewer and Dundes 2018). The marker of an inclusive feminism therefore is its commitment to intersectionality; thus, the type of feminism that *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* depicts, while revolutionary in its own way, remains nonetheless limited and white-centred.

Conclusion

Franny's Father Is a Feminist by Rhonda Leet challenges and changes heteronormative norms and scripts by presenting nongendered chores, emotions, appearance, choice, and gendered acts of resistance. In Leet's book, fathers are responsible for childcare and domestic work while mothers are depicted as breadwinners, men are emotional and expressive while women are serious and in control of their feelings. By depicting a masculine-looking figure who cries with sad movies and jumps with happiness in his daughter's ballet recitals, *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* presents a gender-free form of emotion literacy. This is particularly important in the post-#MeToo era due to the role of emotion politics, and particularly masculine emotion development and expressiveness, in the realm of gender relations and male violence. Through his approach to parenthood, Franny's father takes every opportunity to empower his daughter by encouraging her to decide for herself, choose her outfits and exercise autonomy, and stay true to herself no matter what. He educates Franny to protest the hegemonic powers coerced on her while letting her be the active agent and hero of her narrative. The next case study features more complex and creative manifestations of attributing agency to children. In the next chapter, a literary analysis of *What Are Little Girls Made of?* is presented, where little girls independently and assertively set their boundaries, pursue positions of power, and befriend monsters.

Case Study III: What Are Little Girls Made of?

Courage, sacrifice, determination, commitment, toughness, heart, talent, guts. That's what little girls are made of; the heck with sugar and spice (Hamilton, Bundschun, and Berk 2004).

Jeanne Willis's *What Are Little Girls Made of?* weaves convergent themes of gender, agency, subjectivity, and space. This chapter explores these intersections in an effort to unpack further creative ways in which issues of sexual violence, consent, agency, and empowerment are addressed in young children's literature in the post-#MeToo era, as represented in this final case study. It also contributes to a broader understanding of how #MeToo provides us with lenses that enable a critical re-reading of sweet and lighthearted texts, framing as children's books as either dystopian or indeed more complex than they may appear on the surface.

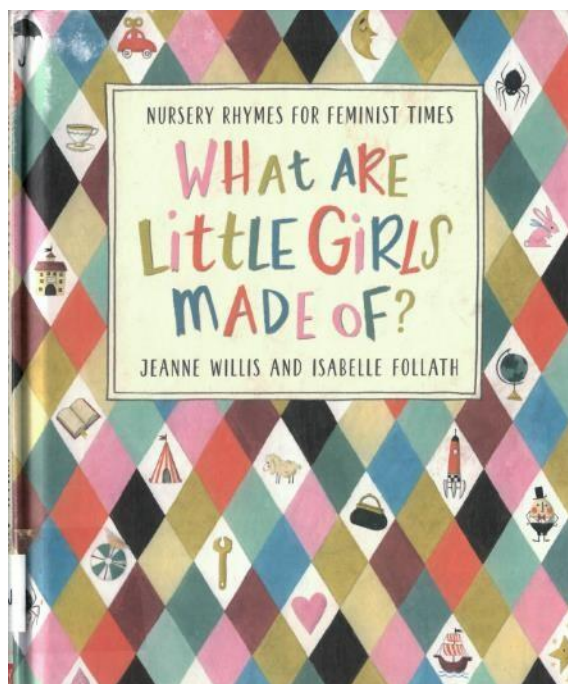


Figure 25. Front cover of *What Are Little Girls Made of?*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

What Are Little Girls Made of? is a collection of reworked nursery rhymes written by the award-winning author Jeanne Willis and illustrated by Isabella Follath. The book was first published in

September 2020 and features an empowering, feminist remix of popular English nursery rhymes that were originally characterized by an underrepresentation and gender-stereotypical portrayals of girls. The book is written for children aged two to five and consists of 17 rhymes, namely “What Are Little Girls Made Of?”; “Georgie Peorgie”, “Little Jade Horner”, “Jack and Jill”, “Bye, Baby Bunting”; “Little Miss Muffet”; “Incy Pincy Spider”, “Lavender’s Blue”, “Doctor Foster”, “Where Are You Going to, My Pretty Maid”; “Bonnie Shafto”, “Diddle Diddle Dumpling”; “Humpty Dumpty”; “Twinkle, Twinkle”; “Mary Mary”; “Little Bo-Peep”; and “Girls and Boys Come Out to Play”.

Unlike the original rhymes, Willis’s reworked rhymes, accompanied by Follath’s witty illustrations, represent girls engaging in various activities and games such as astrology, mechanics, medicine, physics, art, architecture, etc., entitled with subjectivity, agency, and power. The collection of these rhymes shows that girls can be the heroes of their diverse narratives, revealing how problematic and sexist the old versions of these rhymes were. *What Are Little Girls Made of?* places girls in positions of power and authority, and depicts them as having confidence and agency in what they do. It is in so doing that the book responds to the question in the title: little girls are made of many good things; of ‘sun and rain and heart and brain’ (Willis 2020, 1).

As written on the book’s front cover (See Figure 25), *What Are Little Girls Made of?* is a collection of nursery rhymes for feminist times. Reading and analyzing this 2022 collection, as a product of #MeToo children’s literature, provides a better understanding of why the original versions are problematic and how the themes intertwined with the rhymes speak to a contemporary feminist consciousness that, the book implies, should be made accessible to children. In this chapter, a literary textual and visual analysis is conducted to read *What Are Little Girls Made of?* through #MeToo themes including consent, monstrosity, and power.

“Don’t kiss me unless I say!” – Consent in What Are Little Girls Made of?

Consent is one of the main themes of the #MeToo movement. Creating a culture of consent requires going beyond everyday cultural practices and paying attention to what ideas about gender, sexuality, and consent are reproduced in everyday life, also affecting young children (Popova 2019). In *What Are Little Girls Made of?*, “Georgie Peorgie” is the rhyme that directly

and explicitly addresses sexual harassment and consent, and creates a safe space for conversations with children about such sensitive topics.

“Georgie Peorgie” is the second rhyme appearing in Willis’s book. It comes right after “What Are Little Girls Made of?” denoting to carry an important and fundamental message about what little girls can accomplish. The rhyme originally told the story of a little boy named Georgie Peorgie, known to refer to a historical character (e.g., George I; George Villiers, Duke of Birmingham; Charles II) (L. Opie 1985), who non-consensually kisses girls and makes them cry.

The original version of the rhyme read as follows:

Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry;
When the boys came out to play,
Georgy Porgy ran away.
(I. Opie 1955, 185)



Figure 26. Greenway Kate, Georgie Peorgie. Accessed November 21, 2023.
<https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Kate-Greenaway/929208/Georgie-Peorgie-pudding-and.html>.

Although the rhyme goes back to 1841, its first illustration appeared in 1881 (MeisterDrucke, n.d.) and features a little boy and several girls in an open space that seems to be a play yard. In the original version, the boy harasses little girls by kissing them without their consent and then runs away without being held accountable for his actions. The textual and visual elements of the original version depict girls as crying victims of Georgie Peorgie, and even when they outnumber the boy, as the illustration suggests, the girls passively remain peripheral to the boy, who is positioned as the central character. This depiction, as a nursery rhyme read to children, teaches them about the gendered positions of the powerful and the powerless, while normalizing sexual acts without consent.

However, Willis's version of the rhyme tells the story of an encounter between a little boy named Georgie Peorgie and a nameless girl:

Georgie Peorgie, pudding and pie,
Kissed a girl who made him cry.
“Don't kiss me until I say!”
She said, and kicked his ball away.

(Willis 2020, 3)

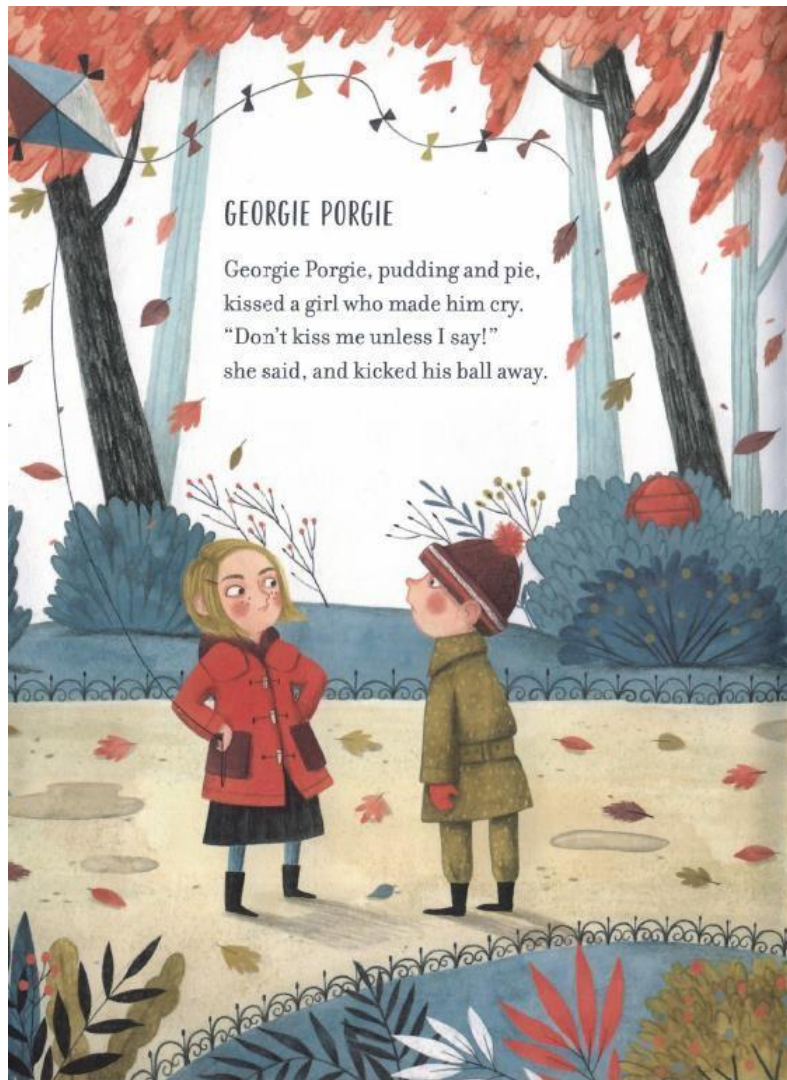


Figure 27. *Georgie Peorgie*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

In this version, we see a significant shift of events that happens in a one-to-one interaction between two kids in a park. In Willis's version, it is Georgie Peorgie who is made to cry by the

girl whom he kissed without permission. The girl here gives a clear instruction: "Don't kiss me until I say!" and further shows her anger by kicking the boy's ball away. The illustrative elements of this rhyme are also meaningfully different from the original one: the two characters are depicted in front of each other, with the girl standing with her hands on her hips, looking angry and confrontational, while the boy is standing with a down trodden face and hands, suggesting a sense of powerlessness.

These elements carry critical messages about consent, agency and sexual harassment: #MeToo themes that shift the problematic representations of the original version. In other words, while the original rhyme fed into rape culture by showing sexual acts without consent and women's powerlessness as norms, Willis's rhyme proposes an empowering and critical narrative of sexual agency for young readers. It role models how girls can state their boundaries, and gives them permission to do so. In her invaluable essay, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention", Sharon Marcus (2013) introduces new perspectives on the issue of rape and offers important insights about rape prevention. First, she criticizes some examples of poststructuralist theory and feminist politics for positioning rape as a clear fact of women's lives; that rape has always already occurred, and that women are always already raped or already rapable (Marcus 2013, 386). She argues that one of the problems of the postmodernist theories of rape is that they present rape as an inevitable material fact of life, the foundation of which is the physical (i.e. bioessentialist) ability of men to dominate women. This view not only reinforces the patriarchal ideology of rape, but also regards 'violence as a self-explanatory first cause' and turns rape into 'an invulnerable and terrifying facticity, which is hard to name, represent, challenge and prevent (Marcus 2013, 387).

In Marcus's view, considering rape as a terrifying reality or *fate* is to align it with masculinist culture. She also comments on trying to stop rape through legal deterrence and posits that such a view assumes that men inherently possess the ability to commit acts of rape, and this assumption grants them primary control, if it is only through the threat of punishment from a masculinized governing body or legal system that men can be deterred from exercising this power. Instead, Marcus proposes that rape should be seen as a language and a process:

We can avoid these self-defeating pitfalls by regarding rape not as a fact to be accepted or opposed, tried or avenged, but as a process to be analyzed and undermined as it occurs.

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One way to achieve this is to focus on what actually happens during rape attempts and on differentiating as much as possible among various rape situations in order to develop the fullest range of rape prevention strategies.

Instead, she proposes that rape is seen as a language, so the attention is put on rape situations, making it nameable and subject to change. Exploring different perspectives on the relationship between rape and language, Marcus talks about the cultural representations of rape that perpetuate harmful assumptions and contradictions about women and rape. However, she emphasizes that the statement that rape is a linguistic fact should not be interpreted to mean that language itself rapes women. The author further highlights the presence of speech in rape situations and challenges the notion that rape is a wordless and impersonal attack. She points out that many rapists engage their targets in verbal communication and may demand specific phrases or conversations during the act. The internalized societal expectations on what can be spoken and what is unspeakable, which differ for men and women, play a role in shaping rape situations alongside physical inequalities and power struggles (Marcus 2013).

Additionally, Marcus draws on the theory of a "continuum" of sexual violence which suggests that language and rape are connected, implying that representations of rape, obscene remarks, threats, and other forms of harassment should be considered equivalent to rape itself. However, this definition, according to Marcus, blurs the distinction between verbal acts and physical assault, contradicting the idea of a continuum that requires a temporal and logical separation between different stages of a rape attempt. While verbal acts should be condemned as initiations of rape situations, equating them directly with rape overlooks the gap in which intervention and prevention can occur (Marcus 2013). Marcus posits that:

I am defining rape as a scripted interaction which takes place in language and can be understood in terms of conventional masculinity and femininity as well as other gender inequalities inscribed before an individual instance of rape. The word "script" should be taken as a metaphor conveying several meanings. To speak of a rape script implies a narrative of rape, a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognize and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off. The concept of a narrative avoids the problems of the collapsed continuum described earlier, in which rape

becomes the inevitable beginning, middle, and end of any interaction. The narrative element of a script leaves room and makes time for revision. [...] Rape script also suggests that social structures inscribe on men's and women's embodied selves and psyches the misogynist inequalities which enable rape to occur. These generalized inequalities are not simply prescribed by a totalized oppressive language, nor fully inscribed before the rape occurs—rape itself is one of the specific techniques which continually scripts these inequalities anew. Patriarchy does not exist as a monolithic entity separate from human actors and actresses, impervious to any attempts to change it, secure in its role as an immovable first cause of misogynist phenomena such as rape; rather, patriarchy acquires its consistency as an overarching descriptive concept through the aggregation of microstrategies of oppression such as rape. Masculine power and feminine powerlessness neither simply precede nor cause rape; rather, rape is one of culture's many modes of feminizing women. (Marcus 2013, 390–91)

In the light of Marcus's theoretical framework, Willis's book can be seen as an act of "re-scripting" rape culture: "Georgie Peorgie" displays a narrative in which the notion of the powerful and the powerless is not taken for granted. Rather, upon kissing the girl without consent, positioned in a series of steps with which Georgie Peorgie asserts his power over the girl, he is immediately held responsible for what he has done and learns a clear lesson from her: that you don't kiss someone without permission. 'Don't kiss me until I say!' (Willis 2020, 3). These fighting words are accompanied with a fighting body. Remarkably, the girl in this rhyme does not act nice; she does not enact the misogynistic idea that girls are powerless and destined to be kissed without consent (like the original version depicts). She even does not stop by just saying, imperatively, that he must not kiss her without consent; she kicks his ball away and makes him cry. The girl's oral and bodily response to the unwanted kiss challenges the stereotypes around the empathetic role that is usually ascribed to girls and women. The illustration accompanying this rhyme also shows us the girl's anger. This depiction of an angry girl whose right and agency over her material body is violated upon being kissed without consent is especially important and meaningful in the context of #MeToo. Anger, as Lorde explains, contains within it contextual assertions of harm. Core to the feminist and #MeToo movement is a process of moving from silence and shame around sexual assault to freedom and

empowerment (Strauss Swanson and Szymanski 2020), and dealing with and expressing anger is part of this process. In fact, anger is the reason why many activists and survivors of sexual harassment have started or joined the #MeToo movement (“Patrisse Cullors and Tarana Burke: Anger, Activism, and Action” 2018): because of being angry about what has happened to them and what continues to happen. Subsequently, the depiction of the little girl showing anger in both face and body can be read as an empowering way of mobilizing and expressing one's refusal to be harassed. Furthermore, although anger is not the only feeling experienced by the movement's founders, its supporters and anyone who has experienced assault, it works as a catalyst for collectives and their standard for justice when the anger of a certain group, bound by race, gender, or class, is marginalized in favor of white privileged anger (Winderman 2019). Drawing on this analyzation of the textual and visual elements in Willis's text, I have shown how the “Georgie Peorgie” rhyme encapsulates a situation of sexual assault, depicting an active interaction between two children in the absence of adult supervision. In this narrative, the little girl fearlessly establishes the boundaries of her body and vehemently expresses her anger and frustration towards the assault from Georgie Peorgie. These fundamental principles, related to boundaries, consent, emotions, and self-expressions, align harmoniously with the key messages advocated by the #MeToo movement. Notably, Willis's revised rendition of the “Georgie Peorgie” rhyme beautifully and affirmatively illustrates the movement's feminist principles of personal agency and the empowerment of sexual assault survivors to speak up and defend themselves. In conclusion, the reworked version of “Georgie Peorgie” in the post-#MeToo era functions to shift the gendered dynamic of predator-victim and rewrite the geography of rape culture by imagining girls that subvert boys' non-consensual behaviours.

Girls and spiders: on gender and monstrosity

The narratives we share regarding gendered sexual violence have a significant impact on our everyday existence: they influence our perception of safety and risk, as well as the way we as individuals, communities, and societies respond to harm (Ciolkowski 2023). Stories of violence all have one common theme: a threat in the outsized figure of the monster. According to Sered (2019), this is characterized as an "imagined monstrous entity" - a being that deviates from humanity and possesses the ability to cause immense harm without any trace of empathy, one

whose menacing presence we and our children must shield ourselves from, regardless of the cost. However, attempts to identify and allocate sexual violence to something inherent to bad monstrous individuals, instead of focusing on the intersection of heteropatriarchal cultural norms as well as racial, sexual, and economic inequalities that lead to an imbalanced power relation and increased risk of power abuse, does not address the roots and causes of violence and abuse of power.

The use of fear in children's literature, carries a deliberate intention to portray violence. The purpose of this deliberate portrayal has traditionally been to instill fear in young readers and encourage obedience by illustrating the consequences that result from disobedience (Stallcup 2002). In today's world, many modern adults and parents tend to prefer books that aim to alleviate children's fears, ranging from monsters to nightmares, rather than the older children's literary culture that instilled fear in them (Stallcup 2002). In *What Are Little Girls Made of?*, Willis and Follath bend traditional fear-inducing rhymes by depicting little girls who, with agency and power, befriend monsters, rather than being afraid of them or act hopelessly when confronting them, and thus, become feminist and radical. "Little Miss Muffet", "Incy Wincy Spider", and "Diddle Diddle Dumpling" are three rhymes in Willis's book that portray a stereotypical-free and empowering, courageous representation of little girls.

"Little Miss Muffet" is a rhyme about an encounter between a girl and a spider while she is having a picnic. While the setting and characters of the rhyme remains the same between the original and Willis's version, there is a significant difference in terms of how fear is induced and treated. The rhyme originally depicted Patience, the daughter of the entomologist Dr. Thomas Muffet (I. Opie 1955), and read as follows:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
There came a big spider,
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.
(I. Opie 1955, 323)



Figure 28. *Little Miss Muffet* illustrated by E. Bachmann. Measures approx. 9" x 12", "Little Miss Muffet 1930s Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes Illustration by E Bachmann - Etsy UK." n.d. Accessed December 30, 2023.
https://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/1180630855/little-miss-muffet-1930s-mother-goose?utm_source=OpenGraph&utm_medium=PageTools&utm_campaign=Share.

As the text and the illustration suggest, when the girl sees the spider, she throws her food away and starts running out of fear, suggesting little girls are easily frightened and helpless.

However, in Willis's version, little miss Muffet not only is not scared, but playfully pets the big spider's legs. It reads as:

Little Miss Muffet
sat on a tuffet
eating her ham and eggs,
and when a big spider

then sat down beside her,
she stroked his sweet, long, furry legs.

(Willis 2020, 8)



Figure 29. *Little Miss Muffet*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

Unlike the original version, in Willis's version of Miss Muffet, not only is the girl not afraid of spiders, but she befriends them and shares food with them. The illustration of this rhyme depicts the little girl having her picnic somewhere in the jungle all alone, with no views of houses or adults in sight. More interestingly, the spider is not the only guest at this picnic: there are ants feeding on the food, suggesting a sort of hospitality and friendliness to beasts and bugs. The illustration also features other drawings of insects, such as a jar full of flies, and a worm in the corner of the tuffet. In fact, Willis's *Little Miss Muffet* appears to be interested in insects and biology, performing an open curiosity about the world, rather than a helpless fear of it. The girl character's handling of fear inspires young readers to not only show courage and boldness, but also agency and independence as she does not wait for an adult to come for help, and neither does she show an aggressive or/domineering behaviour in handling the situation (e.g. fighting, killing, putting away the spider). Furthermore, the setting of this rhyme being a park

can be read as the public realm. In this sense, this rhyme portrays a girl whose mobility, joys, and space occupation are not restricted by the fear of a monstrous other.

“Little Miss Muffet” is not the only rhyme in the book that features spiders. “Incy Wincy Spider” is another reworked rhyme in Willis’s book, which represents a fearless encounter between a little girl and spiders. The rhyme originally did not have a human character; it was a story of a spider called Itsy Bitsy attempts to climb the water spout:

Itsy Bitsy Spider climbed up the water spout
Down came the rain and washed the spider out
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain
So, Itsy Bitsy Spider climbed up the water spout again.
(Straw 2014)

Although the story of Itsy Bitsy (or, as appeared in Willis’s version, Incy Wincy), teaches children important messages about perseverance (Sharpe 2012), in Willis’s version, the messages shift to that of a girl’s courage, power and success. Willis changes the subject of the rhyme; it no longer is about the spider, but a story about Loraine, a little girl who grows flowers:

Incy Wincy Spider, climbing up the spout,
in came Lorraine and helped the spider out.
She put him in the garden to catch the peaky flies
and all the flowers that she grew won first prize.
(Willis 2020, 9)



Figure 30. *Incy Wincy Spider*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

The girl in Willis's rhyme is completely focused on her work, growing flowers, and is not affected or afraid by Incy Wincy. In fact, she thoughtfully and intelligently puts him 'in the garden to catch the pesky flies' (Willis 2020, 9). Remarkably, the illustration accompanying this rhyme depicts a space with many plants, spiders and flies, with the girl character in center of the page, suggesting her central role in this narrative. Furthermore, there are green leaves in the girl's hair and a spider on her head, depicting a fearless, playful and happy child whose girlhood does not limit her but acts as a special power: she is bold, confident, creative, knowledgeable, curious, and kind.

It is also worth mentioning that the setting of this rhyme being a greenhouse can be read as symbolizing workplace. In this sense, the rhyme presents the possible threats and dangers in a working space. But the little girl, with the presence of insects and spiders and spider webs around, fearlessly does what she wants and successfully makes progress.

In line with such engagement with the theme of monstrosity and bravery attributed to girl characters is "Diddle Diddle Dumpling", where Jane, the older sister of John, playfully deals

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with her brother's fear of monsters in the dark. The rhyme originally featured only a boy and read as follows:

Diddle, diddle, dumpling, my son John
He went to bed with his trousers on;
One shoe off, the other shoe on
Diddle, diddle, dumpling, my son John.
(Lang 1897, 191)

The original version of the rhyme is about a little boy and shows an adult-child relationship, while Willis's rendition of the rhyme introduces two siblings, brother John and sister Jane, with Jane assuming the role of the older sister and protector to the little boy:

Diddle diddle dumpling. Brother John
Went to bed with his night light on,
Afraid in case a monster came,
Which really was a crying shame.
Diddle diddle dumpling, Sister Jane
Turned his night light off again,
"There are no monsters, it is true,"
She said, "except for me and you!"
(Willis 2020, 15)



Figure 31. *Diddle Diddle Dumpling*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

Willis's rhyme presents a scenario without adults, where the children themselves dictate the discourse. As the word 'again' in the text suggests, this is not the first time that sister Jane has taken care of her brother at night when he is scared: she turns off the light again and turns the scary scenario into a playful one. Here again we see a portrayal of childhood and child agency and empowerment without the help of adults. Moreover, sister Jane is not just an older sister who acts like a grown-up, but she is a child who is not afraid of monsters; in fact, she has the strength and creativity to turn her brother's fear into a game that reminds them both of their own power, giving them permission to be fearless and independent: "there are no monsters, it is true, [...] except for me and you!" (Willis 2020, 15), and wittily shows her brother that the shadows on the wall are bigger than their real figures.

Interestingly, the accompanying illustration (See Figure 31) shows a dragon picture frame positioned above the boy's bed, while a dinosaur can also be spotted amidst his toys on the floor. This deliberate inclusion of formidable beasts fosters a sense of familiarity in the minds of young readers, acknowledging that they may have a fear of darkness despite their fondness for dragons and dinosaurs, suggesting a range of emotions that are all normal to have.

The portrayal of children, particularly young girls, displaying agency and competence in confronting fear and monsters independently challenges the conventional narratives of horror and the notion of the "monstrous other" that adults often shield their children from.

Consequently, it can be argued that *What Are Little Girls Made of?*, as a #MeToo children's text, explores fear and monstrosity in a lighthearted and imaginative manner, highlighting children's ability to not only confront their own fears but also assist other children in reshaping their perceptions of monsters and fear.

Moreover, given that our understanding and fear of violence is significantly affected by space and place, another interesting aspect of the three rhymes analyzed above is that they challenge the stereotypical beliefs about fear and safety in private, public, and workplace settings. In the light of these representations, *What Are Little Girls Made of?* shifts the traditionally held beliefs about women's fearfulness and need for protection versus men's status of being feared, whilst simultaneously attributing such bravery, curiosity, and independence to children, who are portrayed as happy and capable irrespective of the presence or absence of adults or authority figures.

'You shan't be king, silly billy, I shall be queen!' – Reimagining Power Relations

The topic of power and power relations has a critical place in feminist thought and social movements like #MeToo. Unequal power relations is known to be the underlying factor for sexual and other forms of violence in relationships (Jewkes 2002). Rape, abuse, and sexual harassment are pervasive, and the oppressive system that perpetuates these acts is sustained through explicit aggression and various forms of communication that uphold the dominant power of men over women (Fernández-Morales 2008). Additionally, although the causes of physical and sexual violence are complex, women are particularly vulnerable to such violence due to the social environment in which they live: these social circumstances reproduce men's and women's roles, and grant power and dominance to men, enabling them to engage in controlling behaviour and acts of physical and sexual violence against women (Jewkes 2002).

One of the key themes in *What Are Little Girls Made of?* is the pursuit of power. As a piece of #MeToo children's literature, this book portrays little girls entitled with power while also pursuing leadership and authority. More specifically, in the "Lavender's Blue" and "Bonnie Shafto" rhymes, we witness girl characters that are boldly and unapologetically powerful, and they display their dominance over boys and men.

"Lavender's Blue" is a rhyme of king and queen role plays. It originally featured a boy and a girl character, with the narrative being told from the boy's perspective, positioning him at the focal point of the story:

Lavender's blue, diddle, diddle
Lavender's green;
When I am king, diddle, diddle
You shall be queen.
Call up your men, diddle diddle,
Set them to work,
Some to the plough, diddle, diddle
Some to the cart.
Some to make hay, diddle, diddle
Some to thresh corn,
Whilst you and I, diddle, diddle,

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Keep ourselves warm.

(I. Opie 1955, 265)

The original rhyme places the little girl in the peripheral position, already contextualizing an imbalanced relation of power in which the girl receives instructions from the boy. In the original version, it is the boy who has power over human resources (whereby he allocates certain tasks of plow, cart, hay, etc.) and even conditions his love for the queen if the queen would love him first. However, Willis's version changes the game significantly. This reworked version is told from a girl's perspective:

Lavender's blue, dilly dilly,
Lavender's green,
You shan't be king, silly billy,
I shall be queen!

(Willis 2020, 10)



Figure 32. *Lavender's Blue*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

An interesting point about Willis's rhyme is that, compared to the original one, it is quite short in length. The message is short and clear: a girl wants to be the queen unconditionally. Unlike the original version, in Willis's "Lavender's Blue", the little girl's desire for power does not take place in an imaginary monologue conditioned by *when* and *if*; she is assertive, undoubtful, and unapologetic.

The illustration associated with this rhyme shows us a girl of colour going up the stairs with a crown on her head and a floral cape on her shoulders, denoting a position of superiority and power (See Figure 32). In this illustration, the girl is smiling at the boy behind her, who is standing at the bottom of the stairs and holding the end of her cape. The look on the girl's face shows that she is unapologetic about taking the throne or claiming her power; it does not occur to her to ask for permission or to feel bad about being powerful. In fact, both kids are depicted as accepting and celebrating this possibility. The fact that the little boy seems as same to be the age as the girl, with a tiny smile on his face, suggests that such a shift of power dynamics can be acceptable and easy to understand and embrace by boys. That is, boys do not need to feel threatened by powerful, dominant girls, and it is okay for girls to simply claim the seat of power without being challenged purely due to their gender, or in the interest of upholding old gender norms.

The rotten pears on the ground, as represented in the illustration, with flies landing on them and nipping at them, can be read as a symbolic representation of something old and unnecessary that the girl is leaving behind. Remarkably the girl is drawn in motion while the boy is standing still. Instead, she carries a fresh, ripe red apple in one hand and a hyacinth in the other. The apple invokes the Biblical symbolism of the apple of knowledge, from the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis; while the hyacinth adds more symbolic depth to the rhyme. The symbolism of the hyacinth flower originates from Greek mythology; it is the flower of Apollo, the Sun god, and refers to tranquility, dedication, and aesthetics, as well as strength and self-assurance. Moreover, in Christianity, this flower signifies happiness and love ("Hyacinth," n.d.). Additionally, the red apple in the girl's hand can be read as the symbol of love and appreciation, knowledge, fertility, and desire for more. The red apple, used in many pop cultures as well as religious narratives, also has a reference to female disobedience for it is the fruit that Eve took from the garden of Eden to access divine knowledge and independence (Knauss 2015).

While shame and guilt are some of the traits that are seen to characterize women more than men

(Bartky 1990), in Willis's rhyme, we witness a girl character claiming a seat of power, free of shame and guilt, and without needing to apologise or ask for permission. Furthermore, since men's anger and violence are a typical response to a threat to their power and privileges (Walton, Coyle, and Lyons 2004), showing the little boy with a tiny smile and calm face suggests that girls' positions of power can be non-threatening for men; in fact, boys should be able to also celebrate this and actively participate in elevating girls to seats of power.

Similar to how the little boy is depicted as inferior to the girl who self-appoints as "queen" in "Lavender Blue", in "Bonnie Shafto", we see the six-year-old female protagonist elevated above all the grown male pirates, as she towers over them as captain of her own ship, while they are shipwrecked and frightened by her prowess. This rhyme was originally told from a girl's perspective about a character named Bobby Shafto, a bold good-looking sailor who would one day marry the girl:

Bobby Shafto's gone to sea,
Silver buckles at his knee;
He'll come back and marry me,
Bonny Bobby Shafto!
Bobby Shafto's fat and fair,
Combing his yellow hair;
He's my love for evermore,
Bonny Bobby Shafto!
(I. Opie 1955, 90)

The original version of the rhyme, depicts a narrative which, although told by a girl, puts a male character in the centre and shows that marriage is all that matters to her. Conversely, Willis turns this version on its head and gives it a feminist twist by making it about Bonnie Shafto, a six-year-old girl who is a sailor fighting pirates and claiming her power. The lines are told from a third person's perspective:

Bonnie Shafto's gone to the sea,
Silver cutlass on her knee,
fighting pirate, one, two, three
ahoy there, Bonnie Shafto!
Bonnie Shafto's brave and bold,

though the waves are icy cold,
and she's only six years old,
yo-ho, Bonnie Shafto!
(Willis 2020, 12)

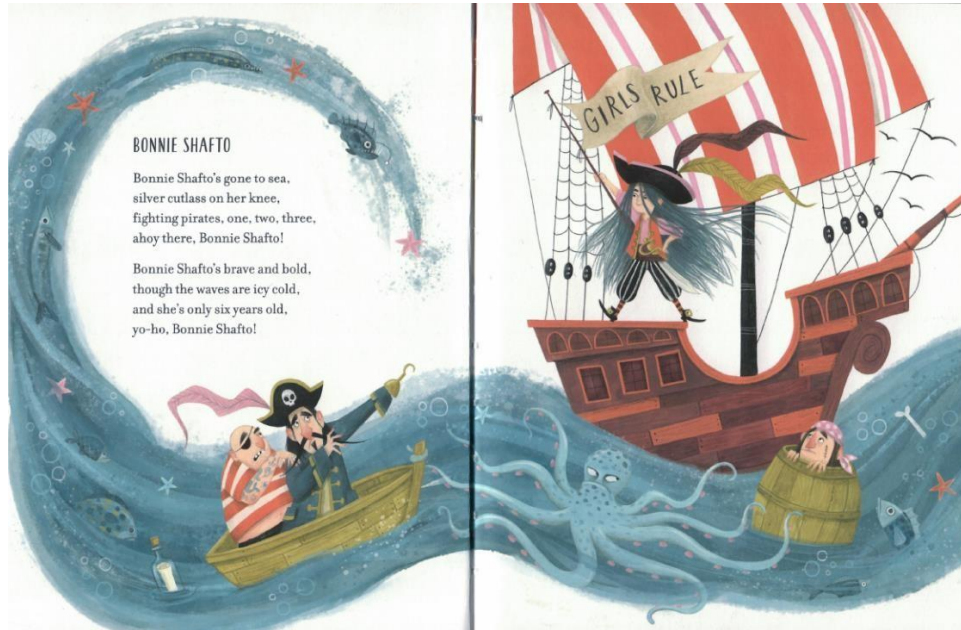


Figure 33. *Bonnie Shafto*, Willis, Jeanne. 2020. *What Are Little Girls Made Of?* Nosy Crow.

The illustration associated with this rhyme shows the girl courageously standing on a ship deck, looking eye-to-eye with the pirates on the sea. The defeated pirates are grown men, looking afraid and intimidated by the little girl as she courageously holds a “GIRLS RULE” flag. The illustration of the girl character, standing firm and solid on the wavy sea with the message on her flag written in capital letters, suggests that her power is not relative or given to her by an authority figure (like a parent or teacher), or by a boy who's given her permission to take it: instead, Bonnie Shafto's position of authority is represented as a given, "natural" fact and an absolute. While in "Lavender Blue" we witness an interaction between two characters of different genders but the same age, negotiating gendered power relations, in "Bonnie Shafto" the book complicates other types of hierarchies, such as: age, physical strength, the power of adulthood vs. childhood, and manhood vs. girlhood.

Another interesting point about “Bonnie Shafto” is that it shows a little girl’s power and confidence despite the known and unknown threats awaiting her at sea – i.e. in the wider

turbulent unpredictable world. The setting of the rhyme being the sea with all the creatures inside it implies a sense that the girl is 'brave and bold, though the waves are icy cold' (Willis 2020, 13). Additionally, these nursery rhymes subvert norms around the gendering of emotions. While in normative femininity, girls are expected to be nice, accommodating, unthreatening, peace-making, never angry or mischievous, and always supportive, in Willis's revisions of the original rhymes, we encounter girls who are not fearful but fearsome; girls who are intimidating and unapologetically angry; girls who are comfortable in their own skin and who dare to challenge men, boys, and adults.

The importance of such messages in post-#MeToo times, or in the author's words, *feminist times*, is that they encourage readers to imagine a world where positions of power and leadership are not occupied pre-dominantly by men, and women can freely and actively assert their power and also desire for power in multiple facets of society. #MeToo children's literature works to show us that girls can be the heroes of their own narratives, and that the constructs of what leads to sexual harassment in workplace and gender-based violence are like those rotten pears on the ground that need to be left behind. Moreover, given that an increased sense of power amplifies one's desire and intention to assume leadership roles (Goodwin et al. 2020), and people who perceive themselves as powerful are inclined toward high-power positions over low-power ones (P. K. Smith et al. 2008), it can be said that *What Are Little Girls Made of?* not only imagines girls who have power, but depicts a world where they can pursue power and leadership roles – where such a relationship with power is not contrary to girlhood.

Conclusion

Jeanne Willis's *What Are Little Girls Made of?* is a collection of reworked nursery rhymes that shifts the traditional gender norms inherent in the original versions and shows an empowering representation of little girls. A literary analysis of the "Georgie Peorgie", "Little Miss Muffet", "Incy Wincy Spider", "Diddle Diddle Dumpling", "Lavender's Blue", and "Bonnie Shafto" rhymes from the book was presented in this chapter, and their significance in the post-#MeToo age was discussed.

Positioning girl characters as heroes of their own narratives, Willis's book provides a safe and imaginative space to address #MeToo topics of consent and sexual harassment to young readers,

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as well as offering a reimagination of children's relationship with harm and threats in public and private spheres. Reading this book in the context of the #MeToo movement guides us toward the creative and effective ways of addressing adult topics with young children. Engaging these #MeToo themes in young children's literature, accompanied by entitling children with political agency and power to lead social and political changes, helps us obtain a better understanding of childhood and children, and to enable a kind of empowerment which builds on children's agency and capability to face, understand, and deal with sensitive or taboo scenarios and discourses that adults are usually reluctant to discuss with children.

Conclusion

During my childhood, the bookshelves I encountered were filled with storybooks featuring male protagonists who were portrayed as emotionless heroes, knights, problem solvers, and decision makers. Meanwhile, female characters were often relegated to passive roles, depicted as weak, pleasant, and unremarkable. As I grew older, I couldn't help but connect these literary representations to the realities of everyday life, especially when I experienced incidents of sexual assault. This project initially stemmed from my curiosity about the potential changes in English-language children's literature targeted at young readers in the post-#MeToo era. The #MeToo movement, which gained prominence as a powerful women's activism movement, has shed light on the pervasive issues of sexual harassment, assault, and violence faced by women. Originated as a support campaign for sexually abused black women in 2006 and growing through Twitter and other digital platforms from 2017, the #MeToo movement has had a transformative impact in various domains. It continues to serve as a means of raising awareness about sexual abuse, harassment, women's rights, gender inequality, and violence.

The current project was framed by significant themes derived from the #MeToo movement. Drawing inspiration from feminist and literary scholarship surrounding #MeToo, I selected themes such as gender identity, gender performativity, gender roles, agency, resistance, consent, fear, and the pursuit of power as the framework for analyzing my case studies. These case studies focused on three English-language books specifically published for children aged three to nine after 2017.

In the literature review, I highlighted the relevance of #MeToo and its themes, presented the significance of studying children's literature, explored the key trends in it, and reviewed different feminist theories of gender. Contrary to outdated beliefs that young children are incapable of comprehending the complex issues central to #MeToo, this research asserts that the three case studies demonstrate how these topics can be introduced to children in creative and accessible ways. Consequently, each of these case studies can be considered as a piece of #MeToo children's literature, as they effectively convey important messages about gender roles, sexual violence, agency and political being, topics that are not usually associated with children. Each of these three case studies empowers children in unique ways, entitling them with agency and power to take control of their own narratives and change the power order surrounding them

in private and public spheres. Stuart Scott's *My Shadow Is Pink* delves into themes of gender identity and queer representation. Rhonda Leet's *Franny's Father Is a Feminist* explores gender roles and children's political resistance. Lastly, Jeanne Willis's *What Are Little Girls Made of?* addresses themes of consent, fear, and the pursuit of power. A common thread among all three case studies is the recognition that when children are given agency equal to that of adults, they not only grasp complex issues but also become active agents of change and resistance in their own narratives. Children in these books are powerful; they have the power to reshape the world, get role modelled, outgrow the gender constructs in the gendered environment around them, and affect change not only in relation to other children, but also in how children can influence and teach adults.

Notably, my research demonstrates that by empowering children to have agency and control over their own stories, we can foster their happiness while instilling their political consciousness, which can manifest in both private and public spheres. Furthermore, my findings indicate that these books, despite their target audience being children, can also serve as valuable tools for adult readers, as they tap into the inner child within all adults. Lastly, my research supports the notion that by viewing children as political beings, we can gain a deeper understanding of childhood, gender constructivism, gender-based violence, and related issues within a broader context.

It is important to note that the three selected books were authored by individuals of white descent. Therefore, further research involving children's literature written by authors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds would enhance the findings of this study, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of urgent and critical themes to be included in books intended for young readers of various backgrounds.

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