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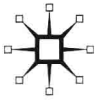

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In memory of my beloved family
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Dilemma: (n.) A state of things in which evils or obstacles present themselves on every side, and it is difficult to determine what course to pursue; a vexatious alternative or predicament; a difficult choice or position.

Contents

Figures

Introduction: Rethinking Gender

In 1977 Gene Kemp's book *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* was published. The book was an immediate hit and it seems all readers at the time, including me, were surprised by what is often described as a 'twist' in the ending. Throughout the book, the eponymous Tyke embarks on numerous escapades with loyal sidekick and not-so-bright friend Danny Clover. Tyke is messy, reckless, smart, quick-thinking, agile, fearless, and always in trouble at school. It is little wonder then that when readers discover at the end of the book that Tyke is a girl they feel they have fallen subject to a narrative deceit. Kemp avoids, until the postscript, the use of gendered pronouns when referring to Tyke, and gives her main character a gender-neutral first name; it seems this simple evasive tactic is enough to make readers feel that Tyke must *naturally* be a boy. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* serves as a useful marker for thinking about gender and, in particular, the theme of this book, the dilemmas that surround gender and sexuality.

The dilemmas I explore in this book do not centre simply on cases of mistaken identity, although these do occur in some chapters. Rather, my interest lies in teasing out and understanding what I see as key dilemmas arising from the contradictions and tensions between traditional gendered subject positions and new gender relations, and the dilemmas that emerge with respect to sexual difference. To rephrase the 1960s Virginia Slims cigarette slogan, 'we've come a long way, baby', and at a wider societal level we could list the social and cultural gains that have been made in the past 25 years since Kemp's book was published with respect to gender equality, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, paid maternity (and in some places paternity) leave, gay marriages and adoption rights. However, as we all know, these gains are far from universal, and the gaps within social policy, the

law, education, politics, and everyday social practices become chasms for many whose gender and sexuality remain outside the normative or privileged limits. When problematisations have their bases in the tensions and contradictions within a binary system of gender, sex, and sexuality, people are faced with dilemmas.

Many of the dilemmas, and underlying contradictions, problematisations, and subjective anxieties remain located in the often polarising and popularising discourses that inform theoretical, institutional, and wider societal understandings about changing gender relations. Post-feminism is an example of a contradictory discourse that the media often use as the scapegoat for myth-conceptions about gender in an advanced consumer culture of individualism and excess. As the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s Women's Movement and Second Wave Feminism, post-feminism is often appropriated as a celebratory discourse in a range of cultural resources for children and young adults to assert female independence and agency while exposing males and masculinity as weak, flawed, and directionless. The new battle-of-the-sexes rhetoric of popular culture and other media-driven outlets now spins on the dialectic of lost boys and empowered girls. However, these extremes of gender 'realities' become part of the circulating 'truths' that have accompanied the social and cultural changes of the past three decades. In response to feminist gains and advocacy, the proponents of the 'men's movements', that gained momentum during the 1990s, offered 'solutions to the damage ... suffered by men' (Connell, 2002, p. xi). However, as Connell notes, there is a contradiction at work as social movements usually arise from discontent, but 'men questionably remain the principal holders of economic and political power in the contemporary world' (p. xi). Despite this continuing hierarchy of gender and privilege, the lives of men and boys are certainly not trouble-free as high levels of violence, injury, ill health, and imprisonment are the realities for many men in countries across the globe. The effects of these gender practices 'may also produce toxic effects in the lives of others' (Connell, p. xii), both males and females, who become the victims of rape, domestic violence, racism, and homophobic attacks.

These examples of competing gender discourses highlight how any attempt to change gender relations is not a simple matter of amending legislation, though this is a necessary step in the process. The central dilemma as I see it with respect to competing gender discourses is how to avoid perpetuating further contradictions by contributing to preserving and reproducing traditional gender relations and hegemonies. Simply inverting hierarchical conventions and power relations does

not seem an equitable solution. How these dilemmas are resolved or transformed will depend on how individuals and groups are able to resignify or adapt conventions in new ways. Such resignifications and adaptations rely on innovative and creative approaches if change is to be effective. Change in discursive practices of speaking, writing, and behaving inevitably involves transgression, crossing boundaries, and re-imagining new situations where past prohibitions and preclusions are dissolved. This view of change necessitates intervention, and as such it cannot avoid a trouble-free passage as individuals will always resist as well as comply with changes that impact on their sense of self and their view of the world. This project of change begins with rethinking gender.

In rethinking gender by attending to its dilemmas within a context of change, I am setting an ambitious agenda. I am not proposing a single-handed intervention that will change the world. Rather, I approach this project by examining how children's literature is responding to new gender relations with narratives that either sustain or challenge existing gender orders and configurations. Children's literature will not change the world but it does make significant and often undervalued contributions to how its child readers see the world and their place in it. Children's literature has similar functions to literature written for adults in that it is the vehicle for carrying, as well as exposing, ideologies about the hierarchical arrangements of society (Culler, 1997, p. 39). Children's literature is not a monolithic field that offers a singular 'voice', nor does it invite a singular scholarship of interpretation. Nevertheless, it comes with a tradition that is often difficult to shake off: one that expresses itself as a traditional homology between a unified subject and a harmonious social context (or if the social context is not harmonious, a resolution towards harmony is often achieved by closure). However, despite the prevalence of this utopian view of ways of being in the world, children's literature has its fair share of rebels (both writers and critics) who refuse to conform to tradition. Similarly, its readers are diverse in their ways of being in the world. In rethinking gender in children's texts, this book considers alternative homologies with respect to the complex and various relations between individuals and social context represented in children's fiction. By exploring these complex relationships, my intention is to cast light on some of the dilemmas that invariably arise when individuals do not fit neatly into normative categories of existence.

My purpose in this book is not to raise a bundle of dilemmas and drop them in the reader's lap. Rather, my purpose is to come at the

subject of gender from different angles, examining how the narrative practices of contemporary children's literature – the dilemmas, antagonisms, resolutions, and disruptions that they express – can be understood by means of both a critical framework and a broader set of social discourses. As David Buchbinder notes, social or cultural discourse 'determines *what* can be spoken about, and in what terms and with what sorts of values. It also determines *who* has the authority to speak about and to whom, and who can only be spoken to' (1998, p. 11). I draw on a range of theoretical insights to assist in my subsequent examination of the primary texts I have selected. My intention is not to 'apply' theory but to put theoretical perspectives to work as I explore key dilemmas and other sub-dilemmas and problematics arising within the children's texts and from the cultural discourses which inform them. Before outlining my critical framework, I want to make explicit the assumptions that implicitly inform this book.

Assumptions

There is somewhat of a doubling of affect at work in writing and reading a book. For the writer there is the excitement and fear that one's readers might similarly approach the text with mixed feelings. My concern is not that a response of 'not another book on gender' might result in the book not being read, but, more importantly, that the topic is foreclosed. Have we really reached a point of saying 'been there, done that' with respect to debates about feminism and gender in children's narratives? There is also another matter that concerns many who write from within the field of children's literature scholarship and that is that we are speaking to 'family'. What does a book about gender issues and children's literature possibly have to say to those scholars and students working in other areas of literary and cultural studies? The assumptions that give rise to these questions are worth considering.

Citing children's literature does authorise a certain kind of space within the broader domains of literary, educational, and cultural studies. However, the response to this relegation of space within the debate need not be one of resignation to keeping it in the family, neither should it necessarily mean a withdrawal from the debates in the wider theoretical and societal arenas. On the contrary, I take the issue of authorisation as my motivation: how can we read gender differently in children's literature studies? What do we have to contribute to the debates and discussions that will provoke a more inclusive community of scholars? How can we demonstrate the value of texts written for

children and young people to those who are unfamiliar with them? I am certainly not the only scholar in children's literature who has responded to these questions by producing texts that speak to the broader disciplines. I won't name these writers at this point as my list would surely be incomplete, but their work will become evident in the following chapters. In aiming for an inclusive readership that entails not only students and scholars within the field of children's literature but those outside it, I also have to consider my assumptions about readers of this book. As a valued colleague pointed out to me, 'there is much to be gained from bringing the reader into the conversation'. In taking onboard this advice, I have endeavoured to temper my enthusiasm for abstract theorisation for a more accessible account whereby the often esoteric terminology of the discourses I draw upon are not treated as a self-evident treatise, but as ideas to be explicated clearly and contested if necessary. I doubt I have been entirely successful in achieving this.

A significant assumption that is implicit in this book is the view that gender is discursively constructed within a heterosexual matrix of power. This view is informed principally, but not solely, by Judith Butler's understanding of gender in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). I do not endorse a view that one's gender is an essential 'given', but following the work of Butler I see the value in considering gender as something that we 'do' rather than 'are'. Butler's notion of performativity is central to my discussion. As Butler explains, 'gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed', 'a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (2004, p. 1). Butler's observation about gendered performance, improvisation, and constraint supports the conceptual framework of this book, which is outlined in the next section.

Another position that is at the heart of this book is the problematic use of the pronoun 'we'. At times I speak to a universal reader, but this is part of my writerly intention to bring the reader into the conversation. However, I do not insist upon nor do I accept a taken-for-granted 'we' with respect to shared interpretations and ideological positions and positionings. On the contrary, I argue that 'we' are constituted through acts of exclusion and othering, and any attempt to speak on behalf of everyone (or someone) is not only foolish but obscures or conceals the differential contexts (social, political, historical, cultural) 'we' inhabit. In reading literature we need to be mindful that representation risks promoting a specific mode of being as its ideal (Grosz, 1995, p. 32). Such idealisation can result in either erasing difference or converting difference to a variation of an ideal.

In a similar way, I see literature and other cultural texts as highly ambivalent and open to multiple interpretations. However, to avoid a fragmented and never-ending proliferation of meanings, it is necessary to settle for a particular interpretation, which is informed and supported by close textual analysis and theoretically nuanced perspectives. This is not an easy task. Also, it is not so much a matter of getting it 'right' but of offering reasonable and supportable interpretations which ascribe certain meanings and significances. Texts produced for children and young adults are written, produced, circulated and consumed within social and cultural contexts which are already invested with sets of meanings about intended readership, form, and content (Hunt, 1991). Fairclough (1992, p. 80) too notes the social constraints that operate on the conventions for production and interpretation and the nature of social practices these conventions are a part of. These constraints, conventions, and social practices with respect to children's literature should not be seen as a reason to 'water down' either children's literature or children's literature scholarship into a digestible pap that will not cause any discomfort. Children and critics both need hearty literary delights to ensure they come back for more.

Finally, in rethinking gender, I am primarily concerned with bodies, and to borrow from Butler (1993) 'bodies matter'. I am mindful of how the assumptions discussed above (and others that remain implicit) influence understandings of gendered bodies and our various responses to the dilemmas that arise in relation to prevailing, binarised categories in Western thought that privilege one term over the other (mind over body; reason over emotion; self over other; male over female; 'white' over 'non-white'; human over machine). Theory and fiction often go hand-in-hand, so to speak, in their approaches to bodies: bodies are both the subject and object of their interests, located in both fantasy and reality, discussed as superficial and psychic entities, depicted as active and passive, powerful and powerless, as human and cyborg. All these manifestations of the body as lived, experienced, fantasised, and theorised open up for us the means to rethink the assumptions that guide our knowledge of existence and to *defamiliarise* our lives by writing/reading about them in a different way which may provoke critical reflection.[1]

The following section provides a detailed mapping of my approach and argument as I trace out the conceptual and methodological framework that will assist me in my analysis of texts in relation to gender and sexuality. By focusing on the dilemmas that pervade gender and sexuality in texts produced for children and young people, I hope to raise

questions and offer informed readings about the fictional subjects, how they come into existence, how they are constructed through the texts, and the limits and possibilities of those constructions.

The view from the inside

In surveying the view from the inside, I am referring to fictional texts produced for and presumably read by children and interested adults. The view reveals that children's literature has been concerned conventionally and historically with young people's identity formation and the dilemmas or obstacles characters encounter along the way. Culler captures succinctly one dimension of the dilemma of identity that informs approaches to literary constructions: 'Is the self something given or something made, and should it be conceived in individual or in social terms?' (2007, p. 34). Culler poses his questions as if the binaries he nominates – given/made; individual/social – must be in opposition, a view that as I mentioned above is reflective of Western thinking's preference for establishing binary categories and hierarchies. Of course, the reality is that identity entails both oppositional and corresponding sets of conditions. These varied conditions that shape identity formation are also found in literary representations whereby 'struggles about identity are struggles within the individual and between the individual and group: characters struggle against or comply with social norms and expectations' (Culler, 2007, p. 35). Narrative closure in young adult (YA) novels, in particular, typically provides a point where the individual has arrived; a moment of self-realisation or self-actualisation, whereby the struggles of finding one's 'true' identity have been overcome. In this typical coming-of-age narrative, there is often an underlying premise of an essential self that will emerge or be discovered. This trajectory turns the narrative into a self-fulfilling, albeit paradoxical, quest – seek and ye shall find what was there to begin with. Such a narrative resolution provides readers with a reassurance that things will work out for the best in the end, which is an enduring feature of the genre and part of liberal-humanism's project of harmonious individuality.

Individuality is a concept which presupposes that there is something possessed within each of us which marks our unique 'essence'. This essentialist view of 'the individual' assumes that identities are self-evident and unchangeable. However, as I mentioned previously, this is not a view to which I subscribe. Rather, my interest lies in how identities and subjectivities are constructed within language and discourse. By joining two concepts – identities and subjectivities – it may seem that I see the

two as synonymous. This is not the case, but I do see the two as constitutive of postmodernist and post-structuralist debates which question their critical relationship. For postmodernists and post-structuralists, the subject is not a coherent being or individual who has an essential core of identity. Rather, 'the subject' is a process of becoming (Butler, 1990a), and subjectivities, or how we come to experience our 'selves', is always multiple and discursively constructed. In children's literature this often evolves as a tortuous journey of *becoming* – becoming more mature, more sensitive, more empathetic, more other-regarding, more 'grown-up'. For girls and boys (both fictional and real), gender serves as the organising pedagogical tool for their *becoming* women and men (see Nelson & Martin, 2004; Pearce, 2002). In the process of becoming, children are not only instructed in certain sanctioned ways of being, but cautioned about inappropriate behaviours (for example: big boys don't cry; girls should not behave like tomboys).

Children's literature is part of this pedagogical process but its lessons are not always sung to the same tune. The reason for this lack of harmony is that children's literature, like other texts, is informed by discourses which carry particular views of the world (ideologies) and assumptions. Gender is inevitably part of the discursive frameworks operating often implicitly in texts. Given these different discourses, assumptions, and ideologies from which texts are written, children's literature encourages its ideal readers to take up certain subject positions. In other words, fiction not only represents a world of subjects who know, understand, and act in particular ways, but also offers the reader a subject position: 'the position from which the text is most readily intelligible' (Belsey, 2002, p. 62). However, as Stephens (1992, p. 50) notes with respect to children's literature, the subject positions available to child readers are often 'restrictive and restricted'; just how this is so remains open to debate. In terms of gender and sexuality, there is a tendency for texts to offer subject positions that express the assumptions and ideologies of dominant cultural groups. Thus, narrative is one of the ways of reproducing subjectivity in that its persuasive language may influence the ways readers 'understand themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live' (Belsey, 2002, p. 61). However, as we know, readers come to texts as subjects who are already socially and historically positioned and these subject positionings will play a large part in shaping how readers interpret fiction (Eagleton, 1983, p. 83). Also, readers are not always compliant and many texts do not simply offer a single or 'restricted' subject position throughout the course of the narrative.

We need to ask questions of these subject positions with respect to gender and sexuality, particularly their impact on notions of identity and subjectivity. Some of these are: What happens when new-founded identities incite conflict from others? When our quest for constructing a coherent identity for oneself is at the expense of another person's freedom? When we have to perform an identity from a restricted set of ways of being? When our performance results in a rejection of that identity by others? As Culler indicated above, these questions shift attention from the individual to broader social and philosophical concerns, by asking implicitly how subjectivity is understood in relation to the other. They also point to the problematic nature of identity as a coherent entity or project of individuality. The dilemmas that stab at the heart of these questions will be explored in more depth in the following chapters.

The dilemmas that 'identity' presents are also the subject of feminist, queer, and post-structuralist theories: theories which carry different ideological positions and often entail their own internal crises. One crisis that is central to postmodernity is 'the death of the subject', which suggests a foreclosure on discussions of gender. Alternatively, 'the crisis' might offer ways to understand the process of the subject's (gendered) construction. The work of theory, as I see it, is both to illuminate and to re-imagine existing conditions. Both purposes help to disrupt certain givens and assumptions by providing us with conceptual tools for envisaging a different social order and for teasing out the uneven conditions under which we live our lives and experience our subjectivities. Of course, all theories and discourses carry their own assumptions, a fact that can be forgotten in our enthusiastic, even evangelistic, take up of their arguments and perspectives. It is literature's function to take readers into its stories and to offer spaces for pleasure, self-reflection, identification, and imagining of the worlds it creates and the characters which inhabit those worlds. Children's literature provides protagonists whom young readers can identify with to some degree (albeit by age or circumstance). The first-person narrator, a common device used by writers to achieve identification between text and reader, is a form of agency whereby the narrator's 'I' enunciates an active and determining presence (Ahmed, 1998, p. 151). Theoretical writings tend to take a broader view by focusing on social identities that are shaped by gender, ethnicity, sexuality, politics, and so forth. Thus, both theory and literature are interested in identity, and for scholars interested in children's literature and what it can say about gender (among other matters), of particular concern is its ability to present 'singular cases while relying