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## Untangling the *Tango*: Reading stances for children's literature

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### Abstract

To understand the responses of diverse groups towards the issue of pulping of certain 'controversial' books such as *And Tango Makes Three* with a gay theme, especially in the context of public access of these books, this paper looks at the complexity of reading stances towards children's literature. Children's literature serves various purposes: gnostical (knowledge) development; development of moral values, societal/social norms and cultural values; gender development; promotion of critical reading skills and cultivation of cognitive, aesthetic and affective development. Such varying purposes will lead readers to adopt different reading stances. As children's literature is valued by parents and educators in specific ways, when certain children's books of controversial themes are taken out of public circulation, heated debates about the issue due to mutually exclusive and opposing stands needs to be understood in terms of diverse stances towards children's literature.

**Keywords:** *words:* Book Pulping, Children's Literature, Reading Stances

### 1. Introduction

The declaration of the pulping of three books – *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), *The White Swan Express* (Okimoto & Aoki, 2002) and *Who's In My Family* (Harris & Westcott, 2012) by the National Library Board because of public complaints about the books containing homosexual content (Lim, 2014) led to diverse views being expressed about the issue of pulping and the types of children's literature to be allowed for public access. The stirring of strong emotions led Lim (2014) to appeal: "As we stand up for what we believe in, let us also remember to listen to those who hold different views, to take seriously their deeply held values and beliefs and to converse with them in a way that builds mutual respect and trust" (p.30). To understand why the community is divided in their views, we need to untangle the complexity of stances towards children's literature which inform the responses of diverse groups towards the issue of pulping of books especially in the context of public access of these books.

This paper begins with a brief tracing of the evolution of children's literature to look for the various stances for reading children's literature to contextualize the debate about the issue of pulping of certain books written for children. The various stances will help us understand why and how children's literature is being valued by parents and educators in specific ways that might be mutually exclusive and lead to opposing stands. The paper will then discuss the stances adopted by various groups advocating for or opposing to the pulping of books with specific reference to *And Tango Makes Three* (see Figure 1) written by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell.

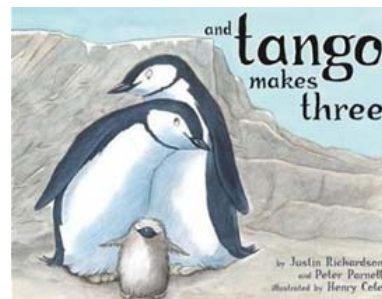


Fig.1. A book by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005)

## 2. Children's literature and its evolution

Children's books are seen as literary works written specifically for children that can come in the form of short stories, fables, fairy tales, poetry and even songs. The target audience for these books is obviously children though it can be argued that writers are aware of parents and educators as the secondary audience. Therefore the authors might write in a style that will allow what is written to be read aloud so that parents and educators can bond with the children while cultivating the children's interest in reading. Children's literature is thus seen as a category of books whose existence absolutely depends on supported relationships with a particular reading audience: children ... as *readers* defined by audience in a way other literature tends not to be (see Hunt, 1999, for detail).

Before the eighteenth century, there were no separate categories for children's literature. Children were exposed to fables for moral instruction or fairy tales with happily ever after endings but which are also full of violence and trickery. Before and till mid eighteenth century, books for children were meant to impart religion, moral values and codes of social conduct. It was only in the latter half of the eighteenth century that John Newberry, an English publisher, published books for children to enjoy and one such book was *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* by Newbery in (1765). Though Newbery's books were also highly moralistic, the children reading them were entertained while indoctrinated. Children's literature as we know it today can be said to begin in 1865 when Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the first novel written especially for children that was purely entertaining, with no instructional purpose and depicting a fantasy world. Fantasy continued to dominate till the 1970s and 1980s when children's literature became more materialistic and realistic. In fact, in the twenty-first century, there is a great increase in the diversity in children's books, from picture books, flap books to online multimedia texts.

## 3. Reading stances towards children's literature

Children's books are indeed diverse, ranging from books that furnish knowledge of the world to books that portray children's everyday life, convey their feelings and their conflicts and books that talk about the other cultures and customs and with each book carrying a message from a specific perspective. Therefore, though children's literature is meant to captivate and entertain the specific audience of children and cultivate a love for reading, readers will adopt different reading stances because children's literature serves various purposes: developing gnostical (knowledge); imparting moral values, societal norms and cultural values; promoting readings skills, and cultivating gender, cognitive, aesthetic and affective development. As Pantić (2006) puts it aptly, "it would indeed be very difficult to argue for denial, or ignore the role literary works play in shaping and cultivating our cultural, aesthetic and moral senses" (p.402). This is because children's literature can promote appreciation about cultural heritage; help children develop emotional intelligence and nurture development of the children's moral values, personality and social skills.

### *Gnostical (knowledge) development*

Children's literature is seen as a means to impart knowledge (gnosis) of the world as well as knowledge of self in relation to the world. Parents and educators will advise children to read widely so that they can widen their horizons as they learn

about the world in terms of natural phenomena (e.g., why and how there is lightning) as well as supernatural phenomena (e.g., who created the world); develop interests in new subjects and hobbies and acquire knowledge about the various world issues (e.g., poverty and pollution of the environment).

### *Moral development, societal/social norms and cultural values*

Children's literature can be used to develop moral awareness through helping children think about moral dilemmas of the characters in the stories and learn about moral values like responsibility, blame, punishment and justice. Children's stories can depict "numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions, an important skill for children to see modeled" (Norton, 2010, p.34). There is unspoken assumption that children's authors will try to impart moral and religious values to young impressionable minds through writing engaging literary texts. Parents and educators, by reading literary works with the children, can "transmit values and shape attitudes about people who function as the core for children's socialization in the school and larger community" (Walker-Dalhouse, 1992, p.48). Parents and educators can help children develop self-pride and to respect differences among people for "teaching young children about the differences and similarities between people will not singularly ensure a more gentle and tolerant society, but might act as a prerequisite to one" (Sobol, 1990, p.30).

In terms of cultural values, when children are exposed to multicultural children's literature, they are given the opportunity to explore the heritage and values of the diverse groups or races of people living in their community as well as to shed some of their preconceived notions and negative attitudes toward others who are unlike them (Barroqueiro & Sprouse, 2012).

### *Gender development and reading interests*

Researchers have been interested in the issue of whether children's interests in reading are related to gender differences which are influenced by societal/social norms and cultural values. In a large meta-analysis with 165 studies done by Hyde and Linn (1988) to examine gender differences in verbal ability that is essential for reading, they found no overall significant difference. Another study on 114 five-year-old children done by Johnston and Wu (cited in National Reading Panel, 2000) also found no gender differences in early reading skill. Similarly, no consistent gender differences were found in vocabulary and reading comprehension (Feingold, 1994). However, according to Johnston, Watson and Logan (2009), gender difference in reading was influenced by the way boys and girls learn to read, i.e., boys learn to read and spell better, with equal overall attainment in reading comprehension through a systematic synthetic phonics, but girls did better in reading, spelling and comprehension through analytic phonics. In a recent study done by Chia and Kee (2013), no significant gender differences was found among young children's performance in word recognition and phonics skills, vocabulary, and reading fluency, except reading comprehension. Thus, the influence of gender differences on reading is still not entirely clear (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010).

### *Cognitive development and reading skills*

Authors of children's literature exercise care in their choice of words and sentence structuring to suit their target audience. In

reading children's literature, cognitive development is stimulated while children gain new vocabulary and syntax for according to Dickinson et al. (2012), children's books offer children the opportunity to hear new vocabulary items embedded in well-formed, relatively short sentences. Such books are rich in varied vocabulary and using the same words in diverse grammatical constructions will offer implicit lessons in how words are used. Children will also become familiar with story structures.

#### ***Aesthetic development and literary appreciation***

Children's experiences with literature need to begin with enjoyment before they can learn to appreciate (Chia, 2008). According to Jalonga (2004), the word *enjoy* literally means *to take pleasure in*; it describes active participation coupled with intense interest, a synonym for *engagement*, not for *frivolity*. Pleasure persuades the child first to look, then to discuss and listen, next to remember and recite from memory, and finally to read a favorite story. For instance, as Meek (1991) has pointed out, "Picture books are not simply privileged reading for or with children. They make reading for all a distinctive kind of imaginative looking" (p.116).

In fact picture books, a special category or genre of children's literature, are publications in which the pictures stand alone, the pictures dominate the text, or the words and illustrations are equally important (Shulevitz, 1989). Because the picture book is both illustrated and written, it "simultaneously supports aesthetic development and growth in literacy" (Jalonga, 2004, p.8) as reading picture books involve the visual skills of "looking at the illustrations, interpreting their meaning, searching for details mentioned in the text, and lingering over favorite images" (Jalonga, 2004, p.3).

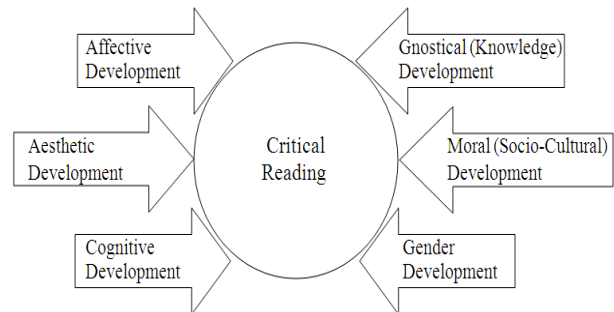
#### ***Affective development***

All children will experience adversity of one kind or another at some point in their lives. If they have been presented with literature that addresses a variety of difficulties prior to having a crisis, they will be better equipped to cope when the need arises. For instance, Ludwig (2014) talks about how herself as an author of children's books, she constructs dialogue for children to gain insight into others' thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as their own. Social and emotional development of young children can be enhanced if we carefully choose the books we share with them and allow ample opportunity for them to ask questions and relate the situations to their own feelings. Being able to understand other people's viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, for as pointed out by Norton (2010), "acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others" (p.27). Children's literature can foster social development by encouraging students to accept other people and their differences. Children can also learn to be empathic and self-aware for according to Shechtman (2008), "Through the imaginative process that reading involves, children have the opportunity to do what they often cannot do in real life – become thoroughly involved in the inner lives of others, better understand them, and eventually become more aware of themselves" (p.18).

#### ***Critical reading***

Besides the gnostical/knowledge, moral/socio-cultural, gender, cognitive, aesthetic and affective stances, there is the critical reading (see Figure 2) stance where reading children's

literature is meant for the development of children's ability to critically evaluate literature (Pantić, 2006). This is because one cannot ignore the fact that all literary works are informed and shaped by the authors' respective value systems — reflecting a set of views and assumptions regarding such things as human nature, social organization and norms of behavior, moral principles, questions of good and evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life, the author's notions of how the world *is* or *ought to be*. These values may reflect individual author's idiosyncrasy or the values of the culture at large, or of subgroups within the culture (Sutherland, 1985).



**Fig. 2.** Reading stances towards children's literature

There are authors who write to highlight controversial issues because they feel that children do encounter such realities and literature depicting such issues can be used for parents and educators for discussion. Since parents and educators are seen as playing an important role in helping children learn to read critically, advocates of critical reading have argued for reading biased books to "provide opportunities to examine how and why inappropriate and inaccurate representations may have been portrayed" (Iseke-Barnes, 2009, p.24). As Sutherland (1985) sees it, comprehensive critical appreciation of a literary work would include an understanding of the ideologies it expresses though the ideologies may be implicit only (masked or submerged beneath a distracting surface) and discerning them may sometimes be difficult. In fact Thompson (2001) has expressed concern about assuming that all adults can deal with controversial books by arguing that few adults can identify the stereotypes and biases of texts and much less guide children towards understanding the inaccurate and misleading representations.

Those taking a critical literacy stance also see children's literature as providing myriad opportunities for incorporating global and justice perspectives in the classroom. Complex issues such as migration, refugees and asylum seekers can be effectively explored through picture story books. This is because critical literacy is about asking questions, interrogating societal issues such as poverty, education, equity, and equality, looking at different points of view, and asking the question: Is everyone included in what we are reading?

#### **4. Discussion: Reading stances And Tango Makes Three**

Having outlined the diverse possible stances to reading children's literature to contextualize the issue of pulping of controversial books, this section looks at one specific book *And Tango Makes Three* to discuss how varying stances in reading such books have contributed to the heated public debates.

In the picture book *And Tango Makes Three*, published in 2005, authors Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, tell the story of a family of penguins. The book is inspired by the true story of two male penguins who formed a family to raise an egg together in Central Park Zoo, New York. From the point of view of fostering social development by encouraging students to accept other people and their differences, *And Tango Makes Three* might encourage students to become more open-minded to different types of families and understand that love is the most important thing in a family. *And Tango Makes Three* shows that adoptive families, even when the adoptive parents share the same gender, are natural family formations (Harvey, 2013).

*And Tango Makes Three* has won numerous awards including the ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award (2005), Gustavus Myer Outstanding Book Award (2006), and Bank Street Best Book of the Year (2006). However, *And Tango Makes Three* is also no stranger to controversy for since its publication in 2005, it has topped the American Library Association's (ALA) 10 Most Challenged Books List between 2006 and 2010. The book was listed as the 'most challenged' by the American Library Association between 2007, 2008 and 2009. It was banned in numerous schools across America. *And Tango Makes Three* has been deemed inappropriate reading material for children because the book's underlying theme of homosexuality challenges ideas and assumptions about homosexuality and the book also raises the question about what makes a family.

In tracing the history of children's literature and the reading stances, it can be seen that children's literature is a constant battle of *dulcis et utile* (pleasure and instruction). Besides the pleasure and instruction dichotomy, children's literature is also a site of multiplicity and intertextuality with "a wide range of possible agendas and complex dilemmas about the uses of literature" (Pantić, 2006, p.407). There is also no general agreement on the values to be promoted, other than to advocate "principles of tolerance, diversity and justice that western liberal democracies adhere to" (Pantić, 2006, p.407). Though it cannot be denied that authors of children's literature should be fully aware that their target audience are impressionable children, some children's literature written by liberal adults hoping to educate children about some harsh or mature realities, or the result of an ill-judged but well-intentioned conception, has caused huge, highly-publicized controversy as these works are deemed to subvert cultural, social and political norms. When our children's education is involved, emotions tend to run particularly high. This is more so as *And Tango Makes Three* is accessible to even the youngest reader.

The initial decision of the National Library Board (NLB) to withdraw the books was based on the stance of imparting values and societal norms as NLB explained through an email that "while we try to sieve through the contents and exercise our best judgment, it is an arduous task to ensure complete adherence of details to our pro-family stand. However, when library visitors ... highlight to us any conflicting contents within the books, we review such books thoroughly and withdraw them from circulation" (Suela, 2014, para.16). This is reiterated by Vincent, A. (2014) in the *Telegraph*, "The NLB, a network of 26 public libraries with a collection of five million books, says that the titles are against its 'pro-family'

stance and that decision has been reached after a complaint by a parent and an internal review" (para.4).

The public only knew about the banning of *And Tango Makes Three* and *The White Swan Express* (see Figure 3) because a parent by the name Teo Kai Loon complained to NLB that the books featured non-traditional families, published his success story on the Facebook page of the anti-LGBT group *We are against Pinkdot in Singapore* (Tan, 2014, para.5). What followed the decision to withdraw the books from the children's section was the announcement that the books would be pulped. The issue of the pulping of the book generated much public attention and heated debates, so much so that the Singapore government had to step in to take steps to appease the public. There was an explosion of discussion from varying reading stances. For instance, Simon Vincent in the independent sg-blog posted that he was among those concerned people who wrote in to NLB to protest its decision to ban the books *And Tango Makes Three* and *The White Swan Express*. He expressed his view that the decision to pulp the books instead of shelving them under the Adult or Reference section was appalling. He wanted controversial books to be available for readers to make a choice, showing that he was adopting the critical reading stance. To him, NLB bans books based on presumptions of what is appropriate for children and what a family should be – the imparting of moral values, societal norms and cultural values stance. This stance was reaffirmed by Singapore's information minister, Yaacob Ibrahim, in his Facebook post that the NLB's decision was "guided by community norms. The prevailing norms, which the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans accept, support teaching children about conventional families, but not about alternative, non-traditional families, which is what the books in question are about" (cited in Vincent, S., 2014).

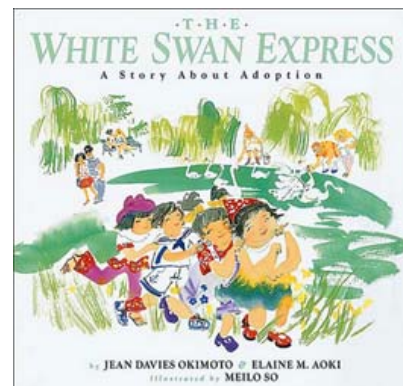


Fig. 3. A book written by Jean Davis Okimoto and Elaine M. Aoki

However, not all parents adopt the same stance for one anonymous parent on the *theonlinecitizen.com* wrote from the critical reading and imparting cultural values stances in talking about the need to respect others who hold different values and how we should embrace the co-existence of such differences though it does not mean the blind acceptance of the value system as there is a need to exercise parental rights to coach their children on what is right and wrong and parents should not shy away from stating their stances (biased or not) on homosexuality issues. The anonymous parent will nurture children's capability to embrace different views and will not shelter his/her children from knowing the reality of and existence of homosexuality so that his/her own children will form and internalize their own set of values and acceptance.

The series of protests led Han (2014) to comment wryly in his editorial, “You would [have] never thought there could be so much flap over a children’s book about two penguins.” In websites, on blogs and social media, the outpouring of views, both for and against the controversial decision of the National Library Board (NLB) to remove and pulp three children’s books continued for more than a week after the news broke and according to him, this debate is “placing another marker along the transition that Singapore society is making to a new political landscape” (Han, 2014, para.7). That the pulping has become a matter of politics is because books express their authors’ personal ideologies (whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or indirectly). To send a potentially influential book into public arenas to promulgate one’s values is a political act for the author’s views are the author’s politics; and these views, when made accessible to the public, become purveyors of these politics, and potentially persuasive (Sutherland, 1985). Williams (2002) reminds us of many examples of authors who explicitly set out to teach us something when they embark on their creation, to move us and to change our viewpoint such as George Orwell telling us something about totalitarianism in his famous *Animal Farm* satire. When interviewed about the book, co-author Richardson had this comment: “People only challenge a book when they fear it has the power to influence thought and create change. The fact that our little book has been seen as transformative by so many for so long makes us very proud” (SLJ Staff, 2011, para.4), showing his awareness of the powerful influence of this book. Richardson, in his most recent interview with the *Online Citizen*, responded to this question: “As an author of the book, what did you expect readers to get out of the story?” with this: “We wrote *Tango* ten years ago with a few goals in mind. At the time, gay couples in America were just beginning to have or adopt children in large numbers. We wanted their children to have at least one book which showed a family like their own. We also wanted to help the parents of their classmates find an age-appropriate way to explain the fact of two-father and two-mother families to their children” and thus, stating in no uncertain terms the aim of their book.

## 5. Conclusion

The free market and liberal (or naively optimistic) publishers mean that certain questionable books aimed at our youngest generation have emerged over the last decade. We need to examine our reading stances for controversial books simply because “[I]f we accept that there is place for it at all, then whose values and literature do we want to promote, how do we help children recognize the forces that work behind them, appreciate others’ values and critically examine those of their own culture, and what does it mean to act morally in these confusing times?” (Pantić, 2006, p.407). Bloom (1987) had expressed concern that the modern belief in openness to all kinds of ideologies, without any notion of right and wrong against which we judge our own and other cultures, the openness in accepting everything and “denying any objective measure has been rendered meaningless and even destructive to both one’s own and the good of others” (p.34).

Indeed, the series of heated public debates has brought up the importance of taking into account reading stances in dealing with the issue of controversial books in Singapore. The NLB’s final decision to place the books in the adult section so that parents who choose to allow their children to read these books

will do so based on their social and individual, personal morality stances can be said to be an act to allow for diverse reading stances. Barbara Jones, director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) in talking about banning of books, sums up the dilemma and how to deal with conflicting stances best, “While we firmly support the right of every reader to choose or reject a book for themselves or their families, those objecting to a particular book should not be given the power to restrict other readers’ right to access and read that book. As members of a pluralistic and complex society, we must have free access to a diverse range of viewpoints on the human condition in order to foster critical thinking and understanding. We must protect one of the most precious of our fundamental rights – the freedom to read” (Suela, 2014, para.27).

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