



**SPINNING
GOLD
LITERARY
JOURNAL**



Spinning Gold

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Contents

- 1 *La La Land* by Zoe Farnes
- 2 Two pages from *One Winter's Day* by Wen Gu
- 4 Interview with Michael Rosen
- 7 *The Garden* by Tianyi Liu
- 8 *Where is my reflection?* by Zoe Xu
- 9 *School Drawing* by Jiyu Feng
- 10 *The Pencils are Angry* by Elizabeth Gaglio
- 10 *Sketch* by Jiyu Feng
- 12 *Drawings from the British Museum* by Irem Sencok
- 13 *Neurodivergence and Diana Wynne Jones' "The Merlin Conspiracy"*
by Adrianna Ryn
- 19 *Dinner Time* by Frankie Gritton
- 20 Interview with Sita Brahmachari
- 23 *The Old Peach Tree* by Tiny Liu
- 24 *The Witchmouth* by Maria Jarero
- 31-2 *The North Wind and The Sun* by Mei Feng Chen
- 33 *The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them* by Alice Bishop
- 35 *In the night playground* by Amy Matthews
- 36 *Are you what you eat?: An exploration of how food and cultural identity is portrayed in picturebooks featuring people of colour* by Hui Liang
- 46 *Hansel and Gretel* by Ana María Ardila
- 47 *The Rain* by Matty Gu
- 50 *The Girl Who Turned into a Forest* by George Lewins, illustrated by Rosa Kelly
- 54 *Ignorance is bliss* by Jazmin Bartram
- 55 *A is an apple* by Zoe Xu

- 56 *How is Mexican identity represented through language and culture in children's literature?* by María Jarero
- 64 *A Maharashtrian Rhino* by Malvika Nair
- 65 *Bathroom Floor* by Zoe Farmes
- 66 *A Little Less Blue* by Mei Feng Chen
- 67 *Sonnet 1* by Zoe Farmes
- 68 *At Home* by Ana María Ardila
- 70 *The Funeral* by Alice Bishop
- 76 *The Moon* by Xiaohan Sun
- 77 *The City Mouse and Country Mouse* by Zoe Xu
- 78 *Spirituality in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Series: A new ideological direction in children's fantasy literature in the absence of Christian affiliation* by George Lewins
- 87 *Best Ever Cup of Tea Made By a Pig* by Mei Feng Chen
- 88 Interview with Bruce Ingman
- 91 *Little Squirrel* by Irem Sencok
- 92 *Fair Play* by Jenny Barker, illustrated by Frankie Gritton
- 95 *Door to Heaven* by María Jarero
- 96 *Hansel and Gretel* by Ana María Ardila
- 100 *Little Squirrel's New Home* by Irem Sencok
- 101 *Sureyya Opera House* by Irem Sencok
- 102 *The Town Mouse and Country Mouse* by Sisi Wu

Front and back illustrations: Duality Project by Irem Sencok

From the Editors-in-Chief:

Welcome to the first edition of *Spinning Gold*, an art and literary magazine created to showcase the talent of the students on the MA Children's Literature programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. Dreamed up by Maria Jarero and Adrianna Ryn over tea at 2am, and run entirely by students in the master's programme, *Spinning Gold* is both a collection of our hard work and a reflection of all that we have learned in this past year (or two!).

Within these pages you will find illustrations, creative writing, and excerpts of essays. There are interviews with Michael Rosen and Sita Brahmachari, both renowned Children's Literature authors and lecturers on the course, as well as Bruce Ingman, famous illustrator and Convenor of the MA in Children's Book Illustration. Throughout is a sense that the next generation of children's literature creatives and professionals have wonderful things to contribute.

Many thanks to Dr Emily Corbett and Professor Vicky Macleroy for their support, as well as to the many staff and students who have given their time and energy to ensuring this journal comes into being. Special thanks to the Centre for Language, Culture and Learning, which hosts the online version of *Spinning Gold*, and to Goldsmiths Adaptable Online Learning (GOAL) for sponsoring the first print run.

We hope you will keep an eye out for future issues — and for the work from all the students who shared their early-career work with us.

We cannot thank you enough for reading.

With love,

Adrianna and Maria

Lala Land

Zoe Farmes

Intended audience: Middle grade

Cheek kissed, door clicked
toss the sheet aside, slide in
head on pillow, feet in socks
toes warm like toasted soldiers

Keep the dreams sweet, thinking of sheep
playing a film from my mind on the ceiling

Until that ceiling turns to sky
and clouds hang down
my bed: a lavender pirate ship
sailing across carpet

To treasure island buried years ago by lava
its riches locked under cool rock

Off the ship I take my glass shovel
dig until the morning comes,
hits the chest
shovel shatters in my palms
to the ring of my alarm



Interview with Michael Rosen

***Spinning Gold Editorial Team:* What is the hardest thing about being a children's book writer?**

Michael Rosen: It's probably the editing process. I often get attached to a particular bit of writing and don't want to let it go. Editors in publishing houses are the final arbiters and writers have to accept that.

SG: What is your writing process, and how has this developed over time?

MR: As I write in quite a few different ways, I have to say that there isn't one writing process. And, to complicate it further, I write poems in several different ways too. A long story or novel needs a particular kind of concentration over a period of time. Some poems are thoughts that have 'brewed' over a day or two. Some poems are like replies to something I've heard. Others involve collecting things that someone has said whether that's 'just now' or from the past.

SG: Can you tell us a bit about your journey to becoming a published author?

MR: The first book I ever got published was a play that I had written when I was an undergraduate at university. It was put on at the Royal Court Theatre and in those days (1968) either Methuen or Faber published virtually every play that was put on at that theatre. Meanwhile I was writing poems about my childhood along with things that were a bit more nonsensical. I built up a pile of these and started sending them round, first to Faber, who had published the play and then to some other companies. In the end, thanks to an intro from Margaret Meek (Spencer) who was a colleague of my father, the editor at a small publisher Andre Deutsch, liked the poems in the pile. She married me up with Quentin Blake and my first children's book

came out, called *Mind Your Own Business*, in 1974. At that moment, (and I wasn't expecting this) I was quickly 'taken up' by the children's book world which was and is very generous towards newcomers. I started doing readings for the Federation of Children's Book Groups, for example, and schools. That, in turn, stimulated me to write and perform more and publishers mostly - not always - liked what it was I wrote.

SG: If you had to choose three children's books that every child should read, what would they be and why?

MR: These are only my preferences and I don't really believe in telling children that they **MUST** read this or that. I've had great times sharing these books with my own children: *Emil and the Detectives* by Erich Kästner, *Clown* by Quentin Blake, and my youngest son loved the *Captain Underpants* books!

SG: Do you have any current projects that you can tell us about?

MR: I have two picture books that I have to write. One is a follow-up to 'The Big Dreaming' that comes out later this year, and the other is a follow-up to 'Goldilocks and the Three Crocodiles' and 'Not-so-little Red Riding Hood' that also comes out later this year. I also have a little group of unfinished books with Walker Books - a graphic novel war story based on true events, a historical fiction novel, a picture book, a Shakespeare anthology ... the list goes on!

SG: What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in writing for children?

MR: You must, must, must keep reading. You have to fill your head with scenes, plots, characters, tones of voice (register), language, motifs and so on. You have to reflect on your own life and see what has mattered to you and why. It's probably also a good idea to think about the books you read as a child. Try and locate what it was that really grabbed you or fascinated you or intrigued you. If you are a parent, aunt, uncle, god-parent, grand-parent, teacher, youth-worker etc, tune in to what the children are saying and thinking. See what

seems to grab their attention, what fascinates them - whether that's in life or in what they read. Both.

SG: Finally, what is the biggest threat children's literature is currently facing and how do you feel we can fight it?

MR: I think two things help to sideline books: the huge power of electronic media and a school curriculum that squeezes out reading for pleasure. I'm not against electronic media - I'm a great consumer of it myself. I'm not sure that it can be fought! All we can do in response to that is try to write and illustrate books that children will want to read or hear read to them. The school curriculum is another matter. I think there is a strong theoretical case to be made that school has become too test-heavy, too focussed on STEM, not enough on the arts. I support anyone and any organisation that campaigns for arts in schools and reading for pleasure.





Where is my reflection?
Zoe Xu @zoelovesgiraffe



School Drawing
Jiyu Feng @jiyuhere

The Pencils are Angry

Elizabeth Gaglio

Intended Audience: Middle grade

After the third graders pack up and go home,
Miss Marco stays in the classroom alone.
She plans and she cleans and she gets things just right,
But something strange happens when she leaves for the night.

First there's some bumping, then a scratch, then a shake,
When no one is watching, the classroom's awake!
The rulers and markers are having a chat,
The scissors are making their own paper hats.
Even the chairs are racing around,
While the maps enjoy rolling up and back down.



Jiyu Feng @jiyuhere
Sketch

But amid all the bustle, there is one small concern,
The pencils are angry, you will soon learn.
They shout all together "We are so mad!
The erasers erased all the notes that we had!
Something must be done, this just isn't fair,
We don't trust that side of the room over there."

These hurtful words started a fight,
And a battle took place in the middle of the night!
Paper clips were flung from side to side,
The glue sticks were scared and attempted to hide.
The crayons starting coloring things black and blue,
'Till finally the globe stepped in, he knew what to do.

"Stop it right now, this must come to an end!
The answer to our problem is right here, my friend.
The third graders are smart, you know that it's true,
By following their example, we'll know what to do."

The globe rolled under the set of class rules,
And explained that adhering would end all the duels.
"Be safe and be kind, and always responsible,
So the classroom at night can be just as phenomenal!"

The classroom agreed to give it a try,
Now everyone knows some rules to live by.
We should all be safe and happy and free,
Class agreements help protect you and me.

So whether you are a kid or a pencil, remember,
It is important to be a good community member.



Neurodivergence and Diana Wynne Jones’ “The Merlin Conspiracy”

Adrianna Ryn

Introduction

A broadly-recognized function of children’s literature is in shaping the worldviews of its readers (Sims Bishop, 1990; Reynolds, 2011) and modelling problem-solving behavior (Cuddigan & Hanson 1988; Barclay & Whittington, 1992). Concerning disability, it can be a powerful voice for integration (Ayola, 1999). Because of its effect on readers, representation of disabled children of all kinds done well is important.

Critical disability studies offer helpful ways of looking at representations of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is “an umbrella term, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum and Tourette syndrome” (Clouder et al 2020). Per Garland-Thompson’s post modern observation that “the margin constitutes the center” (Garland-Thompson, 1996, p.5), it implicitly defines the neurotypical person as one without these

qualities. A critical approach encourages a consideration of the natural variation among brains and modes of thinking, some of which are pathologized and some lauded by society, and seeks to problematize both the creation of these boundaries and the literary processes of cognitive othering which center neurotypical perspectives.

Michelle Resene’s 2016 analysis of Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Case of the Dog in the Night-time* shows how children’s literature can uphold or reject neurotypical views. Using disability studies through a postmodern lens, Resene examines how aesthetic nervousness – the unease provoked by the disabled body as reflected in both literature and in the discourse around it (Quayson, 2012; Couser, 2005) – can come about because the structure of the mystery breaks down due to the (implied) autistic protagonist’s limitations, so the text itself encourages the reader to



experience a sense of superiority to the protagonist.

Disability studies scholars have shown little interest in fantasy. The disinterest is undoubtedly mutual; disability, particularly neurodiversity, seems to exist far more in realistic children's literature than in children's fantasy.

I wish to acknowledge legitimate reasons to resist incorporating disabled characters into fantasy. First, by giving disabled characters magical powers, authors risk associating disability with old stereotypes of mystic power (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). Second, fantasy – particularly through its fairy-tale influence – has long used real disabilities to construct and define what is monstrous (Garland-Thompson, 1996). Third, it could be argued that disability is real, and there is a pedagogic need for realistic fiction to deal with it; in other words, fantasy is superfluous.

Fantasy texts require close examination for both mystic and monstrous tropes. But I argue that fantasy itself has great potential for interrogating the concept of the normate. The primacy of the “normal”, Davis has argued, has influenced our understanding of and preference for “realist” fiction in

the first place (Davis 2013). Fantasy, however, “highlights the instability, inconsistency, or underlying preposterousness of the normal” (Apter 1982, p. 111). Therefore normative ways of thinking can also be troubled and within the bounds of the story the norm itself can be overruled and rewritten.

In the following essay, I examine Diana Wynne Jones' *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003) from a critical disability perspective to see the extent to which magic has been used to disrupt traditional dis/ability binaries, as well as the degree to which the narrative itself supports non-normative viewpoints. I will use a close textual analysis to answer the following questions.

- Does the fantasy problematize normality by countering neurotypical perspectives?
- How does the fantasy prioritize different ways of seeing and thinking?
- Does the author avoid aesthetic nervousness?

The Merlin Conspiracy

Diana Wynne Jones' *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003) artfully demonstrates ways in which fantasy can problematize normality by prioritizing different ways of learning and thinking and by

countering neurotypical perspectives throughout the narrative. The novel's great triumph is in celebrating different perspectives as equally legitimate.

The story takes place in a parallel universe version of Britain called Blest. In this world, magical ability is fairly common. Roddy, a girl who lives with the king's court, discovers that a plot hatched by the king's advisors is turning magic rotten – which is having a ripple effect throughout the multiverse. As Roddy races to stop the conspiracy, it simply becomes a question of how magic will change – towards the black magic that the conspiracy desires, or to a new and reinvigorated magic.

Does the fantasy problematize normality by countering neurotypical perspectives?

Roddy's best friend Grundo is dyslexic. This affects both his writing (“inside out and backwards”, p. 7) and his magic (“he had an unexpected amount of inside out magical talent”, p. 8-9).

Jones does not make magic a metaphor for disability, however. Roddy, who is not dyslexic, is equally magically gifted in her own way. In fact, magic ability seems to be an entirely different type of non-nor-

mativity cognition: “The other children our own age [...] had no gift for magic. They were perfectly friendly – don't get me wrong – but they just had a more normal outlook” (p. 9).

Once magic and cognition are linked, the author plays with the effect to trouble the notion of the normate. There exist in Blest a number of powerful adult magicians, all with such wildly different types of magic it is difficult to be sure exactly what is the norm. The court's ritual magic (which makes Grundo nauseous) is different from the Magid magic of the powerful Romanov, which is also different from the primeval magic of Roddy's grandfather Gwyn, which is different again from the more natural magic of the Lady of Governance. Although Roddy – and presumably the reader – begins the book with the belief that “normality” exists, the concept itself becomes increasingly meaningless against the vast spectrum of different types of magic.

How does the fantasy prioritize different ways of seeing and thinking?

Various ways of seeing and thinking interweave, creating reversals of power and dominance. While visiting her grandfather in Wales,

Roddy is chosen as the receptacle for an ancient form of knowledge; from then on, her perspective veers so strongly from the standard view of magic, she seems to be as different as Grundo:

“I realized that all the magic we had learnt at Court was small and one-sided and incomplete. The reality was huge – and all the things our teachers said were complicated were really quite simple. And the other way round” (p. 134).

Roddy herself was chosen by an ancient wise woman because of the way her mind works: “I think my brain matches hers,” she explains, when Grundo asks enviously why she received the gift of knowledge (p. 133). “That’s what she looked for, a brain, not a person” (ibid).

In fact, Roddy’s gift is as much about the categorization of material than it is about the knowledge itself. The gifted knowledge is placed inside her brain, and is accessible through “headings” which are depicted as various native plants, each forming a thematic category for the spells below. The way those categories are divided is described far more vividly than the actual workings of the spells. In essence, her magic relies on non-normative ways of categorizing the world.

The validity of different ways of seeing is most strikingly demonstrated as characters move between parallel worlds. The liminal space between worlds appears differently to different people. We first see it through the eyes of Nick, a teenager from our world, as a “cool, rustling wood” (p. 48). Later, when the children chase a goat between worlds, they see those worlds as a goat would – a series of islands which they have to leap between. This experience is not only uncomfortable for the humans, but dangerous, because their bodies are not prepared to jump the way the goat does. Later, they see it as a “narrow, rocky passage with no light at all” (p. 434). Because there is no objective reality, only interpretation, there is no norm against which other forms of knowing can be judged. The magic between the worlds reinforces the point that all ways of knowing are equally correct – and equally real. The only wrong way of seeing is to deny the validity of other ways.

How does the author avoid aesthetic nervousness?

Grundo is never seen as an object of pity, and the reader is challenged to think along non-normative ways of thinking. From the start, Grundo is able to use his magic to bring

reality more in line with his mind:

“This book is boring,” he complained in his deep, solemn voice. “Why should I care if Jack and Jill go shopping? Or if Rover chases the ball?” [...] Grundo somehow turned the book into a comic book, all pictures and no words. It started at the back and finished at the front, and in the pictures the ball chased Rover and Jack and Jill were bought by the groceries.” (p. 9)

Grundo is able to adapt his environment to suit him, rather than trying to fit into a neurotypical framework. This corresponds to Nikolajeva’s point that fantasy is a mindscape (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 152).

Another technique the author uses frequently is to constantly bring in comparisons with other characters. Grundo, whose dyslexia might isolate him, is actually explicitly compared to the most people – his mind works like Roddy’s (p. 9), like Grandfather Gwyn’s (p. 86), like Romanov’s (p. 402), and like Nick’s (p. 415). Grundo is also not the only dyslexic person in the novel. Romanov, a powerful Magid who lives outside time and space, briefly mentions to Grundo that “I had back-to-front problems too as a boy. It only takes a month

or so of real effort to learn to work with it. After that you find you can do things rather better than most other people, because they haven’t had to try and you have” (p. 402). Rather than being isolated, Grundo is a member of a diverse community. This elicits empathy from the reader, avoiding Quayson’s aesthetic nervousness, which is when discomfort at disability can not move on to empathy.

As both sides fight over the direction of magic, the balance shifts. “[T]hings went different. About ninety degrees different, and then stuck there. Magic was different, all over everywhere” (p. 465). Roddy observes, “[T]he magic had changed. It was going to be much harder to see things or do things now.” But it isn’t harder for everyone. “I can work with this new magic,” [Grundo] said, when he saw us looking at him. “It’s much easier.” (p.469) In fact, he is likely to be the next magical leader of Blest. The end causes the reader to wonder where our Earth is positioned compared to Blest’s new magic. Would a neurodivergent reader visiting Blest now experience magic that corresponds with their worldview? Or does Blest now align with Earth, meaning that Grundo was – from our perspective, at least – “neurotypical” the whole time? These issues of

positionality disrupt the primacy of the “normal” and invite the reader to meditate on the extent to which Grundo has been disabled by the small-minded court in which he was raised.

Conclusion

I believe that what this essay demonstrates is that fantasy has great potential to grant greater agency to neurodivergent characters. While fantasy may be deemed escapist, it has real potential to engage readers in a closer examination of how “normal” is a label used to enforce certain power dynamics. Apter (1982) and Nikolajeva (2003) have already demonstrated ways in which fantasy problematizes the concept of the normate, but more could be done to link these theories to neurodiversity and disability in general.

Mitchell & Snyder posit that disability representation is reactionary, defensively responding to old tropes, because there is such little good representation (2000, p. 44). I hope this essay has shown that at its best, representation can be not only reactionary, but revolutionary.



Interview with Sita Brahmachari

***Spinning Gold Editorial Team:* What is the hardest thing about being a children's book writer?**

Sita Brahmachari: I think tone is what I work on the most. I have written about many subjects, many of them exploring themes and ideas that are explored in rites of passage in adult novels but in writing for young people I am always working on what I think of as an undertow to my writing. I want the child reader (depending on the age) to feel empowered by reading my stories. I want to create an atmosphere in which the real world and enchantment, or magic realism are possibilities, while never patronising. Hope must be flickering at the edges and finding the right tone to tell a story feels key to me. Finding ways for the child protagonists of my stories to have agency is something I work at constantly. Sometimes while holding a fictional mirror up to what children face in the real world - that can be hard. Children's books have never shied away from the hard truths ... but find a way to navigate the children through.

***SG:* What is your writing process, and how has this developed over time?**

SB: My 'process' is hard for me to chart myself! When I look at my own notebooks, I see some common threads. Usually, a question I have about the world stirs something in me... It could be a sense of awe or a deeply unsettling feeling. Today a raft of refugee people floats off the shores of this small island. ... Such real-life events that burrow deeply into symbolic psyches (as they should) will be a catalyst. There is usually a trigger gut feeling that drives my instinct to find a story. There is usually a need that I feel in myself or in the children I meet. After that my radar is alert to anything that might help to piece together a story that will give agency and power to young people. My notebooks fill up with ideas and, at a certain point, characters emerge and I begin what I call 'riffing' the story in different voices. I like to experiment and play for quite a long time before I settle on

narrative voice. The symbolic worlds of my stories are by thread forming a web to help me cohere a story – It often takes me to having almost completed the story until I begin to fully understand the scope of these metaphors.

***SG:* Can you tell us a bit about your journey to becoming a published author?**

SB: After studying English Literature, I began my work life in youth theatre, helping young people see that their own oral histories were what story is all about. As a child I was aware that families like mine were not what I saw or read about in books, but I had such great stories told to me - so oral history was always a direct way in. Several plays I was involved in such as a co-adaptation of Tan's 'The Arrival' drew on oral history. My first novel was published in 2011 - 'Artichoke Hearts.' To my amazement it won the Waterstones Book Award and paved the way to many novels and short stories ... so far from readers aged 8 – 18, though a picture book for very young readers is coming soon! My novel writing life for young people began at the age of 40, but I have always been connected to storytelling for young people with a deep wish to convey to all readers that their voices, dreaming landscapes and stories are to be treasured.

***SG:* If you had to choose three children's books that every child should read, what would they be and why?**

SB: I couldn't prescribe for all children. We are all drawn to stories for so many different reasons. I can say which ones I loved. The ones that inspired me. 'The Little Prince' moved me. It showed me that a child who is an 'outsider' can be a protagonist in a magical, poignant, and beautiful story that speaks across generations. 'The Ramayana' (I had a child's version growing up) I think I was given it because it told the story of Rama and Sita (my namesake) – but I loved it for its epic storytelling... the many-headed, magic realist possibilities of dreaming up stories, of monkeys building bridges across oceans! The book that inspired me to become a writer, which I read when quite young, was Maya Angelou's 'I know Why the Caged Bird Sings'. It woke in me a sense that stories can draw deep wells of empathy in us... and even inspire what we might become.

***SG:* Do you have any current projects that you can tell us about?**

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The Old Peach Tree
Tianyi Liu @plum_with_ice

The Witchmouth

María Jarero

Intended audience: Young Adult

We'll start at school. Remember? Two four-story buildings. All your classes were on the top floor. On one side, a series of classrooms. On the other, a rail and a 'fantastic' view of the other plain gray concrete building on the other side of 'the green.' They called it 'the green' because it had random patches of grass and trees, but it was just a huge concrete slab with picnic benches strewn about. Standing or walking on the grass was not allowed. Halfway across was *la tiendita* - with expensive yogurt cups, cold nuggets, and an extremely popular salad bar - impossible to go to during your 20-minute breaks between classes. The rest of the floors would inevitably get there before you did, and you'd spend the whole time waiting in line.

April's a blue month. The days are the brightest, the color of your grandpa's eyes. The sun is warm and sleepy, revving up for the constant burning of the summer. The breeze is constant, baby chick feathers caressing your recently-freed skin; jackets and sweaters no longer necessary. Colorful blooms grow on the walls of houses and the trees that line the streets.

You barely share any classes with Mago this semester. It feels weird. You went to the same kindergarten, primary and secondary school. It was a small school with around 50 kids per grade mixed into two yearly-changed groups. You all knew each other quite well. Thirteen years together will do that to people. When you were eight, Noemi, your best friend, was put into Mago's group, and two became three. Noemi's at another school now, but you and Mago happened to choose the same high school. You were happy about this, you guys had never been too close before, sharing spaces and friends but not intimacy. And Mago was always cool to hang around, mysteriously knowledgeable about the world. Mago knew the answer to everything.

When you started at this school, Mago saved you from other people thinking you only cared about boys. Like they did at your old school. You didn't know people thought this, it had never come up before. Mago assures you everyone talked about it when you weren't there. Did this

mean that all those people you grew up with thought so little of you? Mago was there to protect you now. Always by your side, telling you everything everyone said about you. You never knew you were that important in the social scheme of things, but people appear to talk about you a lot more than you would think and rarely seem to have anything nice to say.

When you found out you would barely have classes together, you called Mago in panic. How were you going to know who you could trust? She told you you would find a way. You guys are best friends forever. She promised. And up until one week ago, she kept her word. You would meet up in the breaks between classes and after school ended. You'd text constantly, keeping each other up-to-date on stupid rumors and funny gossip. Almost as if nothing had changed. And the panic subsided as you made friends in class. Except you didn't, really. Mago reminded you constantly. It's possible to be friendly with someone, but you weren't friends until people invited you over for lunch, the one meal people share with their families every day. You just can't say you're friends before that. You learn so much about someone by having lunch at their house. What kind of flavored water do they have with lunch, made from fruit or from a pre-packaged powder? Do they have soup?

How much rice do they eat? Can you say you know someone when they haven't invited you into their home?

'You've only had lunch at my house,' she says, patting your hand softly. 'But it's ok, someone else will want to be your friend someday. I'm sure. They just need to be ok with how annoying you are, you know? It's a matter of time.'

'I'm annoying?'

'Yeah. Like how you're always talking about yourself and stuff. And how you think you're pretty when you're actually, like, average. Unless you stop doing that, it's going to take a while for people to like you.' Someone walks past and says hi to you. You say hi back, wondering if your smile is too bright, making you seem shallow; if your hi was too nice, making you seem fake. You never wondered about these things before. Mago smiles.

*

The beginning of the end started two weeks ago. You didn't know it yet. School had just restarted after Spring Break, and a guy from French class invited you to his birthday party.

'Who's invited?' You guys weren't very close, so surely he was inviting a lot of people. 'Oh. Not a lot of people from school, honestly. But you can bring anyone you want!'

'Thanks!'

You decide to invite Mago. This was your weekend to hang out, the routine was to spend every other one together. 'This way, we get to spend quality time together, but we can have space for our other friends.' She'd reasoned. You spend those weekends with Noemi and her new friends or at home. But you're always waiting for the next weekend, a feeling on your back pushing you to restlessness.

*

The party wasn't until Friday. During the week, Mago found out that her crush would be there. It went from being something to do to something you were looking forward to.

Her crush is a guy in your high school but in a different program. While you and Mago learn a third language, he is in the traditional English and Spanish classes. A few months ago, she spotted him once on the patio and fell completely in love. You were so important then. You were the one to tell her his name. You knew it because he was friends with a guy called Luis, whom you knew from a summer program you had done just before school started.

'His name is Rodrigo. His friends call him Ro.'

Mago begged you to keep talking to Luis. 'At least until I can talk to Ro.' And so you'd awkwardly become friends with a group of boys with whom you had nothing in common.

Mago would stand just a few steps away when you talked to them, interjecting at random moments but otherwise apart from the group.

When you questioned her, she mentioned wanting to seem cool and mysterious so Ro would approach her. She assured you it was working. Maybe it's because you've never had a boyfriend before, but you've never quite understood how she measures her success. Maybe it's something one of her 3 older siblings taught her. You don't even have an older cousin to ask about these things. Still, you pretend to see the little glances she tells you they share, and you pretend to believe that he's also in love with her. She knows more than you do, after all. She's already had a boyfriend, even if it was online.

*

The week flies by, and it is suddenly Friday. Your mom drops you off at Mago's house so you can get ready together. Her mom is taking you to

the party, and your mom will pick you up to have a sleepover after. Hair and makeup done, you sit on Mago's bed. She is still panicking about what to wear. Mago shows you different outfits, modeling her shirts in front of her body.

'What should I wear?'

'Definitely that flowy blue blouse.' It's what you would wear, and your mom is always complimenting you on your outfits. You realize this doesn't seem to translate as well to Mago's body when she puts it on. Will she be angry if you tell her to change blouses?

Where you are short and curvy, Mago is tall and broad. Your hair, long, brown, and wavy, is nothing like Mago's soft, black pin-straight curtain of hair. Your eyes, big and blue, clash with Mago's almond-shaped, honey ones. So you try to help her look her best, but you don't quite have the eye for it. You still don't really understand that each body is unique and looks its best in different ways.

'Maybe we should try that other one on too.' You point to a yellow shirt with considerable cleavage. You would never wear it. But Mago bought it for a reason.

'Why?' Mago, turns from looking at herself in the mirror. Her voice is a wall you've run into. Her eyes are knives.

The trees shiver suddenly outside, the wind shaking dry and fresh leaves against each other. You're quiet for a second too long. Then, words tumble out of your mouth, tripping over themselves. 'We don't want to make decisions without checking all of our options, right?'

Mago tries the yellow shirt on. It looks great. She forgets about the blue one. You can stop picking at your thumb now, darling. It's already started to bleed.

April nights are the darkest blue, the moon washing the colorless world in silver. The breeze grows stronger, biting at your skin. Untethered from the sun's joy, the wind that was once refreshing is now bitter. Street lamps light the city as its citizens become metallic cars prowling the streets, people tucked safely inside their hollow chests. It's quiet except for the zooming of motors and the breeze.

You go to the party. Immediately, you are accosted by the light, the music, the birthday boy. He points out the group of people from school, the one including Luis and Ro. Mago makes the best of her cleavage as she walks up, you one step behind. Ro doesn't look up from his phone.

It's a big house. The walls are a pleasing, warm yellow. One wall is a window that has been pulled open completely, letting people sprawl all

the way into the backyard. There's a pool in the back, and the birthday boy keeps yelling at people when they get too close. The boys from school are sitting in a circle of plastic chairs about halfway across the grass. As usual, two boys stand up to give you their chairs as soon as you arrive. You're the only two girls in the group. You're the only one who was actually invited. What would you have done with this group of boys by yourself?

Early in the night, Mago and Ro disappear together. You thumbs up at her behind his back. The boys around you suddenly seem to all be looking at you. One tries to tell you a joke you don't understand. They make fun of him when you don't laugh. Two of them start pushing and taunting each other, arguing over who you want to talk to. The true answer is neither. Why do they want to talk to you? Do they think you will like the winner? Mago will tell you when she comes back.

You wish you knew anybody else so you could leave like Mago, but you stay, gripping a cup full of soda instead. You try to laugh at what the boys say without looking too eager. You try to talk without seeming too interested. You don't want to give them any ideas. Small groups start to break off, and you're left talking with Luis and another boy. It takes less than expected for Mago to return, averting her eyes every time you try to catch her gaze. She doesn't seem like herself. She laughs far too loudly and talks far too much for that. Ro comes back, too, sitting with the rest of the boys. Only his back is visible for the rest of the night.

*

Mom calls. She's outside.

You walk out to find her and Mago's mom talking on the sidewalk, arms crossed over their bodies to stave off the night chill.

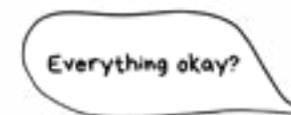
You turn to Mago. She picks up the pace and leaves you behind before you can say anything.

'Hola, mi amor!' Mom notices you, calling out to you. Mago walks to her mom quickly. 'Hola, Mami.' She pulls you into a hug.

'Did you guys have fun?' Mago's mom asks.

Before you can do or say anything, Mago quickly assures them it was a great party and that it's just a shame that she had a stomachache. Why didn't she say anything? Mom would've come to pick you guys up earlier if you'd asked her to.

You say your goodbyes. Mago still doesn't meet your eyes.



You send it to Mago while in the car. You spend the weekend with your mom and your grandparents, ignoring the darkness growing from the pit of your stomach. The message goes unanswered.

At night, alone in bed, the breeze climbs under the covers with you and pierces your heart. It squeezes tight, and whispers fear into your veins, across your body, chilling you to the bone. What's wrong? This echoes in your mind, tossing and turning in bed until exhaustion takes over.

*

It's finally Monday. School starts and ends in a blur of notes and giggles. Your phone stays silent in your pocket. Phantom vibrations haunt you throughout the day, but the screen is blank every time. On Mondays, you have soccer practice after school, and Mago has track and field. Usually, you and Mago meet by the tiendita as soon as the final bell rings and then have a light lunch together before going to practice.

Mago's not there today, but you find her sitting at your usual bench. Mago looks up at you and stretches her lips in a non-smile.

'Hey.' Mago's voice gives nothing away. You can't tell if something's wrong. 'Hi, how are you?'

You sit down, ready to eat your grilled panela cheese.

You clear your throat after an awkwardly long time of Mago not saying a word to you.

The wind picks up the hairs at the nape of your neck. You shiver uncomfortably.

'So... You never texted me back.' You shred your panela into bits, methodically slicing with your fork and knife. You can't bring yourself to stop and look up.

'I was sick. You know that.' Mago turns the slightest bit, just enough for you to see her eyes rolling in annoyance.

The wind rustles a bush next to you, and you look at it wearily. This bench is hidden at the far end of campus, where nobody goes because it's just too far away from things to be convenient. You think it has creepy, haunted vibes because the sunlight doesn't quite reach it, but Mago loves sitting there to talk about Ro. At least, she usually does.

'I just thought since it was our weekend-'

'Our weekend?' Mago interrupts you with a scoff. 'Just because we've

been hanging out a lot, it doesn't mean we're, like, a couple or anything. God. You're always all over me.

Your mouth opens and closes, but the words are locked away in a box of shame built by Mago's hands just for you. Are you really that clingy? That annoying?

'Ugh, are you going to cry again? This is why nobody ever tells you anything. You make it all about yourself.' Mago's looking at herself on her phone's screen instead of at you, but her eyes flicker in your direction. Something happens to you then. The shame box in your chest shatters, replaced by anger.

Rage boils up inside you, bursting to be let out. You wish you could just tell her that people don't usually like her. You've heard them talking about it. You think they just don't understand her, they don't see how funny she is. She says things as they are. Just because it sounds mean doesn't mean it is mean. Especially if it's honest. But maybe they're right. You shouldn't tell her, though, even though you desperately want to. You know she's going to pin this fight all on you if it happens. And then Noemi will be angry at you, too when Mago tells her. You take a deep breath.

'I'm not crying. What are you talking about?' You laugh awkwardly, stuffing your mouth with salsa-covered grilled cheese. The texture's gone rubbery, it squeaks between your teeth, and shivers run down your arms. You swallow and feel its path all the way down your throat and into your stomach.

You try again.

'You talked to Ro at the party.' It was meant to be a question, but it's not.

'So?' She picks at her nails, avoiding your eye just like at the party.

'He's a jerk.' 'What? Why?'

'Did you tell anyone I liked him?' This is a crucial moment. Not only does she have to know the truth, but she also has to believe it.

'I would never!'

Her eyes bear into yours with a fierceness that closely resembles insanity. Satisfied, she lets up after a few seconds.

'He told me I was gross and to stop stalking him. He even said that he's sure I begged to be invited to the party because I knew he was going.' Mago's averted eyes make it impossible to know if she's hurt by this. Surely she must be. Ro is the only thing she's talked about for months.

'That's ridiculous!'

Is it? She eats lunch at this bench because he always walks past it. She spends her breaks at a specific spot in the hallway because it's near his usual classroom. You don't point these things out.

'I told him that I went because you were invited, and he replied, 'of course.' What does that even mean?' She steals a bit of cheese off your plate. You don't like that she doesn't even ask, but she only rolls her eyes at you every time you remind her.

'I don't know. Maybe Beto's in love with me or something. I still don't know why he decided to invite only me.' You force an awkward laugh out. Sometimes the way Beto looks at you makes you uncomfortable, but you haven't quite decided if that's just how his eyes are or if he's interested in you.

'You're so full of yourself. This is why people think you're

The North Wind And The Sun
Mei Feng Chen @feng__er



boy-obsessed, you know,' Mago rolls her eyes but then sort of smiles before stealing another bit of your cheese.

'It was a joke.' You say flatly, your mouth filling with a bitter taste. You push your plate away toward Mago, but it's almost as if she doesn't want it anymore as soon as you're willingly giving it up.

Your thumb's bleeding again. You don't even remember picking at it.

The North Wind And The Sun
Mei Feng Chen @feng__er



The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them

Alice Bishop

Intended Audience: Young Adult

Jacob wondered how to butcher this strange new creature.
A proper job, blood let correctly.
Knives kept well.
Meat blessed by the rabbi.
But would a rabbi bless such a creature?
Was it kosher?
Jacob was confident he could slice it up.
Providing he had a rabbi's blessing.

The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them

No. The creature was not deemed kosher after all.
So Jacob brought it home with him.
And years later, it ran across the ankles of his and Rachel's five children.
On a gloomy Shabbat evening
Begging crumbs of challah.
Rebecca, their youngest, always snuck it a smidge
Of the braided bread.
On particularly naughty days
She would do it
Before the prayers were sung and the Shabbat candles were lit.
Jacob, of course, pretended not to notice.
God had granted them so much in this new world.
Surely, he endorsed the creature.
As long as it wasn't eaten.

The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them

Outside of the warm glow of the Shabbat candles
Darkness curled around the Lower East Side tenement.
The darkness that had followed Jacob's people since their early days
In Egypt and before

Since the first exodus (Exodus) they ran
Ran to Poland
Ran to America
Ran to the Lower East Side
And tomorrow
Or next year
Or when Rebecca had children
They would run again.

The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them

There is a little egg
A fragile egg
The egg that held their Shabbat song
The small egg could be easily carried
But the carrying required great care.
As they passed the ageing egg
From mother to daughter
From father to son
It became easier to
Drop.

The Shabbat Candles Only Go Out if You Stop Lighting Them



In the night playground
Amy Matthews @chickandpeastudio

Are you what you eat?: An exploration of how food and cultural identity is portrayed in picturebooks featuring people of colour

Hui Liang

Introduction

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are.” - Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*.

This quote by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin resonated very strongly with me. Food makes up a large part of my identity as a Singaporean Chinese. It is deeply embedded in our traditions, our culture and our history. On a personal level, food is a symbol and act of love and affection in my Asian household. My parents are not outwardly affectionate, but they show their love by nourishing me with food.

The social and cultural study of food has largely been centred around social sciences, but in the last few decades, food studies has established itself in the humanities, specifically literature (Keeling and Pollard, 2009). Within

children’s literature, Wendy Katz’s (1980) seminal article “Some Uses of Food in Children’s Literature” provided one of the first insights and discussions into the role of food in children’s literature. The relationship between food and culture is inextricably linked. Keeling and Pollard (2009) asserts, “food is fundamental to culture” (p.5) due to the foundations upon which civilisations have been built. They further argue that food is also fundamental to children’s literature as it sheds light on power relations, ideology, feminist issues and more. Critics have argued that food preferences tend to be specific to each culture (Daniel, 2006). However, the study of food in children’s literature has been largely western-centric, with a focus on classics with a majority of European and American authors.

This essay will hence focus on the following questions through the exploration of four picturebooks: How is food portrayed in children’s literature, specifically focusing on people of colour? How can cultural identity be understood through food in children’s literature?

Food as an indicator of strong familial ties

Food plays a role in bringing the family together, indicating strong familial ties. In *A Sweet New Year for Ren* (Sterling, 2022), the whole book revolves around the family preparing special dishes for Lunar New Year. In Figure 1, the illustration of the food is varied, featuring warm tones which create a sense of cosiness. The depiction of food is tasty, stimulating and inviting. The swirls of steam above the food makes it look piping hot – in Chinese, we have a saying *chen re chi*, which loosely translates to ‘eat the food while it is hot’ – so all the food looks freshly prepared. The appearance of the food being hot and fresh accurately depicts an aspect of Chinese culture as referenced in the earlier saying. The varied use of colour, texture and attention to detail for each individual dish, like the creases on the dumplings or the garnish on the soup, really bring each dish to life, and each food item is illustrated delicately,

nanced and well fleshed out.

A two-page spread illustration of an extended Chinese family celebrating the Lunar New Year. The table is round and covered in a red cloth, the walls are a warm yellow, and red lanterns hang from the ceiling and in the background, outside the windows. The table is full of traditional dishes like dumplings, fish and noodles.

Figure 1. *A Sweet New Year for Ren* (Sterling, 2022).

Throughout the book, the details included in the background such as the decorations for Lunar New Year like the red lanterns, peach blossoms, wall stickers, red packets and Chinese knots are all realistically and authentically portrayed. They remind me very much of my own house during the festival.

Although food is the main theme of the story, much more is highlighted within the culture through food – the family ties, bonds and love that exists between the family members. Ren declares that her favourite part of the new year is when “everyone is here, together” and as the story closes – “Our stomachs are full and happy, like our hearts” - one sees very clearly how food is an important tool in building the family’s cultural identity.

In a similar vein, *My Day with*

Gong Gong (Yee, 2020) tells the story of a young girl, May, worried about spending a full day alone with her grandfather as they do not speak the same language. In this book, food is used as a tool in bridging familial ties, specifically, intergenerational relationships. At the start of the story, May struggles to have fun as she follows her Gong Gong on his day around Chinatown. In fact, her unhappy day culminates in her bursting out in tears as a pigeon poops on her. However, as seen in Figure 2, her day looks up when she unexpectedly receives a pork bun from her grandfather. The pork bun plays a pivotal role in the narrative by acting as an olive branch that bridges the relationship between May and her grandfather, transcending language barriers. The significance of the food item extends beyond a mere offer of food - it represents the cultural identity of intergenerational familial ties through the lens of food.

Two illustrations of a young Chinese girl wearing a yellow puffer jacket with her elderly grandfather, who is wearing a yellow and blue baseball cap and a green puffer vest. The first illustration shows him giving her a teddy bear and her reacting in excitement. The second one shows her with a dumpling in hand and smiling up at him, while he smiles down at her.

Figure 2. My Day with Gong Gong (Yee, 2020).
Through the story, readers are in-

troduced to cultural elements such as the Chinese zodiac sign, traditional dim sum and Chinese chess. The book also includes the English translation for some Cantonese phrases used in the book. These accompanying elements depict aspects of everyday Chinese culture and allow readers to peek into the windows of their world (Bishop, 1990). These two picturebooks reveal how food can be used as a tool to represent strong familial relationship, helping to establish the cultural identity of people of colour.

Food as an indicator of maturity, wisdom and 'coming-of-age'

Food (or the ability to prepare food) is indicative of the protagonist's maturity. In these books, through the preparation of food, an elder will be able to impart wisdom and life lessons important to their culture. In this way, food is a symbol of passing down the culture's heritage and history, as well as the teaching of values and knowledge that are important in the culture (Daniel, 2006).

In *Tofu Takes Time* (Wu, 2022), while teaching her granddaughter Lin how to make tofu, Nainai (paternal grandmother in Mandarin) is simultaneously teaching her the art of patience and the vast mean-

ing behind each step of tofu-making. Nainai reminds Lin that tofu takes time, and that she needs to be patient. She also explains each step of the process, introducing her to the wonders of this simple yet powerful food.

The making of tofu and waiting also indicates the passing of time as Nainai and Lin wait for her parents to come home to have dinner together (Figure 3). This anticipatory build-up, using the process of tofu-making to ultimately show their family coming together. It is a celebration of the beauty of everyday life. This image of a family gathering to enjoy the food is a recurring one throughout the books in this essay and is culturally significant, especially during important festive seasons.

A two-page spread of a Chinese family including one grandmother, one father, one mother and one young girl sitting at a peach-colored table in front of a turquoise background decorated with delicate flowers drawn in gold. The table is set with various dumplings, cabbage and rice. The family smiles as they share the meal.

Figure 3. Tofu Takes Time (Wu, 2022).

The everyday objects used to make tofu become her playground. Through the use of magical realism, the illustrator changes everyday objects into an imaginary playground, giving the plain tofu

a whimsical nature. The seemingly plain cloth becomes the fabric of her childhood (Figure 4). In their interactions and imagination, the cloth used to squeeze out liquid from the beans becomes her parachute while the over-sized bowls and utensils make up the infrastructure of her playground. Through these stories woven into the tofu-making process, Nainai is able to pass on stories that go beyond just tofu-making, demonstrating how food is used as an indicator of maturity and 'coming-of-age'.

A two-page illustration with a light pink background including five small clouds. A strainer, various mugs, a bowl and a few cloths create the illusion of a hilly foreground. A girl's imagination shows her parachuting through the image with a white cloth used for making tofu.

Figure 4. Tofu Takes Time (Wu, 2022).

Food as a tool in representing home - cultural roots, family history and memory

Food features very strongly in refugee or immigrant narratives, as it is a tangible link to one's cultural roots and history (Keeling and Pollard, 2020) and is a "vehicle for remembrance" (Manalansan, 2004, p.362). These picturebooks highlight the power of stories told by elders as a form of passing on their cultural roots and shared memories.

A Different Pond (Phi, 2017) tells the story of the protagonist's father arriving in Minnesota from Vietnam as a refugee and the author shares in the Author's Note that his parents shared these difficult stories as they were a part of their lives. The food item in this story stands out because, unlike the previous picturebooks which focus on making the food item or buying it, the protagonist and his father have to go fishing to obtain food. Through the young boy's experience in going fishing with his father, he ponders upon his cultural roots and the country his dad came from. From the contemplative expression on the boy's face (Figure 5), he considers the implications of his uncle's death during the Vietnam war. Despite the heavy topic and cold weather, readers are able to sense the close relationship between the protagonist and his father while they have fun working together to catch more fish. This is significant as food is used as the vehicle to evoke the memory and cultural history of this family. The experience of catching fish together allows the protagonist to ponder upon 'the country my [his] dad comes from' (Phi, 2017).

Two illustrations in a forest at twilight. The one on the left shows a man and a young boy by a pond with a bucket and other fishing gear (no poles). The boy is kneeling looking into the pond and the man looks over him. The one on the right shows them carrying the bucket together and walking away. The boy looks back over his shoulder.

Figure 5. *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017).

The book ends with the protagonist's family coming together at the dining table enjoying their catch of the day. This cosy scene (see Figure 6) is heart-warming as one imagines the delicious fish that have been fried "on both sides until they are crispy", together with the relaxed atmosphere. The illustration also includes culturally authentic items found in East Asian households during meal-times such as a rice cooker, chopsticks, sauce dishes and communal dishes of food. The picturebook is able to offer readers a glimpse into everyday experiences of people of colour, creating scenes and emotions that others are able to relate to and identity with.

Two illustrations, the one on the left shows an extended family sitting over a red table, sharing a meal. There is a yellowish tint over everything in the scene except for the clothes of the two characters at the forefront: father and boy smiling at each other. The image on the right is one of the boy, fast asleep in bed. He is dreaming of the pond where he went to fish with his father.

Figure 6. *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017).

The food in these stories is a strong signifier of the characters' links to their cultural roots and family history. This is significant as it sheds light on how cultural identity can be understood through food.

Watercress (2021) written by Andrea Wang and illustrated by Jason Chin differs from most of the books explored thus far in that the focus of the food item is not in the cooking preparation or process, but rather the meaning attached to watercress. The picturebook is set in Ohio, where the protagonist's parents are first-generation immigrants. The protagonist initially rejects the watercress and all that it represents, but ultimately shows acceptance, representing a larger theme of cultural identity. Like *A Different Pond* (2017), it is a child's letter to their parent, one of learning about their heritage and embracing it. In fact, Wang expressed in an interview that *A Different Pond* was an inspiration

for the book and also a mentor text (Wang, 2021).

The colour palette in this picturebook features sepia tones and dreamy watercolour hues, giving the reader the feeling as though each page is heavy with memories long past. The illustrator's deliberate use of yellow ochre and cerulean blue "often used in Chinese paintings" (Chin, 2021) in soft strokes of the watercolour brush gives the illustrations a "dream-like quality" (Artist's Note). This complements the text which leans heavily on memories of both the protagonist as well as those of her parents.

The watercress is the main plot driver as it is symbolic of the protagonist's parents' memories of their childhood in China. The story starts with the family driving along a road lined with cornstalks, but the mother spots watercress in a ditch by the road. This prompts them to stop the car to forage. In Figure 7, the illustration of the maize on the left of the double spread merges seamlessly and blends into the bamboo – symbolising the transition to a memory from China as it is a native plant. This represents the duality of cultures and the inseparability of the past and present. The contrast in the brighter shades of the present

(left) against the darker hues of the past (right) complements the past and present duality. It is the presence of the watercress in the ditch that prompts the parents' memories and "longing for China".

Two illustrations divided by a crop of plants. On the right, it is a sunny scene. Two adults stand over a red car seemingly fixing the engine. A young child sits in the car and looks back. On the image on the right, in a darker scene, two children walk off into the right. The smaller of the two holds a bundle of crops in his hands, while the other carries a basketful of them on their back.

Figure 7. *Watercress* (Wang, 2021).

The protagonist is struggling with her identity as a Chinese American teenager and the first-person narration allows us to see the world through her eyes. On the page on the right of Figure 8, the scene in which we see her dipping her toes into the ditch, she seems off-balance and uncertain – mirroring her lack of acceptance of her immigrant heritage. This is complemented by the choice of words like "stings" and "squelches/ up between my toes", giving the reader a sense of discomfort. On the accompanying page, the language used to describe the task set by her parents gives a sense of being dictated to ("haul", "told to" and "have to"). When paired with the illustration, the reader is able to sense the unwillingness in the girl's facial expression, especially

when contrasted with her brother. To the protagonist, everything about the watercress leans towards negativity, thus by extension, her view towards her cultural heritage.

Two illustrations. The one on the left shows one girl and one boy at the edge of a body of water; they sit between the long grass that grows there and take off their shoes. The image on the right shows the girl carefully walking through the water to the watercress growing on the right-hand side of the image.

Figure 8. *Watercress* (Wang, 2021).

Going beyond mere discomfort, the protagonist also associates watercress with dirt and 'otherness', not recognising it as food. For instance, she describes the handfuls of watercress plucked by her brother with "roots dripping dirty water" and points out "tiny snails" on the leaves. This echoes Daniel's (2006) idea of how food has the ability to evoke shudders of disgust and relegate certain food items to abjection. And by association, the cultural groups related to that food item. When contemplating the bag of watercress she has collected, she is faced with the "weight of all/the watercress." This innocuous bag of watercress is not heavy with memories like it is for her parents, but heavy with shame and disgust. So much so that she is "half hopeful" that the bag will give way, "sending all the plants back down/into the muck." Here,

readers are presented with a clear picture of how she feels towards the watercress – that she feels it belongs back into the muck. Additionally, the choice of word 'plants' instead of 'vegetables' signals how the protagonist rejects the idea of watercress as food. The textual representation in the book relates to the society at large, representative of how children of immigrants feel about their conflicting cultural heritages (Wang, 2021).

Similar to the other picturebooks in this essay, a number of pivotal scenes are set at the dining table. The double spread in Figure 9 perfectly sums up the clash in cultures and the friction that exists because of their differing views towards watercress. The protagonist's shame is also spelled out when a car drives by as the family is picking watercress and she ducks her head in hopes that it is "no one I know". Having to pick the watercress by the roadside dredges up all the memories of being laughed at and treated as an 'other' by her peers. The illustrations truly complement the text on the double spread where the resistance presented by the girl seems insurmountable, seen through her hunched forward posture and disengaged facial expression. This is contrasted with the eagerness of her parents and brother and their

successive encouragement for her to try some as the watercress is "fresh" and "free". The washed-out tones on the right side of the spread portrays all that is going on in her head, unbeknownst to her very practical parents.

This resistance towards consuming watercress represents the protagonist distancing herself from her family's cultural history and all that it represents. From a multicultural standpoint, this double spread is also important in challenging misconceptions or prejudices against the culture by depicting the lived experience of the protagonist.

Two illustrations. The one on the left shows a family having dinner together. The father, mother and son are all turned towards the daughter, who looks sad. They seem to be reprimanding her. On the right, the image shows this same girl, looking sad and alone, being pointed at by her peers.

Figure 9. *Watercress* (Wang, 2021).

The scene in Figure 10 of the protagonist exploring and trying the watercress is pivotal in her renegotiating her transnational identity, as observed by Keeling and Pollard (2020) in their analysis of *Inside Out and Back Again*. Just as the protagonist in that text grudgingly accepted dried papaya (instead of the fresh papaya that she is used to), the protagonist in *Watercress*

mediates the clash between cultures by accepting the food which represents her Chinese heritage - thereby uses food to renegotiate her transnational identity.

One double page spread, showing a girl at a table eating by herself. Her mother stands in a room behind her, turned away. The girl is contemplating her food, holding it with chopsticks close to her face along with her bowl.

Figure 10. Watercress (Wang, 2021).

Throughout the scenes in the house, the details of the illustrations included numerous other cultural markers like the porcelain vase, chopsticks, communal sharing dishes and Chinese paintings on the walls add layers to the understanding and appreciation of the protagonist's culture and their world. There was evidence of thorough research and careful consideration to ensure respectful, nuanced and layered portrayals (evidenced by the author's note and artist's note). The author wrote this story based on her own memories growing up as a child of Chinese immigrants while the illustrator explained how he wanted to ensure his illustrations complemented the "many layers of memory, culture and emotion" (Illustrator's Note).

A critique that I initially had was the inclusion of the protagonist's

mother's story in China which might have the danger of over-emphasising the 'forever foreigner stereotype' (Rodriguez and Kim, 2018) that 'others' people of colour, and sees immigrants as unassimilable and exotic. However, upon considering the whole narrative, I see the importance of this double spread (Figure 11) because it is precisely the explanation of this story that causes a turning point in the protagonist's mindset. It is conveyed through the text that her parents are usually not forthcoming about their lives back in China as she "never talks about her China family", so this revelation and accompanying illustration is especially poignant and pivotal. Through the muted illustrations and colour palette, the absence of the little boy speaks volumes. This memory must have been rather traumatic for the protagonist's mother, which was why she was not able to share it openly with her daughter. However, through the interactions with watercress, it became the "tangible or perhaps edible link between past and present" (Howell, 2015, p. 30 cited in Keeling and Pollard, 2020). As the protagonist's mother had to leave her homeland, everything familiar was taken away from them, but food was the remaining "viable, accessible, material" marker of her cultural identity (Keeling and Pol-

lard, 2020, p.173) and constitutes her present transnational identity.

Two illustrations. The one on the left shows one woman, one man and two children (one girl and one boy) at a table, interacting. The boy holds out his bowl towards the man; the woman and girl seem concentrated on their food. On the right is the same image, except there is no boy. The rest of the people look noticeably older and sadder. There is an empty seat where the boy should be.

Figure 11. Watercress (Wang, 2021).

Wang is an OwnVoices author who shares openly about her experiences that inspired this book. In the Author's Note, Wang shares that, "Memories have the power to inform, to inspire, and to heal." Just like in *Freedom Soup* and *A Different Pond*, food, and its associated memories and stories, has its place in children's literature - helping to create the cultural identity of people of colour.

Conclusion

In this essay, I used food as a lens to examine representations of cultural identity, specifically focusing on people of colour. Through the analysis of picturebooks, I sought to find out if cultural identity could be understood through the portrayal of food.

While critics (Rodriguez and Kim, 2018) have pointed out that food can sometimes be a rather surface or tokenistic representation of a culture, especially when used in isolation, however, through the exploration and analysis of the above picturebooks, I would argue that when represented well, food can be a strong representation of unique cultural identity. Through the picturebook survey and the framework of analysis, I found that authentic and nuanced portrayals of food can signify strong familial ties and serve as a symbol of home.

Food is representative of culture, and for people of colour, it can be a window and gateway into so much more than the food item itself. It has the ability to showcase their everyday lived experiences, their historical roots, and the battle between their conflicting cultural heritages. However, just as Rodriguez and Kim (2018) advocated for multiple Asian American stories, I too believe that the varied and multiple representation of food from the cultures of people of colour will shed light on the cultural identity of minority groups within a community.



The painted floor checks and led
them into the cottage. There the
wicked witch's delicious meat of fruit
and preserves with sugar and spices
and apples and nuts.

The Rain

Matty Gu

@veryverymatti

Intended Audience: Picturebook readers

Drip drop drip drop
Miss Sheep doesn't enjoy rainy days

Pitter patter pitter patter
Miss Sheep tidies up her wilted droopy
plants
Annoyed by the rain
'When will the rain stop?' sighed Miss
Sheep

Swish swash swish swash
Miss Sheep knits a sweater from her wool
Annoyed by the rain
'When will the rain stop?' mumbled Miss
Sheep

Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh
Miss Sheep puts up a little blanket fort
Annoyed by the rain
'When will the rain stop?' muttered Miss
Sheep

BOOM BANG CRACK!
lightning struck and the house went dark

The tiny lava lamp in the tent is the only
light left
Faintly glowing
a small light in the blanket fort



Rustle rustle rustle rustle
 Miss Sheep rummages through the house
 and finds all the shining things
 marbles, glasses, mirrors, a teaspoon, a safety pin
 and a fishbowl
 shimmering and glittering
 the room, the sweater, and even the tiniest bit of
 dust
 flickering and twinkling
 Raindrops sparkle in all their different rays



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Drip drop drip drop
 Pitter Patter Pitter Patter
 the empty flower pots on the balcony are making
 music
 ‘Since when does the rain sing?’ hummed Miss
 Sheep



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Swish swash swish swash
 Miss Sheep finds her sweater comfortable to wear
 It’s warm and fluffy and not itchy
 ‘Since when does the rain dance?’ thought Miss
 Sheep



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Miss Sheep grab the stuff she needs
 Heading out
 Looking up
 ‘Maybe it doesn’t matter’, says Miss Sheep quietly
 The rain can stop whenever it wants.



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Author's Note:
 This poem was originally written in Mandarin by me and my friend. We have both experienced the loss of loved ones over the past few years and it has been a bit difficult. The general idea of the poem is a healing process. Sometimes, when we have a tough time in life, it feels like it's raining endlessly. Everything gets wet and cold and we find it hard to pull ourselves together. However, we didn't write this poem to say that we should wait for the rain to stop, but rather that we want to find beauty and enjoy the little things in life during this not-so-easy season. We both love the saying, 'You don't have to be fearless. Sometimes doing it afraid is just as brave.' As for now, we are still practising enjoying the rain as much as Miss Sheep!

The Girl Who Turned Into a Forest

Written by George Lewins

Illustrated by Rosa Kelly



One day a girl walked out of her village.
She walked past things she had known and people she would never meet.
Her mind was clear and empty.
She filled it with the sounds of the leaves and the warmth of the sun.
She walked between the land and the sky.
When her legs could carry her no further, she lay amongst the trees.
The stars and sun made patterns above and her breath slowed to the length of moonlight.
Weeks became months and months became years.
Her stillness taught her the heartbeat of the Earth.
Year by year, her body became one with the land.
Her hair grew in explosions of ferns and grasses.
Her fingers twisted as roots in the soil.
Her eyes became the sparkle in the swift stream that flowed through the mountains.
So it was that the girl became a forest.

She was nourished by the infinity above and below her.
She nourished all those who lived by the changing of her seasons and the shelter of her branches.
She asked for nothing and gave everything in return.
Her senses wound their way through the woods – carried by water and light.
She saw the village she had known.
She saw a family praying for her return.
She saw sadness transform itself into old age.
She saw friends grow into men and women,
saw them with children of their own.
She saw them grow weary and frail and bent by time.

She saw happiness too. Small gardens of kindness which blossomed in joy.

She saw the care in their hearts and the patience in their hands.

With the turnings of the seasons, she saw the spread of people and places and buildings and faces.

The children of children needed stone for their houses.

The mouths of their babies cried for food from the fields.

The hearts of their fires ate wood for their fuel.

Gradually, they bit deeper into the heart of the girl who was forest.

She asked for nothing and gave everything in return.

Years trickled into generations and generations became death for her mountain.

She knew neither pain nor despair.

She flew freely with birds in spring and slept in blankets of soil in winter.

She felt the people of the village amongst her trees and pitied them for the hunger which her life could not satisfy.

Their houses grew taller and stronger and wider, leaving scars in the rock that could not be healed.

Their axes grew crueller and faster and sharper - machines that transformed her forest to fields.

She felt their panic when they knew she was fading – that her endlessness must, at last, have an end.

An end that would swallow them all in its limitless nothingness.

The people of the village planted new

trees in her hills.

But these trees did not speak the language of the roots she had known.

They could not feed or protect the life of the forest.

Slowly, like sap rising in spring, her wandering soul collected itself at the peak of the mountain.

Her mind was clear and empty.

She filled it with the sounds of the leaves and the warmth of the sun.

She walked again between the land and the sky.

When the forest she had been was nearly over, she lay once more amongst its trees.

She still felt the faint heartbeat of the Earth.

Inch by inch her river-eyes dimmed.

She grew deaf to the whisper of the wind in her branches.

Her fingers shrunk back from tangles of roots.

She fell into a sleep as deep as the mountain.

She dreamed dreams of endless greens.

She dreamed of laughing streams and the murmur of trees.

Soft carpets of moss and blood-red berries

in thickets of thorns.

The girl still sleeps on the mountain,

asking for nothing and giving

everything in return.

She waits to be woken and to

wander once more a

mongst the forest

that she was.

Ignorance is bliss

Jazmin Bartram

Intended Audience: Young Adult

I do not know them, I never have. But their memory thrums behind my eyes like a string plucked, still vibrating. A note quivering on a still night, waiting for a reply that will never come.

I have never known them, but sometimes I recognise them from the way they meet my gaze, standing in the margins of a storybook. The eyes are the windows to the soul. They are steadfast, unmoving, rocks.

Obsidian.

It drives the wind from my chest and able fingers strum on the red strings of my heart.

They crouch like aching shrapnel in my chest. I know if I move it will kill me, so I sit quietly in my chair and watch the rain through my open window. How can such a beautiful sound hurt so much? It is like a fish-hook in my guts, pulling me to places far on the horizon, places I have never known. Over the sea to the green open fields, the dark twisted woods, the slate grey mountains.

There is a word in Welsh for this pain. I hum it, hiraeth, and it blooms in my head, echoing like a lamb's feeble bleat down a steep valley, scraping the stone sides as it falls.

It is deafening.

Sometimes I leave the window open at night. Loose sheets of paper whirlpool over hardwood floors and catch papery thin against thick stone walls. I can fool myself that I am not here. I am flying over moors I have never seen. Creeping animals vye in purple heather. They are screaming rabbits, squawking fowl, tricky foxes. I am among my people.

They laugh and spit brown and sing lilting songs in a language I don't know. They are hardy, beaten, bastards. They look at me sideways through suspicious eyes.

I know I must do this for them but it is difficult sometimes, to live in a cage. It isn't right. They would know, would understand if I didn't continue. But I do.

Every day I wake and I find that I am still here and I get up and I pace my room and collect the loose papers and I ignore the aching, weeping, wailing pain that roils about inside me. And I close the window.



A is an apple
Zoe Xu @zoelovesgiraffe

How is Mexican identity represented through language and culture in children's literature?

María Jarero

When I was 17, I read my first book with a Mexican American protagonist, excited at the prospect of seeing a little bit more of myself in it. Until that point, most, if not all, of the characters I'd read about had been American, British or from an unknown fantasy land. Upon reading the book, it was extremely disappointing to find out that while being Mexican seemed to be mentioned constantly, no details of Mexican life were conveyed. Where was the food, the family life, the Spanish? Where was anything that made someone Mexican?

What was this book missing for me to consider it Mexican? What would a book have to have for someone to think 'being Mexican is important to this story'? Or maybe 'because the character is Mexican, this story can happen'? Using Mexican American literature, which typically strives to define Mexican identity (Savin, 1995, p.123), I will try to figure out what attributes are deemed necessary to make a character or story be

Mexican.

A person or group's identity consists of 'the qualities [...] that make them different from others' (Cambridge.org, n.d.).

One of the main ways to create a group identity is through cultural identity, which includes 'ethnic or national origin, religion, race, gender, language, country, education, occupation, age, family, status' (Altugan, 2015, p.1161). This identity stems from how people experience life and create a sense of who they are. Through their experiences and from others' reactions to them, people gain understanding of the social world that surrounds them (Altugan, 2015, pp.1160-1161). In this way, we create a sense of self through the lives we lead: heavily influenced by the groups we live in, and the opportunities allowed to us.

When shared, these experiences create a sense of belonging by bringing us to similar conclusions

about the world and how it works. These are called 'Cultural Models', a 'configuration of default values that typically correlate well with those of others' (Bennardo & De Munck, 2014, p.2). By inserting language, culture, and identity into stories, representations of cultural models are created (Chappell & Faltis, 2007, p.254), meaning that the way we believe life should be is 'reduced to simplistic normative storylines about ways of being and thinking in the world' (Chappell & Faltis, 2007, p.254). We know what to expect from the character and their story because of where they are from, where it is set, and the general set-up. For example, we might know implicitly what a character's accent is because of their origin, or a character's age because of their school grade, without further explanation. We don't need it to be explained that a Mexican American character's skin may be darker than an American character's. We may expect it to be so because of the cultural models we have created throughout our lives.

But how can someone use a cultural model to represent a group in a way that shows they know and understand it? As Bishop says, 'What does it take to "portray the essence of a people?"' (2003, p.25). A story that rings true for a culture will

include 'authenticating details', 'such as the grammatical and lexical accuracy of the characters' dialect, and taken-for-granted information possessed by members' (2003, p.28). This means that, in stories, speech patterns and word usage must be recognizable and understandable to its members without a moment's doubt. But also, there must be a sense of shared knowledge specific to the group, like how to cook a traditional dish.

Therefore, we ask ourselves, what factors does a story need to be considered as authentically Mexican? Christiansen found that Mexicans living in the United States consider their identity to be based on four things: 'language (bilingualism in Spanish and English), skin color, transnationality, and display/practice of Mexican culture' (2015, p.9). We see this reflected in Latino children's literature in the United States, as it commonly includes 'Spanglish, Standard Spanish, language use, culture(s), geographical and social spaces, home, family, and identity affiliations' (Chappell & Faltis, 2007, p.254). Christiansen's (2015) and Chappell & Faltis' (2007) research overlap regarding language and cultural affiliation; for this reason, these will be the two major factors considered when analyzing Mexi-

can American literature's connection to Mexico. This connection is crucial, because since the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848, Mexico has worked to celebrate Mexican American culture as evidence of the power and reach of Mexican culture (Shain, 1999, p.684).

Mexico is usually linked to Spanish and not indigenous languages because of a historical phenomenon. During the 19th century, Spanish usage increased until it was proclaimed the 'national language', and cultural unity was created through one common language (Cifuentes, 1992, p.12). While the Spanish language has been a major unifying factor for Latino culture as a whole, the global usage of English in the modern world has given birth to Spanglish – a fusion of Spanish and English – which is spoken all over the Hispanic world (Stavans, 2003, p.5). Mexican Americans expect each other to know Spanish because it's the national language and English to some degree because of acculturation.

When discussing the ways Mexican American communities display cultural affiliations, Garcia quotes Arce (1978), who mentions cultural consciousness: the cultural preferences and attitudes shown

by names given to children, food, entertainment and media preferences, to name a few examples (1982, p.298). This will be shown by 'behavioral patterns of speaking Spanish, having knowledge of Mexican culture and traditions, eating Mexican food regularly [...]' (Garcia, 1982, p.298). People do this by opting to name their children traditional Mexican names like Maria or Carlos or by choosing to eat enchiladas or mole for dinner, details mentioned continuously in Mexican American literature. Food, for example, is a simple detail that can show where a character grew up and what they are used to.

Another cultural trait mentioned repeatedly in academic literature is Latino family structures, which highlight a strong, extensive connection known as 'familism' (Coohey, 2001, p.130). Coohey combines Delgado's (1992) and Zayas' (1992) words to describe this as 'the most important culture-specific set of attitudes and beliefs held by Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South Americans' (2001, p.130). Latino attitudes and beliefs surrounding family spread to include extended family members like grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins, who are mentioned as important figures and influences in Latino's lives (Coohey,

2011, p.130). A Latino's family life will include close relationships not only with their nuclear family but with their extended family as well, with them being expected to have the roles of friends and guides often.

The use of the word 'Latino' to describe Mexican-adjacent culture is deliberate, as Latino is a word that 'derived from Latin America [...]' meant to allude to a separate identity from Spain' (Morales, 2003, p.2). It is their shared history and geography that groups Latinos together and creates a culture shaped by their communal aspects. Latino identity is 'neither black nor white' (Morales, 2003, p.25) and is 'made invisible through negation' (Morales, 2003, p.25). How can you show the standard Latino in the media when it is not external features that make someone Latino but rather cultural practices? How can you show 'standard' cultural practices if each Latino has a unique combination of the same heritage? Even within one country, cultural practices vary greatly because of cultural multiplicity. 'It refers to the cultural diversities that come from the existence of two or more groups in a society where people's views and practices generate a characteristic sense of a collective identity' (Barakoska, 2013, p.). For example, a

slang word that might have positive connotations in one area of the country might have completely opposite meaning in another, and both are just as valid. Having this 'cultural multiplicity is one of the main reasons Latinos find it difficult to be represented by mass media' (Morales, 2003, p.25). Even through their differences, the similarities are enough that they consider themselves to be one group.

Certain shared aspects within the community unite Mexicans as one cohesive group. In this case, the aspects that will be analyzed will be Spanish language use and cultural consciousness, including food, knowledge of traditions, and family relationships, including extended family.

The advantage of reading Mexican American books is that the question of identity and cultural identity is usually explored deeply as the characters try to find aspects of themselves and their lives that connect them to their "home" culture. As they try to come to terms with their own identity, they explicitly question what it means to be Mexican and if they fit the criteria.

Through close textual analysis, I will focus on word usage, context clues, preconceptions, and

key themes. Using the previously mentioned research, I have created some guidelines to analyze the already stated topics and how they represent Mexican identity:

Spanish Language Use

- Does the main character speak Spanish?
- If they do/don't speak Spanish, how do they feel about it?
- What judgment is made around Spanish-language usage?
- Are characters encouraged or discouraged to speak Spanish?

Cultural Consciousness and family relationships

- What cultural markers are mentioned in daily life, and how are they mentioned? Is it a normal part of the character's life?
- What aspects other than food are used as links to Mexican culture?
- Is there pride or shame surrounding the discourse around Mexican culture?
- Is the family's opinion of them important to the character?

The chosen book is 'Everything Within and In Between' (2021) by Nikki Barthelme. The author is a Mexican American who has publicly spoken about their struggles in finding where they fit in within

Mexican culture. I think this is important to mention as any cultural inaccuracies may then be chalked up to the author's personal experiences and knowledge about a culture that they did not grow up and live in. Also, it only reflects one Mexican American's true feelings surrounding their Mexican ancestry and its impact on a person's identity.

This book focuses on Maria Fernandez's journey to connecting with her Mexican roots, which starts when she notices her grandmother, who she lives with by herself, has received a letter written in Spanish from her estranged mother. Maria, known to her friends as Ri, can't understand it as she has been actively discouraged by her grandparents from learning Spanish. This triggers a journey of self-discovery for Ri where she confronts her heritage, her prejudices, and how to be comfortable in her Mexicanness.

The book starts with Ri asking to be changed to Spanish in her school's language program and her guidance counselor actively discouraging her. She thinks it's unnecessary for Ri to switch since she assumes Ri's family life gives her enough practice, as she implies by saying, 'You could practice Spanish at home, with your familia.'

(p.1). This upsets Ri, but she feels she can't say anything because of the expectations surrounding Mexicans. Her teacher expects her to speak it at home based solely on the fact that she's Mexican. Not only that, but she also assumes her family speaks it well enough not to warrant a need to study it in school. This leads to Ri feeling shame about how little Spanish she speaks, a recurring theme in the book, whether she's hiding the fact that she doesn't speak it, like in school, or reminding people of this fact, like in her neighborhood. 'I don't want people in my very bilingual neighborhood forgetting I don't speak Spanish and trying to talk to me. Expecting me to speak it back. It's embarrassing that I don't.' (p.15).

Ri's grandparents stopped her from learning Spanish, even going so far as to never use it around her. Even after her grandfather's death, her grandmother followed his ideals: 'We live in America and we speak English, he would say' (p.134). These stem from prejudice and racism the grandfather faced for having a Mexican accent (p.133), but this is only explained to Ri after she confronts her grandmother about remembering her speaking Spanish with her mom when Ri was a child. Learning this does not diminish Ri's longing to

learn Spanish, as she still sees the language as the key to finding out more about her mom and connecting with her past. When Ri confesses to her grandmother about transferring to Spanish class, she says, 'I just want to have some of my culture in my life. It's ridiculous that we're Mexican, but you don't want me to speak Spanish' (p.23). Ri's grandmother becomes furious, telling her that she is not Mexican; her mother was born in the United States, and her father was white (p.23) and even goes so far as to say that the world sees her as white (p.23) and she should take advantage of that. Ri says that no matter what she looks like, 'it doesn't change where our family came from or our history. That doesn't change who we are, who I am' (p.23). To Ri, learning Spanish is something that she feels she should have done a long time ago, something that is part of her heritage that she can work on herself (p.13).

Ri also sees Spanish as a requirement to fit in with the Mexican kids in school. She assumes that her lack of Spanish is the reason why she hasn't been part of the community for so long. Even after a conversation with her friend Edgar where he contradicts this, she believes she is the only Mexican in school who doesn't speak

Spanish. “We know a lot of people who don’t speak Spanish,” Edgar says. [...] “Not everyone learns it and that’s totally normal.” [...] I want to believe him so badly. Even if some people I know don’t speak Spanish either, I assume it’s likely that their families don’t push them towards whiteness the way Grandmother does with me. They know they’re part of our community. Unlike me.’ (pp.177-178)

To Ri, not speaking Spanish and not being allowed to speak Spanish are the main indicators that her grandmother is trying to make her be like a white person and not Mexican. “Learning Spanish made me feel closer to Mom, yeah, but that’s not all our culture means to me. [...] It’s who I am, where my family is from, and it makes me feel like I’m a part of something” (Barthelmess, 2021, p.307). With this, Ri confesses how she sees Spanish as an integral part of being Mexican. For her, the language and her culture are intrinsically tied. It isn’t until she has a conversation with Cassie, another Latina student who doesn’t speak Spanish (p.238), that she realizes her own prejudices are what have been keeping her from feeling Mexican. Before this moment, she hadn’t even questioned Cassie’s validity as a Mexican, she felt it was an uncontested fact. If Cassie doesn’t

speak Spanish and is undoubtedly Mexican, can she be too? ‘It’s easy not to realize how many of my assumptions are still sticking around – because of my own insecurities – that I need to unlearn’ (p.239).

Although Ri doesn’t feel very Mexican, Mexican food makes regular appearances in her daily life without her appreciating it as a cultural marker. She eats things like enchiladas (p.17) and carnitas (p.135) and calls them by their Spanish name but doesn’t seem to consider this as relevant. Her grandmother buys her food at the ‘mercado’ (p.97), buying things like ‘tortillas, cilantro, jalapeños, tomatillos, and beef for carne asada’ (p.97). Since her grandmother oversees the food at home, it is easy to assume that Ri’s fridge would always be full of traditional Mexican food and ingredients, but she doesn’t see how this sets her apart from an American family. It’s interesting that she doesn’t notice the importance of this when she is constantly visiting her friend Brittany’s house and would easily be able to contrast her fridge with her friend’s.

During the book, Ri grows to admire Edgar, one of her classmates in Spanish class. Edgar has spoken Spanish his whole life with his family, has visited Mexico multiple times, and he has a large ex-

knowledgeable he is about his family and his roots, especially as he knows all this information without having to ask anyone. Through Edgar, Ri gets the opportunity to practice more Mexican traditions. Once, he tells her about last year’s Día de la Independencia celebration, which he describes as ‘All I want to do is enjoy mi pozole and wait for el presidente to come on the television and lead El Grito’ (p.248). He makes sure Ri understands the context of his comments by mimicking the traditional Independence Day celebration: ‘¡Viva México! ¡Viva!’ (p.248). After this, Edgar’s mum invites Ri to the following year’s celebration, which Ri interprets as ‘An invitation! And suddenly a new connection to my culture opens up’ (p.249). All of this leads to Ri confessing to her grandmother that it is her intention to celebrate more traditional Mexican celebrations (p.307). By doing this, she thinks nobody will be able to deny she is Mexican anymore, not even her grandmother.

Ri’s desire for a close-knit family drives her to learn Spanish and involve herself with the culture, as she believes learning it is the key to bringing her mom back home and becoming a family, all three of them. One night, she prays ‘I want to be a family again. Me, Mom, and Grandma. Please’ (p.76). An

undercurrent in the book is Ri’s struggle with resentment toward her grandmother because she feels she is the reason Ri is not Mexican enough. Her grandmother feels that the less Mexican Ri is, the better her quality of life will be. Ri feels that pretending that she is not Mexican is only isolating and hurtful for her, ‘you made me feel like she [Brittany] was [...] better than me, because she’s white. [...] It made me feel like I wasn’t good enough, like I’d never truly be good enough, exactly as I am, everything within and in between’ (p.307). However, Ri’s love for her grandmother keeps her trying to become closer to her and to be the family she wants to be: ‘I want to do things like celebrate Día de la Independencia by cooking up a storm of our favorite food and honor Grandpa’s memory on Día de los Muertos. I want to learn Spanish [...], and I want to do them with you’ (p.307). All of this shows what Ri considers to be important to be a Mexican other than speaking Spanish: celebrating traditional Mexican holidays, eating their favorite foods, and doing it together as a family.

In this essay, I used Christiansen’s (2015), Chappell & Faltis’s (2007), and Coohy’s (2011) research to create a cultural model that could describe what factors are

commonly used to represent Mexican identity in Mexican American literature. The two most important, although not exhaustive, factors would be Spanish and cultural markers, like food and family, which are crucial to the Mexican identity in children's literature.



A Maharashtrian Rhino
Malvika Nair @toasted_ketchup

Bathroom Floor

Zoe Farmes

@poemsbyzoxo

Intended Audience: Young Adult

Trigger/Content warnings: Mental health issues, suicide attempt, blood.

Feet cold on the bathroom floor, I watch Mummy cry
Noise pounds through paper walls,
Chew my blanket; other end hangs floppy.

I watch Mummy
Sprawled.
Dad holds her wrist
Wet red towel
Drips pools puddles
Bathroom tiles
On the phone
Talking fast
Words speed out
Like racing cars
Hear a wailing
Down the street
Piercing siren
Sounds meet
Our front door.
Daddy sees me
Panicked eyes
Push me through
The corridor.

Feet cold in Wren's bed, I hear the ambulance come
Yellow jackets rush through the hall,
Chew my blanket; other end hangs floppy.



Sonnet 1 **Zoe Farmes**

Intended audience: Young Adult

Twist your head back to remember
Times past darkness wriggled in
Gripped, smothered in the center
Locked you in a cage of skin.

Hot and heavy in the black
Blind flapping captured bird
Secrets upon secrets stacked
Never releasing weighted words.

Long last you're sky rising
Lame wings healed from words you spoke
Finding freedom in the flying
Rusted chains finally broke.

Hark back, appreciate, view shift
Your moments in the dark spotlight.



The Funeral

Alice Bishop

Intended Audience: Young Adult

Trigger warnings: Grief, miscarriage, drug overdose

This is the worst day of my life, which is kinda selfish.
Because today's not even a day of Johnny's life.

Johnny's family is Catholic, so they have the funeral at a full-on parlour. The kind where you walk straight in, you don't even have to buzz up and climb over some other business to get there. Not to say it's particularly fancy. The place is in Queens. You gotta take the 7. A lot of people don't really consider the 7 beyond Times Square. They just use it to get crosstown in Midtown. But like all trains the 7 has a beginning, middle, and end.

It's the kinda stop that the train screams into. Overground, so the neighborhood hears the screams on rotation 24 hours a day.

Shawna comes with me to the funeral. I can't remember if we take the train together or she meets me there. I can't remember a lot of things about that day. It's a weird guttural haze. I'm screaming with the train.

Either way, I'm with Shawna when I walk through into the doors of the parlour, right from the street. It's as if Johnny invited me to a party and then didn't bother to come. 'How could you leave me here with these people?' I keep thinking. It's possible I say it out loud too.

Johnny's friends are all aspiring musicians like him. Like he was. They're mostly rich and entirely awful. And I don't think any of them have ever liked me. So, without Johnny there it's incredibly awkward.

I got ready for the funeral like I would have done for a date. I'm wearing a short black lacy dress. One he liked. And black leather boots that go up to my knees. He would have said something embarrassing and raunchy. 'Nice boots but they'd look better resting on my shoulders.'

I've got on a crop top printed with his band's logo that I used to wear like a human billboard. It made him smile, pulling me over and gesturing to me like an object when discussing the band with one fat cat or another. Lots of black around my eyes. Red lipstick. My eyes are rimmed in red too. From crying. I ran out of tears pretty early on so now I just

kinda crackle dryly like a false tinsel fire.

We begin the interaction, unsurprisingly, with a comment about my appearance. One of Johnny's bandmates says "Look at those baby blues. No wonder he fell for you." As if my stupid dry tearless eyes couldn't be anything but a betrayal.

Me and Shawna walk through the small reception area into the main room. The family have mounted a huge, printed photo collage. Johnny is everything that he was in the pictures. He's alive. He's hot. He's young. Johnny's grandpa stands next to the collage in contrast. The old man we should be burying next to the photos of the young one we are.

Johnny used to take me home to his attic room in a rickety house in the old neighborhood. The kind of house that didn't fit anymore. In those days, when we first started dating, he referred to his mysterious roommate who lived downstairs. As the months went by it transpired that the roommate was in fact his grandfather. So "my roommate" became "Grandpa". One word. Capital G. And another layer between us was peeled back.

Next to Grandpa stands the rest of Johnny's family. The people with a real right to him, and to grief. I haven't met them. Johnny's father was in jail when we started dating. I guess he's out now. Johnny and his family are actually from New Jersey, and it shows.

Me and Shawna walk by them and try to say the things you're supposed to say. Well, she does. I'm still inside the guttural scream. I have met Grandpa before. I hold his wrinkled hands just briefly, as he has to remove one from his cane to perform the gesture. His eyes, set deeply into the withered face Johnny will now never have, meet mine. And we cry dryly. In this moment Johnny finally gets the thing he wanted. He breaks my heart. He gets it in the worst way possible.

After we walk by the family, the room opens up into the expanse of what's going to be the funeral. Rows and rows of chairs facing Johnny for his final performance. But instead of strutting around the stage he just lies there in this cruel and hollow way. In the dead way. They're Catholic so it's an open casket funeral.

The first time I saw Johnny on stage he was disgusting in the human way. He was an absolutely electric performer. If you didn't know any better you might think he was being electrocuted, the way he twitched and jived on the stage. There was this time Johnny's buddy paid 50 bucks to tase him. Both boys found it hilarious for different reasons.

There was something inside Johnny that was so big and so alive. Not everyone found him hot in the conventional sense. Johnny worked as a mover to support himself as he pursued his music career. He had the large build of someone who could easily lift a wardrobe. But it was also the build of someone who ate at odd hours and mostly from cans or food trucks. He would sweat profusely when he performed. To the point where his white shirt would be slick with the stuff. The translucent white stuck to his expansive self and plastered his brown chest hair down in mats. Anyone looking could see his nipples. After the show, he came to talk to you with his hair so wet with sweat it would flick off and spatter you as he made animated conversation.

I eye the stupid dead sweatless thing in the coffin with suspicion.

We line up to 'View the Body'. I think about all the ways in which I've viewed Johnny's body. These thoughts don't belong at a funeral.

The chick at the front is playing some kinda Celtic dirge on her phone. She goes ahead and plops the phone directly onto Johnny's breathless chest.

At times, Johnny and I watched TV together on his laptop. His bed was a sometimes-sheeted mattress on the floor of his attic room. My head on his chest, I would try to rest the computer onto him in that same way. He would recoil at the feeling of the cold metal on his bare skin.

'I'm not a table.'

This girl plops the phone onto him, and I laugh because he would have hated it. I laugh a lot that day although it's probably pretty inappropriate.

The girl is now kneeling on the floor doing these arm motions. It's too much. Shawna looks at me and says,

'People grieve in all kinds of ways.' Shawna is the most reasonable person I know. She's incredibly grounded and I love her.

Now it's my turn. Usually, I'm very mindful about this kind of thing. Aware of taking up too much space, too much time. As they say in medical school, don't hog the cadaver. But not today. I'm not sure how long I stand there for.

The family have dressed Johnny in a dark suit, which obviously looks good on him. The funeral people have slicked his hair back, which doesn't make sense because Johnny's hair was always tousled and falling forward from jumping around the stage. They also tried to recolor his skin, but I can see the blue peeking out at me from underneath.

Friends and bandmates have tried to recalibrate this bluish suited

Johnny. Someone has tucked a cigarette behind his ear. Someone else has pinned a badge with the band's logo onto his tie.

I want him to open his arms for me as he had so many times before. Open them up so I can crawl inside. He doesn't.

It wasn't perfect the first time he said I love you. We were up in the attic messing around. He had tried something intended to be fun and a little bit cheeky. Only it didn't go over well. I sat on the bed, leaned up against the bare whitewashed wall, my arms crossed over my chest.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I wouldn't never do anything to hurt you. I love you.'

It was kind of cliché, but he didn't mean it that way.

'Thank you,' I said.

He repeated my words back, hurt. It wasn't the response he was hoping for. I dove under the covers, and we didn't bring it up again.

There was this one day when we were at my friend Charlotte's house. Her mom's in corporate law so it's a really nice place on the Upper West Side. Huge living room. There is this decorative piano that no one really plays. Me and Charlotte sat on one of the couches and started gossiping about someone or something. Johnny sat at the piano. He started playing this stupid song about a raccoon and crooning along. I was facing his back and watching his broad shoulders heave as he stroked the keys.

He wasn't playing for us to listen or give him attention or anything. He was playing because he saw the piano and simply had to. In this way Johnny is a true artist. Was a true artist. And I respected him tremendously for it. In this way I loved him very much. Maybe it's not in the way everyone expected me to. But I did.

I never told him I loved him while he was alive. But I say it often now that he is dead.

The rigid, folded arms don't open. They just lie there, barrier-like. Johnny predominantly played guitar, although he liked playing many instruments. The tips of his fingers were caked in years of calloused skin. It felt like sand brushing against me when we touched. There are still calluses on his fingers. But now he can't play guitar. Seems wasteful.

There is this smell. This powerful chemical smell. Formaldehyde. And just underneath it, the smell it's trying to smother. The primal smell of the dead. If you don't know what I'm talking about then good for you. It's not something I'm gonna try to give you. The smell sticks in my nose. For months. Every time I try to eat. The smell of my preserved dead ex-boyfriend.

I don't know it at the time, but the next meal I'll eat will be like an exorcism. I'll lie on the floor of my room drinking cinnamon Fireball straight from the bottle, the tepid Styrofoam container of veggie lo mein at arm's length. It'll be the kind you can only get from places with bulletproof glass between you and the guy. You slide the money in the slot, and he slides back the noodles. Finally, I'll be drunk enough to be hungry. Finally, the toxic sweet cinnamon smell will override the formaldehyde and death. I'll grab a fistful of lo mein and shove it into my mouth. I'll proceed, lying on the floor, to finish the container. Fistful by fistful.

Standing in front of Johnny, I really really want to touch him. The people who went before seemed to have done that. Lay hands. The problem is I know that if I touch him, he'll be cold. And if he's cold he's dead. And Johnny wouldn't do that to me. So, I don't. I could have touched him one last time. But I don't.

Now it's time to take our seats for The Service. The whole bit with the priest. I don't so much sit as rock around in my chair. Shawna tries to touch me, but I shudder away.

Here comes this fool in the frock with his little white collar. The priest has an accent that lends his speech some musicality, which feels appropriate.

"We all loved Jonathan but now he has been called home to God." Jonathan. It's honestly kinda insulting. The priest keeps calling him Jonathan. Anyone who knew Johnny knew he was colloquially called John. I called him Johnny; friends called him John. Jonathan was his father. If you're going to do a guy's funeral, you should probably know that stuff. And it's God this and God that. I start laughing. Hysterical.

"We all loved Jonathan but now he has been called home to God." Well, actually no. I didn't love "Jonathan" as far as he knew. And he didn't want to go off with God. He loved me. He wanted to stay with me. He wouldn't have left me for a smoking hot side-chick, let alone the Almighty. This guy who can't even get Johnny's name right? He clearly doesn't know anything about it.

There was this day that slept over at Shawna's. She lives with her dad over in Astoria. He works in family law so it's an okay place. She has her own room and her own bathroom. I was going to pee and dug a box of super heavy extra deluxe tampons outta my bag. Shawna raised her eyebrows. I explained about this crazy period I was having. How I needed a new one of these bad boys almost every hour. How it hurt.

She was quiet for a moment and then said, "Bro, sounds like you're

having a miscarriage.' We both sat there silently after that. Then I went into the bathroom and reapplied a super heavy extra deluxe tampon. The one I pulled out was soaked with blood and goo.

I think about God and this priest hosting a reality show. The show is called Daddy's Little Angel or Spirit Dad or something like that. It's about a hot, young, single dad trying to navigate his music career, raise his daughter, and date. It's set in Heaven.

There's a lot of singing and music and praying. And then the whole thing is gradually over. People start to leave. I root myself down into a pushed aside pew. Shawna is hovering around me like a well-meaning fly.

Eventually the only people left are us and the family. It's grossly inappropriate. I'm usually super sensitive about these kinds of things. But not today. The family clutch each other and form a semicircle around Johnny. They are all weeping. If this was a movie, the credits would start to roll over them. Only it's not. We have to keep on going.

If I leave, they'll take him away. And if they take him away, he'll be dead. And Johnny wouldn't do that to me.

Shawna gets me out of there eventually. I don't remember how. We go to this big diner on Jackson Avenue. I accidentally leave my gold hoop earrings there. I remember because I'm so upset about it. I really liked those earrings.

There is a word that isn't said at the funeral. But I hear it a lot after.

If Johnny had been hit by a car it would have been cut and dry. But people like to bed down into the murky quagmire of that word.

Overdose.

And underneath it all they come back with one little thought. 'He did it to himself.' I never cared much for that little thought.

'I'm sorry your dad died in Iraq. But, you know, he did enlist. So. You know. He did it to himself.' Would you say that to a friend?

It's like everyone wanted me to learn some lesson. But guess what? I didn't. It was just stupid. Stuuuupid. I say that word a lot now. Johnny was gorgeous and talented and way too young when he died for literally no reason; it was stupid.

A lot of people felt I didn't have the right. Shocked that I didn't have some kind of dignified and selfless reaction. Baffled at my lack of perspective. I wasn't his widow. It was just some inconsequential teenage romance. We weren't even together when he died. But teenage exes aren't supposed to die. They're supposed to start dating people who are

Spirituality in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Series: A new ideological direction in children's fantasy literature in the absence of Christian affiliation

George Lewins

“Our roots are in the dark; the earth is our country. Why did we look up for blessing — instead of around, and down? What hope we have lies there. ... Not in the light that blinds, but in the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls.” (Le Guin, 1983)

Dr Seuss once described fantasy as “a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope” (Seuss, 1965). Rather than gazing out at the cosmos in awe, he proposed that the fantastic mode allows readers to look inward – to scrutinize the workings of the self and of society. Defining parameters of the genre that is ‘fantasy’ and the extent to which it reflects or subverts reality remains a debated issue, but there is a consensus amongst its critics that fantasy literature does, either actively or inadvertently, engender such critical reflection (Bakhtin, 1984; Hume, 1984; Hunt, 1997; Jackson,

1981; Levy & Mendelsohn, 2016; Reynolds, 2007; Zipes, 1983). If this is the case, then my childhood reading of the works of Ursula K. Le Guin undoubtedly provided me with a more than adequate ‘telescopic lens’ with which to explore my own emergent philosophical and political beliefs and sensitivities.

Ursula K. Le Guin wrote prolifically from 1959 to 2018. As the youngest child of two highly academic parents (an anthropologist and a psychologist turned author) she grew up in an environment which promoted curiosity, scepticism and a hermeneutic approach which is evident in her writing (Mayer & Shin, 2023). She avoided labelling or defining her work as belonging to specific genres, but it is true that her writing sought, in her own words, “a distancing from the ordinary” (Le Guin, cited in Pennington, 2002, p. 82), an attribute which is characteristic of

fantasy literature (Levy & Mendelsohn, 2016). Her skill in conjuring fantastical worlds, coupled with her instincts for probing and interrogating our own, gives her books a depth and richness that has contributed to her global success and devoted fandom. Much has been written about Le Guin’s fantasy in terms of their critical approach to social issues around gender and anarchism (Mayer & Shin, 2023), but it is her themes of religion and spirituality that are central to this analysis of the adventures of Ged the wizard in the original trilogy of her Earthsea series. I will argue that within these works she introduced a shift away from the Christian influenced ideological monopoly in Western children’s fantasy literature in order to pave the way for alternative spiritual outlooks and approaches.

The following literature review focuses on the specific context of Le Guin’s work within the fantasy genre. It explores definitions and confinements of the genre as a whole, examines the potential for subversiveness through fantasy literature and contextualises Le Guin’s work by exemplifying some Christian themes in the fantasy canon which her writing sought to deviate from. The latter section of the review explores existing academic approaches to religious

literary criticism of this kind, including a brief exploration of medievalism in fantasy literature.

Defining the Fantastic

What we would describe as the fantastic is “much too large to constitute a single genre. [It includes] whole conventional genres such as fairy tale, detective story, Fantasy” (Rabkin, 1976, p. 118). Defining a specific fantasy genre is challenging due to the broadness of its essence. Jackson details the etymology of ‘fantasy’: “it derives from the Latin, phantasticus ... meaning ‘to make manifest’. In this general sense, all imaginary activity is fantasy” (Jackson, 1981, p. 13). For the purposes of this essay, I will consider mythology and folklore as separate yet constitutional elements of the literary fantasy genre – recognising their oral traditions as foundational (Hunt, 2001), as well as in the sense that they provide much of the archetypal source material for fantasy authors (Sullivan III, 2001). In literary terms, many critics include aspects of ‘impossibility’ in their modal definitions. Hunt describes fantasy as a form of imaginative speculation: “that which cannot be” (2001, p. 2) and Jackson identifies it as “any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation” (1981, p. 13). Despite

this assertion, Jackson reminds us that fantasy does not exist entirely separately from reality, in fact “it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real” (1981, p. 21). Saunders adds that “fantasy is not the opposite of reality but is rather another way of making sense of that reality” (2011, p. 5). The mimetic element of fantasy is coupled with elements of the ‘marvellous’ (Jackson, 1981, p. 22; Hume, 1984) in a way which Aristotle reportedly described as a “stylizing of reality in which the ordinary features of our world are brought into focus by a certain exaggeration” (Davies, 1999, p. 3). It is this critical exaggeration of reality that underpins so much of the fantastic mode, much in the same way that Bakhtin describes elements of the carnivalesque and the grotesque in the works of Rabelais (Morris, 1994).

Subversion in Fantasy

This transactional relationship between the real and the fantastic is a key component in understanding the genres potential for social commentary or criticism. By creating worlds which are separated from reality, authors are granted a degree of critical freedom which is not always afforded to works of realist fiction (Jackson, 1981). Le Guin recognised this in her own

writing process: “Fantasy is a literature particularly useful for embodying and examining the real difference between good and evil” (Le Guin, 2004). Irwin’s assertion that a “fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (1976, p. X) introduces an interesting nuance with its use of ‘accepted’ in this instance. Jackson refines this by noting that fantasy is any literature which refuses to accept “prevailing definitions of the ‘real’ or ‘possible’” (Jackson, 1981, p. 14). This distinction recognises the subjectivity of perceptions of ‘reality’. Cultural shifts or advances in scientific understanding can alter the parameters of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ in society; this, in turn, may situate fantastical literature closer to, or further from, pervasive societal norms. In much the same way as Beauvais (2014) argues that “one country’s radicalism may be its neighbour’s mainstream” (p. 21), I argue that the extent to which a work can be considered fantasy can fluctuate based on the sociocultural and temporal locations in which it is read. Since fantasy is predicated on inversions or distortions of normalities, it is not surprising that the mode has been identified as such a verdant source of subversiveness and political criticism.

In *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes, building on the work of Barthes and Jameson, explored this field of theory, specifically in terms of the political subversiveness of fairy tales. He describes the process of writing as “an intervention in a continuous discourse, debate and conflict about power and social relations” (Zipes, 1983, p. 3), thereby suggesting an inextricable link between authorship and socio-political context. “Fairy stories speak truth to power, Salten’s original Bambi was about the inherent danger of being Jewish in 1920’s Europe” (Zipes, 2023). This link is evident in Cowan’s recent book on religion and myth in fantasy literature. He provides examples of how tropes, themes, symbolism and characterisations in the fantastical have changed over time to reflect changing social, cultural, and political values (Cowan, 2019). Le Guin spoke openly about the political influences which underpinned much of her work: recognising societal shifts and reacting accordingly to ensure her writing maintained its subversive nature. On the subject of capitalism, she stated that “Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art ... the art of words” (Le Guin, cited in Curry & Shin, 2023, p.VIII).

Bearing this socio-historical aspect of fantastic authorship in mind, the context of Le Guin’s own environment and time period forms a key component in an analysis of her work. Indeed, she notes the impact of historical context in her introduction to *The Word for World is Forest*, a novella inspired by her aversion to the Vietnam war. “It was from such pressures, internalised, that this story resulted; forced out, in a sense, against my conscious resistance” (Le Guin, 1972, p. 7). As the socially dominant perception of the war was one of positivity, largely due to the influence of the government (Hastings, 2019), Le Guin’s allegorical criticism of colonial imposition was ‘radical’ in that it challenged or interrogated a societal norm. Her *Earthsea* series was written during a period which Crockett describes as postsecular, a term used to describe the need for new approaches to religion and politics in the face of the untenable nature of a purely secular society (Crockett, 2018, p. 6). The increasing “deprivatization” (Casanova, 2007) of Christianity into the workings of politics troubled Le Guin as it gathered momentum in America during the 50’s and 60’s (Gaston, 2021). Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley argued that, in this time period, “Americans stood ready to re-embrace

the transcendent, albeit within the matrix of a complex, industrialized society” (Greeley, 1972 cited in Gaston, 2021, p. 40). Le Guin’s choice to promote a new approach to the transcendental in *Earthsea* can thus be situated both as a reaction against a growing Christian influence in politics, as well as a rallying call for those with the potential for faith to explore the Taoist and Pagan principles espoused in her work.

Christian Informed Constructions of Childhood

Nikolajeva, in exploring the aesthetic approach to content in children’s literature, uses the history of the fairy tale as an example of a mimetic genre which mirrored changes in society (2005). The evolution of specifically targeted didacticism within their continually reimagined narrative form signified prevailing societal attitudes via a direct comparison of source material. Zipes’ comprehensive study of the work of Perrault highlights an emerging religious, specifically Christian, element to the moral themes of his fairy tales (Zipes, 1983). According to his research, even though “the narrative perspective may vary, the starting point for the discourse on manners through fairy tales affirms the dominant Christian Absolutist

view” (1983, p. 48). This presence of, and adherence to, Christian moral themes is linked to evolving concepts of childhood throughout Western culture. Rose speaks to the fundamental ‘impossibility’ of defining ‘childhood’ because of this constant renegotiating of attitudes and perspective towards its essence – a field of debate which she points out is itself invariably dominated by adults (Rose, 1992).

Key Western historical stances on the nature of childhood were predicated on notions of Christian teaching (Reynolds, 2014). Before expounding on these constructions, it is important to recognise the limited nature of their demographic scope. Generally, ideas of ‘childhood’ were based on “middle-class life and values, with children of the poor either disappearing from view or being used as symbols and ciphers for literary and political ends” (Reynolds, 2014). Similarly, their formulation occurred during historical periods of western empire and colonialism. In this sense, they expounded the prevailing ideologies of the period and either exoticised or degraded societies which were non-European (Saïd, 1978). These traits are visible in the evangelical and pro-colonial fantasy adventures of the *Swiss Family Robinson* (Seeyle, 1990) and the romanticised

‘savagery’ present in *The Jungle Book* and *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (Shackford, 1978). Le Guin was conscious of the troubling legacy of these genre defining themes when she wrote a sequel to the original *Earthsea* trilogy 18 years after its first publication; explaining that she was “dissatisfied with others [examples of fantasy], notably [because of] a Eurocentric storytelling style and a masculinist plotting” (Le Guin, cited in Bratman, 2018, p. 106). Her use of Taoist, Pagan and Native American philosophies reflects her propensity for broadening this narrow, Westernised, Christian frame of social perspectives in her work. Author Kat Kimbrel alludes to the positive effects of this aspect of Le Guin’s writing on her own work: “with *Earthsea*, I suddenly saw, through Le Guin’s anthropological roots and Taoist beliefs, peoples of her archipelago that were radically different in culture, history, beliefs, faith. It was a revelation” (2018, cited in de Yampert, 2018).

Hunt outlines a brief history of the most significant examples of Christian oriented notions of childhood and their resultant didactic methodologies within the literary field (Hunt, 2001). Their form progresses from overtly evangelical allegory in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Bunyan, 1678), puri-

tical rationalism and Christian duty seen in works like *Gulliver’s Travels* (Swift, 1726); and later, the romanticism of ‘nature’s child’ and innate innocence described by the likes of Wordsworth and Rousseau (Rudd, 2010) – evident in texts such as *The Golden Key* (MacDonald, 1867) and *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1911). Key to understanding the didactic nature of more contemporary fantasy is this shift from the consensus that fantasy led children towards sin to the belief that “the child is born innocent, and can be tempted through the fantastic to the marvellous in Christianity” (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016, p. 2). C.S. Lewis used the enchanting world of *Narnia* in this way to retell and engage child-readers with the story of Christ’s birth, death and resurrection: “The Magician’s Nephew tells [of] the Creation and how evil entered *Narnia*. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe the Crucifixion and Resurrection” (Lewis, 1961). Le Guin arguably uses the same methodology of narrative ‘temptation’ to introduce radical or subversive concepts in her own work; however, as Maslen points out, if she ever provides ‘answers’ they are “usually couched in the form of further questions” (Maslen, 2018, p. 1). In this sense she avoids implications of didacticism in her writing: “I’m not a preacher, I’m a

fiction writer... I expect my novels to offer some moral guidance, but they're not blueprints for action, ever" (Le Guin, 2012).

Medievalism

Linked to the romantic movement's concept of innocence is the use of medievalism in fantasy literature. Elizabeth Fay argues that the Victorian desire for innocence in an increasingly industrialised world led authors to idealise feudal society, drawing on its simplified, communal relationships with nature whilst simultaneously glossing over its drastic social inequalities (Fay, 2002). Maria Cecire problematises these medieval representations within children's fantasy literature, pointing out, among other things, their rigid representations of gender roles and the instances of Islamophobia present in many examples of the genre (Cecire, 2009). She notes the use of maps within Tolkien's Middle Earth and Lewis' Narnia and how each of these worlds centralise white, Western and (by the authors own admission) Christian cultures; and feature "inhospitable desert, beyond which live dark-skinned peoples who require suppression or subjugation" (Cecire, 2009, p. 397). This medieval approach to fantasy all too often echoes a desire for crusade and

holy war and justifies violence. It not only creates harmful distinctions between cultures, but also implies a moral superiority of one religious' culture over another. Lewis himself stated a troubling view of what he described as 'Eastern' cultures: "I still can't help thinking that the Christian world is (partially) 'saved' in a sense in which the East is not" (Lewis, cited in Cecire, 2009, p. 400). Le Guin argues that this is a false dichotomy which justifies brutality "until the Problem of Evil is solved in a final orgy of savagery and a win for the 'good' team" (Le Guin, 2004). Once again, she seeks to disrupt this norm, replacing white, Christian solipsism within her Earthsea series by building an archipelagic world of multi-cultural nations. She describes the most common skin tone, and the protagonist Ged, as "copper-brown" (Le Guin, 1968, p. Afterword) - whereas the separatist, desert region of the Kargad Empire is "peopled by pale, fair-haired folk" (Hunt, 2001, p. 45).

Religious Literary Criticism – A Methodology

Dennis Taylor noted that the impact of spirituality and faith is not as clearly defined as other social strands are in texts (Taylor, 1996). He emphasised the pressing need for "religious interpretations that

into productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses" (Taylor, 1996, p. 124). He points out that 'dominant' literary discourses, such as Marxist, feminist or critical race theories, can each unearth valuable interconnections between literature and their own areas of specialism; "but what is left over is a nagging spiritual question" (Taylor, 1996, p. 125). In the field of children's literature, many critics have analysed the religious themes of Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, in large part due to their overt criticism of Christianity (Gooderham, 2003; Gruner, 2011; Pinsent, 2017). Pullman's work is undoubtedly worthy of its widespread interpretation, but I would argue that it is limited by the very nature of its directness. Pullman sets up a dichotomy between secularist, intellectual freedom and Christian dogma, leaving little room for examining "the gap" in between these two opposing concepts that Briggs and Briggs argue is one of the great strengths of children's fantasy (Briggs & Briggs, 2006). Clarke posits a reason for the lack of religious criticism into these kinds of intermediary texts, Le Guin's among them, in that exposing "spiritual experience to the harsh scrutiny of academic discourse might lead to a degradation of the sacred" (Clarke, 2009,

p. 197). This sensitivity underpins the criticism of faith within Le Guin's work, a trait she respected despite her atheism: "Belief is a great word, and a believed truth too can be great and beautiful. It matters very greatly what one believes in" (Le Guin, 2014).

Conclusion

Le Guin's thoughtful weaving of Eastern, Native American, and Pagan philosophies within her fantasy is underpinned by her adherence to Taoist passivity and non-confrontation. She paints a rich picture of spiritual alternatives to Christianity without imposing or evangelising her cause. She described herself as an "inconsistent Taoist" (Le Guin, cited in Erlich, 2006) thereby demonstrating a degree of critical awareness of her own beliefs, an aspect which is encouraged in the character's discourses within her books. One of the strengths of her spiritual messaging is in this very doubt. She does not seek to impart a particular, pre-held belief system through didacticism, but rather aims to inspire her readers towards a critical and thoughtful approach to faith and belief as a whole.

I believe that Le Guin successfully achieved an ideological shift in her unpicking of the didactic

Interview with Bruce Ingman

***Spinning Gold Editorial Team:* What is the hardest thing about being a children's book illustrator?**

Bruce Ingman: The most difficult thing is probably the uncertainty. Will children like the book? Will anyone like the illustrations?! Will the creative pairing create magic? I suppose that's a mixture of uncertainty and self-doubt but you can't let it affect your work - that can be quite hard too! If you are going to be successful enough to keep illustrating, you've got to be prepared for hard work - but that's the easy bit - the harder bit is understanding that a lot of success is also down to good luck and alchemy that's out of your control.

***SG:* What is your drawing process, and how has this developed over time?**

BI: It starts from the get go with drawing, it's the best way for me to think through and visualise my ideas/characters/sense of place. The immediate reaction to the words is to start rough drawings, character sketches, reading between the lines and getting ideas down on the page. I like to sketch the whole book out in a notebook very quickly. It is always surprising to me that a lot of my immediate instinctive reactions to a story remain in the finished book. This hasn't changed at all over time. I also do a lot of colour roughs. A lot.

***SG:* Can you tell us a bit about your journey to becoming a published illustrator?**

BI: After the Royal College of Art I worked as a freelance illustrator, mainly for editorial magazines and design companies, and was getting a bit frustrated and looking for something that would give me more control of the creative process. I went to see a friend's girlfriend who worked at a children's publisher and she asked me to develop an idea I had in

my portfolio. Thinking nothing much would come of it, I went back to my studio and completed a pretty much full colour dummy of a picture book having real fun in the process. Luckily, they loved it and I was off. I had found something that came more naturally to me. That was about four years after leaving the RCA.

***SG:* What is your favourite picture book and why?**

BI: Such a difficult question. It would most likely be different if you were to ask me tomorrow. If you look online I have answered this question a few times. Today I will plump for *Dr De Soto* by William Steig, a typically inventive and amusing story with charming illustrations. It's utterly beguiling. The story cleverly conveys a message without being moralistic with funny lines that kids will remember for a lifetime. It proves what I try to explain to students, that you can still have a lot of creative freedom within the craft of picture book making.

***SG:* Do you have any current projects that you can tell us about?**

BI: I always have a few projects on the go. You should always be thinking ahead and playing around with ideas. I'm hesitant about talking about projects in case I jinx them! But I'm researching an author/illustrator for the Thames & Hudson Illustrator series and I have a story I've written which is on the drawing board.

***SG:* What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in illustrating for children?**

BI: Hopefully you have chosen this career because you are absolutely passionate about it. It's a 24-hour job, you are never not an illustrator; it's how you look at things, how you respond to what's around you, always listening and watching. This is why every illustrator has to carry a notebook. It's also important to see what publishers and other illustrators are up to so time spent in bookshops, big, small and especially independent, and libraries is always time well spent. And then, be yourself.

SG: Finally, what is the biggest threat children’s literature is currently facing and how do you feel we can fight it?

BI: AI is obviously the biggest challenge of the time but I don’t have an answer, nor do I think anyone has yet. I (have to) believe it will be difficult to replicate the intricate mechanics of assembling a picture book and for AI to reproduce the quirky individual voice that makes the best picture books so distinctive.



Fair Play

Written by Jenny Barker

Illustrated by Frankie Gritton

@jennybbarker

@JBarkerPrimary

This is a tale of determination and grit
Of inspiring women who refused to quit
They simply loved football, the beautiful game!
But for far too long, they were made to feel shame

The first ladies' match was in 1895
From that moment on, they started to thrive
The North beat the South (7 to 1!)
Something quite special had just begun

A few decades later, women's football was growing
Teams trained hard whether sunny or snowing
Dick, Kerr Ladies and the Hey's of Bradford played
Along with St Helen's- but they never got paid

As they worked hard in factories during World War One
They formed incredible teams and played for fun
At the end of 1920, on Boxing Day
A crowd of 53,000 came to watch the girls play

For charity they raised many thousands of pounds
These talented players seemed to know no bounds
Nettie Honeyball, Alice Woods and Lily Parr
They were stars at the time, and they could have gone far

Then in 1921, the dreadful decision came
Football's for men- it's not a female game!
It was 'quite unsuitable for women,' so the FA claimed
These girls were unladylike and had to be tamed



Women were banned from pitches by the FA
And although they fought hard to continue to play
It was hurtful and tough when they kept getting pushed back
The war years were over and women's teams were off track

Ridiculous claims caused many bickers
Like 'They kick too hard!' and 'They wear baggy knickers!'
After this cruel and unjust shun
It became clear: the glory days were done

Many continued to play anywhere that they could
But the damage was done and abuse they withstood
In the 1930s, men's football arrived on the screen
And the women at home wondered what could have been

If only they were allowed to have the same chance
To play and perform and to really advance
How many trophies could they have brought home?
It's awfully sad this will never be known

It's hard to believe just how long it took
For women in football to get some much-deserved luck
It wasn't until 1971
That the FA reflected on the damage they'd done

They lifted the ban, formed a number of clubs
And the women showed them they were wrong for their snubs
In 1991 came the Women's World Cup
And ever since then, it's been on the up

The WSL and the Champions League
Are starting to cause a lot of intrigue
For the women's game, there's a buzz and a passion
With kits selling out – Chloe Kelly's in fashion



We have the Lionesses, who make us so proud
We can watch them on TV or cheer in the crowd
Lauren James, Ella Toone, and the mighty Beth Mead
With their talent and work rate, they're sure to succeed

A backheel from Russo, a tackle from Bright
Hemp gets the ball and she sprints out of sight
European champions in front of a sell-out crowd
It came home to Wembley and the roar was so loud

Although there is still a long way to go
(We need training for refs and equal pay when you're pro)
At last girls can see the game is for them too
If you've not tried it yet then it could be for you

So go for a kickabout, join your school team
Or tune in from home to the next livestream
Practise your skills and aim for the cup
From this journey we know we should never give up

Arsenal, Man City and Chelsea too
Perhaps you'll be scouted and make your debut
If you work hard, who knows where you'll go?
Football's for girls; let's watch it grow.



Door to Heaven

María Jarero

Intended Audience: Young Adult

Luke runs around the corner wildly, grace forgotten in favor of speed. He holds onto the wall, to keep his turn tight and save precious seconds. He ignores the scrapes it leaves on his palms, he can't afford to care about anything else. One last turn and then he just has to find the door.

He doesn't think anyone has noticed he's out right now. He hasn't heard anyone following him but, for all he knows, they have transformation powers and are scuttling along behind him in the shape of a rat, or a cat, or a dog. He's being paranoid, transformations are not so simple, as he well knows. But it's better to imagine the worst and be prepared for anything.

'Come on, come on.' The torches lighting up the streets are barely enough for him to see the numbers lining the houses. As a person who might as well need a map to find the bathroom in his own house, he hates how similar all the houses on this street are. It's impossible to remember which one is his, which is embarrassing enough in daylight. At night time, it's just a nightmare. Finally, he finds the number he's been looking for: a bold, embossed 67.

He tickles the fingers of the hand-shaped door knob, bringing it to life. It grasps at air blindly, until he clasps it firmly. A few seconds pass.

'Come on,' he tries to keep his impatience in check. It wouldn't do to upset the door and be denied entry to his own home.

Finally, he feels it. The rush of the door reading his magical signature. The slight, powerful handshake that he tries to match.

It hesitates for a second before he hears the click of the lock. Finally, he slips inside and shuts the door quickly. He stops to thank it and beg not to let anyone else in after him. He feels its magic accept his request. For now. It's as good as he can expect, being the least favorite homeowner. The clock strikes midnight.

Luke finally lets himself think that he almost didn't make it, and what would have happened if he'd been just one second later.

'Ah, you're finally here. Just when I predicted you would be.'



Hansel and Gretel

Ana María Ardila @anardila.ilustracion

An old, strong voice breaks him out of his spell with the door. He's slightly annoyed, still convinced that he could have persuaded the door further in his favor. But he can't be too mad, Caleb has always been this way, ever since they were children. Always in his own world. Always invading Luke's. Always everywhere all the time, his voice, his presence, his magic. There has never been a time when Luke hasn't felt Caleb surrounding him and he has never been able to look in any other direction.

He turns and sees his friend standing there with a teacup and kettle in his hands. His blond hair is standing up in random tufts as it usually is when he's been tinkering in his workshop all day. His deep brown eyes are tired but focused completely on Luke. A slight, shy smile is on his lips. Luke can count on the fingers of one hand the amount of times he's seen Caleb's full-blown smile. It's always unexpected and so, so bright that Luke is kind of glad Caleb doesn't pull it out more often. Luke's sure his heart would have stopped working by now if he smiled like that every day.

'If you saw me coming... why didn't you open the door?' Luke pants out.

'I did, didn't I? It didn't ask you for the secret handshake. Usually I

activate that by midnight.'

'We have a secret handshake? Since when?'

'Since always.' Caleb's voice is so matter-of-fact that Luke wants to strangle him. Just for a second though.

'Why do we even have a secret handshake? Isn't a magical signature lock enough? And why don't I know the secret handshake to unlock my own front door?' Luke is getting more agitated by the second, one second away from punching Caleb in the face. He would have to make the decision last-second though, so his psychically-talented friend can't see it coming.

'We've always had it. For extra security, of course.'

'Of course, he says,' Luke thinks with an eye roll. His best friend cannot do things normally, as if magical signatures are not enough.

'And when are you teaching it to me?' Luke grits out.

'You don't need it.' Caleb waves him away.

Luke thinks about arguing for a second, but then flops down onto a rickety stool next to the kitchen table. Knowing his best friend, the door-knob was foolproof and would always recognize both of them without asking for further identification.

Caleb turns around and starts fiddling with his cup of tea on the kitchen counter. He automatically pulls out a second cup for Luke and Luke has to bite back a smile at the domesticity. They've only been living together for two months and yet- it feels like forever. Finally in the big city, the two of them, together. Just like they always dreamed when they were kids. Caleb, as predicted (and not by himself), was a popular inventor with quite a few rich patrons. And Luke was an apprentice to one of the biggest transformation spellcasters in the country. Or, he had been until she disappeared.

'Cutting it close with curfew, aren't you? New girl?' Caleb's voice is light enough, but the fact that he doesn't turn to look up from his teacup is enough to tell Luke he's hiding something.

'I was actually with Professor Whitley.'

Caleb finally looks up, eyes wide with shock. He puts his cup down, tea sloshing down the side and onto his fingers. He doesn't seem to notice.

'Professor-? How? She's been missing for three months!'

'I found her.' Luke puffs up with pride, a smile on his face. Finally, he takes his hat off and places it on the table. It scuttles off towards the hat rack with a huff.

'Obviously.' It's Caleb's turn to roll his eyes. 'The question is how.'

'You mean you didn't see it coming?'

'You know that's not how it works.' Caleb huffs.

Luke can't hide his smile, Caleb smiles begrudgingly in return. Luke was there the first time 12-year-old Caleb had a vision, he's helped him figure out how it works. Five years later though, they're still not completely sure. Luke thinks it has to be something Caleb truly cares about, something he is invested in, for him to see it. Caleb disagrees but won't give a reason for it. Maybe he's just embarrassed that 90% of his visions seem to be about Luke.

'I-' Luke fiddles with his family ring, the one that marks him as a transforming spellcaster. He takes it off and spins it on the table, watching it for any sign that he shouldn't tell Caleb. As always, it never comes. 'I got a letter. A week ago.'

'And you didn't tell me?' Caleb sits down opposite to him and pouts, arms crossed and everything.

'I didn't know if it was real! And it had a secrecy spell cast on it, I literally couldn't.'

Caleb's eyes widen in alarm, he immediately starts hovering his hands over Luke, looking for traces of the spell. Secrecy spells are illegal, and have been ever since The Second Rebellion. In theory, they were taught how to fight them off in class, and Luke had gotten top marks on it. But the first seconds are crucial and Luke didn't notice the spell until it was too late and his lips were sealed. In theory and in practice are quite different, is all Luke can say.

'It's gone,' Caleb mutters, but his hands still flap anxiously around Luke until his friend takes them between his own.

'Hey, it's ok. The Professor Uncast it today.'

Caleb's eyes flicker back and forth quickly, holding Luke's gaze. It takes just a second before he freezes and slumps into Luke's arms. He twitches softly and makes a gurgling sound. Luke holds him tightly, riding the vision out with him. Caleb normally wakes up from his visions on the floor on his hands and knees, trembling with effort. Every once in a while, though, Luke will come across his friend's collapsed figure and will put him in a more comfortable position. Usually lying down with his head in his friend's lap with fingers carding through his hair.

'You can't.' Caleb's hoarse voice interrupts Luke's musings about how soft his hair is. 'You can't.'

Luke thinks Caleb is still in the throes of his vision until Caleb's hands grip his arms tightly. 'Luke, you can't.'

His voice sounds so stressed, so frightened that it breaks Luke's heart.

'I have to.' He can't pretend not to know what Caleb is talking about. 'The Professor chose me to do it. She thinks I have what it takes!'

'It's too dangerous!' Caleb's eyes fill with tears that don't make it down his face. He rips away from Luke's arms and wipes at his face with a huff.

'What did you see?' Luke stands up and approaches his friend carefully, like he's trying to catch a pigeon with his bare hands.

'I don't know. You were unconscious. There was blood. I couldn't tell if you were alive or not.' Luke gulps, but his resolve does not waver.

'This could change the world.' He finally whispers, eyes trained on the ground under Caleb's bare feet. 'I could finally live freely.'

'Don't pretend this is about freedom.' Caleb's voice tells Luke that the idea is as unappealing as a lunch invitation to a hungry witch's cottage. 'This is about you and your crazy dream about being important.'

'You wouldn't understand! You didn't grow up a Castello.'

'I might as well have! I grew up next to you!'

'You don't get the looks I get when people hear who my grandfather was! They look at me like they're just waiting for me to pull a cape on and threaten to kill them!'

In the silence that follows, Luke realizes he's been screaming. He clears his throat awkwardly, tries to relax his body and then sits down again.

'I need to show them I'm not like him.'

Caleb's hand on his shoulder is both an apology and a comfort.

'I'm going to save the princess. You can't stop me.' He finally whispers.

'You're not like him. You know that, right? You don't need to atone for his crimes.'

Luke looks up, meets his best friend's eyes. He sees how sincerely Caleb believes this, that he's not guilty by proxy, that his blood isn't tainted. He wishes he could say the same.

When, at 5 years old, it came out that his grandfather was the feared Grand Hirudinæ, Luke's future came crashing down around him. Before, the name Castello would have opened any door for him. Now, he was calling himself Luke Yarrow and was starting over far away from his family home where people no longer feared him but still avoided him.

'I need to do this.'

Caleb steps back with a sigh. He runs a hand through Luke's dark, thick hair. The curls thread through his fingers as his eyes focus on something far away, something Luke can't see. He finally drops his hand and turns his sad eyes back onto Luke.

‘Fine.’ There’s a beat of silence before he squares his shoulders. His eyes burn with an inner fire. ‘But I’m going with you.’

Luke jumps up and wraps his arms around Caleb, strangling him with a hug. ‘I wouldn’t have it any other way.’



Little Squirrel's New Home
Irem Sencok @iremsencok



Sureyya Opera House
Irem Sencok @iremsencok

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Are you what you eat?: An exploration of how food and cultural identity is portrayed in picturebooks featuring people of colour.

Hui Liang

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How is Mexican identity represented through language and culture in children's literature?

Maria Jarero

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