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Just How Radical Is Radical: Children's Picture Books and Trans Youth

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Abstract

This paper analyses the Australian children's picture books *The Gender Fairy*, by Jo Hirst and Libby Wirt, and *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship*, by Jess Walton and Dougal MacPherson. Both are examples of a rare engagement by Australian children's authors and illustrators; indeed, Hirst has the distinction of being the first Australian author of a picture book with a trans protagonist. The authors and illustrators engage with trans issues within a socio-political context that continues to problematise gender identity, particularly when it pertains to young children. To circumvent at least some of the controversy their efforts might generate, the authors and illustrators balance the radical potential of their subject matter with the perceived needs of the marketplace and the constraints imposed by the genre. In doing so, they create books that are radical, but not so radical that they generate controversy that obscures their message.

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Introduction

The evidence for the entrenched conservatism of children's picture books, particularly those used in Australian early childhood classrooms, is compelling. In a recent audit, ninety-nine percent were identified as promoting dominant cultural viewpoints (Adam, 2019; Adam and Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Adam and Harper, 2021). The significance of this imbalance in picture book selection extends beyond the collecting quirks of individual institutions: it offers broad insights into contemporary attitudes and morals by revealing what parents and teachers desire for children (Kerby et al. 2022; Baguley and Kerby, 2021; Kerby and Baguley, 2020; Flothow, 2007; Avery, 1989). As an integral part of a child's early exposure to literature, picture books are a powerful ideological tool; one well placed to transmit societal values that drive the social and academic development of young children (Adam, 2021; Adam et al., 2017; Adam, 2019; Adam and Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Kerby et al., 2019). Children's literature is therefore widely credited with an almost unrivalled role in ethical socialisation and education; as Clémentine Beauvais argues, "ethical instruction has always formed part of children's literature," a part widely acknowledged for its capacity to act as a "facilitator of ethical life, as a companion in ethical choices, and more generally as a participant in the ethical climate of a given society" (2015, pp. 108–109). According to Haidt and Joseph (2004), when children are exposed to "stories that permeate the culture", which can range from parables in the New Testament to "metanarratives" about history and world affairs, those narratives acquire "moral virtue" (p. 62). What this virtue entails is by its nature very broad and can include the creation of a framework for building empathy, acceptance and friendships, reinforcing social-emotional wellbeing, problem-solving, and the acquisition of conflict resolution skills (Kemple, 2004).

To maintain a broad market appeal in this ideological battleground, picture books often mirror the dominant social attitudes of the book-buying public rather than being in the vanguard of social and political change. Picture books have engaged with complex issues with great care and frequently display a marked effort to operate within a middle ground rather than offer anything that could be perceived as radical. This engagement with contemporary issues is far from new, for as Russo (2018) observes, picture books have always been political: "that's why they are fixtures on lists of banned or censored books." Their authors, however, have usually been careful to remain within touching distance of mainstream opinion, an approach which is obviously commercially attractive. Megan Tingley, executive vice president and publisher of Little, Brown Kids in the US, notes that children's books on activism and social justice topics are increasingly considered "retail-friendly. They're not homework, people want them in their homes" (cited Russo, 2018), but this is yet to be fully realised in the books currently available, as the limited range of texts explored here suggests.

In this article, we analyse the Australian children's picture books *The Gender Fairy* (Hirst and Wirt, 2015) and *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story about Gender and Friendship* (Walton and MacPherson, 2016). These books are examples of a rare engagement by Australian children's picture book authors and illustrators; indeed, Hirst has the distinction of being the first Australian author of a children's picture book with a trans protagonist. The texts feature trans characters who identify with a binary gender (i.e as a boy or a girl), and thus this is the focus of our study, although we acknowledge the many ways in which gender diverse people self-identify, such as: trans, non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, hijra, kathoey, waria, and Sistergirl and Brotherboy (Transhub, 2020; UNAIDS, 2015).

The two texts studied here are the only ones listed in the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature's bibliography (Nitschke, 2019) of diverse children's picture books with explicitly trans protagonists, although there is a small selection of books which challenge traditional gender roles. We argue that, to circumvent at least some of the controversy their efforts might generate, the authors and illustrators balance the radical potential of their subject matter with the perceived demands of the marketplace and the constraints imposed on them by the genre. In doing so, they create books that are radical, but not so radical that they generate widespread hostility.

This research seeks to answer two key questions:

- How do Australian children's authors represent trans protagonists and can these depictions be considered radical?
- How do these representations both work within and seek to extend a "trans architecture"?

Drawing on the geographical conceptualisation of physical and discursive space in the work of Foucault (1990) we explore how the discourse of gender is constructed, particularly through inclusive representation in literature. Incorporating Crawford's (2010) concept of "transgender architecture," we explore how discursive spaces can be redesigned to be gender-inclusive and gender-affirming by changing the rules of what can and cannot be said (McHoul and Grace, 1995, p. 31).

As Foucault (1990) explains, any book is "caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (p. 23), and where a "regularity" between objects, statements, concepts and thematic choices occurs, this can be considered a "discursive formation" (p. 38). Importantly, Foucault distinguishes between contributions to discourse that are considered either as:

> old or new; traditional or original; conforming to an average type or deviant. … in describing the first, it [new discourse] recounts the history of inventions, changes, transformations, it shows how truth freed itself from error… The second group [traditional discourse], on the other hand, reveals history as inertia and weight, as a slow accumulation of the past, a silent sedimentation of things said. (p. 38)

We employ these two groupings to facilitate our discussion of "radical" texts. The dominant, cisgender heteronormative discourse can be construed as traditional, as the "silent sedimentation of things said" (Foucault, 1990, p. 141) about gender. Texts that offer something original, and challenge the rules of what "can and can't be said" can therefore be considered original or "radical". Yet these books still work within the "networks" that make up both the tropes of children's literature and gender discourse, and thus cannot be considered *too* radical, as they work deliberately to transform from within rather than challenge from without.

Here, Crawford's theory of a transgender architecture becomes helpful in extending Foucault's geological metaphor. Discourse is in many ways organic; however, it is also very deliberately *constructed* in authors' word and image choices. Crawford (2010) considers the way in which architecture contributes to the traditional discourses of gender. This is evident in the exclusionary and binary gendering of spaces such as toilets, and at an institutional level, prisons and schools. These spaces are inaccessible to both non-binary and binary-identifying trans people, who either do not have an appropriate facility to access, or may face hostility or challenges when accessing facilities which are perceived to be in conflict with their assigned sex or gender expression. This prevents trans people from feeling safe and at home in these spaces. Sanders (2023) builds upon Crawford's work to note that, for many trans persons, being "at home" is not necessarily the achievement of a fixed identity, but rather the freedom to engage in "deregulated movement" with "unique and shifting gendered boundaries" (p. 1064). This relates not only to physical spaces, but to discursive spaces. Thus, children's books which feature transgender protagonists can be viewed as a deliberate, constructed extension of the house that gender built, to create a more inclusive space in which trans identities have a legitimate presence. However, as we highlight in what follows, there is strong resistance to this type of inclusivity.

Trans People and the Australian Socio-political Landscape

In traditional discourses of gender, gender diversity has historically been conflated with homosexuality and has been positioned both as sinful (Drescher, 2009) and pathological/diseased (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1973, 1994). It was not until 2010 that the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) (2011) formally addressed the pathological and binary perspective of gender diversity in their *Standards of Care* (7th ed.; SOC-7). It included the overarching assessment that "the expression of gender characteristics, including identities, that are not stereotypically associated with one's assigned sex at birth is a common and culturally-diverse human phenomenon [that] should not be judged as inherently pathological or negative" (p. 4). This re-framing informed the Australian socio-medico-political landscape, including more recent legal decisions in the youth space, where the Queensland Supreme Court in early 2022 (Re:A [2022] QSA 159) confirmed that persons under the age of 18 years can provide their own consent when seeking gender-affirming care, as is usual for other medical treatments, where they have sufficient capacity to do so.

This applies in the absence of one or both legal guardian's consent and in cases where one or more guardians disagree.

Despite these victories, among others, discrimination and prejudice against trans persons, including anti-trans sentiment based in the traditional gender discourse, remains. For example, in 2023, the British anti-trans rights activist Posie Parker organised a "Let Women Speak" tour of Australia during which she argued that the promotion of trans rights silences, endangers, and discriminates against cisgender women and characterised trans women as sexual predators who pose a safety threat to girls in female bathrooms (Karvelas, 2023). This extended to debate about young people and schools (Wood, 2019). The Brisbane Citipointe Christian College contractually demanded that families denounce homosexuality and that students identify by birth gender, or risk being excluded from the school (Courty and Rendall, 2022). Toowoomba Regional Council member Tim McMahon called for a review of children's books about gender identity in the council's local libraries as children may be "indoctrinated by warped thought" (Chen, 2021). Similar resistance occurred in early 2023 in the state of Victoria, where local businesses cancelled their drag story time and craft event after receiving threats and online commentary likening drag performers and trans women to paedophiles (Aubrey, 2023; Dexter, 2023). These examples not only highlight the ways in which adherents of traditional gender discourse feel threatened by the increasing visibility of LGBT+ identities, but also a concerning conflation of non-heteronormative identities with a discourse of abuse and deviancy, echoing the experiences of the LGBT+ community during the 1980s moral panic sparked by the AIDS crisis. The traditional gender discourse also works against a trans architecture, as LGBT+ identities are denied both representation and physical presence in public spaces such as toilets (Davis, 2018) and libraries.

Research suggests that trans persons, especially trans youth, are not only becoming increasingly visible but also more diverse and younger than previously reported (Cheung et al., 2018), with a trans rate as high as 8.4% among children/adolescents (Zhang et al., 2020). For example, one Australian study reported non-binary individuals comprising 30% of the more youthful cohort (Cheung et al., 2020, 2018; Delahunt, et al., 2018). Nevertheless, institutional discrimination and stigma across multiple social domains (Brömdal et al., 2022a, 2022b; Sanders et al., 2022; Strauss et al., 2020; Zwickl et al., 2021), including, vitally, educational settings (Bartholomeus and Riggs, 2017a, 2017b; Brömdal et al., 2022b; Hill et al., 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2017), continue to contribute to disproportionate rates of ill-health and discrimination, violence, unemployment, and financial hardship (Franks et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2020, 2021; Swan et al., 2022; Zwickl et al., 2021). Strauss et al. (2020) reported that trans youth (14–25 years) experience high rates of depression (75%), and self-harm (80%). Depression rates are seven times higher than those of the non-trans youth population, with almost half of all trans youth attempting suicide, a rate 14 times that of the general Australian adult population (Strauss et al., 2020). Recent studies also indicate that trans youth experience higher rates of homelessness compared to their non-trans peers, with the greatest cause of homelessness rooted in mental health issues (64%), rejection from family (44.7%) and family violence (43.3%) (Hill et al., 2021).

The 2021 *Writing Themselves in 4: The Health and Wellbeing of LGBTQA+ Young People in Australia* report, outlines how trans youth (74.3% male and 67.7% female) felt both unsafe and uncomfortable at their educational setting, leading to higher rates of absenteeism (Hill et al., 2021). The report also identifies how Australian educational settings perpetuate a sense of trans isolation, invisibility and exclusion by not doing enough to prevent abuse and violence towards trans students; and lack of visibly supporting and affirming students' gender through diverse activities, including learning and teaching material, toilets, changing rooms, and sports (Hill et al., 2021). These figures speak to the need for a more inclusive architecture, one in which both physical and discursive spaces create a sense of "homeliness" and belonging for trans youth (Sanders et al, 2023).

Trans Issues and Australian Children's Picture Books

Authors in the Australian market looking to explore trans issues have sought to avoid their work being labelled as "radical" by appealing to teachers through the positioning of their work as a classroom resource aligned with the curriculum. Given the paucity of offerings by Australian authors dealing with trans issues, there is, on the face of it, little appetite for them and by extension, no incentive for mainstream publishers to fill that gap. However, this may be less about an interest in the content than the publisher's fears of conservative backlash, akin to the recent campaign against Budweiser and other brands who ran LGBT+-inclusive advertising campaigns (Klee, 2023), and also members of the trans community or their allies being willing to work as children's authors, as they are targeted by the same "anti-woke" opposition (Pashley, 2021). Any assessment of the genre's engagement with trans issues therefore confronts the challenge of just how few examples there are on which to draw.

As Seddon (2001) observes, the curriculum is a cultural construction, one that is inevitably grounded in an acknowledgement of core beliefs and values. Students are exposed to these core beliefs and values whenever they explore issues such as gender, racial and social equality, which are often grouped under the umbrella term "social justice" (Baguley et al., 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2017). Ewing (2010) places these issues at the very core of an authentic national curriculum such as the one currently used in Australia, for such an endeavour must be driven by "equity and social justice and improved learning outcomes for our most disadvantaged and isolated students" (p. 127). Although the Australian Curriculum has a clear commitment to "developing strategies to challenge narrow views of gender, race, violence, sexuality, gender diversity and ability to contribute to inclusive communities" (ACARA, 2022), the lived experience of trans and gender diverse students indicates continued failings in educational settings.

By aligning their two picture books with the curriculum, the authors are building upon solid foundations. Rather than presenting their books as a radical intrusion on traditional gender discourse, the use of curriculum gives their work a validity, as they are building from within. This sense is further cemented by their choice of genre: both picture books use elements of the fantasy genre to further increase the

traditional appeal of their work. *Introducing Teddy* uses a core trope of children's books, anthropomorphism, which allows for "humor and whimsy to disguise didactic messages as fun [and] mask the protagonist's identity as a reflection of the child's own developmental foibles" (Fraustino, 2014, p. 148). Tilly, the protagonist, has no visible gender traits, instead signalling a transition through the wearing of a bow. This combination of making the protagonist non-human and the representations of gender non-physical/biological makes the work less realist and therefore less of a direct challenge to conservative concerns. While *The Gender Fairy* is more overt in its representation of trans identity (the young boy imagining himself a ballerina, for example), the arrival of the Gender Fairy again deploys a trope of children's fantasy literature. The gender fairy works as a "fairy godmother" figure, a Proppian "helper" who offers supernatural guidance to the protagonist (Jorgensen, 2007, p. 220), again giving a non-human representation of gender diversity. As Benson (2003) explains, fairy tales are often treated:

> as a form which embodies and prescribes a particular set of culturally dominant ideologies centered on the codes and paradigms of patriarchy. They are read as suggesting and symbolically rewarding gendered patterns of behavior particularly pertinent for young readers, depicting as they often do the transition from adolescence to maturity. (p. 168)

Thus, the use of this traditional discourse-affirming genre works to make the books more readily accepted, despite their challenges to traditionally gendered behaviour. These books expand the discursive architecture of gender from within, rather than seeking to disrupt from without.

However, the use of gender stereotypes positions diversity as an "issue" as it highlights how trans identities can be seen as "other" or outside of the dominant discourse. The exploration of "issues" in children's books may be written with "the best of intentions" yet there is a danger that they may "further isolate individuals or even families by defining them by an issue such as a disability rather than weaving the issue into an imaginative story" (Nitschke, 2019, p. 3). Luecke (2021) argues that books with gender-diverse protagonists tend to focus "on the problematization of gender creative behaviors (such as wearing clothing or participating in activities seen by society as atypical for one's assigned gender)" and this results in a fear of rejection if they engage in these behaviours. This approach is evident in both texts analysed, as the protagonists feel "very unhappy" (Hirst and Wirt, 2015, p. 12), sobbing (Hirst and Wirt, p. 16) and worrying their friends won't like them anymore if they "reveal" their gender identity (Walton and MacPherson, 2016). The protagonists' concern about being rejected for their difference from the dominant norm subtly works to reaffirm the norm itself. If gender diversity is an "issue," this is compounded by the limited range of representations present in educational settings.

Adam's (2021) work on representations of race in children's literature notes that "educators mistakenly believe that one book about a particular cultural group is adequate to portray that group's viewpoints and perspectives" and so school collections can have just 1% of texts that portray the "ideologies and viewpoints of a non-dominant culture." Both Callahan and Nicholas (2019) and Chapman (2016) found that, while early childhood teachers felt they respected diversity, binary and

cisgender norms are reinforced in curriculum and activity design, assumptions about home and family, and the interactions the educators have with the children. This suggests that both the classroom environment and the texts teachers largely select work to reaffirm the dominant view of gender as binary and cisgender, and where diversity is acknowledged it is treated as "different" or "special" and so works to "Other" the group (whether that be based on gender, race or culture) rather than create a genuinely inclusive and expansive understanding of diversity (Callahan and Nicholas, 2019) through the construction of a trans architecture.

Advocates for diversity argue for the importance of these books in both libraries and in more formal educational settings, as they not only provide an opportunity to raise awareness and acceptance about different gender identities, but also to talk about discrimination with children of all ages (Hirst and Wirt, 2015; Telfer in Hirst and Wirt, 2015; Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2021). This aligns with the vision of trans architecture, which is a space where all genders can interact and learn about one another, rather than the creation of a separate "safe space" specifically for trans persons. Vitally, representations of gender in children's books provide an important platform for children who do not identify with the gender assigned them at birth, to know they are not alone, to be heard and seen, and ultimately to thrive and become their authentic selves (Dalal, 2021; Hirst and Wirt, 2015; Telfer in Hirst and Wirt, 2015; Stuart, 2022, 2020; Tayler and Price, 2016; Walton and MacPherson, 2016). Yet they also are of benefit to cisgender or nonbinary students, as they make trans identities visible in a space where they are often excluded. The presence of these books in public institutions like libraries and schools are a key building block of a trans architecture.

Despite the relative dearth of trans themed picture books, they do not lack contextual precedent. For example, Miller (2018) made a distinction between "old queer children's books" from the 1980s and 1990s which focused on gay and lesbian families and "new queer children's books" from the 2000s which shifted their focus to gender queering by the children (p. 1646). At the time they were first published, the same-sex family books of the 1990s were radical, in the sense that they acknowledged non-heteronormative nuclear family structures in a way that had not previously been done. They did not challenge the respect afforded for family, but rather sought to broaden the understanding of who can be a family to include same-sex couples. As a result, they usually focused on

> homosexual adult characters from the perspective of presumably heterosexual cisgender children who are affected by queerness only insofar as it differentiates them from their peer group. The modest conflict is quickly resolved once the normalcy of gay and lesbian parented households is established. (Miller, 2018, p. 1646)

These texts were gradually absorbed into the architecture of family representation, and so extended the boundaries of what could be said about sexuality and family. Despite this, both the books of the 1990s and those published more recently are marked by strict parameters that limit the exploration of LGBTIQ+ themes because of the "prohibition against the representation of any sexuality, much less queer sexuality, especially in childhood" (Abate and Kidd, 2011, p. 6). Nevertheless, authors

and illustrators of children's picture books are increasingly speaking to both adults and children "separately or together, in words and images that not only delight but shock, provoke, and, perhaps, enlighten" (Cech, 1987, p. 198). Cech sees this as an opportunity for children to confront more complex issues:

> If we cannot protect our children from a violent world, perhaps we can at least equip them with the political insight and the moral courage to recognize and to act to change some of these conditions. (Cech, 1987, p. 206)

Authors and illustrators can nevertheless find themselves constrained by the imagined "demands of children's literature as sanitary, benign, and didactic" (Tribunella, 2010, p.102). Both the books we analyse deal with controversial topics, yet the authors and illustrators have consistently, and with some skill, drawn on familiar tropes to avoid positioning their work as a radical "woke" attempt to challenge tradition. Their focus cannot help but touch on issues of considerable public debate, but they have sought to engage with the market rather than be either celebrated for their efforts or dismissed as propaganda.

Radical but not Too Radical: Reading Trans Picture Books

Jo Hirst's *The Gender Fairy* offers an unapologetic exploration of trans issues within an educative framework, one that equally addresses adults and children. A foreword by Dr Michelle Telfer, Director of The Royal Children's Hospital Gender Service and according to Hirst one of the world's leading experts on trans children, establishes that aim from the very opening of the book. Central to Hirst's efforts is the belief in the educative value of her work:

> [There was] a great need for a book with notes for parent and teachers, as this is still such a little understood area. The feedback is that the book and the notes have been really helpful. I get some beautiful messages from parents and educators. (Jones, 2016)

The story opens with 'Once upon a time', which immediately offers the comfort of the familiar by linking it to fairy tales, a traditional source of material for picture books. This is further established with the arrival of the Gender Fairy as a helper or guide. The subsequent narrative is framed by two children's struggle to understand their identity and to recognise that it should not be imposed on them by societal expectations.

From birth, the two protagonists are aware, though they cannot yet articulate it, that they are subject to labels. As babies, they are placed in cots, one with a sign attached that says, "It's a girl" and the other, "It's a boy" (pp. 6–7). This overt imposition of identity is supported symbolically by the presence of pink and blue blankets and other gifts that express a binary view of gender. As the children mature, they found that "they didn't like some of their presents. They didn't like some of their clothes. The children were unhappy. They felt that something wasn't right" (pp. 11–12). The illustrations are, if anything, more overt. The female child has received

a doll but clearly prefers a football and toy truck. The male child has received a toy race car but would prefer a ballet tutu. Hirst and Wirt are challenged here by the need to cater to the level of understanding of their readers. They must first establish the stereotype in order to subvert it. This has the unintended consequence of using traditional understandings as the measure for "normal" conceptions of gender, which in turn can act to soften the radical potential of the message. Hence the book deploys the language and imagery of the dominant gender discourse in its attempt to challenge or expand it, which leaves it open to critique that is in fact reinforcing gender norms.

When Hirst and Wirt seek to represent trans identity, this is done through the use of binary constructions of gender stereotypes; thus the radical potential of this engagement may pass unnoticed by younger readers. Almost imperceptibly, the intended audience increasingly becomes the adult reader. The child who is labelled a girl reacts to this lack of alignment between her gifts and her interests by feeling "very, very angry" (p. 14); a response that some adult readers might characterise as a masculine one. The overt engagement with the more radical educative imperatives sees this child then referred to using the pronoun "he", which in case a reader missed it the first time, is used on two subsequent occasions and is in bold. The child who was labelled a boy is "very, very sad," a response grounded in stereotypes of femininity, and again, gendered pronouns are bold in the text (p. 15). Once again, however, one must know the "rules" of language before the message can be understood, suggesting perhaps, at the very least, that it is a book to be read by parents to their children rather than as a private exposure to literature. This foregrounding of correctly gendered language highlights the importance of correct pronoun usage for trans children. This would certainly appeal to parents and trans children. Hirst sees these families as her primary audience, rather than trying to challenge mainstream attitudes more generally. As she notes, "I've had lots of older transgender teenagers tell me that they wish *The Gender Fairy* had been around when they were younger as it would have given them the language they needed to express themselves to their parents and get help earlier" (Jones, 2016). The Gender Fairy assumes the "adult" role in the story and is on hand to answer the children's questions and reassure them by telling them "Only you know whether you are a boy or a girl. No one can tell you. If you feel no one knows who you really are, you can tell a grown up you trust" (p. 20). The dual messages of "no one can tell you who you are" and "tell a grown up you trust" echo common themes in safety messaging for young children and recognise the cisnormative view and anti-trans sentiment of the traditional gender discourse.

Clearly, Hirst and Wirt are aware that the children are not the only people who need reassurance. By positioning the book within a familiar framework known to both parents, educators and children, Hirst and Wirt deradicalize their message. The themes are familiar, even if the issues appear new. Hirst is not an aggressive ideologue, though what she does is inevitably political. The book has no identifiable antagonists except for the children's own confusion. There are no cisgender characters with whom they must contend or who are themselves subject to a transition in terms of their own understanding. The changes that Hirst and Wirt seek to support are grounded in self-identity, not societal. The Gender Fairy reassures the little girl

when she asks, "Does this mean there is something wrong with me?"; "It is very normal" the Gender Fairy argues, "and has happened to other children too." The close of the book emphasises Hirst's decision to address trans children and their parents. The children ask if the Gender Fairy is a boy or girl. The Gender Fairy replies, "Does it matter?" (p. 28). While this was no doubt intended to be affirming, and probably as a vehicle to introduce non-binary identities, it reflects a desire to merely "explain gender diversity in a simple, age-appropriate way" (Jones, 2016), as the rest of the text works to establish binary trans identities by deploying traditional constructions of masculine and feminine gender expression.

Introducing Teddy: A gentle story about gender and friendship (Walton and MacPherson, 2016) is indeed a gentle story, one that engages with an "issue" in the least polemical manner possible. As with Hirst and Wirt, there are curriculum materials, in this case online, indicating a clear educative imperative. But Teddy's story is addressed primarily to the child reader rather than harbouring ambitions to serve as a guide for parents. It is, however, also grounded in the familiar. The story opens with Errol and his teddy playing together. They "ride their bike," "plant vegetables" and "have sandwiches for lunch in the treehouse" (pp. 1–2). But Thomas the teddy is sad and doesn't want to talk to Errol, worrying that "you might not be my friend anymore" (p. 10). This is a significant opening, as recent scholarship has consistently found that similarities based on gender, race, activities, and interests play an important role in the development of the understanding of friendship amongst preschoolers (Afshordi and Liberman, 2020, p. 336). However, Afshordi and Liberman (2020) also found that by the age of five children recognise that "prosocial support and spending time together are better signals of friendship than similarity" (p. 336). Walton and MacPherson explore this in the narrative after Errol's teddy Thomas rather fearfully acknowledges that "I'm a girl teddy, not a boy teddy" (p. 12). Errol encourages him to discuss his concerns by reassuring him that "I will **always** be your friend, Thomas!" (p. 9). This bolding is the only variation to the font in the story, and both visually and verbally reinforces the idea that being a good friend is characterised by acceptance and inclusivity. This is reinforced in Errol's reaction to Thomas' news: "I don't care if you're a girl teddy or a boy teddy! What matters is that you are my friend" (p. 12). This focus on friendship is further explored in the illustrations, with Errol and Tilly sharing a big hug. Errol then invites their friend Ava to play. Errol informs her, without awkwardness or judgement, that "Teddy has a new name! Let me introduce you to Tilly." Ava's response, "What a great name … Let's go and play, Tilly!" (p. 14), displays the same instinctive acceptance of difference. Tilly then acts on her newfound confidence by moving her bowtie to her hair, saying "'I've always wanted a bow instead" (p. 17). Ava again responds positively, "Good for you, Tilly. Wear whatever makes you happy!" (p. 17) Perhaps inspired by her friend's courage, Ava says "I think I will get rid of my bow. I like my hair free." The story closes with the same opening lines, with Errol and Tilly playing together every day. They "ride their bike", "plant vegetables" and "have sandwiches for lunch in the treehouse" (pp. 23-26). This continuation of their shared interests and spending time with one another reinforces that their relationship transcends the issue of gender.

Though very much a gentle story, as the author and illustrator foreground, *Introducing Teddy* does hint at darker issues. When Tilly discusses her sadness with Errol, she says "I need to be myself, Errol. In my heart, I have always known that I'm a girl teddy, not a boy teddy. I wish my name was Tilly, not Thomas" (p. 12). This awareness on the part of Tilly challenges the common critique of trans children that they are "too young to know." Research shows that affirming children's gender identity has significant psychological and social benefits, which is particularly important given the disproportionate rates of mental illness and suicide attempts amongst the trans population (Strauss et al., 2020). While Tilly's friend Ava encourages her to "wear what makes you happy" (p. 17) the story centres on friendship and acceptance, while *The Gender Fairy* is much more explicit in its exploration of trans issues by positioning them as rights to be claimed and acted on. For example, children "can wear the clothes that you like," "play with the toys you enjoy the most," choose their own name, and use the gender-appropriate toilets. While this positive messaging is important for young people, the final element is contentious, as public toilets remain one of the most policed and political spaces for trans people and this simplification suggests they don't need to worry, when in fact research shows that up to 70% of trans people have faced verbal or physical challenges, including assault, when using public toilets (Hill et al., 2021). Another noteworthy element of Hirst and Wirt's text is the way in which the trans characters conform strongly to a gender binary. The trans boy reacts with anger, while the girl reacts with sadness, and they both initially engage in heavily gendered activities. In contrast, the characters in *Introducing Teddy* engage in bike riding, tree planting and playing on the swings, thereby sidestepping the more contentious issues concerning stereotypical behaviours, although Tilly firmly identifies as a girl, establishing a binary trans identity as Hirst and Wirt's characters do. This use of elements of the traditional gender discourse and common children's literature tropes works to extend current gender discourse rather than 'break new ground' in a radical way. Hence, these texts create a more inclusive architecture where trans identities can find a home by building from within rather than through a radical reimagining. Yet there is still work to be done in constructing this more inclusive architecture, as the use of binary representations excludes non-binary people. The Gender Fairy is perhaps constructed as a non-binary figure in their response "Does it matter?" (p. 28) when asked about their gender, but this is not explored further. This may be due in part to the age of the audience and the author's desire to make the idea of gender identity more straightforward, but does leave a gap in the literature, and thus the construction of an inclusive architecture remains incomplete.

Conclusion

Both *The Gender Fairy* and *Introducing Teddy* deal with controversial issues in a literary genre where mainstream publishers are reluctant to provoke those who have strong views about appropriate topics and approaches. In addressing the first of our research questions about how radical trans children's books are, our discussion has shown that, while the representation of trans protagonists cannot be considered

genuinely radical within a framework of trans architecture, they are nonetheless perceived as radical by a conservative section of society who adhere strongly to traditional discourses of gender. This is seen in book reviews which describe *The Gender Fairy* as "Seriously dangerous" (Amazon Customer, 2017) and describe *Introducing Teddy* as follows: "Yet ANOTHER voice of deception among today's ridiculous views on gender. Children are angsty and confused enough about life and relationships without being force-fed nonsense about 'choosing' their own gender!!! Hello!! Last time I checked, gender is BIOLOGY, not psychology. Feelings are not facts" (Amanda, 2020). That both teams of authors and illustrators respond to a socio-political context that is far from universally supportive in a field where there is a marked sensitivity to overt proselytising says much for their thoughtful and nuanced approach. While it is true that some elements of society will oppose books such as these regardless of approach as they subscribe strongly to the dominant traditional gender discourses, by avoiding the pitfalls of being truly radical and working outside of this discursive space, the authors and illustrators have found a middle ground, like Goldilocks, that is just right for introducing binary trans identity. This middle ground is built upon traditional tropes of genre and the use of some of the language of the traditional gender discourse, yet it works to extend what can and can't be said about gender (although this could be further expanded to include non-binary identity), thus working towards the construction of a trans architecture for young children, one in which trans persons are seen and included, not pushed into a "safe space" outside of the dominant discourse.

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