

Oh, the Things Kids Will Know
By Katie Sheridan

Are children's books the root of radicalism?

Heather has two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, two hands and two feet. Oh, and two mommies. But that's OK, because Heather finds out that everyone's family is different in *Heather Has Two Mommies*. And in the book, her teacher, Molly, tells them, "The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other."

Lesléa Newman, author of this feel-good kids' tale, saw a lot of reactions during her book's release in 1990. Some praised her as an icon; others condemned her as a threat to America. And Carl Lenhof, the owner of Veritas Catholic Books at the time, just labeled it as crap. Literally. The Dayton, Ohio man became so outraged by the book that he took it into the public library's restroom and defecated on it.

Though not all opponents of Newman's work have shown disgust with such severe acts, they've made their opinions known. Then-New Hampshire senator, Robert Smith, read the book to Congress as evidence for his education regulation. (The measure would deny funds to any school using books that legitimized homosexuality.) The legislation never passed, but Newman knew just what the proposal meant: a fight.

But Newman never meant to create a ruckus. "I write only to tell a story," she says. And she tells that story for others. Heather, for one, was created for an acquaintance; the lesbian mother of one asked Newman to write a book she could read to her daughter. "I know how important it is for a child to see him- or herself reflected in a book or TV show," Newman says. As a child, she looked for a Jewish family like hers in books. She began to believe her family was weird when she couldn't find anything that reflected her life. "Every child wants to belong," Newman says. And her inability to find a similar fictional family in her childhood fueled her determination to take the woman's challenge.

Good Intentions and the Environment

People have been arguing about political values in children's books for decades. Dr. Max Skidmore has seen the debate continue throughout America's history; the only things that have changed are the book titles. The University of Missouri-Kansas City political science professor says people have interpreted everything from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Where the Wild Things Are* as anti-something. But Skidmore remembers the comic books. In the 1930s and 40s, American writers included anti-German and anti-Japanese messages in their books, trying to convince readers of America's heroism in World War II. From there, youth literature transformed into an outlet for subliminal messages. During the Cold War, America continued its messages—but now against the Soviet Union—by inventing Captain America, who defended "truth, justice and the American way." But those Pro-American messages soon progressed to other topics. In 1958,

Garth Williams wrote *The Rabbits' Wedding*. He told the story of two bunnies, one white and one black, getting married. Alabama threw its racially-charged anger directly at Williams. Skidmore says Williams only thought the white- and black-colored bunnies would be “visually stimulating” for children, nothing more. Williams also added sardonically that he had no idea rabbits were the same as humans.

Parallels drawn in *The Rabbits' Wedding* make it no surprise that even books like *Rainbow Fish* are still being called propaganda. *Rainbow Fish* tells the story of a fish with beautiful, shiny scales who holds himself in high esteem. The other fish don't like his attitude and refuse to play with him. Finally, Rainbow Fish decides to share his scales with the other fish. When he shows them his generosity, they flock to him. But many reviewers, like Michael Newman, don't think this is the whole story. In an attempt to explain his disgust, Michael says, “The book is so bad, destructive, immoral, and wrong that I have trouble figuring out where to start.” Michael argues that Rainbow Fish shows kids that being special is wrong, they must bribe people to like them and they will only find happiness in mediocrity.

But the accusations don't end there. Amazon reviewer Linda Vantassell predicts a new dictator's dawn because of *Rainbow Fish*. “This book is purely and simply a primer for Socialism and eradicating the ‘self’ for the ‘good’ of the collective whole,” she says. “This is the mentality which turned the Soviet Union into a giant graveyard . . . and this is the same mentality which has destroyed every nation which has ever attempted it.” Not only does Rainbow Fish promote bribery and uniformity, he also promotes the deaths of thousands and the fall of the United States. Amazon reviews of *Rainbow Fish* have erupted into a debate of 5-star raters claiming the valuable message Rainbow Fish sends versus 1-star raters warning parents of the evil, misleading ideas *Rainbow Fish* instills in children.

So, who's right? Phil Nel, the director of Kansas State's children's literature graduate program, believes the Amazon reviewers missed key factors. “It would be truly remarkable for one story to manage to indoctrinate those who read it,” Nel says. “Taken in context with other literature or read in a socialist family . . . it stands a stronger chance — but only if the child hearing the story identified with the values of his or her parents.” Nel reminds parents that they are not excluded from what their child learns. Not only are parents able to influence what their children read, they are also able to influence the way they read. While Nel defends children's individual beliefs, he also says they are affected by their surroundings, which are made up in large part by their parents.

From Bedtime Joke to Publication

David Hedrick's book, *The Liberal Clause*, started with his two daughters. The political writer began telling the girls a bedtime story about a Christmas in which President Obama replaces Santa Claus. As Santa, Obama unionizes elf work, outlaws churches, eliminates fires to reduce global warming and decides all children will get the same amount of presents. Liberal elves act as representatives for the children. Instead of doing a good job, the elves distract the kids with

candy. Soon, the children begin to act naughty because they'll get the same number of presents anyway. They also begin to realize that they don't agree with the decisions their elf representatives are making and that they had been distracted by candy.

"I never intended to publish it," Hedrick says. But once he started telling his political friends about it, they thought it was a great idea. He set to publishing it himself. His publication even earned him a spot on The Daily Show Christmas Special. Hedrick knew he'd get backlash; so he decided to engage his sense of humor as he had while writing his book. He describes his book as being like Shrek: made for kids but with jokes that parents enjoy. But he maintains that children will understand the book's gist and the morals: Work for what you want and look deeper into people's words and actions, especially those of representatives.

Hedrick is certain that kids will remember his lessons and be affected by them. But he also realizes the limitations of a single book. He believes that parents and continual exposure play a role in a book's impression on a child. "Kids who go to public school can have two lives," Hedrick says. "Their home life and their life away from their parents, which can influence their beliefs." He says if kids spend more time away from their parents and are often exposed to a certain idea, they become more likely to accept that idea. Hedrick's belief in the influence of continual exposure encouraged his decision to publish *The Liberal Clause*. He wanted to give kids an alternative to the proliferation of books with liberal values that he sees today.

Brainwashing in the Schools

As an elementary school teacher and children's books author, Corey Green doesn't buy Hedrick's logic. When it comes to kid's book influences, Green says, "Politics just doesn't factor in." She believes children's worlds revolve around themselves. The things that happen in their own lives are what kids will learn from children's books. She remembers the lessons she learned from books as a child. *The Babysitters Club* helped her understand things that were outside of her immediate world but still applied to children, like deafness, New York, ballet and autism. She carried those stories with her because they connected with her personal world. "[Children] just know what is going on in their lives," she says.

Green believes that if political influence comes from anywhere, it comes from families. And even with familial influence, she believes values deemed "liberal" by some are values that everyone tries to impart to their kids. As far as Green is concerned, the debate over brainwashing liberal values in children's books is limited to a small group of believers. The issue has never come up in the classroom for her, from parent or child. Dick Murphy, a Des Moines School District Representative, says the schools in his district don't run into arguments either. But the city has installed parent committees and teacher committees for book selection to circumvent disagreements. The committees decide what books to include in the libraries, programs and lessons. The Des Moines School District also allows parents to limit what their own child can check out without limiting the entire school.

Moving Forward

The memories of the good outweigh the bad for Lesléa Newman. Since writing *Heather Has Two Mommies*, Newman has written *Mommy, Mama, and Me*. The American Library Association recognized the book as a notable children's book of the year. Newman was moved by the recognition because she saw times had changed. Newman's optimism led to her next book, *Daddy, Papa, and Me*, and a great outlook: "There are still people that aren't happy that my books exist," she says. "But I'm more interested in the people that are."

Sidebar: Surprising Controversial Children's Books

1. *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell. *And Tango Makes Three* is the story of two male penguins who care for and hatch an abandoned egg. Readers flagged the book for having same-sex caregivers. They did not like the nod to homosexuality, much like the *Heather Has Two Mommies* controversy.
2. *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. The well-known book surprisingly turned controversial after HarperCollins digitally removed a cigarette from the illustrator's hand in the back picture.
3. *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf. Hitler and post-civil war Spanish readers took issue with the alleged pacifist ideology. Others, like America, interpreted the book as advocating fascism, anarchism and communism. But the story simply told of a bull who would not fight the other bulls nor any matador. Instead, he liked to sit and smell flowers.
4. *Little Red Riding Hood* by Brothers Grimm. It's strange that people saw the Grimm version of *Little Red Riding Hood* as controversial. People did not like the fact that Little Red Riding Hood is depicted carrying wine in her basket. Of all the messed up things the Brothers Grimm wrote, who would get offended over a picture of a little girl with wine for her grandmother?
5. *The Rabbits' Wedding* by Garth Williams. In 1958, this book caused a disturbance in Alabama. At this time, segregation was the law of the land; readers did not appreciate the connotations of a white rabbit marrying a black one. The book was put on reserve at the libraries so readers had to ask for it from behind the desk.