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Nudity in kids' books is nothing to worry about

Who draws the line on what is and isn't acceptable for children's viewing? Karen Eliot

What deadly affront would cause a group of conservative booksellers – and a rather attractive golden retriever – to protest by doffing their duds to pose in the buff?

The cause was the savaging of a children's picture book – Tous à poil ! (Everyone get naked !) – by a conservative French politician, as The Independent recently reported. Conservative leader Jean-François Copé savaged a book for children in which all kinds of people took off their clothes.

In a similar vein to Piers Ackerman's recent attack on Peppa Pig as an supposed example of the feminist bias of the ABC, the French challenge to Tous à poil ! lines up opposing views on which gender and family identities should be promoted.

The incident draws attention to the longstanding role children’s books have in socialising their target audience – and the radical differences in values that make this area of writing such a political battleground.

Who decides what kids get to read?

Many institutions and individuals have roles in gatekeeping what is appropriate – or not – for children to read. These include schools and teachers, religious bodies, publishers...
themselves, and parents, to name only a few.

Most of us can probably cite examples of censorship that appear ludicrous to our like-minded friends: the banning of the Harry Potter books in some religious schools or the label “un-American” applied Sherman Alexie’s Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, a wickedly funny satire for young adults on the social disadvantage experienced by native Americans growing up on “the Rez”.

Nudity in children’s literature is a flash-point because it triggers debates about how knowledge of sexuality should be regulated. Where, to whom, and in what contexts should sexual behaviour be expressed? How much should children be told about their bodies and their various capabilities?

Exposing children to frank discussions of sexual functioning and the range of adult sexual behaviour remains contentious even in secular communities. This is in no small part due to a residual belief in the meme of childhood innocence.

Protecting innocence

Earlier ages may have believed, along with the 17th-century children’s writer James Janeway, that children were “Brands of Hell” and “not too little to go to Hell”. But, from the late 18th century in Europe, the idea of the child as closer to nature and the spiritual began to take hold.

According to the Romantic poet William Wordsworth the child’s soul was borne to Earth “trailing clouds of glory” from “God, who is our home”. It is arguably from these Enlightenment and Romantic philosophers that many modern cultures derive their belief that children are inherently innocent and need to be protected from corrupting knowledge.

Who’s in the buff?

Whether the depiction of the body in children’s books is viewed as normative or potentially subversive has to do with a number of factors.

The age, gender, race and social position of the child influence how nudity in children’s picture books is received. The bare bottoms and genital-less figures of May Gibbs’ Gumnut Babies are generally uncontentious, as are the more recent versions in the photography of Anne Geddes. These infants are depicted as types of the female asexual. Their nudity is visually associated in with nature and innocence.

May Gibbs’ Gumnut Babies. Wikimedia Commons
Click to enlarge
But famous American artist Maurice Sendak’s full frontal image of a gleeful young boy in his In the Night Kitchen caused more affront to social sensibilities. Tellingly, the images in Tous à poil ! show a number of full-frontal figures. They are gently and humorously drawn images of an assortment of ages and races, but the primary markers of sexual potency – the penis or the pubic hair of adult women – are openly on display.

The register of banned and challenged books compiled by the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom indicates that most attempts to ban books from libraries and classrooms arise from complaints about sexual explicitness (30%), offensive language (35%), age-inappropriate material (19%) and depiction of homosexuality (7%).

The race of the child bears cultural meaning when it comes to nudity and clothing. Research on South African children’s literature found that stories written by white writers frequently foreground a lack of clothing in stories featuring indigenous children. In earlier decades, illustrations that were chosen tended to portray naked black characters as comic or to emphasise their differences from white children. The white child cross-dressing “down” to near-nudity can signal degeneration or, in recent years, views that promote racial equalisation.

The social position of the child is often signalled through clothing and dressing. Illustrations or depictions of lower-class children might cheerfully depict them as barefoot and ragged. The upper-class child’s body, on the other hand, is subject to elaborate social rituals of washing and dressing.

In Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic Edwardian story The Secret Garden, the effete heroine, Mary, is a spoiled child of the British Raj. Mary is comically undermined by her maid because she cannot dress herself without aid from the stout and healthy Yorkshire peasantry.

Cross-dressing across class lines was also exploited for sentimental effect – such as in Lewis Carroll’s famous photograph of Alice Liddell in the artistic pose of The Beggar Maid.

**The whys and hows of flashing the bod**

The genre of the book also influences audience expectations and reception of the naked body.

There is often a comic licence given when sexually explicit material is depicted – such as in the Bum series by Australian writer Andy Griffiths. The sentimental mode found in May Gibbs’ Gumnut Series also positions readers to see the infant’s nudity as innocent and unspoiled through the metaphoric association with Australian flora.

Informational books may also have greater freedom to use explicit detail.

As socially licenced texts with a didactic purpose, this genre frequently covers issues such as developing bodies, hygiene and self-care, or sexual reproduction – for example, Where Did I Come From or The Boy’s Body Book.
Informational books often have license to be more explicit in their illustrations. Steve Rhodes, CC BY-ND

Many of these texts also deploy comic or cartoon modes to soften the potential affront. One painterly exception is Jenni Overend and Julie Vivas’ Welcome with Love. Other informational books signal their place in the legitimate realm of science education. Nilsson and Swanberg’s How Was I Born?: A Child’s Journey Through the Miracle of Birth uses photographs and textbook format to redefine intimate bodily images as acceptable scientific knowledge.

Pictures have greater power than words – at least to shock us, it seems. Until the late 20th century, fiction for adolescents was generally evasive about sexuality. Explicit depiction of bodily engagement in sexual activity remains less common than more reticent romance.

The privileging of male-female relationships in fictional treatment of the body would be another story. Nevertheless, in pictures or in words, it seems that writers and readers are still somewhat coy about undressing the child.

*Are you an academic or researcher working in literature? Contact the Arts + Culture editor.*