Appropriate

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Abstract

This essay aims to map uses and attributions of the word "appropriate" as they occur in various disciplines related to children's literature. Three competing interest areas—publishing, education, and societal ideologies—provide insight as to how "appropriate" developed into an abstract cover-word for a variety of outside agendas. One usage stems from publishers, authors, and editors who privilege books that adhere to historically established industry standards, such as rhyming text and anthropomorphism. Educators, however, utilize theories of development to establish "developmentally appropriate" pedagogy which, as a result, has the potential to limit the literacy experiences of children. Finally, gatekeepers and moderators—a group which may include parents, caregivers, or special interest groups—use "appropriate" to signal books that correspond to those adult's ideologies and effectively protect children from what they define as disagreeable content. Ultimately, "appropriate" indicates books, ideologies, and materials that correspond to what adults from a variety of different—and often contradictory—fields assume children "need" to develop into proper citizens of their society.

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One of the earliest uses the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) provides for "appropriate", as an adjective, is "specially fitted or suitable, proper," citing a 1544 book by Thomas Phaer: "remedyes . . . appropriate to euery membre throughout the bodye." Over the following three centuries, the word implied that certain controlled content was proper at distinct stages of its life. In *A Sequel to Common Sense*, John Lay (under the pseudonym Theophilus Philadelphus) wrote, "our children run through the progressive stages… and demand attentions from their parents applicable and appropriate . . ." (Philadelphus, 1777, p. 42). "Appropriate" continued to define what children supposedly "needed" at specific stages of their lives, although the specific characteristics of these needs changed alongside concepts of childhood.

In the field of children's literature, the word appropriate typically appears in three different contexts. The first belongs to authors and publishers who use appropriate to indicate what aspects of form make books "for children." The second is in the purview of educators who utilize theories of development and scientific data to define what qualifies as "developmentally appropriate." The third relies on the imagined effect that the content of a work might have on a child's character in order to determine what is suitable. These varied definitions call attention to the lack of a cohesive and universal definition for appropriate children's literature.

The discussion around what is appropriate for children begins with the image of children as vulnerable and innocent, inspired by philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke in the late seventeenth century (Miller, 2014). Locke's influence, especially, permeates the content of eighteenth century American and British texts. For example, Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749), used didactic yet enjoyable "attempt[s] to gain the child's affection for modes of authority" (Weikle-Mills, 2008, p. 45) to manipulate white, Christian children into accepting the power of adults. As a result, the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau served as catalysts for a shift in what was considered appropriate literature for children and, indeed, defining the term "childhood."

During this time, many of the formal characteristics of a book typically considered appropriate for children, such as the use of illustrations, "poem-like texts," morals, and fairy tale influences developed as publishers began to actively compete against each other (Shavit, 1995, p. 35). The commercial success of one book, such as *Marmaduke Multiply: A Merry Method of Making Minor Mathematicians* (Scott & Pierce, 2013) inspired others to adopt similar techniques. As a result, popular literature began to feature condescending simplicity that assumed children were "lacking the abilities, skills, and powers that adults have" (Gubar, 2013, p. 451). Believing that children are incapable of understanding complexity, authors also relied on "anthropomorphism . . . rhyming couplets, made-up words, or alliterative titles . . . [and] sloppy allegories" (Law, 1993, p. 16-17). Time and habit established these books' style and format as "suitable" for children. Works that strayed too far from these characteristics threatened the traditional (and profitable) picture book format.

However, later in the nineteenth century, North American and British authors and illustrators began experimenting with both form and content, thereby challenging the ideas of what an appropriate children's book looked like. Despite this, books that diverge from either the ideology of "condescending simplicity" or traditional layouts are often questioned for their appropriateness. For example, David Macaulay modified the traditional one-narrative picture book for *Black and White* (1990) to include four connecting stories happening at once. As Jill Kedersha McClay (2000) found, this innovation perplexed some adults who could not imagine how to read four intertwining stories to a child. McClay discovered that teachers and librarians "often underrated children's abilities to understand, much less enjoy it . . . [T]heir comments

frequently justified these opinions by referring to the difficulty *they* had with the book" (McClay, 2000, p. 101, author's emphasis). As McClay's findings show, a book is more likely to be considered appropriate when it resides in the comfort zone of an adult.

Educators, however, have adopted scientifically-founded "developmentally appropriate" guidelines for curriculum, instruction, and caregiving routines. When considering children's literature, the developmental appropriateness of a book often depends on whether it "fits" a reader's age or ability, rather than on literary complexity. For example, infants allegedly benefit from easily manipulated books such as Tana Hoban's *Black on White* (1993) or Dorothy Kunhardt's *Pat the Bunny* (1940), whereas preschoolers require books that are clearly organized, "conceptually challenging" (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008, p. 493), and informational. Due to these developmental standards, many teachers and caregivers only provide children with the experience of reading books written for their developmental level. Although each school of thought rightfully focuses on creating learning opportunities in the best interest of children, it potentially results in situations where children—even from the same family or community— learn skills and experience literature in wildly different ways, based on what their primary educator deems appropriate.

Outside of education, morality remains the central concern of the key gatekeepers and reformers who claim to have the child's best interest in mind. As a result, books have been carefully monitored, challenged, and, in extreme cases, censored to coincide with societal ideas of what is appropriate for children. As Frank Beck (1989) states, "A single word can raise protest, and whole subject areas are either off-limits or viewed with suspicion, on the assumption, usually unexamined, that children cannot comprehend or handle certain topics" (p. 151). Texts are most often challenged for sexual content, although other areas of contention may include, "queer themes, crude humor, death, and drugs" (Bittner, 2015, p. 167). This emphasis on comprehension and cognitive maturity hints at not only an overlap with the educational use of the word appropriate, but also the implication that children are incapable of protecting themselves.

To validate these opinions, gatekeepers will ascribe pseudo-scientific or ideological connotations to the word appropriate. For example, in Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), two male penguins happily hatch and raise a baby penguin. According to the American Library Association (2014), the most common complaints against the appropriateness of the book was because it, "promotes the homosexual agenda," which implies that heteronormativity and appropriateness are inextricably linked. As this example shows, typical complaints about a book's appropriateness often center around either the literary value or the supposed capacity for corrupting children (Crowe, 2001). However, groups and organizations that challenge books on the basis of their ability to be appropriate often use the word as a shield to cover for their own personal agendas and their fear of the "subversion of dominant socio-cultural practices" (Miller, 2014, p. 130). Justin Richardson, one of the authors of *And Tango Makes Three*, echoed this sentiment in a reflection on the controversy surrounding his picture book by stating, "many people offer disingenuous challenges because they cannot admit the true reasons for their objections" (Young, 2011, p. 37).

And Tango Makes Three serves as a striking example of how the word appropriate is rarely used amongst those directly invested in children or children's literature. More often than not, those concerned with what makes "appropriate" children's literature focus on pointing out what is "inappropriate." The lack of a definite understanding of what exactly an appropriate book constitutes, or what is appropriate for children to read, will lead to unending debates over such

concepts as form, age suitability, innocence, maturity, and morality. Perhaps the reason for such polarizing debates over appropriate children's literature results from the lack of interdisciplinary research and practice involving publishers and authors, gatekeepers, and educators. As a general rule, educators and literary critics, or parents and publishers do not mix unless a conflict arises, creating an impenetrable binary that hinders rather than helps children. Therefore, perhaps the discussion should focus less on concrete distinctions between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" and more on collaboration towards an academically interdisciplinary understanding of what is appropriate in children's literature.

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