

*Embodying an Image: Gender and Genre
in a Selection of Children's Responses to
Picturebooks and Illustrated Texts by
Sarah Toomey*

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Another attractive product from Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Sarah Toomey's book is the outcome of her masters' research in Children's Literature at Roehampton University. Her background as a primary school teacher no doubt lent her some further insights into this research project. The methodological rationale is justified from the beginning as both 'qualitative' and 'interpretative' (p.2), a mixture of the empirical and the creative which seems appropriate for this interdisciplinary encounter of sociology, illustration and literary studies.

Toomey's research makes use of twenty-four, highly entertaining interviews, extensive extracts of which are helpfully included for the reader's reference in the appendix. Her sample comes from two anonymous primary schools in Northern England with pupils from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, all between the ages of four to seven. One small criticism might address the disproportionate gender ratio of 3:1, eighteen girls to six boys, exacerbated by Toomey's subjective privileging for her 'own personal engagement with feminism' (p.7). Despite the interesting observations this allows the female interviewer to make, feminism is surely concerned with achieving the equality of the sexes rather than

an unfair attention devoted to one over the other. However, when it comes to feminist revisions of classical tales like ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, Toomey’s gender bias leads her to some interesting findings. In general she discovers that boys will be less likely to read a book about a female protagonist while many girls still find non-traditional representations difficult to access. This is an important study on how children of both sexes process irony.

The book is neatly organized into three thematic parts; ‘Vampires, Witches and Monsters’, ‘Princesses, Pirates and Female Adventurers’, and ‘Bears, Wolves and Dragons’, each loosely clustered around the three different age groups; reception, year one and year two. The nine chapters are equally divided between these three sections, the structure taking its cue from the interview findings and thus largely prescribed by the children’s responses.

Toomey supports her arguments by reproducing many of the picturebook illustrations throughout. Often the illustrations to the chosen books are garish and kitschy with only one of her interviewees, Rosa, preferring ‘old-fashioned books and stories’ (p.209), though it is unclear whether she favours the ‘classical’ narratives of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm or the nineteenth century illustrations of Arthur Rackham and John Tenniel, for example. Taste in children’s literature can vary dramatically between the adult and the child, and often this can result in prejudices concerning what constitutes quality reading material. However, Toomey explains that she allowed the children to select their own reading material, regardless of illustrative or educational value, which seems to endow her study with more authenticity.

Often a picturebook is treated as a favourite toy or forbidden object; frustrated Rohan tries to destroy his, Sadie conceals hers

under her cardigan while Anya hides hers in her schoolbag between the covers of a textbook, highlighting the picturebook's content as something secretive and knowingly transgressive. The latter's desire to read *Barbie as the Prince and the Pauper* (2004) is complicated firstly by the fact that she is not supposed to be reading a book based on a DVD in school. However, Toomey insists that film and televised versions of tales actually increases reading activity by inspiring the child to familiarize itself with the narrative through another visual medium.

Secondly Anya is under the misconception that the overt femininity of her choice is a guilty pleasure to be ashamed of. Through the interview what quickly becomes apparent are the traditional gendered roles that her parents have instilled in her; Anya's mother is a fan of Britney Spears and willingly indulges her child's preference for blonde princesses and dolls recognizing her childhood self in her daughter, while Anya's father 'never, ever' plays, listens or encourages anything remotely 'girly' (p.167). Elsewhere, another six-year old girl called Naomi chooses *Lil Bratz: Beauty Sleepover Bash!* (2005) despite disapproval from her teacher. Both Anya and Naomi's choices allow Toomey to touch on a tangential debate concerning the suitability of children's toys. The mass controversy over Barbie's impossible hourglass frame, and more recently, and perhaps even more problematically, Bratz dolls with their exaggerated eyes and behavioural defects, is well known. The main criticism seem to be that such dolls represent unhealthy role models which perpetuate gender stereotypes but here Toomey argues for their 'emancipatory potential' within the storybook narrative as resourceful heroines (p.62). She would perhaps concur with Moira Redman's claim that 'Barbie lets the imagination run free' (2008), and with Bratz manufacturer Issac Larian's view that the

product is ultimately for the child not the adult (Rowan, 2004). Grotesque as they can be, one might ask why toys should have to conform to more truthful representations of reality when they are devices for imaginative excursion and play. Or are we ultimately damaging our children by allowing them too much choice? Toomey seems to question whether there is really anything wrong with brunette Anya identifying with Barbie or four-year old Alex playing Dracula? Both are temporarily ‘embodying an image’, fictional representations which are explorative but not necessarily dangerous. As the cultural theorist Susan Stewart points out ‘the toy is the physical embodiment of fiction: it is a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative’ (1993, p.56). Toomey confirms this link between stories and toys elsewhere with a slightly younger girl called Lucy choosing a book about a tiger because it reminds her of her favourite soft toy and, by extension, her dream occupation through role-play as vet. While this may be a more gender-neutral example, it is involved in the same imaginative process as those children who chose picturebooks about Barbie, Bratz or Dracula. In a book which stresses the ability of the child to read between the lines, to interpret complex semiotic constructions and to puzzle out the meaning behind the metaphor, Sarah Toomey ultimately argues for the child’s right to choose.

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