

Moya-Guijarro, A. Jesús and Eija Ventola, editors. *A Multimodal Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books*. Routledge, 2021. 306 pages

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Gender stereotypes are socially assigned to people from a very early age. They place psychological effects on the individual ranging from self-esteem issues to ambition and expectations, and may effectively shape the way in which society acts and reacts in any given discursive situation. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) describes a gender stereotype as “a generalised view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women” (*Gender Stereotypes* 1). More often than not, gender stereotypes have been studied for their negative effect on girls and women, as their detrimental consequences have been reported to reduce aspirations and limit career options (Mmari et al.). However, gender identity, i.e. a person identifying as male, female, or other, in contrast to that person's biological sexual traits, is understood as a kind of social identity crucially related to cultural roles typically associated with men and women. Consequently, with reference to some expected social behavior, the volume seeks to encompass a variety of aspects of gender and non-binary consequences, as well as to the means by which those stereotypes are manifested and culturally transmitted. Furthermore, as mental models and social schemata are formed at a very early age, it is important to understand the myriad of aspects that go into meaning-making, identity building, and the discourse modes that small children typically consume.

A Multimodal Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books (2022), edited by A. Jesús Moya-Guijarro and Eija Ventola is a groundbreaking volume in the field of multimodal studies and includes contributions and valuable insights from seminal authors and theorists in linguistics and children's literature, including co-editor Eija Ventola, and contributors Charles Forceville, Perry Nodelman, Christian Matthiessen, and Kay O'Halloran, as well as other influential scholars in various fields of study. The volume embarks on a discussion

of Children's Literature through a unique lens that views the function of images as going beyond the purpose of merely creating a more appealing aesthetics. Instead, it contends that the images have distinct narratives in picture books, a genre in which the combination of words and images play an important role in the meaning-making process. Images create and raise ideas and ideologies that go beyond the meanings that the verbal or visual modes transfer on their own, and, viewed together, are complex communicative devices. Taking this premise as a starting point, the volume presents picture books as complex multimodal products of complementary images and words which create an aggregate meaning intended for a young readership.

The editors and authors approach the concept of genre in picture books with twenty-first century realities and our ever-developing societal changes in mind. They recognise the important changes that have taken place in the family unit and which structure today's families, particularly in the case of same-sex families and how they have direct and significant repercussions in social, political and literary areas. Although previous research work on same-sex families in children's literature has been carried out, this volume is unique in its multimodal approach; claiming that meaning cannot be fully understood merely through linguistic content as there is deeper meaning to be found in the *interaction* of images and text in the literary works. The volume tackles word-image interaction from a large sample of stories that feature children who either live in same-sex families, or stories in which male and female characters reject the usual socially typical stereotypes to which they are assigned in traditional narratives.

The theoretical frameworks employed in *A Multimodal Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books* include a vast range of the most relevant literary theories, multimodal frameworks and approaches in discourse studies. They also push the boundaries of previous studies as the theoretical concepts and frameworks are applied to previously unaddressed areas of stereotypes in Children's Literature. The volume comprises chapters based on theoretical frameworks ranging from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal theory, Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodal Social Semiotics, O'Halloran's Systemic-Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis, as well as cultural and feminist theories, cultural cognitive and social-semiotic approaches.

The scholars and theorists featured in the volume also reveal the quality of analysis, as many of the chapters are written by authorities in the above-mentioned frameworks, making the book as a whole not only a collection of innovative approaches, but also a handbook of seminal insights.

The book comprises thirteen chapters and is divided into three main parts. The first two parts deal with male and female characters and archetypes that challenge their respective traditional gender stereotypes, while the third focuses on the family unit with the aim of challenging traditional views on family form and structure. Part I ranges from Chapter 2 to Chapter 5 and focuses on stories which portray boys who defy gender identities, and the chapters in this section analyse characters whose behaviour reveals a desire to promote social acceptance.

Chapter 2, “Julián is a Mermaid. Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Qualitative Multimodal Content Analysis”, by Danielle Kachorsky and Alexandria Perez, explores how Love, the writer and illustrator of *Julián is a Mermaid* uses both individual modes and modes in combination to “normalise” Julián’s love of mermaids, his desire to be one, and his grandmother’s acceptance of his transformation into a mermaid. This chapter demonstrates how in this story the combination of verbal and visual elements promotes a message of acceptance, despite inconsistent representations of gender identity and expression across the modes.

Chapter 3, “Ideational Construal of Male Challenging Gender Identities in Children’s Picture Books”, by Izaskun Elorza, continues along this line, but with a unique perspective of the ways in which the traditional acceptability of binary social gender roles is challenged, particularly through agency, desire and behaviour. Through a framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Visual Social Semiotics, Elorza examines the lexico-grammatical and semiotic visual resources that are deployed to construe gender identities as ideational meaning. It then argues that the construal of stereotypes in the picture books analysed is often based on the narrative relationship between the protagonist and the group representing a given gender stereotype, and that the logical causal chains underlying this construal is what leads to, but also deconstructs the existing dichotomy.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 also deal with binaries and male gender stereotypes, exploring the ways in which meaning potentials are created

in the visual narrative, how those meaning potentials are influenced by social factors, and how the verbal and visual elements promote gender acceptance. In Chapter 4, “At the Heart of It: *Once There Was a Boy*”, Brooke Collins-Gearing draws on theories of intersubjectivity, and feelings and emotion to discuss the ways in which *Once There Was a Boy* challenges the dominant ideas of culture and stereotyped gender binaries through the metaphor of a beating heart. The chapter pinpoints, through an exploration of both the written and visual elements of Leffler’s picture book, how dominant ideas of gender binaries are disrupted, and Western ideas of the construction of “boyness” are shifted.

In “Gender Assumptions in Picture Books about Boys in Dresses”, Perry Nodelman closes Part I by exploring picture books about boys who like to wear dresses and other female-identified clothing. Drawing on semiotic and cognitive approaches, Nodelman’s study demonstrates that although the intended purpose of these books is to promote acceptance and tolerance, specifically transgender tolerance, a closer examination reveals the ways in which the books unconsciously undermine that intention. His study shows that, although reviewers and advertisers tend to relate the books to sex and gender issues, the stories, in fact, do not connect dress-wearing with possibilities of being gay or transgender. Instead, they function as a sign of individuality and evoke clichés that perpetuate gender stereotypes about men and women alike.

Overall, Part One is an excellent assortment of analyses that not only serve as analytical foundations in multimodal analysis and social semiotics, it also provides tools for social change and resilience.

Part II shifts the focus of gender stereotypes over to female protagonists and their non-conformity, and involves non-traditional princesses and girls whose behaviour deconstructs patriarchal views of gender, showcasing the semiotic visual resources that are deployed to do so.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the figure of the non-traditional princess with the aim of highlighting the relationship created between text and image that communicate subtle and complex meanings, not always compulsorily akin to the expected claim of challenging gender stereotypes. Chapter 6, “Queering the Princess: On Feminine Subjectivities and Becoming Girl in Contemporary Picture Books”, by Angela Thomas and A. Jesús Moya-Guijarro, draws on feminist post-

structural theories, Visual Social Semiotics and Appraisal Theory to analyse *Pirate Princess* by Bardhan-Quallan and McElmurry (2012) and *The Princess Knight* by Funke and Meyer (2004) and identify the ways in which diverse feminine subjectivities are constructed in each visual narrative and question how it effectively represents the complexities of girlhood in relationship with the ways in which one can 'become' a girl. The authors claim that, in these two texts, there are somewhat mixed and problematic messages. In both picture books, the texts construct a difficult path for choices, as for each protagonist, the role of knight or pirate are simply presented as natural for a male, yet for these girls, the choices go against their gender's natural order.

In Chapter 7, "A Clever Paper Bag Princess, A Fearless Worst Princess and an Empowered Little Red: A Critical Multimodal Analysis", Verónica Constanty and Viviane M. Heberle aim at substantiating how lexico-grammatical and visual resources are used in children's books to (de)construct the representation of girls as delicate and defenceless. Their results show how lexico-grammatical choices equip some of the characteristics of the main characters in the stories, and reveals the features used to deconstruct the patriarchal and binary views of gender shown in traditional fairy tales. As the stories examined in these two chapters seem to be written as a move to empower, the unintended meaning found within the text-image is one which inverts empowerment and begs the question about the effectiveness of these stories in contesting traditional ideas of the feminine.

Chapter 8 shifts back to the motif of characters who do not conform to their gender stereotypes, yet through female protagonists, and via a theoretical framework that is not often seen in this genre. Santamaría-García in "A Semiotic and Multimodal Analysis of Interactive Relations in Picture Books that Challenge Female Gender Stereotypes" is refreshing and unique in that she draws on social-semiotic approaches in combination with the Systemic-Functional model, but also analyses the text-image synergy from the perspectives of commitment and coupling. The analysis of affiliation draws on focalisation resources for eye contact and type of gaze, pathos, social distance and attitude, all of which produce different relationships of power and involvement. In *Princess Smartypants* by Cole (1996), *Arthur and Clementine* by Turin and Bosnia (1976) and *Tutus Are Not My Style* by Keers and Wilsdorf (2010),

the female characters find agency and “a voice of their own” through systems of affiliation and attitude.

Chapter 9, “Communicative Functions of Part-Whole Representations of Characters in Picture Books that Challenge Gender Stereotypes”, by A. Jesús Moya-Guijarro, also takes on an interesting framework building on Social Semiotics and Cognitive Approaches. The integration of both cognitive and social-semiotics in the study of multimodal artefacts established previously (see Feng and O’Halloran, 2013, previously developed by Moya-Guijarro, 2011; 2013) sets up and expands upon an exploration of metaphor and metonymy. This chapter demonstrates, through an extensive analysis of twenty picture books, that metonymic representations in the picture books featuring girls are used to ascribe negative qualities; part-whole depictions are used in the stories portraying boys to highlight the idea that children should always be proud of who they are, independently of their vital preferences and orientations.

Part III turns the readers’ attention to the family unit and focuses specifically on challenging traditional views on the family form and structure. Through an impressive range of textual analyses, this section breaks down the concept of the conventional family and highlights picture books that may be resources for transcending limiting views of the family structure in today’s society, inviting reflection on existing role distinctions in the real world. Chapter 10, “Gender Stereotypes in Children’s Picture Books: A Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis”, by Xinchao Zhai, Kay L. O’Halloran, Lyndon Way and Sabine Tan, pinpoints through analysis of the interplay of text and image, the distinct sets of semantic features in multimodal constructions of husbands and wives, demonstrating that gender-biased semantic choices make uneven distribution of experiences in family life. This study concludes that the husband/wife roles are limited to controlled settings and social activities, thus resulting in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes that tend to be fossilised into gender-specific roles.

Chapter 11, “Linguistic and Visual Trends in the Representation of Two-Mum and Two-Dad Couples in Children’s Picture Books”, by Mark McGlashan, examines a corpus of more than fifty-two picture books and provides a comprehensive account of trends in the naming and visual representations of parents and focuses on how representational strategies have changed over time. As this study is based on an extensive

corpus, Corpus-assisted Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is the main theoretical framework employed, and details the changing representations of same-sex parents. The patterns in this study show that there seems to be a trend in representing LGBTQ+ parents in family roles from which they have traditionally been excluded.

Also a corpus-driven study, Chapter 12, “The Depiction of Family and Self in Children’s Picture Books: A Corpus-Driven Exploration”, by Coral Calvo-Maturana and Charles Forceville, investigates how families are represented in picture books in terms of gender and other aspects of diversity that partake in portraying the self. This chapter examines the roles and activities of (grand)parents, children, (pet) animals, and non-family members along with events and occurrences in public spaces. Furthermore, the chapter points to future research on relevant areas to explore in multimodal studies, and suggests visual density as a powerful cognitive to re-evaluate issues pertaining to representing the family and self.

The last chapter, “The Moomin Family: An Elastic Permeable Multi-Dimensional Construct in Semiotic and Social Space”, by Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, takes on foundational insights on anthropology and a Systemic-Functional approach in an analysis of the *Moomin family* in Tove Jansson’s books. The analytical choice rests on the metafunctionality of folk tales that simultaneously construe a world view and enact protocols for interactive behaviour. The family members in these stories are caring and inclusive, and challenge traditional stereotypical constructions of family.

Overall, Part III serves not only to demonstrate the ways in which family structures have been and are traditionally represented through gender stereotyping, but it also provides examples in which these stereotypes are being challenged in literature.

Through its analysis of an expansive corpus of children’s literature, *A Multimodal Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Children’s Picture Books* not only proves to be a ground-breaking volume that contributes to the necessary and pertinent understanding of the message that picture books transmit to young children (and their parents) through the interaction of text and visual, but also serves as a progressive model in terms of its theoretical framework and analytical approaches. As well as serving as a handbook of multimodal approaches to analysing

discourse and contributing to advancing related research, this volume, maybe more importantly, is a valuable social tool as it addresses social problems and contributes to social change. The volume will thus benefit scholars in multimodal and cognitive studies, researchers involved in picture book analysis, teachers of primary education, pre-service teachers, and parents. Moreover, in today's media-oriented society, the development of young readers' visual literacy has become more prevalent than ever before, and this volume contributes to the understanding of the multimodal manifestations of the world in which we live, and contributes to the promotion of social inclusion and equality. The reader will particularly appreciate the fact that it not only adopts an analytical model that connects literary characterisation with relevant social issues, but it also showcases the benefits of gender-inclusive and non-traditional families that contribute towards educating more critically aware children.

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