Good Secrets, Bad Secrets: Disclosure in Children’s Picture Books About Sexual Child Abuse

Objectives and perspectives:
Well over 50 picture books have been published for children on the topic of sexual child abuse (Lampert & Walsh, 2010) many with the aim of teaching their very young readers how to tell the difference between good and bad secrets. This paper looks at three recent picture books for how they focus on disclosure as an end point.

The theoretical framework
Arguably the most complete examination of politics in children’s texts comes from John Stephens, whose book Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction (1992) also proposes a methodology to explain the slippery interrelationship between the politicizing discourses of texts and the subjectivities of readers. This is a crucial relationship. Stephens, drawing upon Bakhtin, questions not only what is meant by the authors of these texts, but also how the texts may be received by the reader as mediated by a host of other socio-political factors. He is in agreement with both Sutherland (1985) and Hollindale (1991) about politics manifesting themselves either consciously and deliberately, or implicitly. Thus children’s texts are one element in a complex set of cultural practices which produce identities for a particular time and place. Children’s books are identity producing, socializing texts, and so by their very nature are politicizing.

This paper takes a feminist perspective on sexual child abuse, especially drawing on Reavey and Warner’s (2001) poststructural critique of the ‘confessional culture’ that leads us to take for granted to notion that ‘just telling’ is a ‘cure’ for sexual child abuse. This literature sees the confessional as a quick fix strategy, and worries that it positions child abuse as a personal problem rather than a social issue. To some degree this puts the onus on the child as responsible for the child abuse – if they just tell someone the problem will disappear. The main problem seems in the end to be their inability to tell, rather than the child abuse itself.

But child abuse is both a personal issue and also a social problem and the opposition between social and social effects is an artificial construct’ (Reavey & Warner, 2001, p. 2). By focusing only on the telling, these picture books risk increasing, rather than decreasing a young child’s
feelings of responsibility reducing sexual child abuse to issues associated with interiority, recovery and self-actualisation. By worshipping the authentic voice for its own sake the books may contribute to an essentialising of the child as ‘victim’, losing the political reminder that sexual child abuse is not a personal, but a much broader political and social issue. Some feminist critique of child abuse suggests these discourses of disclosure reinforce our romance with therapy at the expense of examining the problem itself.

The paper also draws on Foucault’s theory of confession as therapy. The utilization of Foucault in this context is controversial as is any approach addressing children and the overall issue of sexuality. As Jenny Kitzinger points out, there are aspects to child sexual abuse that make articulating issues around the experience difficult. Nevertheless, asking children to confess in order to be healed is a continuation of the overall normalized belief that “spoken in time, to the proper authority, and by the person who (is) both the bearer of it and the one responsible for it, the truth heal(s) (Foucault, 1976, p. 67). As will become evident, in these books the telling and healing happen instantly and automatically without complication.

However, when children are the subject, keeping secrets (or sharing them) produces a double whammy. I intend to demonstrate that through these texts the child reader finds herself in a dilemma. Children at a very young age have already been acculturated into taboo and repression (Finklehor, 1994) but in these books they are simultaneously told disclosure will heal everything. Which of these discourses – taboo or disclosure – is privileged in these texts? This is a complex web for children who are both instructed through normalized discourses to tell and also warned not to tell. The confessional is both an instrument of power and a stumbling block. The belief that all one has to do in order to be healed is tell is an oversimplification.

**Methods**

In its analysis of the unique form of picture books which combine both print and visual text, this paper draws on the field of children’s literary criticism (Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 1992), and utilises strategies for reading the images of picture book illustration (Kress & Van
Leeuwen, 1996). The three picture books included in this paper require a method of ‘reading’ visual images as well as verbal text. Kress and van Leeuwen (1990) stress that the visual components of a text are independently organised; they are connected to the verbal text but not dependent on it, hence they communicate in ways that may concur, contradict or alter the meaning that may be made of the written words. Their explanation of the grammar of images informs the semiotic analysis of the illustrations in these texts by examining such visual features in a picture book as composition, layout, colour and design. Alongside the text illustrations play a powerful role in persuading the reader to take up particular stances. Picture books about sexual child abuse, which include as many pages of illustrations as pages of written text, require a way of understanding these images.

Primarily, though, it is a close look at repetition and reiteration that forms the basis of this analysis. The repetition of words, phrases and images as related to disclosure in these three picture books are strong semiotic evidence of socially held beliefs. It is these beliefs that are worthy of more examination.

**Data sources**

The three texts include Kleven’s 1998 *The Right Touch*, Pearl’s 2010 *Samuel Learns to Yell and Tell*, and Ledwon & Mets’s 2006 *Mia’s Secret*. These books, like many children’s texts, fall into the category of *instructive* texts that have a long history of didacticism and pedagogical intent. Additionally, there seems little question amongst literary theorists that all children’s books play a socialising role, whether that is their direct intent or not. (Hunt, 2001). In effect, these books are written as *interventions* and are purposeful selected as typical of the corpus of picture books on sexual child abuse.

**Analysis**

*The Right Touch*
Explains how children are enveigled into positions of powerlessness and acquiescence – how they are silenced. In this respect, the book does recognize power relationships as a main player in sexual child abuse.

*Samuel Learns to Yell and Tell*

*[two illustrations here – happy Samuel and mother, and p. 28, Samuel having nasty thoughts]*

The next text, Samuel Learns to Yell and Tell (Pearl, 2010) is overtly Christian. The book contains cautionary tales from a mother to her son Samuel to warn him of predators, explained here as doing the devil’s work. The first story warns Samuel about a playmate who wants to show him his ‘peepee’. In this respect it is in fact a little more explicit than Mia’s Secret, which is less blatantly about good and evil, but also more evasive. At least here we know what body parts are involved. Samuel promises his mother, “I’ll not stay and think it’s fun/ This evil that he’s done, when he says hush I’ll RUSH, RUSH, RUSH/ to tell his evil secret.”
The second story is about an unidentified male friend or family member who ‘touches Samuel down there’, telling Samuel “HUSH, Don’t say a word/ It is our little secret”. (p.13) Samuel’s mother ask him, “Will you do just as he says and keep his evil secret? or will you run and tell and yell? Will you be brave, my Samuel?” (p. 14) The goal in each situation is to make the deed public. Other stories the mother tells Samuel have to do with the evils of looking at pornography; one has to do with having lustful thoughts. In this way, the act of child abuse is equated with all sexuality in general, all undifferentiated here as the devil’s work, including Samuel’s own individual desire. In this instance, Samuel’s mother asks “Samuel dear, what will you do/ When evil lures even you?/ Someday when you think a nasty thought/ will you hide away so you’ll not be caught? Or will you stand for truth and light/ And do what you know is truly right? Samuel dear what will you do/ When evil tempts EVEN YOU?” (p 29). Indeed, in a book replete with happy, smiling illustrations of a white middle class Samuel and his mother confidently facing out to the world, the single sole ‘dark’ illustration is this one, with a frightened looking Samuel furtively hiding behind a blue curtain, seemingly caught in the act, possibly masturbating.

In each case, irregardless of the sexual activity, Samuel repeats, “I’ll run and tell and yell” (p. 23). While the repeated message to Samuel is to tell and yell, ‘nasty thoughts’ are here seen as equal to molestation. This leaves Samuel little wriggle room – if he tells on a potential perpetrator he must also tell on himself when he feel sexual desire. True, Samuel is encouraged to disclose, but there is judgment implicit in his confession. Because of its blatant ideological stance, this book is used to illustrate how children’s books are never neutral, never without judgment.

*Mia’s Secret*
Mia’s Secret is the second text I would like to discuss, used here to illustrate a common failing of these books that is the invisibility of social class and ethnicity in these books. Mia and her family have all the markers of middle class – their suburban house is full of toys and books, pot plants and paintings, the characters are white and blue eyed, etc. They are middle class bodies. Mia, who ultimately uses her teddy Tikka to whisper her secret to her mum, can trust that her mother is likely to know where to turn to for help. With its apolitical, ‘neutral’ representations of race and social class, the books obscure the productive role of socially situated factors. For instance, is it as easy as ‘just telling’? Is the stranger or family friend who gives her presents and asks Mia to play his ‘secret game’ the only blip in her otherwise perfect life? Perhaps so, but when every one of the similar books presents this as truth, a skewed picture of child abuse issues is delivered.

The ending of Mia’s Secret is also somewhat problematic. On the one hand, the book does a good job of suggesting Mia’s understandable inner conflict. Mia likes the unnamed man’s puzzle books and the presents he gives her and wants him to be her friend. She plays with him because ‘she wanted him to be her friend’. However, the secret game made her happy, but it hurt her. She finally pushes him away, even though he says sorry and promises to be more careful, but he reminds her that ‘Bad things happen when someone breaks a promise’. Nevertheless, she works up the courage to tell her mother via her teddy bear, Tikki.
The book ends with Mia telling her mother, and mom, “I knew Tikka needed Mia’s help to talk”, says “I’m listening. Mum then pulls her close and hugs her as hard as she can, and Mia says “We did it, Tikki. We did it!” While, like the other books, there are parents notes at the end of the book, it is troubling that the book ends with only the disclosure, and nothing afterwards. The onus remains on the child to simply tell. On the one hand this is good. She is now unburdened of her secret with the main responsibility now on the mother to act upon it. But it also implies an instant healing that is likely not to be the case. The books desire to model perfect scenarios and, if you like, ‘best practice’, but they leave much unsaid.

**Conclusions and significance:**
Of course, these are picture books, so a brief explanation of the political nature of children’s literature is also helpful here. To begin, these books are written for the adults and carers as much as for the children so their ‘message’ if you like is received by adults. They presume a particular interpretive community, one influenced by Oprah. The ideas about disclosure reproduce normative ideas about disclosure and healing and become the ‘end point as though, for instance, there will be no further repercussions (including psychological or physical effects) of having been abused. Even if one ascribed to popular discourses around ‘poor self esteem’ the reader would find no evidence in these books that anything is required except telling.

The selected picture books adhere to two powerful contemporary discourses, one about what motivates young children and the other about disclosure as ‘healing’. The first supposes that keeping ‘secrets’ (and knowing how to tell a good one from a bad one) has great moral weight for children. These three texts, and indeed most picture books in the larger corpus, presuppose the demand to ‘keep a secret’ is what both leads to abuse and protects the perpetrator. The second, in a world of Oprah and reality television, claims that ‘telling’ that secret solves the problem for the child. By unpacking the embedded and complex ideas about secrets and disclosure this paper explores the significant ways picture books reinforce ideas that may or may not tell a full story.

Because the common elements in these books are so strong, they are the only culturally available stories for children, thereby essentialising a complex and serious issue. They
produce only one narrative of power for both adult and child readers – that is that ‘telling’ is the only way to gain power over sexual child abuse. This is largely an absolute modernist ‘truth’ based on large assumptions about the healing power of disclosure.

References


