

Mallan, Kerry, *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*

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In 1977 the children's book *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* by Gene Kemp became an immediate success, appealing to broad readerships. The narrative follows the adventures of twelve-year old Tyke who is reckless, smart, and always in trouble. However, a significant twist takes place in the final chapter when it is revealed that Tyke is actually a girl. Kemp deliberately avoided using gendered pronouns and gave Tyke a gender-neutral first name. Readers thus assumed that they were reading about a boy's adventures. Kerry Mallan employs this example to encourage discourse about gender and the dilemmas that surround gender and sexuality in children's fiction.

Mallan analyses certain key dilemmas taking place between opposing arguments that deal with traditional gendered-subject opinions and new theorised relations. She thus intends to examine children's literature in response to both traditional and recently constructed gender relations, since gender constructs significantly shape how children perceive the world. Mallan defines gender dilemma as "a state of things in which evils or obstacles present themselves on every side, and it is difficult to determine what course to pursue; a vexatious alternative of predicament; a difficult choice or position" (x). In her introduction, the author confirms the need to reassess the meaning of 'gender' due to the flexibility of the definition and its varied use in theories such as feminism and queer theory, especially with respect to the issues of characters' agency and the ways in which writers subvert specific themes by tackling gender roles in fiction. The arguments for this new gender approach are explored by Professor Mallan in the present book with specific regard to their importance in children's literature, by imagining the ways in which children view the world and their place in it.

In a chapter entitled "Desire, Pleasure, and Romance: Post Feminism and Other Desires," Mallan explores the classic description of children's literature, the Bildungsroman, in order to portray the rite of passage into adulthood and compare it with the 'coming out' of gay and lesbian fiction. Sexual identity and gender connected even in children's literature as a form of acceptance of differences between people or characters in stories shaped by the post-feminist movement. The post-feminist movement of the 1980s pushed female protagonists into the main character positions not only in cinema and television but also in children's literature, in an attempt to invert the previously dominating gender hierarchy. This hierarchical shift has continued and has since been applied to characters in older texts which have been adapted into

relatively recent films featuring strong female protagonists, such as those in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and particularly in the strong female heroines of Disney's movies.

Following the chapter on post-feminism, Mallan moves into the "Beauty Dilemma" with a quote by Francette Pacteau, "No woman escapes 'beauty.' Unavoidably, from her earliest years, beauty will be either attributed or denied to her. If she does not have it, she may hope to gain it; if she possesses it, she will certainly lose it. But what exactly is 'beauty?'" (59). In this chapter, Mallan suggests that beauty is a difficult feature of gender identity and often comes at a price. This section of the book argues that fantasy often accrues an economic value. Children's literature originally perceived beauty as a means to distinguish between good and evil. Fairy tales aimed at children have shown for centuries that being ugly is the equivalent of being evil and have thus created an appearance-based consciousness of evil. Children's literature has not only embraced the idea that strong female characters can be accepted, but has also indicated that beauty is dependent on the acceptance of a girl's body by herself. Authors have shown that while there is an ugly side to beauty, the myth surrounding it is reproduced mainly through the manipulation of other cultural constructs. In some contemporary literature, the idealised fantasy that beauty will bring about eternal happiness is of less importance than the knowledge and acceptance of differences, especially in terms of the development of strong female protagonists.

Kerry Mallan's study thoroughly engages with the complex issue of gender in children's literature. The book delves into the meanings behind those debatable subjects in children's literature that play a significant part in defining characters and issues that need to be addressed. Mallan challenges the portrayal of beauty and sexual identity in the way children read literature and how it affects their everyday lives. The identities in children's literature which Mallan has highlighted prove that the influence of society and commercialism play a much larger role than originally acknowledged in the fields of literature, children's development, and education as a whole. This study is enlightening to those fascinated by children's literature and also to those interested in gender, identity, education, and contemporary cultural influence on young people.