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Construction of Non-heteronormativity in Children's World: Analysis of Selected Books for Children

ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity refers to a rigorous social gender order in which the only assumed and accepted gender division is between male and female. Non-heteronormativity implies a loosening of the social gender dichotomy. Both the concepts of heteronormativity and non-heteronormativity in relation to children are rarely used, probably because of prevailing notions of an essentially asexual and unproblematically heteronormative, 'natural' process of gender identity acquisition in childhood. In this paper, I address the issue of gender and sexuality in childhood in academic discourses and analyse the construction of non-heteronormativity in selected children's books. Impulses for the research are provided by critical readings of classical psychological and sociological developmental theories, as well as theories and research on the construction of gender identities in children rooted in the paradigm of social constructivism. The presentation of books created with children in mind, in which the authors point to a way of "taming" non-heteronormativity in the children's world, may strengthen inclusive tendencies in educational activities and change the existing social gender order.

Keywords:
gender, sexuality, childhood, non-heteronormativity, children's books.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is devoted to the construction of non-heteronormativity in children's books. I am interested in the ways of constructing stories written to introduce children to non-heteronormativity in its various manifestations, so that they can also be used in educational practice.

In the first part of this article, I would like to present the framework of two approaches or currents of scientific discourse which reflect on the processes of "acquiring" or "constructing" gender identity[2] in children in order to use the conclusions thus obtained as tools to conduct an analysis. This analysis will be presented in the second part of the article. I will present an analysis of three selected books in order to answer the following research questions:

1) What kind of non-heteronormativity does the work present?
2) By what literary means and with reference to what pedagogical methods is non-heteronormativity presented?
3) What kind of message about non-heteronormativity can children and adult readers grasp?

The basic concepts I am using are relatively new, they function in many different contexts, as well as in colloquial and journalistic language, so let me quote my own understanding of them.

The term 'heteronormativity' is an extension into the social and cultural realm of the term 'heterosexuality', referring to the realm of sexual relations. A. Kłonkowska and W. Dynarski in their open proposal of a dictionary of "terms of diversity and gender and sexual (non)normativity" define heteronormativity as "a cultural configuration that reduces sexuality to heterosexuality. Heteronormative culture excludes non-heterosexual identities, defining them in terms of marginality, anomaly, degeneration, or deviation" (Kłonkowska & Dynarski, 2017). Heteronormativity thus refers to a rigorous social gender order[3] in which

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2   Discourses of sexuality and gender regarding children differ in the language used. The term "gender identity acquisition" implies the existence of objective, external forms of sexuality/sexuality "to be acquired", while the term "gender construction" conversely implies significant subject participation, dependence on social and cultural conditions, and openness, uncertainty about its final outcome.

3   I understand gender order, following R. Connell, as the pattern of gender relations of a given society, which also includes the sphere of sexuality and sexual relations. Defining gender as "the structure of social relations that centers on the arena of reproduction and the set of practices that transfer the difference between bodies in terms of the construction of the reproductive system

the only sexual division, sanctioned by custom, often also by law and imagination, is a binary female-male gender and a more or less "forced" heterosexuality. It also assumes a rigorous relationship between biological sex, gender identity and behaviour, including sexual behaviour. The concept of non-heteronormativity is linguistically derived from heteronormativity, by its simple negation through the addition of the prefix *non*. As W. Dynarski points out, "discussions regarding a positive definition of non-heteronormativity, both in the legal sphere and in the academic arena, are still continuing" (Dynarski, 2016). Non-heteronormativity implies a greater or lesser relaxation of social gender rigor and a rejection of the explicit association of a biological sex with a particular gender identity, appearance, and behaviours, including sexuality. Non-heteronormativity is based on a non-binary understanding of gender, with gender representing a continuum of diverse combinations of identity, appearance, behaviour, and sexual practices.

Non-heteronormativity is related to gender and sexual diversity and includes all gender identities, behaviours and sexual orientations or combinations thereof, such as homo-, bi-, trans-gender/sexuality, a-genderism. It also has to do with equality and rights of sexual minorities. The provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 "show the dignity attributed to the individual as an inalienable element of his/her existence, independent of any aspect of differentiation. […] any aspect of the conditionality of any of the differences in human functioning should not be the basis for discussion of the scope of the exercise of the rights ascribed to the individual. It is dignity, not questions of the conditioning of sexual orientation, that should be central to discussions around the rights of sexual minorities" (Dragan & Iniewicz, 2020, p. 10).

Both the concepts of heteronormativity and non-heteronormativity in relation to children are rarely used, probably because of prevailing notions of an essentially asexual and non-problematically heteronormative, "natural" process of gender identity acquisition in childhood. In this text, I am concerned with the search for "fissures" in the heteronormativity of the child's world. The impulse for this search has been provided by critical readings of classical psychological and sociological developmental theories, as well as theories and research on the construction of gender identities in children rooted in the paradigm of social constructivism. On

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to the realm of social processes", R. Connell emphasizes that "gender is multidimensional. It is not just about identity, work, power, or sexuality, but about all of these aspects simultaneously" (Connell, 2013, pp. 31, 127–129). Elsewhere, she defines the "metropolitan gender order in the age of globalization" as a model of gender dichotomy that "was born in Western Europe" and assumes, among other things, that "both sexes are heterosexual" (Connell, 2013, pp. 185–186).

the other hand, the presentation of books written for children, in which the authors point out the ways of "taming" non-heteronormativity in the children's world, may strengthen the inclusive tendencies in educational activities and change the existing social gender order. In this context, I agree with those researchers who point to heteronormativity as a major obstacle to the realization of social equality between men and women because it preserves "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995) and limits the potential of each individual (Bem, 2000). Let me add that by using the term "children", "childhood", I mean the pre-adolescent period in an individual's development, especially middle and late childhood (around 5–11 years old).

This article is only an outline of possible more in-depth research and therefore does not pretend to be either complete or exhaustively detailed.

CHILDHOOD AND (NON) HETERONORMATIVITY

The issue of gender construction and children's growing (or not) into the heteronormative social order is rarely explored4 and belongs to the sphere in which the axioms of psychological and sociological classical concepts of development and gender identity formation are dominant and taken for granted. This tradition is still dominated by the perception of the special nature of childhood by attributing to it cognitive, moral and sexual immaturity. On the other hand, since pop culture, through the saturation with modern technologies, has become a living environment in which children are "immersed" practically from birth, a process of earlier and earlier sexualization of children is taking place that parents seem to be aware of as well, often reinforcing these processes through an emphasis on gender-appropriate colouring of clothes, choice of toys and leisure time activities, etc. Sometimes there is also an early sexualisation of children with the parents' consent (for example, the fashion for organising beauty contests for children such as Little Miss and Mister). Both of these processes, in turn, are explicitly heteronormative. "In the contemporary Western society, sexual scripts are reserved for adults. Yet from an early age, children are pressed into a rigid heterosexual mould" (Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 169).

According to the American researchers, this is due to four social forces: peer groups, parents, the media, and school. Peers are "fundamentalists when it comes

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4   "Children are hetero-gendered too, although this process is undertheorized and understudied" (Martin, 2009, as cited in: Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 169).

to gender conformity and see heterosexuality as a key component of the female role" (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000, as cited in: Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 169). Parents assume their children are straight and reward heteronormativity. Hyde and Jaffee argue that the media promote heterosexuality and discredit homosexuality. Schools influence children through curriculum, teacher-student interactions, and the formal structure of classes. Most children conform to these coordinated heteronormative pressures (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000, as cited in: Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 169). According to Polish studies, there is no place for non-heteronormative people in Polish schools, either in the classroom, during breaks, or in the teachers' room. The most invisible category of pupils at school, ignored actually and symbolically, and consequently excluded from the public sphere, is the LGBT+ group (Zamojska, 2010; Abramowicz, 2011; Gawlicz, Rudnicki, & Starnawski, 2015; Pogorzelska & Rudnicki, 2020).

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES AND STUDIES ON ACQUIRING (CONSTRUCTING) SEX

The classical concepts of developmental psychology that are still in use and that constitute the canon of psychological knowledge in the training of psychologists and educators generally perceive gender differences (and it is always the two sexes) as consequences of biological differences (physical, genetic, physiological, hormonal, etc.) and construct intellectual, emotional and behavioural differences between boys and girls analogously to these differences that are unchangeable and "natural". The result is a top-down "imposition of a grid of definitions" (Weeks, 1981, as cited in: Bem, 2000, p. 101) on the world of children that either universalizes childhood by blurring the developmental characteristics of girls and boys or naturalizes (essentializes) gender differences, both of which disregard the influence of the broad socio-cultural and situational background. In research practice, however, little is done to give voice to and listen to children themselves, to girls and boys. In this sense, the mainstream expert discourse, based on the tradition of developmental psychology, can be said to be in opposition to the discourse on human rights, including the rights of a child to autonomy and developmental subjectivity, and at the same time in opposition to the achievements of gender and queer theory, which for over forty years have been deconstructing or completing the axioms of classical developmental concepts.

Theoretical approaches to individual development, particularly psycho-sexual development or the acquisition/formation of psychic (variously named) and

behavioural structures related to gender, are generally arranged into two streams that partly reflect the divisions between the research objects of individual scientific disciplines (mainly between psychology and sociology) as well as differences rooted in specific scientific paradigms or metatheoretical assumptions.

The first of these streams refers to the positivist, empiricist approach to social reality and, importantly, acknowledges/recognizes the objectivity of the scientific facts it uncovers. The second stream is part of the social constructivist paradigm and – according to its assumptions – makes all "discoveries" and "truths" relative by pointing to the participation of language and discursive constraints (historical, social, cultural) in creating social reality. The reality expressed in language always has an element of subjectivity and an element of convention (the linguistic system itself is conventional), that is, limitations on what can be said due to the location of the subject in time and in social space. Because of these premises, gender and sexuality are considered either as derivatives of biology, objectively given and universal gender variations, expressed in specific gender roles and gender identities that determine certain behaviours, or as fluid, ambiguous individual "gender projects", "trajectories of gender formation", dependent on the "existing gender order" (Connell, 2013, p. 172), given culture, social structures and situational context.

The first of these streams is formed at its core by the classical concepts of developmental psychology relating to gender and sexuality (Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Kohlberg) and socialisation theories derived from structuralism. They describe a child as an asexual being who gradually assimilates social and cultural norms (heteronorms) consistent with his or her biological sex. This gender traditionalism is identified with the natural (objective) development of a child and its source is, depending on the concept, either internal psychic dispositions derived from biological sex differences (as in Freud) or innate cognitive mechanisms related to the perception of the social world (categorization and self-categorization). These "universal" developmental models serve as the norm for checking and correcting the behaviour of individuals/children and provide guidelines for educational practice (the concept of upbringing as guided development). Discursively, they separate "norm" from "pathology" through appropriate terms. According to the Freudian model, child sexuality in the pre-oedipal period (infancy, early childhood) has an impersonal, diffuse and autosexual character, the sensations of pleasure are physiological (sucking, excretion) or accidental, involuntary (child masturbation). "The knowledge that boys and men have penises, while girls and women do not, is supposed to be the beginning of the formation of personality differences" (Harris, 2000). Freud's starting point for gender differentiation (Oedipal period) that assumes asymmetry in the possession of something that is beyond our

control (penis or vagina) naturalises these differences and symbolically, through the juxtaposition "possession – absence", differently validates girls and boys. At the same time, it should be noted that Freud was the only one among the classic developmental theorists to create the concept of (adult) male and female homosexuality on the basis of the assumed inborn bisexuality, but he probably believed (although there is no conclusive evidence for this) that it was the result of developmental disorders in childhood such as a regression to earlier stages of development (Grunt-Mejer & Iniewicz, 2020). However, he did not study children themselves.

According to the theories of cognitive development and structuralist theories of socialization, children adhere very strictly – in the face of their peers – to the principles of binary gender division, which manifests itself, for example, in the fact that they "naturally" and spontaneously form unisex playgroups at all times and in all places. As Sandra L. Bem puts it, "a young child spontaneously discovers the duality of nature, its division into masculine and feminine parts, and then classifies and evaluates him/herself and others in terms of this dichotomy" (Bem, 2000, p. 111). For both of these arguments, it is characteristic to locate the source of the sexual division in natural, objective and unchangeable, universal developmental processes.

The second stream of theories is related to the feminist concept of gender/sex, which has shifted the discussion towards the study of cultural influences on the maintenance of gender binary division. However, this does not mean that all feminist-oriented concepts of developmental psychology reject its naturalness. There are two kinds of critical reflection here. One is related to feminocentric developmental psychological theories, which attempt to supplement the Freudian concept with a feminine element, thus abolishing its androcentrism. At the same time, they perpetuate the polarization of types and vitalize femininity and masculinity (e.g., the concepts of Karen Horney, Nancy Chodorow, or Carol Gilligan). The latter reflection is definitely more interesting due to its potential to undermine heteronormativity. It refers to theoretical concepts which locate the main source of an individual's behaviour not inside the individual, but outside it, i.e., in the environment, or culture. In developmental psychology, for example, it is the gender schema theory by Sandra L. Bem or the sociological concept of "doing gender" proposed by C. West and D.H. Zimmerman (1987). The most radical, or in other words, the one that has moved most in the direction of cultural influence, is in this context considered to be the theory of the so-called "clean slate", Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which deconstructs the very distinction between gender and sex and its basic message is to invalidate the difference between the sexes because it is a discursive product. These concepts theoretically justify the

artificiality (cultural origin) of what we call heteronormativity and point either to the role of assumptions built into culture, the so-called prisms of gender according to Bem, or to the role of language/discourse in its construction (Butler), or to the interactional, situational character of gender definitions (Zimmerman/West).

The guidance from this recommendation justifies a reversed view of the development of sexuality and gender in children. Instead of "imposing a grid of definitions" on the lives of real individuals, we should look openly and without preconceptions at everyday life and see how children, young people, girls and boys behave, speak, interact in situations of a particular gender order, how they deal with it, how they perceive it and "embody" it. In a now famous and classic study using the ethnographic method, Barrie Thorne (Thorne, 1993), observing children (boys and girls) in class and playing in the school yard in American elementary schools, noted that gender reproduction in school is not one-way and one-dimensional, it is shaped by interactions and dependent on the situational context. "You cannot say that gender differences just exist. They are something that happens, that needs to be triggered, and thus something that can be cancelled, modified, or made less relevant" (Connell, 2013, pp. 36–37).

To sum up, it seems that the two above-mentioned currents of theories/research on gender formation/construction during childhood, although they assume in radically different ways that children participate in the construction of the social order of gender, do not generally deal with the problem of the development of non-normative sexual orientations or psychosexual identities during childhood. There are, however, memoirs, autobiographies or even video footages of individuals whose non-normative behaviour or sense of mismatch with the assigned sex appeared before adolescence (cf., e.g., Maciej Loter's 2016 autobiography *Chłopiec w czerwonej sukience* [The Boy in the Red Dress], or the French documentary *Petite fille* [Little Girl] by director Sébastien Lifshitz from 2020). In sexology literature there is a descriptive term "prehomosexual children" (Bozett & Sussman, 1989 , as cited in: Iniewicz & Ogarek-Szulc, 2020, p. 166), referring "to childhood behaviours attributed to another sex, without, of course, prejudging sexual orientation or gender identity" (Iniewicz & Ogarek-Szulc, 2020, p. 166).

NON-HETERONORMATIVITY IN CHILDREN'S IMAGINARY WORLD – THREE STORIES FOR CHILDREN

Children's literature has also been changing over the past half-century against the background of changing mores, the development of media technologies, but also

changes in attitudes towards children and childhood (recognition of children's subjectivity, their relative autonomy in development, their right to make their own choices and create their own "self"), and granting them rights (the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989). According to Ryszard Waksmund (2000), this transformation involves "a gradual evolution from literature for children (instrumental) to children's literature (ludic)".

The former, which is older, among other things, relies on the teleological nature of text (purposefulness), or intentionality. It becomes a tool for moralizing the little ones, and connotes a specific audience, hence "for". "Children's literature is dominated by the aesthetic and pedagogical function (alternative to the previous one), the idea of *paideia*, creativeness, and the shift of the center of gravity towards the category of literariness and the aesthetic qualities of the text" (Waksmund, 2000, as cited in: Krauze-Sikorska & Klichowski, 2020, p. 206). Another important change is that in children's books we often deal with the effect of double addressing (Cysewski, 2001, as cited in: Krauze-Sikorska & Klichowski, 2020, p. 187). "The boundary between what is appropriate for children and what is appropriate for adults is becoming increasingly flexible" (Krauze-Sikorska & Klichowski, 2020, p. 187). Looking from a pedagogical point of view, one could add that an important element of the difference between literature "for" children and children's literature is the minimization or significant departure from persuasive means in favour of modelling and play (including language play).

The changes also apply to the subject matter of children's books, which now include areas that were previously "off-limits" or even taboo, such as death of a loved one, separation of parents, war, post-war history, ecology, illness, disability, women's rights, psychosexual development, carnality, homosexuality, etc., according to the following principle: "It is adults who perceive what we call taboo as taboo. Children do not understand that there are issues that are not talked about until adults either mention or show them to kids" (Sehested, 2012, p. 19). This is, of course, due to the dynamics of the general emancipatory tendencies in contemporary societies, which are manifested in demanding recognition of the rights of various social groups that have been discriminated against, subordinated or marginalized so far. The presence of their voices in the public space causes also a reordering of the widely understood media sphere, so important for contemporary children and youth. Audio-visual images, such as films, series, songs in which non-heteronormative people appear, are easily accessible to everyone through Internet channels and movie streaming platforms. It influences the growing acceptance of LGBT+ people, causing "one of the biggest generational and epochal shifts ever" (Twenge, 2019, pp. 258–259).

In the field of children's literature, especially books written by contemporary authors, there are also publications that raise the issue of non-heteronormativity, or even create the world of children as a non-heteronormative world. This fact is reflected by researchers in various ways, most often in the context of breaking taboos in children's literature (Sochańska & Czechowska, 2012; Cackowska, 2013; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017; Nowak-Kluczyński et al., 2020), or in the context of analysing the representation and construction of non-heteronormative protagonists of literary texts (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012; Fidowicz, 2016). The context of reconstruction of the gender order, inclusion and democratization of social relations during socialization and education is very important. This has been written about in Poland, among others, by M. Cackowska (2017), but also by the Czech researcher L. Jarkovská (2014). M. Cackowska referring to the text by P. Nodelman (2004) points to the educational potential of picture books – "the more they [children and adults] become aware of the extent to which the representations of the world in a picture book are distorted and the relations between image and text are ironic, the less they will be surprised by the various deformations in the reality around them. […] This will allow us to give children the power to negotiate their subjectivity, a much more desirable goal than pushing them towards conformity to our expectations" (Cackowska, 2017, p. 43). L. Jarkovská draws attention to two important issues from the point of view of this text – firstly, the social resistance to themes of non-heteronormativity in children's books. She explains it as follows: "Homosexuality in the children's stories is more considered to be sexuality than heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is a kind of blueprint that we do not even notice in children's tales; so that when mother and father appear in such a story, nobody thinks about them having a sexual life. When two mothers or two fathers appear, sexuality seems to be more present. That is why the children's stories that involve a homosexual couple or family seem to cause embarrassment at least, or aversion even in relatively open and tolerant people. In the contemporary Euro-American culture, childhood is constructed as innocent and helpless, calling for our protection. We love children, because we are captured by their vulnerability, fragility, innocence, sincerity and totally unspoiled nature. Children who are not like this are not considered childish at all. We love the idealization of childhood that is the embodiment of paradise on Earth" (Jarkovská, 2014, p. 78). The second important point is to emphasize the importance of the different relationships with the text of the adult and child reader, which should be an important guideline for authors of children's books and for adults – parents and teachers. "A text does not work in a linear, unequivocal way; its interpretation always is related to the way of reading, the experiences of readers, and to their relating to the text and context in which

they read. It is not at all certain that gender-stereotypical stories will determine children to traditional gender structuring of their lives, while feminist stories will emancipate them from these traditional structures. It is not just a matter of what is happening in a story and who the characters are, but mainly of what children take from them. It often can be significant details that the adult do not even notice" (Jarkovská, 2014, p. 81).

The analyses presented below refer to the current dealing with the construction of non-heteronormativity and breaking taboos in literary texts for children. Although these are the texts for children, they are certainly also chosen and read by adults, whom M. Cackowska calls "the primary receivers and first interpreters of text and image" (Cackowska, 2017, p. 44). Therefore, it seems important to me to pay attention not only to how authors normalise non-heteronormativity in the pages where, according to the idealised image of childhood, it has not been allowed so far, but also to what positive patterns of reaction to non-heteronormativity they propose for adults – parents and educators.

The collection of books analysed is a subjective choice, necessarily limited by the volume of the text. Moreover, the Polish book market does not offer a large selection of books on particular topics for the youngest age category of children's readers. Publishers focused on including taboo subjects in children's books, such as, e.g., *Dwie siostry*, *Czarna Owca*, *Zakamarki*, mainly publish translations. I narrowed down my selection to fiction books, but genre-wise diverse (two illustrated books, one picture book), coming from three different language areas (Sweden, Poland, Czech Republic), using different styles and means of expression (realistic story, fairy tale with animal characters, story with magical elements).

I will present an analysis of three selected books in order to answer previously mentioned research questions.

In analyzing and interpreting the meanings and contexts of the selected texts, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA). This is a qualitative research method that focuses on texts and their interpretation. Discourse here is understood as a way of capturing social reality in language. It involves the analysis of the meaningful aspects of social reality. Critical aspect in the name of CDA research method means awareness of the limitations of one's own research perspective, awareness of the subjectivity of interpretation and open commitment to social change. What is also important in this research approach is the consideration of the historical and social context of the functioning of the analysed utterance (Van Dijk, 2001; Duszak & Fairclough, 2008). In reading the artistic representations of non-heteronormativity in three examples of children's literature, I take into account the contemporary educational and legal discourse, which emphasizes the inalienable

dignity of every human being, regardless of differences in behaviour, identity, or sexual orientation. At the most general level, I am interested in the relation between an artistic work and social practice, in this case – the practice of treating non-heteronormative people.

I analyze three books that represent a slice of life of contemporary preschool and early elementary school children and are primarily intended for them. These are the following works:

1) a contemporary fairy tale by Polish authors Maria Pawłowska and Jakub Szamalek entitled *Kim jest ślimak Sam?* [Who Is Sam the Snail?] with illustrations by Katarzyna Bogucka;[5]
2) a picture book by a Swedish author Pija Lindenbaum *Igor i lalki* [Igor and the Dolls], translated into Polish by Katarzyna Skalska;
3) a story with magic elements by Czech author Markéta Pilátová entitled *Jura a lama* [Jura and the Llama], not translated into Polish, with illustrations by Dora Dutková.

The analyzed books are different in terms of literary form and narrative construction. The book *Who Is Sam the Snail?* is built according to the scheme of a classic fairy tale with animals as anthropomorphized characters. Although the story takes place in an animal world (all characters are animals), the concerns, emotions, and problems are "human". The book *Jura and the Llama* also has a fictitious narration. It also features animals that speak (even in different languages), some of them have magical powers, but these magical elements do not obscure the social reality, very similar to the world of modern children. Both works mentioned are illustrated books. The illustrations accompany the text, they do not form an integral whole with the text. The picture book by Pija Lindenbaum is different. Here the pictures "define" the text, creating an emotional pendant to the words. This book does not have a compact, closed plot, it is in fact non-narrative. It consists of observations, descriptions, children's dialogues and the inner monologue of the main character, the preschooler Igor. It is the most realistic one, there are no magical elements in it. All of the pieces construct non-heteronormativity in a child's world, though in very different ways.

The fairy tale *Who Is Sam the Snail?* is constructed in a very thoughtful way. It features a closed plot with a distinct protagonist – first-grade pupil snail Sam. The plot is adapted to present the multiplicity and diversity of non-heteronorma-

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5   For a complete bibliographic record of all works analyzed, see References.

tivity in the animal world. The first layer of meaning is created by the linear story about the hardships of the first-grade pupil snail Sam on the first day at school, his fears and hopes connected with his new classmates, the teacher and his first school assignment. Both Sam's feelings and all the material elements of the environment such as school, classroom (front-row desks versus back-row desks), backpack, lunch, being made a student, first homework typed up on the computer by caring parents, pasting pictures to the printout, lack of coloured ink, etc. They are identical to the worries and material elements of every modern child's environment. This familiarity of emotions and surroundings creates the basis for identification with the protagonist. The second layer of the story are the emotions associated with acceptance and reaction to otherness – the protagonist's appearance – by new classmates ("... they were very cool/ ... And no one shouted after him: 'Hey, snail, show your horns, I'll give you some sweet corns!' and in the backyard it sometimes happened"; Pawłowska & Szamałek, 2015, p. 10) and the inability to identify of the hero/snail with a specific gender, which creates problems with following the teacher's instruction, as standard as: "We will split into two teams. Boys please stand on my left and girls on the right" (Pawłowska & Szamałek, 2015, p. 14). Conflict resolution occurs as a result of the school's skilful pedagogical efforts to convince the snail that its gender otherness is nothing exceptional, as the animal community consists of many unusual family arrangements, relationships, and creatures with complex gender identities (marmoset monkeys, lip fish, black swans, squirrels). However, all the non-normative behaviours of animals presented in the pages of the book "have their source in scientific research", as the authors explain in the afterword, referring to the accompanying scientific bibliography. The encyclopaedia information about non-heteronormativity in the animal world thus forms another layer of the text, i.e., the encyclopaedic one. Built into the story are also important guidelines for adults on how they should react when confronted with child's non-heteronormative behaviour – not to be surprised, not to correct, but to support. Teachers, in turn, should pay attention to the excluding and often used in schools mechanism of gender division of the student community, even if it is only for fun.

The text of the picture book *Igor and the Dolls* by Pija Lindebaum is a situational story about a preschooler whose father is a football fan and Igor himself is liked and invited to play football by his classmates in kindergarten. Despite this, he prefers to play with a doll. Once he gathers the courage and joins the girls with the doll he brought in his backpack hidden from his dad. The girls let Igor play, then they change their dresses and dance together, fooling around. After a while, the other boys join them. When it stops raining, they all go outside to play football

and Igor kicks the ball right in the middle of the goal. The expressive pictures describe emotions and mood of the main character. Thoughts, inner opposition or approval of Igor are expressed in short sentences ("All the time just this soccer"), in the visual layer we see no smile, lowered corners of the mouth. The drama of overcoming fear and anxiety of leaving the assigned gender role is played out in the visual layer (father – a giant, taking up all the space of the page, Igor – a little boy with a doll in the corner of the room). The text does not contain any admonitions, prohibitions, or instructions; there is only a description of the children's games in the kindergarten and Igor's thoughts and wishes ("he does not want to go to kindergarten…"; "he would like daddy to come and pick him up…"). I think its significance lies in the fact that Pija Lindenbaum has managed to come close to the way a few-year-old child perceives the world, which serves to identify with the protagonist by the child audience. To adults, in turn, it presents the child's non-normative play behaviour as not raising any problems in kindergarten or among peers, normalizing it.

Markéta Pilátová in her book *Jura a lama* adopts a similar strategy of normalizing non-heteronormativity. She creates a children's adventure book that focuses on a five-year-old boy Jura who lives on a farm in the mountains surrounded by animals: a cat, sheep, and lamas, brought to Czech mountains from Bolivia. The drama of the story is created by the "ethnic" conflict between the native sheep and the foreign lamas (lamas speak Ketchua, Czech sheep do not accept lamas, accusing them of taking a better pasture). The "subversive" element of the story, however, remaining in the shadow of this foreground conflict, is the protagonist's unusual family arrangement, the non-heteronormative parental relationship of Jura's "two moms". The situation of the same-sex marriage and "family of choice" is explained on the first page of the story with three short sentences: "Jula and Jola loved each other very much, so they got married. And they have a son together. They named him Jura". The marriage of the two women and their having a son is not at the center of the story, it is just a minor detail, an introduction to the extended adventure story of Jura and the animals. In this way, by placing non-heteronormativity in the background of the story, one invalidates its significance (normalizes it), not only for this particular story and its protagonist, but also, I think, for child readers.

SUMMARY

The aim of this article was to look at contemporary children's books that deal with non-heteronormativity through the prism of psychological and sociological

concepts of gender and the development of sexuality in children. As social sciences are not cumulative, all concepts, be they classical (psychoanalysis, social learning) or those derived from gender theory (gender performativity, doing gender), are in scientific circulation, but on the issue I am interested in they differ significantly in their approach to non-heteronormativity. Obviously, authors of contemporary books for the youngest children who consciously deal with the topic of non-heteronormativity are not guided by one or another theoretical concept. They carefully observe the social world and the world of contemporary children, based on principles stemming from general human rights and on the recognition of the child's subjectivity and relative developmental autonomy. It can be stated without doubt that their approach to gender excludes a rigid dichotomy and behavioural unambiguity resulting from assigned gender. How these texts are read by adults and by children themselves remains an open issue – for further research (cf. Jarkovská, 2014).

A literary work is always a construct, so the second issue addressed in the article was the question of the authors' use of the constructive means they use to 'tame' the child with the phenomenon of non-heteronormativity.

Non-heteronormativity in the selected children's books is constructed as something as natural or normal as heteronormativity. These two constructional strategies – the naturalisation and normalisation of non-heteronormativity – come to the fore. Depending on whether the aim of the book is to provide knowledge about non-heteronormativity or to distinguish and psychologically support the non-heteronormative protagonist, the authors use different constructional means, remaining in the convention of the illustrated book or children's picture book, but also addressing adult readers. They refer to natural facts (*Who Is Sam the Snail?*), create a magical world (*Jura and the Llama*), or describe with empathy and understanding a young boy's emotional dilemmas connected with gender (*Igor and the Dolls*).

The authors of the analyzed children's books, by constructing non-heteronormativity, not only demonstrate that such a phenomenon exists in children's world, but through their construction and narrative strategies they teach children, as well as adults, how to react and what attitude to take towards this phenomenon. They do this not in a persuasive way, but by adopting the principle of modelling. The authors of these books consciously adopt a particular vision of a child and society, which could be called an emancipatory vision in two senses: an individual one – a child emancipating himself/herself towards self-awareness and agency; and a social one – the community emancipating itself towards change.

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