Where the Wild Things Aren't

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We tell our children that weirdness is a blessing in disguise. That's our fantasy, not theirs.

Other than fairy tales — which were, by and large, originally compiled for adult audiences — children's literature from the past holds little of interest for children today. Consider one of the earliest known examples of a book targeted at children, James Janeway's *A Token for Children* from 1671. A typical story in this collection tells us how young a child was when he memorized the catechism, how passionately he cared for the souls of his brothers and sisters, and how obedient and respectful he was with his elders. It might quote at length from one of his prayers and end by describing his peaceful death from the plague at the age of 10. Every story in *Token* ends in this way, with a boy or girl rewarded for his or her piety with a happy early death.

Things do loosen up a bit over the next century, but narrative fiction directed at children in the 1700s and early 1800s still tends to be heavily didactic and moralistic, featuring stylized descriptions of children inhabiting not a social and political reality but an abstract, idealized world of moral instruction — instruction that they, in turn, receive gladly and obediently.[1] Children today would not know what to make of it.

Franziska Barczyk

The children's stories that can still entertain us today start to pop up toward the end of the 19th century, relating the adventures of ordinary boys and girls such as Tom Sawyer and Heidi. The children in novels from this period sometimes find themselves in weird worlds — such as Alice of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Tom in *Water Babies,* or Marie in E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* — but they are not at all weird themselves. Mowgli is a remarkably ordinary and well-adjusted child, considering he was literally raised by wolves.

It is only in the 20th century, and into the 21st, that we start to see stories featuring odd and exceptional and moody and alienated children: *Pippi Longstocking, Harriet the Spy, A Wrinkle in Time, Tuck Everlasting, Bridge to Terabithia, Ender's Game, Matilda, The Golden Compass, Harry Potter, A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Mysterious Benedict Society, Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children,* and so on and so forth. The protagonist of these novels is often a nonconformist, disobedient to authority figures, a misfit or loner who lives in a world of their own — and prevails in spite of all that. She is somewhat more likely to be a girl than a boy. Tom Sawyer's misbehavior is a case of "boys will be boys," whereas when Harriet or Pippi or Matilda misbehave, they are being freaks — albeit lovable ones.

There are so many more examples from across different mediums: the delightfully macabre Wednesday Addams; Rudolph's odd red nose, which proves to be the salvation of the reindeer gang; Max the wild child, who not only becomes King of All the Wild Things but also gets his supper, and it is still hot. There is Coraline, whose alienation from her surroundings and attunement to the uncanny explain her entry into the Other World, rather than the other way around. And notice that teen movies from *The Breakfast Club* to *Mean Girls* to *Booksmart* likewise focus on *weird* teens.

This pattern also goes some ways toward explaining which older novels still hold our interest. Mary in Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, who is introduced as being "as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived," is probably more familiar to you than saintly Cedric from Burnett's earlier novel, *Little Lord Fauntleroy.* Cedric might have been "the Harry Potter of his time" in terms of *Fauntleroy*'s popularity and influence,[2] but the two boys are, instructively, opposites: Cedric is cheerful, charming, and optimistic, even before he stumbles into wealth, whereas Harry is a troubled, moody, and lonely child, even after he discovers his powers. The drive to continuously remake *Little Women* — in graphic novels, movies, TV series, and musicals — springs from our interest in the weirdest daughter, Jo. As a child I was enthralled by *Anne of Green Gables* but lost interest in the book's sequels, when Anne completed her transition from eccentric misfit to respectable young lady.

Where once children were instructed to be saintly, or at least virtuous, or at least ordinary, now they are invited to be weird. It is tempting to view this as straightforward ethical progress: We have finally liberated children from the shackles of our preconceived assumptions about who they are supposed to be, and now they can develop toward their true and authentic selves. But there is something that complicates this simple narrative about children's literature — namely, the intellectual backdrop against which it was being written.

It is during the 20th century that a variety of thinkers from a variety of disciplines — anthropology, sociology, psychology and philosophy — start calling the very idea of a true or authentic self into doubt. This is the period during which the Enlightenment ideal of freedom and autonomy and self-determination fell from grace, accused of fundamentally misrepresenting humanity, of disguising the fact that we are creatures thoroughly shaped by the contingencies of the culture in which we are embedded.

Given the collapse of individualism, why celebrate weirdness?

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In 1960 the historian Philippe Ariès argued, famously and controversially, that "child" is a relatively new concept, emerging around the 16th and 17th centuries. Before this period, he claims, children in Europe were seen as miniature adults: "In medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist."[3] Ariès spawned a cottage industry of refuters, but the interest in his work is as much about the *kind* of claim he was making as it is about the question of whether the idea applies to medieval parenting. Will the study of history reveal that we have *created* the kinds into which we now reflexively and thoughtlessly divide human beings?

To the extent that we are inclined to answer "yes" to this question, that is probably due to the influence of Michel Foucault. Foucault studied a process he called "normalization" as it occurred in prisons, schools, insane asylums, and hospitals. He was interested in all the ways people give and receive instruction in how to be who they are, but especially how to be sick, how to be insane, how to be childlike, how to be a

criminal, and how to be sexual. He wanted to show that what might initially appear as a naturally occurring category — "the madman" — was in fact the product of a lot of work on the part of both the madman himself and the institutions tasked with managing him. When Simone de Beauvoir criticizes gender essentialism, or Judith Butler offers an account of gender as a performance, or Sally Haslanger characterizes gender as a social construction, they are making a claim of the same kind, about "woman." Ian Hacking has described autism and obesity as cases of "making up" a new kind of person. Before we had the label, and the institutions that do the labeling, "people did not experience themselves in this way, they did not interact with their friends, their families, their employers, their counsellors, in this way." Afterward, it "was a way to be a person, to experience oneself, to live in society."

Since claims of this kind are controversial, it is important not to exaggerate them. None of these thinkers understands the relevant category as constructed *from nothing*: Ariès would, of course, grant that there were obvious ways in which the children of the Middle Ages differed from adults of that period, regardless of whether they formed the basis of an officially recognized classification. Likewise, Hacking acknowledges that in an important sense there were autistic people before Leo Kanner named the condition in 1943, and obese people before we started measuring BMI.[4] Believing in social construction doesn't mean turning a blind eye to the underlying biological reality. Nonetheless, the construction matters because it heralds the introduction of a regulatory regime by which people start to mold one another, and themselves, according to a set of new norms.

Hacking is particularly interested in narratives of autistic people — autobiographies and novels written by autistic people and novels featuring them.[5] On his account, these narratives teach autistic people the "right" way to be autistic. They might focus their self-presentation — or, in Butler's phrase, "performance" — on generally recognized manifestations of autism, such as difficulty making eye contact, or socializing, or understanding non-literal meaning, or tolerating scratchy textures. This line of thought derives from Foucault, who understood such effects not as a revelation of the repressive force exercised by the powerful on the powerless but as an instantiation of what he called the "positive" or "productive" manifestation of power. Each of us strives for legibility, and in doing so we actively participate in constructing our various identities.

Even when qualified in this way, some will object to the claim that categories such as "gender" or "childhood" or "obesity" or "autism" are substantially socially constructed. It is important to see that with respect to many categories, there is no controversy at all. A time traveler from the distant past would be perplexed by our world of digital nomads, social media influencers, soccer moms, vegans, homeschoolers, nerds, climate activists, gamers, graduate students, flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, and so on. If our traveler came from ninth-century Norway, where everyone believed that the Earth was flat and schooled their kids at home and no one was vaccinated, he would still find *our* flat-earthers and homeschoolers and anti-vaxxers weird. Back in medieval Norway, neither "flat-earther" nor "homeschooler" was a kind of person you could be. These

days, everyone believes in social constructions. This is obvious from the media, which is eager to report to us about new ones. Here are two recent examples.

The Nov. 19 issue of *New York Magazine* featured an essay by Katy Schneider on the dull movement: a group of people who embrace the fact that they are not especially unique, lead unexciting lives, and are given to mundane observations. The Dull Men's Club has over a million members on Facebook, and there is a Dull Women's Club too. Presumably, there have been dull people for a very, very long time, but it is only against the backdrop of our novelty- and attention-obsessed culture that such people, first, started to experience themselves as weird, and, next, decided to do something about that. All of a sudden, there is a *right* way to be dull. For instance, you are to call yourself a "dullster," not a "dullard."

On Dec. 3, the *New York Times* published an interview with the fashion model and actress Julia Fox titled "Julia Fox's Guide to Being a Freak," in which Fox positions herself as a model for other freaks: "I don't get salty when people take inspiration from me. I want to guide more women, more queer people, to feel like, 'Well, if she does it, I can, too.'" From this we learn that in order to be a freak, you need to be either a woman or queer. Fox also tells you how to talk if you are a freak. You say things such as, "I'm going to be myself and live my truth" and describe yourself as "exhausted from trying to pretend to be normal all the time." More rules for being a freak: Freaks wear clothing from designers who have fewer than 1,000 Instagram followers, they congregate at St. Mark's Place in NYC, and they prefer to read stories "written from the point of view of an outsider, someone who's struggling." Fox has a "sixth sense" for finding other freaks just like herself, and the existence of this category, of people who are, on the one hand, not "normal" or "straight," yet are, on the other hand, *just like each other* is presupposed in the interview, which is framed as "a tutorial on being yourself and finding your fellow freaks." If you assumed that the one category that would never be normalized was "abnormality," you underestimated humans.

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In stories for children, weirdness always turns out to have been a blessing in disguise. We could think of the various happy endings to these stories as a menu being placed before the child: Either your weirdness is only a surface feature that promises to rub off over time, or there is a group of people out there just like you, or some talent will emerge to overshadow your weirdness, or you'll spin the straw of childhood bullying and exclusion into the gold of some heroic moral crusade. Never mind that there is, in fact, no cosmic compensation program through which people receive superpowers in exchange for other disadvantages. Never mind that being victimized tends to harm people rather than improve them, making them vengeful or fearful, not heroic. "What if I never meet the people who are just like me?" You will. "But what if there are no such people?" Don't forget, some of it rubs off. "But what if it doesn't?" Maybe you aren't rubbing hard enough.

We seem to be offering our children a deal:

> Unlike the parents of earlier generations, we understand that what was right for us may not be right for you. Times are changing, and we are not going to coerce you into the mold of what was 'normal' or 'good' for us. Instead, we are going to let you be whomever you want to be. Consider yourself at liberty to discover your true and authentic self! But you have to hold up your side of the bargain: Your authentic self had better turn out, in the end, to be a person who a bunch of other people also authentically are.

Our children's books are not moralistic and didactic in the way that those of the 18th or 19th century were, but they are moralistic and didactic in their own way. Have we made progress?

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In her (forthcoming) paper "Over-intelligibility," philosopher Maya Krishnan draws on insights from Butler and Foucault to highlight the dangers of the demand that we sort ourselves into categories that make sense to others. Krishnan discusses how Susan Sontag, having made clear that she was disinclined to discuss her sexuality publicly, was pressured by interviewers to identify as a lesbian or as a bisexual. Krishnan also gives us the example of a character from a novel — Danzy Senna's *New People* — who benefits from the liberty of not having to classify an unwanted sexual encounter as "rape." There can be costs to applying concepts. For instance, some concepts commandeer our attention in ways that we might have reasons to resist. She writes, "We continually make claims on one another, under the pretense of making claims about how things are." Instead, Krishnan proposes, we should accept "zones of disarticulation," where someone is permitted not to slot themselves in a given set of purportedly exhaustive categories — straight vs. lesbian vs. bisexual, or rape vs. consensual sex. More intelligibility isn't always better.

Krishnan is surely correct to note that tolerance for people who resist our efforts to understand them is sometimes called for, and her overall framing of the problem of intelligibility is one to which this essay is heavily indebted. But Krishnan, as I understand her, is adding to the toolbox of ways we manage weirdness: The tolerance-of-ambiguity approach is worth considering, alongside the usual blessing-in-disguise approach. She is not offering us a way out of the business of weirdness-management altogether.Opting for less legibility has a cost because it downplays weirdness, deflating its pretensions of significance. Consider Krishnan's explanation of why the character in the novel should be allowed to see what happened to her not as rape: "The concept of rape, for Maria, presents a kind of standard script which seems to overstate the importance of the event to her own life." Krishnan recounts the words Sontag — under pressure to come clean about her sexuality in advance of its being made public — chose to use, and they are instructive: "That I have had girlfriends as well as boyfriends is

what? Is something I guess I never thought I was supposed to have to say, since it seems to me the most natural thing in the world." Her sexual relationships with women don't *need* to be the topic of discussion because they are *unremarkable.* The self is permitted unintelligibility exactly insofar as it presents that unintelligibility as being so insignificant that it is not worth our trying to know.

If the message is either you're part of a group or you're unusual in a way that doesn't matter to anyone, not even you, then the bottom line seems to be that you can't *really* be weird — except in the Julia Fox sense.

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So are we progressively liberating people by cultivating new ways of being, or are we finding ever more fine-grained ways to squash them? My answer is: both.

It is not so surprising that Sontag, born 1933, preferred to be private about her non-heterosexuality. The same was true of Foucault, born 1926, and countless other public intellectuals born within a few decades of them. This preference for privacy was probably not unrelated to the degree of discrimination faced by gay people throughout the 20th century. Today, fewer and fewer famous gay people are so hesitant. In 2008, Queen Latifah told the *New York Times*, "I don't feel like I need to share my personal life, and I don't care if people think I'm gay or not," but in 2021 she announced that she was married to a woman and ended the speech with "Happy Pride!" It has taken some time for gayness to be normalized within the culture at large, as opposed to within subcultures. Each year it seems more true to say that being gay is a way a public figure can be.

This change comes with expectations, for instance, that as a gay person, you will feel and express gay pride. There may also be expectations about how you dress, your politics, and who you socialize with, and: if you are a writer, who you write about; if you are a singer, what you sing about; if you are an actor, the roles you choose; if you are a filmmaker, the stories you tell; if you are a comedian, the jokes you make; if you are a teacher, your curriculum; if you are a business owner, the inclusivity of your branding, and so on. All of that seems preferable to the prospect of being beaten or killed or jailed or fired or disowned for being gay, as you might have been a few decades earlier. The punishments for "doing gay wrong" are less severe than the punishments for "doing sexuality wrong" were back when gay was not a way you could be. I think we *are* finding new ways to squash gay people, but those ways are better than the old ways. This may not be as much progress as we hoped we were making, but it's still progress.

It seems likely to me that in a century we will call gay people, or autistic people, or obese people something different, and even classify them differently. Some of those now called gay (or autistic, or obese) will not belong to the new classification, and some of those we now think of as not being gay (or not being autistic, or not being obese) will belong — and this shift in labeling will herald a significant normative shift in what

rules apply to, and get self-applied by, the group in question. "Painfully unenlightened" is how our descendants will see us — in some cases the activists among us most of all. (Often, the means we used to liberate ourselves in the short term are what we most end up needing liberation from in the longer term.) When the future describes its categorial changes as progress, it will do so on the same grounds that the present cites for describing the decriminalization of gayness that way — namely, the truth.

I have already explained why the claim that identity is socially constructed should not be conflated with the claim that it is constructed *from nothing.* No one thinks that a concept such as "woman" or "child" or "autistic" is social *all the way down.* But there is another clarification that's just as important: They are not social *all the way up.* Social constructions, like all constructions, are constructed for a reason. They have a purpose, and they are not constructed *towards nothing.* Just as the invocation of social construction doesn't require us to ignore biology, it doesn't require us to ignore ethics. There is a reason we have the category of gay people, and that reason can only be human happiness. Some categorizations conduce better to human happiness than others, but we are very far from the end of the process of figuring out which. It's going to have to be a matter of trial and error, over the course of which the boundaries of our categories will move around, our norms will move with them, and the rules of how to be a person will keep changing.

The idea of "getting the categorization right" goes all the way back to Aristotle, but for him, and for a long time after him, this was a matter of trying to make social categorizations match natural ones: Figure out who the natural slaves are, and then enslave those people! The Foucauldian revolution means saying goodbye to this project entirely. The categories we think of as being so natural or essential can be shown, by the historian of modernity, to be relatively new. Foucault himself retains a kind of nostalgia for the world innocent of our peculiar categorizations: the pre-modern world in which the madman is left to roam instead of being institutionalized, or the ancient Greek world, with its very different ways of regulating homosexuality. He reads, at times, like the despairing atheist jealous of people primitive enough to be able to fool themselves into believing. Or maybe the right thing to say is that Foucault was a historian, not an ethicist.

As an ethicist, I believe that the Enlightenment represented genuine progress in moral ideas. Human beings really do have an innate dignity, derived from our power of reason, that constrains the ways that we are permitted to treat one another. I also agree, at least in some ways, with the influential critiques put forward by thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, to the effect that the Enlightenment overemphasized individualism.

Being a person is too hard a job to leave to a single person. We can't do it on our own, not even as adults. Figuring out how to be a person is a group project, and we have to help each other. But the catch is that we don't really know what we are doing, so sometimes we end up hurting each other instead. When you are weird, you experience this hurt. Social categories have been poorly constructed and fail to conduce

to human happiness. The weird person is a record of the mistakes we have made. The children's books say, "It's OK, kids. We're going to fix them," which is not a lie, except the part about the timing. The truth is that we *are* going to fix them, and you're all going to help, but the happy ending may be a very long time coming.

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