

Empathy in a Vacuum:

Modeling Empathy in the Depoliticized Worlds of Easy Readers

As a ChLA panelist the past five years, I have placed narratological, structuralist, and Lacanian theories in conversation with theories of literacy development to theorize both fiction and nonfiction Easy Readers. In my presentation last year, I highlighted the dearth of Easy Readers addressing transnational migration (immigration, emigration, refugeeism, and ethnically-related travel writ large). I observed that, in the handful of Easy Readers that do address these topics, texts tend toward the didactic, with a strong narrative voice directing the child reader's emotional response. The textually encouraged emotional response is often matter-of-fact, even clinical, rather than empathetic. I posited that, since Easy Readers are children's first foray into reading without an adult intermediary (Karen Coats), adult gatekeepers attempt to "chaperone" (Joe Sutliff Sanders) the meanings of texts through the narrative voice, often encouraging emotional distance from characters experiencing marginalization in the process.

In light of the 2019 conference's focus on empathy, I would like to pick up where last year's presentation left off. If we, as adult gatekeepers, seem to favor Easy Reader texts that discourage overt, narrative-based empathetic connections between child readers and characters experiencing marginalization, what role do we envision Easy Readers playing in young readers' development of empathy? And what structural elements of the Easy Reader are designed to encourage this development?

After analyzing hundreds of Easy Readers over the last few years, I would argue that Easy Reader narratives do model empathetic connections between characters in ostensibly depoliticized worlds. Many of these characters coexist on equal sociopolitical footing to each

other (Frog and Toad, Ling and Ting) but some experience a never-questioned imbalance of power (Fly Guy and Buzz). Visual elements, such as characters' gazes, often also encourage empathetic connections between child readers and childlike characters who exist in seemingly depoliticized narrative bubbles. As scholars and gatekeepers, we must ask ourselves whether it is sufficient to model empathy in these artificially depoliticized contexts. Can we expand our representations and perhaps relinquish a bit of our own adult power over child readers in the process?