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Children's literature and/as political critique: Storying the violences of exclusionary politics

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Abstract

The forcible removal of unwanted individuals from the body politic – as, say, illicit migrants or terrorists – is a prominent feature of contemporary world politics. This prominence, and its typical storying from the vantage point of the national or communal 'self' needing protection, risks rendering exclusionary politics and their considerable harms unremarkable, even unremarked. In this article, we argue that children's literature offers a powerful, yet largely overlooked, resource for illuminating, engaging, and critiquing such practices. Drawing on examples from three prominent and enduringly popular texts – *The Enchanted Wood*, *The Lion Who Wanted to Love*, and *Where the Wild Things Are* – we show that the centring of excluded subjects in these books helps to render visible (1) the contestable, and often arbitrary, grounds for exclusion from existing communities and (2) the threatened or actual violence that underpins exclusionary decisions and processes. In doing this, the books offer powerful demonstration of the capacity of children's literature – and popular culture more broadly – to expose and mount critique of emerging trends in world politics.

Keywords

banishment, children's literature, exclusion, popular culture, world politics

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Introduction

Powers of exclusion – widespread in the contemporary period – enjoy a provenance stretching back hundreds, if not thousands, of years (Gibney, 2020), with antecedents

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including very ancient regimes of outlawry and banishment (Jarvis and Legrand, 2020). In today's world, such powers encompass, but are not limited to, proscription powers criminalising listed terrorist groups within designated territories (Jarvis and Legrand, 2018); 'externalisation' practices mandating the transfer of asylum seekers to overseas territories for detention, processing, and evaluation (Cantor et al., 2022); forcible transfers of prisoners to offshore detention sites such as Guantanamo Bay (Fitzpatrick, 2002); and deportation orders enabling the forcible removal of non-citizens (Walters, 2002).[1]

The contemporary growth of exclusionary politics has, unsurprisingly, generated significant scholarly concern. Theoretical work on 'the exception' has facilitated new insight into the exercise and limits of sovereignty, and the reduction of designated individuals to little more than 'bare life' (e.g. Agamben, 1998; Neal, 2009). Thematic analyses have focused attention on denationalisation and citizenship deprivation (e.g. Choudhury, 2017; Fargues, 2017), the blacklisting of terrorist groups and their members (e.g. Jarvis and Legrand, 2016; Sullivan, 2020), and the growing appetite for deporting individuals from self-designated 'hostile environments' like the United Kingdom (e.g. Collyer, 2012).[2] Work such as this is important because it tends to mobilise an explicitly critical energy in at least three senses of the term. First is via an ontological curiosity towards the conditions that are generative of specific exclusionary paradigms: a questioning, put otherwise, of the national security or criminal justice questions that exclusion purports to answer (see Burke, 2008) through the removal of those designated 'undesirable'. Second is a typically overtly critical orientation toward the normative and political implications of forcible removal as a political practice. And, third is a concern with the racialised construction and application of such powers, such that citizens of specific heritage or background – the most well-known example being Shamima Begum – find themselves at far greater risk of exclusion than others (Masters and Regilme, 2020).[3] Such concerns have, if anything, gained further urgency with the prevailing global populist zeitgeist (Tony Blair Institute, 2018), with one recent UK poll, for instance, finding 46% public support for the government's (now abandoned) plan for deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing (Heffer, 2023).

This article begins from a shared ontological, political, and normative concern with the contemporary politics of exclusion. Its contribution is to complement legal and ethical analyses such as those above by pulling attention to the construction and critique of exclusionary politics in a prominent yet widely ignored cultural site: the children's book (see also Jarvis and Robinson, 2024). Building on recent insight into the importance of popular culture to world politics (Crilley, 2021; Grayson et al., 2009) – and, in particular of popular culture's capacity to invoke or provoke thinking in relation to global affairs (Clapton and Shepherd, 2017; Hannah and Wilkinson, 2016: 14–16; Shapiro, 2012) – the article offers a critical reading of exclusion's conditions and outcomes via three successful and high-profile texts: Enid Blyton's (2018) *The Enchanted Wood*, Giles Andrea and David Wojtowycz's (1999) *The Lion Who Wanted to Love*, and Maurice Sendak's (2013) *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Our argument is that representations of exclusion in children's books merit scholarly engagement for two distinct, but related, reasons. First, the prominence of exclusionary practices within children's literature provides opportunity for reflecting on the prominence of such practices within global politics. This is because children's books are at once *part of* the materialities and experiences that constitute global politics, such that the words and images they contain are purchased, consumed, read, and interpreted by subjects around the world (Weldes and Rowley, 2015). They also, moreover, function – like

other popular cultural sources – as a useful 'mirror' through which to understand and make sense of global political processes and events (Neumann and Nexon, 2006). Second, children's literature also has considerable critical potential for rendering visible often-overlooked logics, rationales, and consequences of security paradigms such as exclusion. As demonstrated below, this includes pulling into focus: (1) the contestable, and contingent, grounds upon which decisions to expel individuals often rely and (2) the threatened or actual violences – physical and otherwise – upon which the exclusion of unwelcome individuals relies. Thus, where the familiar political and media storying of exclusion from the vantage point of the collective self to be protected positions this practice as a necessary and legitimate application of established principles, children's books such as those explored here demonstrate protection's imbrication with violence; security's imbrication with insecurity; and the self's reliance upon others. While similar arguments are presented by advocacy organisations like Amnesty International (as demonstrated below), children's literature holds considerable and potentially unique power in this context. It emphasises the experiences of the banished, harnesses the emotive power of its narratives and illustrations, and reaches a broad, impressionable audience.

To develop this argument, the article proceeds in four stages. We begin by situating our analysis in wider literatures on children, popular culture, and world politics. Here, we contrast Politics and International Relations' (IR) belated recognition of children's artefacts with work in other disciplines such as children's studies, before reflecting on the prominence of exclusion in children's books as a literary genre. A second methodological section then introduces and contextualises the three books on which we here focus to justify our selection, orient the reader, and to account for the interpretive work beneath our own analysis. A third section engages with the interrogation of exclusion's grounds and violences in each book as indicative of their value as both mirror and critical tool. The article concludes by reflecting on significant opportunities for future work in this under-explored site of world politics, not least given our own focus on works by authors within the global North.

Children's literature and/as global politics

Recent years have witnessed belated but growing academic acknowledgement of the importance of popular culture for global politics and therefore the field of IR (e.g. Kangas, 2009: 317–318; Shapiro, 2008; Weldes, 1999; Weber, 2021). Such work offers vitally important insight into popular culture's capacity to shape understandings of world politics among citizens, policymakers, and others, as well as to intervene directly *within* world politics. Engaging with videogames (e.g. Ciută, 2016; Robinson, 2015) and vampires (Rowley and Weldes, 2012), soap operas (e.g. Innes, 2017) and science fiction (Fey et al., 2016; Weldes, 1999), poppies (Basham, 2016) and pubs (Saunders and Holland, 2018), and much else besides, such work has been integral in mapping and deepening understanding of the 'intersections of culture and [international] politics' (Crilley, 2021: 166). These intersections, of course, are both multiple and evolving, with one well-known contribution charting four distinct relationships between the two phenomena: *popular culture and politics* in which popular culture is either a cause or product of political events; popular culture *as a mirror* facilitating reflection on established theoretical and pedagogical assumptions; popular culture *as a source of data* allowing insight into a community's 'dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs'; and, popular culture *as constitutive of politics* given its ability to

enable or constrain political outcomes through contribution to social understanding (Neumann and Nexon, 2006: 6–20).

Given the importance of work such as the above – and given its standing outside the traditional 'centre' of fields such as IR and Political Science – it is, perhaps, surprising to see that its insights have rarely extended to the objects and experiences of *children's popular culture*: the focus of this article. Indeed, cultural artefacts that are explicitly marketed at, or primarily consumed by, children remain still, and curiously, neglected in this area (see also Beier, 2015: 2; Jarvis, 2024). In attempting to help address this neglect, this article builds on a small number of recent engagements with children's stories (Alemán, 2012; Grayson, 2013), picture books (Jarvis and Robinson, 2024), fairy tales (Starnes, 2016), novels (Heit, 2015), comics (Cooper-Cunningham, 2020), and games (Jarvis, 2024), as well as with films marketed, at least in part, at young audiences (e.g. Doucet, 2005; Smoodin, 1994). Among other things, such work helps to detail the constitution of global politics – for children, and for others – in traditionally neglected times and spaces: cinema trips or bedtime stories, for instance (Jarvis and Robinson, 2024: 77). It also, as Grayson argues of *A Bear Called Paddington*, demonstrates the emphatically *political* nature of children's cultural artefacts with their 'potential to provide narrative foundations about who one is, and how the world operates' (Grayson, 2013: 380). Siobhan McEvoy-Levy's (2018) work on *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, to give one important example, demonstrates the vitality of speculative fiction not only for younger audiences' understanding of peace, but also for their participation *within* peace processes including through facilitating the negotiation of youth identities, transnational 'bridge-building', and the mobilisation of social justice campaigns (see also McEvoy-Levy, 2017).

By broadening and deepening understanding of global political processes, work such as this demonstrates how the importance of children's popular culture extends beyond analogous engagement with 'real world' dynamics (Kirby, 2017), with the medium's capacity to render visible the exclusionary construction of ideological fictions such as around multiculturalism and cohesion (Maza, 2012). Such work helps researchers and students interrogate established paradigms in fields such as IR (Dreyer, 2016), while generating hitherto-overlooked opportunities for interdisciplinary learning from adjacent fields with more extensive experience of engaging with children's popular culture (see Watson, 2006). As Reynolds (2007: 3) argues, 'Many children's books offer quirky or critical or alternative visions of the world designed to provoke that ultimate response of childhood, "Why?" "Why are things as they are?" "Why can't they be different?"' Such work underscores the significance of children's actions and agency in global politics, showing that young people possess remarkable potential – perhaps capacity – to narrate, question, and critique the world, including through nuanced and critical interpretations of sociopolitical issues (see also Hunt, 2006). As demonstrated by disciplines beyond IR, there is real value in engaging with these texts, their contexts, and their potentialities, in order to move beyond 'misguided and sentimental notions of childhood innocence' or naive belief in the simplicity of children's perspectives on the world (Halberstam, 2012: xxiii).

Work on children's literature in childhood studies, cultural studies, and education, for instance, has investigated the emphatically political contexts behind the production, consumption, and utilisation of children's books (e.g. Nordenstam and Widhe, 2021), and the importance of this medium for moral and political development and learning, both conservative and progressive (e.g. Johansson, 2013; Patterson, 2019; Todres and Higinbotham,

2016).[4] Such insight has been significant for, and speaks to, wider contemporary IR scholarship on the politics of children and childhoods tracking the storying of global politics by, for, and around children including in relation to migration (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018; Pruitt, 2021), reconciliation (Mollica, 2023), child-soldiering (Tabak, 2020), and children's suffering (Berents, 2020). Although much remains to be done, this and related work has made it more difficult for IR to ignore children's agencies (see Beier, 2020), experiences (MacFarlane, 2023), and encounters (e.g. with textbooks and museums) (e.g. Hoban, 2022), all of which will be contextually located and specific.

This article takes normative and analytical inspiration from the above scholarships in our effort to think the politics of exclusion with and through children's fiction. Viewing these books as constitutive of global politics as encountered by children, their interlocutors, and other readers, we argue that the genre not only spotlights the importance of exclusionary politics for global politics, but also gives us tools with which to critique the assumptions and workings thereof. One of the reasons why children's literature offers such a useful starting point here is the very prominence of exclusion therein. Traditional fairy tales – Snow White or Hansel and Gretel, for instance – see the forcible outcasting of their protagonists from their homes by powerful or authoritative figures,[5] while Cinderella suffers effective ostracism from the family unit via banishment to the kitchen and condemnation to a life of servitude. Enduringly popular stories – described, sometimes, as 'classics' – draw on exclusion's inherent jeopardy as a plot device, as with Peter Pan's temporary banishment of Tinkerbell which facilitates the latter's manipulation by the villainous Captain Hook (Barrie, 2018). Most obvious, though, are stories organised around the figure of the outlaw ('real' or imagined): 'an individual who has been cast out of society, either for a crime or because he [sic] has become a threat to those in power – sometimes a combination of both' (Seal, 2011: 4). This figure's enduring appeal in children's stories (e.g. Phillips, 2008) derives, in part, from its provocative engagement with questions of power, resistance, and (in)justice. It finds its archetype, of course, in the figure of Robin Hood: the Sherwood Forest dwelling fugitive who famously robs from the rich to give to the poor. This character's enduring resonance, to preface themes below, may be, as former Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo (2012) argued in an interview accompanying his re-telling of the Robin Hood myth, because children:

> understand right from wrong, and can readily see that oppression by the rich of the poor has to be resisted. The Sheriff of Nottingham is a bully. Children know about bullies just as grown-up children do, and we all know that in the end we have to stand up and fight for what we believe. Robin Hood in my story does just that. Such a struggle involves violence, it always has done.

Depicting exclusion in children's literature

The three examples through which we engage with exclusion's grounds and violences in this article – *The Enchanted Wood*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Lion Who Wanted to Love* – were chosen according to two criteria: (1) analytical purchase and (2) societal standing. These criteria helped us to select the three books from a wider 'long list' of potential texts engaging with exclusion put together through online research, library visits, and serendipity in the case of books already known to the authors from their experiences as children and parents.

The first criterion – analytical purchase – concerns the power of these three books to invoke and provoke thinking on the phenomenon of exclusion in global politics. As

Lene Hansen argues in outlining the importance of comics for IR, 'The choice of IR question can be driven by a range of theoretical and empirical research concerns, and these concerns should, in turn, be considered when specific comics [or, here, children's literature] are selected for analysis' (Hansen, 2017: 591). Michael Shapiro (2008, 2012), in his work on film and world politics, similarly advocates analysis of fictional texts that mount arguments about world politics and its constituent dynamics (see also Weber, 2021). In this sense, we do not argue that these three books are representative of children's literature as a whole, or of engagements with exclusion therein: the genre is far too diverse and varied for any small sample to reasonably sustain such a claim. Instead, our argument is that these books – read alongside each-other – shed important critical light on the workings of exclusionary politics and therefore on the capacity of children's literature to illuminate and critique world politics.

Second, beyond a thematic proximity generated by their common analytical engagement with exclusionary politics, the books are also prominent examples of what might be taken as the Anglo-American literary 'canon' for children, evidenced through their prize-winning status and standing in the United Kingdom and other countries of the English-speaking global North. *The Enchanted Wood* (Blyton, 2018) opens Enid Blyton's *Faraway Tree* series: a perennially popular quadrilogy which has spawned television series, movie projects, and continuation novels from high-profile authors including another former Children's Laureate, Jacqueline Wilson.[6] Maurice Sendak's (2013) *Where the Wild Things Are* has, if anything, even greater standing as a 'classic' of children's literature, winning prestigious prizes such as the Caldecott Medal, selling over 20 million copies since publication in 1963 (Charles, 2013), enjoying translation into over 30 languages (Charles, 2013), and benefitting from multiple media adaptations including animated films and operatic performances.[7] *The Lion Who Wanted to Love* (Andreae and Wojtowycz, 1999), first published in 1997, is a more recent 'classic' published by high-profile collaborators author Giles Andreae, and illustrator David Wojtowycz, the former best-known for the decorated *Giraffes Can't Dance.* Another prize winner, this third book won the 1998 Red House Children's Best Picturebook Award coordinated by the Federation of Children's Book Groups and voted for entirely by children. To be clear, our approach in this article is to see these indicators of merit as productive, rather than reflective, of the books' standing or importance. For our purposes, the books matter because they are widely read, rather than being widely read because they matter. Such indicators, put otherwise, actively *position* such books as part of the 'mainstream' literary diet of children in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States in which their authors/illustrators lived or had cultural ties, for instance through their own education.

This standing of books such as these as prominent examples of children's literature is further important, we argue below, because they give to voice to arguments raised by progressive organisations and social justice campaigns such as Amnesty International. In contrast to the marginality or frustrations often experienced by such groups – especially in relation to national security discourse – children's literature has potential to bring injustices and wrongdoing into the 'mainstream' of everyday life and experiences. As Rundell (2019: 60) so powerfully argues:

> Children's books are not a hiding place, they are a seeking place. Plunge yourself soul-forward into a children's book: see if you do not find in them an unexpected alchemy; if they will not un-dig in you something half hidden and half forgotten.

Engaging with children's books as a 'mirror', then, may help to expose a disconnect between the ideas adults encounter through adult communication and those they explore with their children regarding exclusion: NGOs' criticisms of government policy on exclusion, for instance, may be more widespread and less peripheral than assumed given their prevalence within children's literature. And, as argued in the conclusion, such questions become, if anything, more urgent when thinking about the genre more broadly given that books by other authors – of colour, from global majority countries, and so forth – may story exclusion differently, such that our chosen texts speak to particular, rather than general, experiences and understandings.[8] Indeed, there exist important differences even between the three books on which we here focus – *The Lion Who Wanted to Love*'s explicit marketing as a progressive celebration of difference, for instance, sits uneasily beside Blyton's oeuvre which is regularly criticised as conservative or reactionary.[9] Moreover, where Blyton's *The Enchanted Wood* is a chapter book aimed at intermediate readers, the other two texts are picture books with full page illustrations accompanying the narrative.

In the following, we now offer brief precis of our three books' engagement with exclusion in order to orientate readers unfamiliar with the texts. From this, we develop our own analytical reading of each around exclusion's grounds and violences.

The Lion Who Wanted to Love

First published by Orchard Books in 1999, *The Lion Who Wanted to Love* unfolds across 28 unnumbered pages dominated by colourful and stylistically sparse illustrations (Andreae and Wojtowycz, 1999). The book's narrative centres on its protagonist's inability to conform to the pride's carnivorous norms. In the words of Leo – a 'small lion who didn't fit in':

> . . . when I'm close to a zebra
>
> A funny thought goes through my head,
>
> Instead of deciding to bite through his skin
>
> I'd much rather hug him instead.

Leo's dislocation from the pride's expectations leads directly to his exclusion from the community, with his mother – surrounded by other pride members – informing him, 'if you insist you're not going to hunt, Then there's no place for you in our pride'. The double-page spread capturing Leo's expulsion sees the disconsolate young lion looking back over his shoulder as he heads 'off to the jungle' to 'learn how to cope in the animal world'. Two of his new cohabitants – a monkey and a snake – bear witness to Leo's banishment from the surrounding trees – the former shocked, the latter saddened – while other pairs of disembodied eyes peer out from the blackness beyond.

The Enchanted Wood

Our second example comes from a much older chapter book for children: Enid Blyton's (2018) *The Enchanted Wood*. First published in 1939, the book centres on three siblings' move to a new house in the British countryside. Located a short walking distance from their new home is a 'rather a mysterious sort of wood' (Blyton, 2018: 4) that the children

– Joe, Beth, and Frannie – discover to be populated by whispering trees and assorted fairy-folk. The children's adventures in this wood begin on their second visit when they witness a gnome stealing a bag from a small group of elves. Giving chase, they happen upon what they later learn to be the Faraway Tree: 'the oldest and most magic tree in the world' (Blyton, 2018: 11). The tree counts pixies, fairies, and other unusual characters among its residents, has a 'slippery-slip' slide running through its trunk, and an unpredictable revolving universe of far-away places at its top.

The book's moment of relevance to our analysis follows an early incident in which two of the tree's residents – Moon-Face, 'a moon-faced person' (Blyton, 2018: 32) and Silky, a fairy – are caught throwing acorns into the mouth of a sleeping resident, Mister Watzisname. As Silky recollects:

> [Moon-face] was very naughty . . . So was I. You see, we heard Mister Watzisname snoring as usual, and we crept up to him and saw that his mouth was wide open. And, oh dear, we popped a handful of acorns into it, and when he woke up he spluttered and popped, and then he caught sight of us hiding behind a big branch (Blyton, 2018: 74).

While Silky manages to escape, the perpetually snoring, ill-tempered Mister Watzisname apprehends Moon-Face, throwing him through a hole in the clouds to the land at the top of the Faraway Tree. The potential consequences of this expulsion, as Silky continues, are genuinely existential:

> Mister Watzisname is sitting on the ladder ready to catch him and throw him back. . . . Mister Watzisname will sit on the ladder till the land swings round and another one comes. Then Moon-Face won't be able to get back, and he may be lost forever (Blyton, 2018: 75).

Where the Wild Things Are

Our final example comes from Maurice Sendak's (2013) *Where the Wild Things Are*, first published in 1963. The story centres on the experiences of Max, a young boy 'sent to bed without eating anything' by his – never pictured – mother after a night of 'making mischief' dressed in a wolf suit. Enduring his punishment, an intrigued Max witnesses his room's transformation into a forest and climbs aboard a 'private boat' to sail across an ocean, 'in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are'. Uncowed by the ferocity of monstrous hybrid creatures many times his size, Max succeeds in 'tam[ing] them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once'. Declaring Max 'the most wild thing of all', the wild things crown him king and join in a 'wild rumpus' of howling at the moon, swinging from trees, jumping, and dancing. As the evening sky turns pink, a homesick and visibly saddened Max sends the wild things off to bed 'without their supper'. Smelling 'good things to eat' from 'far away across the world', Max abdicates his role and – ignoring the wild things' threats and entreaties – returns in his boat to the 'still hot' supper awaiting him in his now-restored bedroom.

Theorising exclusion through children's literature

The remainder of this article approaches the extensive engagement with diverse practices of exclusion in children's books as a 'mirror' (Neumann and Nexon, 2006) facilitating fresh reflection on the importance of such practices for the organisation and governance

of global politics. Analytically, we do so by situating our discussion within scholarship on popular culture and world politics emphasising fiction's power to explore personal and subjective experiences of global politics that may be hidden beneath the grand narratives that have historically dominated fields like Politics and International Relations (Welland, 2018: 443). Arguments about the power of such insight resonate with the attention to trivialised and ostensibly banal sources or carriers of knowledge within feminist scholarship and related work on the everyday (e.g. Elias and Rai, 2019; Nyman, 2021). Engaging such sources is productive because, as Davies (2010: 178) notes in relation to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*:

> . . . a critique of IR entails an analytical engagement with documents that can mediate between theoretical reflection and the lived dramas of everyday life, such as those mediations produced in popular culture.

Our conception of children's books as a mirror that facilitates analytical attention to experiences of exclusion within global politics is concretised methodologically through Michael Shapiro's (2012) account of the 'aesthetic subject' – a concept he develops from Bersani and Dutoit (2019). This involves following the stories of fictional characters – Moon Face, Leo, Max, and their interlocutors – to explore what their movements and encounters reveal about wider political structures and contexts (Shapiro, 2013: 317). Doing so enables a bracketing of questions around the psychological or interior lives of fictional characters (Tedesco and Davies, 2022: 3). It has especial illuminating capacity for our purposes because of the tendency of children's books – such as the three on which we focus below – to build their plot around the experiences of a small number of characters (Jarvis and Robinson, 2024).

Approached thus, the remainder of this article unpacks the ways in which the experiences of specific aesthetic subjects in our selected texts help render visible (1) the contingent and therefore contestable grounds upon which exclusion decisions are made and imposed by authoritative actors and (2) the underpinning of exclusionary processes by actual or threatened violence. In doing this, we show how such texts resonate with other forms of political critique – including by human rights and advocacy organisations. On top of this, moreover, the centring of excluded subjects as protagonists or central characters in children's literature gives this genre especial capacity to move beyond positioning those who are subject to exclusion decisions as mere victims meriting pity. Without detracting from their critique of exclusion, each of these texts ascribes some sense of agency to the figure of the excluded.[10]

Exclusion's rationales: Authority and grounds

The political exclusion of dangerous or unwanted others is frequently, indeed typically, justified as a necessary and legitimate response to the physical or moral threat posed to some privileged referent: a community, a way of life, national security, and so forth. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the Home Secretary may seek deportation of individuals on the grounds that doing so is conducive to the public good (UK Home Office, 2021). The scope of such grounds are instructively broad, and may include the deportee's criminality, their involvement in a sham marriage, a national security rationale, or the existence of 'compelling circumstantial evidence that the person's conduct or presence in the UK has or will cause serious harm, but the person has not yet been convicted of a criminal

offence' (UK Home Office, 2021). The elusiveness of these criteria, their future-oriented rationale such that (in the United Kingdom at least) no criminal conviction is needed, and the severity of exclusion raise profound questions of justice and legitimacy upon which advocacy and human rights organisations have focused (e.g. Amnesty International, 2021; Justice, n.d.). Such questions are no less substantial in efforts at, or practices of, forcibly offshoring from states like the United Kingdom, compellingly described in one report as an act of 'political sadism' (Human Rights' Watch, 2023).

Critique such as this is important because it helps highlight the potentially arbitrary exercise of exclusionary powers by states and their apparatuses against individuals who may lack adequate opportunity for resistance or representation. Human Rights' Watch (2023), for instance, powerfully illuminates the desperation of individuals seeking safety from war or oppression against whom offshoring powers are used. Amnesty International (2021), relatedly, demonstrates the variable precarity of residents to deportation powers in states like the United Kingdom, noting:

> Among the people affected by these powers are people who have lived here for many years, including people who have lived in the UK all or most of their lives. While there is no power to deport a British citizen, many people grow up in this country without British citizenship but with rights to it.

Children's literature, we now argue, facilitates critical engagement with ethical discussions such as these, not least through its willingness to engage both the excluding power's authority and the adequacy of the grounds on which such decisions are made.

Authority. In terms of authority, the three books in our sample are important because they actively expose the hierarchical relationship between actors responsible for exclusion decisions and those who find themselves subject to those decisions. Mirroring real-world exclusionary practices – as well as the interventions of organisations such as those above – the books' critical potential here is in their highlighting the limited scope that exists for resisting exclusion in fundamentally asymmetric regimes such as those confronting refugees or non-citizens deemed national security threats.

Most straightforward, perhaps, is the relationship between Max and his mother in *Where the Wild Things Are*, with the latter's overt positioning as a figure of maternal authority responsible for correcting her son's mischief-making. The strictness with which the mother conducts her punitive work – Max's banishment to his room for (repeated) rule-breaking continues the verbal outcasting he suffers, 'his mother called him "WILD THING?"' (Sendak, 2013) – helps to story exclusion as the prerogative of fundamentally unequal power relationships. Such inequality is hinted at, too, in the lack of any contestation over Max's punishment when he is (eventually) dispatched up the stairs to his room. A related invocation of authority is also apparent in *The Lion Who Wanted to Love* (Andrea and Wojtowycz, 1999), with Leo's banishment from the security of the pride going similarly uncontested by the young lion. Leo's home, in contrast to Max's, is unmistakably a communal one, with the mother both speaking for, and surrounded by, other pride members at the moment of his expulsion. Authority, here, may therefore also rest upon the tacit consent of other community members, with membership of the pride dependent, at least in part, on recognising this regime.

Although focused on similar dynamics, a rather different construction of hierarchy is apparent in Enid Blyton's (2018) *The Enchanted Wood*, in which the excluding actor's authority rests not on their structural position in the family unit, but rather on their

superior material capabilities. Mister Watzisname has no discernible relationship to, or responsibility for, the character of Moon-Face beyond the happenstance of a shared residence in the Faraway Tree. His ability to expel Moon-Face from that space, therefore, is a product, purely, of the superior physical strength he manages to summon when he 'caught hold of [Moon-Face] and threw him right through the hole in the clouds' (Blyton, 2018: 74). Although a return home remains technically open to Moon-Face via the ladder connecting the Faraway Tree to the revolving lands above, there is no feasible prospect of his navigating past the 'petty sovereign' (Butler, 2004) of Mister Watzisname who has taken it upon himself to police the tree's border and the potentially indefinite outcasting it facilitates. As Silky the fairy responds when asked about Moon-Face's potential return: 'you see, Mister Watzisname is sitting on the ladder ready to catch him and throw him back. So what's the use of [attempting to return]?' (Blyton, 2018: 75).

In different ways, then, each of these books highlights the contestable authority grounding regimes of exclusion. Power – in the form of structural privilege and/or brute material capabilities – is exposed as the foundation upon which authority for such decisions ultimately resides, the absoluteness of which is apparent from the absence of any contestation by those subject to exclusion: Moon-Face, Leo, and Max. The decision to exclude is, moreover, essentially by fiat at the hands of self-appointed authorities in each of these cases. No opportunity is there, in any of the books, for scrutiny, debate, or dissent of the banishment decision, and none of the excluded characters are provided space to explain or defend themselves, or to offer mitigating grounds for their disruptive actions. If the harshness of this exceptional power is softened in *Where the Wild Things Are*, at least, by the pastoral care implied in the orderliness of Max's home and the meeting of his immediate needs via a hot supper (Sendak, 2013), each book helps pull into focus the contingent foundations of the sovereign prerogative to exclude through their emphasis on its underpinning basis in contestable attributes of power.

Grounds. Beyond their critique of exclusionary authority, each of these books also has capacity to demonstrate to readers the questionable grounds and proportionality of exclusionary powers. Their common storying of exclusion as a disproportionate response to purported threats or seemingly minor infractions is, itself, evidence of their 'mirroring' similar trends in the real world. On top of this, the implication in each that exclusion is (at a minimum) potentially illegitimate points also to their scope for exposing political activities otherwise concealed from, or potentially overlooked by, adult publics. This, of course, speaks to popular culture's capacity as a tool for informing citizens or rupturing dominant discourses, as well as to potential proximities between popular fiction and the critical discourse of human rights groups similarly invested in exposing otherwise hidden practices.

Contra claims to necessity (through security) or legitimacy (through legality) in 'real world' practices of expulsion, the three texts considered here each encourage a sustained questioning of the validity of the justifications upon which such decisions reside. Tapping, perhaps, into children's attentiveness to perceived injustices (Ellard et al., 2016: 129–130), the texts' storying around the experiences of their primary aesthetic subjects enables new reflection on the reasons for, as well as the proportionality of, expulsion as punishment for transgressive behaviour. Moon-Face, as we have seen, suffers banishment from the Faraway Tree for assaulting a sleeping Mister Watzisname while his co-accused, Silky, manages successfully to evade their prank's target and therefore punishment (Blyton, 2018). Max, in turn, suffers his fate for causing damage to his house, chasing

what appears to be the family dog, and threatening (in jest) to eat his mother (Sendak, 2013).

Although the guilt of Moon-Face or Max is never questioned, each book actively encourages readers to ask about the proportionality of exclusion – the temporal limits of which are left open in each case – as a response to misbehaviour or disobedience. As importantly, although both characters might have understood the transgressive nature of their acts, there is no suggestion in either case of prior contribution to the breached rules beyond whatever tacit consent may be inferred from living in these shared spaces. Each character is punished, ultimately, for transgressing the interests of the effective sovereign: disrupting Mister Watzisname's desire for sleep (Blyton, 2018) and Max's mother's ambitions for an orderly domicile (Sendak, 2013). And the rapidity of punishment, in each case, leaves scant impression that these rules and their consequences have been codified or formalised.[11]

Leo the lion finds himself similarly beholden to a powerful and incontestable figure of authority, and equally lacking in any meaningful recourse to mechanisms of appeal or mitigation (Andrea and Wojtowycz, 1999). The depiction of Leo's punishment, however, is far more pointed than the others because it highlights expulsion's capacity for punishing identity as well as behaviour. Leo is cast out of the pride not because of what he has done, but because of *who he is*. He is expelled because of his preference for hugging rather than hunting zebras, and his inability or unwillingness to conform to the pride's hegemonic norms. Exclusion here is revealed, then, as a power that can be imposed upon types of subject as well as upon types of conduct (see McSherry, 2004). It is a power that can be targeted at loving lions, or, in other contexts, refugees or citizens of designated countries.

The violence of exclusion

A second critical theme within these three books is their capacity to pull attention to the violences that facilitate and enable exclusionary politics. As above, there are two aspects to this. First, and most obvious, is through their highlighting of the importance of physical violence to the practice of exclusion itself. However, dressed up in the language of sovereignty, national security, penal codes, and the like, the literal use of force commonly accompanies the expulsion of individuals from their communities, as indicated, viscerally, in deportee experiences:

> The guards tried to pin me down with their legs and their knees. After some time they put a belt from under my armpit down to my abdomen. They started tightening it and I was screaming and screaming 'This is too tight for me!' . . . After some time I passed out – there was no air. Someone shouted that they should put me in the recovery position. I was in panic and hyperventilating. They held my head and tried to force a tablet into my mouth. I was choking and gagging for 30 minutes (Miller, 2015).

Although detail such as this is, understandably, absent in children's books, the violence of exclusion is readily apparent in each of our examples. Such violence is present in the angered expressions of Leo's pride as he glances despondently over his shoulder on his walk to the jungle (Andrea and Wojtowycz, 1999). Violence is there, too, in the closed door demarcating the boundary between Max's bedroom as his place of confinement and the rest of the house/community from which he has been outcast (Sendak, 2013). And violence is there also, of course, in the superior physical strength of Mister

Watzisname who is able to both physically remove the offending MoonFace from the Faraway Tree, prevent his return, and deter any intervention by his co-conspirator or comrades (Blyton, 2018).

But the intertwining of exclusion and violence is not limited here to the moment of removal. Testimony from deportees, again, speaks powerfully to non-literary physical, mental, and other harms that follow forcible isolation from family and friends, compulsory exposure to new environments, and dislocatory experiences accompanying exclusion. One man's experience of deportation from the United Kingdom to Jamaica under the Windrush scandal is painfully illustrative of some of these wider physical and other violences:

> . . . Kemoy started hearing voices. His thoughts were running too quickly and he felt that people were talking about him. Trusting no one, he began leaving Open Arms [the homeless shelter in which he was staying] for days at a time, and walking for miles, aimlessly. One time he was badly beaten up by police officers after straying into a wealthy neighbourhood. He stopped showering, and smashed his phone after an episode of paranoia. He was experiencing severe headaches, smoking weed almost compulsively and not eating, sleeping or washing regularly. Back in Scotland, his mother was desperately worried, unable to contact him and unable to visit him in Jamaica because of her own insecure immigration status in the UK (De Noronha, 2020).

The three children's books considered here do an equally powerful job of centring the excluded's exposure to multiple violences. Max, on entering the world of the 'Wild Things', finds himself isolated from his home, his family – and, indeed any fellow humans (Sendak, 2013). Although lauded and anointed by his new cohabitants, his banishment involves sacrificing whatever ontological security was offered by the stability of his familial home and relationships. Leo, following his expulsion, finds himself denied the pride's protection (Andrea and Wojtowycz, 1999). As a result, he is exposed to the threat of starvation within the state of the nature that is his new jungle home while simultaneously coping with isolation from his community. And Moon-Face is forced to confront an entirely unknowable fate as he is thrown up to the Faraway Tree's unpredictable rotating universe (Blyton, 2018). Not only is he cast into an unknown and unfamiliar land above the tree, Moon-Face also has no way of knowing when that land will move on and therefore irreparably sever any route back to his home.

In each of these examples, then, we see nuanced attention to the plural violences caused by banishment – with these books provoking reflection on, among other things, the deprivation of social contact, liberty, autonomy, and security that is characteristic of contemporary expulsion initiatives (Beckett and Herbert, 2010).[12] Precisely because their plots are organised around the experiences of the excluded, readers are confronted with the corporeal, psychological, and cultural violences (see Galtung, 1990) that legitimise or enable the expulsion of targeted individuals. In doing this, as we have shown, books such as these serve to highlight the multiple forms of power inherent within and beneath such practices: structural and agential, material and normative, formal and informal.[13]

Conclusion

Exploring the potential of children's literature as a site in which the politics of exclusion is mirrored, critiqued, and reproduced risks accusation of trivialising the very real experiences and harms suffered by people subject to deportation, banishment, or other forms of exclusion. Such accusations are familiar within the wider field of popular culture and

world politics, even if that work has become less peripheral over the past decade or so (Crilley, 2021). Yet, as we have seen, children's literature has huge value as a site in which the world is storied, interpreted, critiqued, and perhaps even changed. Despite its accessibility, moreover, children's literature is also itself frequently challenging and complex.

Our argument in this article has focused on the ways in which prominent and enduringly popular examples of children's literature depict the logics, experiences, and consequences of exclusionary politics with specific reference to: (1) the contingent authority and grounds of exclusion as a form of security politics, and (2) the violence on which exclusionary politics relies, and that it enacts. In so doing, the article has shown how engaging with popular culture can contribute to existing debate on exclusionary politics by complementing theoretical and empirical analyses of the practices and consequences of this particular exercise of power, while speaking to and alongside the critical interventions of advocacy and other organisations.

Our overall argument is that engaging with children's picture books – and thereby employing popular culture as a mirror – is highly instructive for several inter-related reasons. First, we have demonstrated that controversial political issues such as exclusionary politics are actively engaged with and communicated to children in this literary genre. Second, we have shown how engagements with exclusionary politics therein are complex and can be read in different – and perhaps competing – ways. Third, our reading has demonstrated that these books are polysemous texts. In particular, these books can be seen to both articulate and demonstrate a politics of exclusion framed through state-centric rationales, but they can also be seen to mirror the critique of state conduct that is offered by human rights and justice groups who are concerned by the apparently arbitrary and disproportionate grounds on which exclusionary politics is practised. Fourth, given the wide readership of these books, our analysis demonstrates that this complex engagement with exclusion reaches wide and impressionable audiences, taking the critical potential sought by human rights and justice groups into the home and everyday experiences.

Given the lack of attention to children's literature as a site for the storying of world politics, there is, we argue, considerable scope for future research building on our analysis. Most obvious would be expanded engagement with representations of banishment, outlawry, and other forms of exclusion across children's books. Such a study could involve the charting of changes across time and place, and the complicity or criticality of such texts in their storying of this security practice. Do depictions of banishment differ, for instance, outside of the Anglo-American examples on which we focus above? How has the figure of the excluded character evolved over time, given that figures like Robin Hood enjoy an existence stretching across centuries? Second, there is scope for greater conceptual work on the logics of exclusion as storied in children's literature. Such work could pull attention to exclusion's gendered and racialised logics: it is noteworthy, for instance, that the banished characters considered here are all identifiably male. Third, picking up themes above, there is scope for exploring the reception of these texts by readers. How do children decode fictional acts of exclusion such as those explored here? How are such acts explained by interlocutors such as guardians, teachers, or librarians, and does the reading of these texts have enduring political consequences for the views of children? And fourth, there is scope too for greater engagement with the producers of such texts: do the authors, illustrators, publishers, and marketers of children's books engaging with

such themes have critical (or conservative) political motives? Do such motivations change historically, including in relation to evolving practices of (here) exclusion in the 'real world' of global politics? Questions such as these are, of course, some way beyond the scope of this article. Our hope is that our discussion and analysis offers valuable resources and inspiration for future work of this sort.

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Notes

1. Such powers find local equivalents in anti-social regimes, control orders, and other tools restricting the movement of particular individuals (see Macdonald, 2007). Equivalence might be drawn, too, with practices such as takfirism that deny individuals membership of religious communities (see Swinhoe, 2021).
2. The appetite is characterised, most dramatically, in the United Kingdom at least in the 2018 'Windrush Scandal' (see The Economist, 2018).
3. As one reviewer helpfully noted, such differences point powerfully to the prominence of hierarchies of citizenship in the contemporary period.
4. Our sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers for pushing us to expand the contexts of our article here.
5. We accept that the designation of fairy tales as children's literature is contestable. While the examples given in this article have popular renditions for children, we acknowledge that there is an important politics to the reproduction of these stories in formats suitable for children, often in highly gendered ways. Our thanks to the anonymous reviewer for highlighting this to us.
6. Blyton's enduring popularity as an author is indicated by the 600 million copies of her books in circulation, and the translation of her books into over 90 languages (Thiagarajan, 2022).
7. Indeed, Barack and Michelle Obama chose the book – widely reported as one of the former's favourites – for their reading at the White House's Annual Easter Egg in 2015 (Marc, 2016).
8. Our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for pushing us to be more reflexive on this point.
9. Indeed, the Enid Blyton book on which we here focus has endured several revisions to its plot and character names over time to reflect changing social conventions and mores.
10. We offer our reading fully aware that alternative interpretations are both possible and desirable, given these books are all polysemous texts which can be read in multiple ways. Our own reading is thus not designed to foreclose alternatives, nor is it offered as the definitive reading; instead, we actively welcome alternative and competing readings of these texts to demonstrate their complexity in relation to the politics of exclusion.
11. An alternative reading could, again, be offered in which the social norms/rules of non-violation of a person and/or property are already understood. From this point of view, at best Moon Face is being mischievous, at worst he is engaging in assault. Similarly, at best Max could be seen to be engaging in riotous play, but at worst he is engaged in vandalism and animal cruelty.
12. The harms that these books emphasise are both fleeting and overcome which is, of course, quite different to the fate of the excluded in the 'real world'. Again, if appropriate to contemporary mores in children's literature, this is also reflexive of the capacity of children's literature for polysemous interpretation.
13. Our thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

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