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GOOD INTENTIONS: OTHERING LGBTQ LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN THE SLOVENIAN LITERARY SYSTEM

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Abstract: The article looks at the position of LGBTQ literature for children and young adults in the Slovenian literary system. In particular, it attempts to demonstrate that LGBTQ texts are often written, understood and didacticized with (implicit) reference to difference, empathy, acceptance and otherness. It analyses literary and critical texts with a focus on the apparently well-meaning processes of othering found at the levels of plot, character, writers' didactic interference, critical reception and publishing. These processes influence how the members of the in-group perceive the members of the out-group (both of whom can be readers and writers) and how each see themselves. Not only do they reflect, but they also help shape reality and impact on the ways individuals are treated in society. Therefore, the criteria of literariness, though essential, are not absolute, and all agents in the children's and young adult literary system should take account of the human/children's right to inclusion.

Introduction

In Slovenia, LGBTQ literature published specifically for young readers is a relatively recent development, mostly dating from the 21st century. While the novel *Dečki: roman iz dijaškega internata* (Boys: A Novel from a Boarding School, 1938, reprinted 1970 and 2016) by France Novšak (1916–1991), generally regarded as the first homoerotic novel in the history of Slovenian literature, has also been discussed as a novel for young adults (e.g. Pirnar, 2006; Picco, 2011b; Blažić, 2020; for more on Novšak and the novel, see Zavrl, 2016, 2020), the first book with homosexuality as the main theme specifically intended for teenaged readers to appear in Slovenia was the translation of Nancy Garden's *Pismo za Annie* (Annie on My Mind, 1982, ST Dušanka Zabukovec, 1996). It has been described as "an excellent novel" that

"provides a way to awaken understanding, sympathy and the ability to empathize with teenagers' feelings of love" (Pirnar, 2006: 238), but the lesbian identity it portrays is an almost life-threatening condition. Correspondingly, the Slovenian afterword entitled "Can Love Be a Bad Thing?" frames same-gender desire in terms of "differentness" and trauma; while being supportive, it perpetuates the association between homosexuality and anguish (Cotič, 1996).[1]

Janja Vidmar, one of the most prolific and celebrated authors of children's and young adult literature in Slovenia, has written more than a few so-called problem novels, covering topics from racism, body image, violence, underage pregnancy to existential angst and many more. Among them is *Fantje iz gline* (Boys Made of Clay, 2005), a novel that has been hailed as breaking down the taboo of gayness (Picco, 2011b: 20), as well as a sensitive approach to the taboo and social rejection of same-gender love and prejudice against it (Haramija, 2009: 167–168, 2012: 332). However, Vidmar builds her novel's LGBTQ world on merging many of the negative tropes: suicide, violence and bullying, dysfunctional families, childhood abuse and identity confusion, self-harm, destructive love and suchlike. Consequently, same-sex desire is inextricably related to darkness and pain.

Starting from these introductory observations, the article seeks to demonstrate that LGBTQ texts for children and young adults are often written, understood and didacticized with (implicit) reference to difference, empathy and (in)tolerance, especially in mainstream book production and reception. The term "differentness" (Slovenian: *drugačnost*) is repeatedly used when discussing the topics and individuals that do not fit the assumed norm. It seems to (mal)function as a politically correct euphemism for a great variety of heterodoxies, identities and personal circumstances. Its theoretical counterpart is "otherness" (Slovenian: *drugost*), which is one of the central concepts in the humanities, operating "as a kind of 'universal' notion at the intersection of sociology, philosophy, cultural, postmodern, postcolonial, women's and gender studies, ethnology, anthropology, linguistics, pedagogy, psychology, psychoanalysis, literary studies, etc." (Virk, 2007: 123). Although the concept should not "turn into empty 'political correctness' or 'patronizing attitudes'" (Virk, 2007: 128), this seems to be the case time and again in the analyses, reviews and pedagogical uses of literature for children and young adults as well as in the literary texts themselves.

[1] The gap between the publication of the original and the Slovenian translation exemplifies the more general delay in the publication of LGBTQ literature for children and young adults in Slovenia.

The following analysis, which is not a comprehensive overview of children's and young adult LGBTQ literature in the Slovenian language (for a more general outline, see Picco, 2011a and 2011b; Zavrl, 2021), explores the various categories of othering – some direct, others less so – that occur at the levels of plot, character, writers' didactic interference, critical reception and publishing.[2]

Labels

One of the first and most important publications to turn to in any overview of books for children and young adults in Slovenia is the *Priročnik za branje kakovostnih mladinskih knjig* (The Guide to Quality Books for Children and Young Adults; hereafter referred to as *Priročnik*). Published annually by the Centre for Children's and Young Adult Literature and Librarianship at the Ljubljana City Library, it is an invaluable source of information, presenting and evaluating the book production of the previous year. It is all the more important because there is little systematic reviewing of book production for young readers in Slovenia. The average number of evaluated books for the last five years for which figures are available (2015–2019) was 773, of which 81% were fiction. The average ratio of originally Slovenian to translated books for the same period was 42% (Slovenian) to 58% (translated) (*Priročnik*, 2020: 21).

In addition to other information, the *Priročnik* provides tags describing the book's themes, tropes and issues. The frequency of the tag of "differentness" – as an instance of straightforward othering – varies between the years. In the 2000–2020 period, it was applied 299 times for the total of 10,052 tagged books (2.97%). The shares oscillate between 9.69% (in 2017) and 0.48% (in 2005). The tags used to represent LGBTQ tropes are "homosexuality", "bisexuality" and "transsexuality". They were used 23 times in the same period (of which "transsexuality" was used three times and

[2] No principled distinction is made between originally Slovenian books and translations because, first, translations play a very important role and make up a substantial share in the Slovenian literary system; second, it seems unlikely that the readers looking for books with a particular topic would also apply the selection criteria of writers' nationalities/original languages; and, third, the same othering mechanisms are at work in both groups. If the book is a translation, this will be immediately obvious because on its first being mentioned the Slovenian translator's name (preceded by "ST") will be provided; translations are also supplied with their original titles and the years of original and Slovenian publications. Only works of fiction are discussed.

"bisexuality" once), that is, for 0.23% of the books included. Both "differentness" and one of the LGBTQ tags were used for eight books (most recently in 2015).

As well as being infrequent, the three LGBTQ tags are non-specific, and sometimes they are inadequate, misleading or erroneous. The first book with an out gay male adolescent protagonist to appear in Slovenia, Kate Walker's *Peter* (Peter, 1991, ST Marta Pirnar, 2007), follows the first-person narrator on his reluctant path to accepting he is gay. The tags in the *Priročnik* (2008: 91) are "differentness, boys, homosexuality, adolescents, growing up, self-image". Leaving aside the questionable label of "differentness", the rest translate efficiently as "coming out", a very common trope in LGBTQ literature and thus perhaps deserving a tag of its own. "Homosexuality" is not among the tags attributed to Tamara Bach's novel *Punca z Marsa* (Marsmädchen, 2003, ST Barbara Lipovšek, 2007) although it is its theme (*Priročnik*, 2008: 82). Benny in James Heneghan's novel *Povračilo* (Payback, 2007, ST Kristina Dečman, 2009) kills himself because he finds no support in the homo-/transphobic bullying he suffers, yet the *Priročnik* (2010: 120) gives it the tags of "adolescents, violence, growing up, immigrants, death, distress", none of which specify the real problem.

On the other hand, the "homosexuality" tag is given to John Boyne's *Upor na ladji Bounty* (Mutiny on the Bounty, 2008, ST Jure Potokar, 2011) even though it features sexual abuse of children, not homosexuality (*Priročnik*, 2012: 95). The same is true of Jani Virk's *Brez imena* (Without a Name, 2018) (*Priročnik*, 2019: 117). Linking homosexuality with paedophilia and abuse in this way is evidently inappropriate, for the same reason as there is no "heterosexuality" tag in the books about abuse where the victim and the perpetrator identify with different genders.

Topics about gender non-conformity in literature for children and young adults – as well as in society at large – remain among the most contentious. Like English, Slovenian distinguishes between "transsexual" (Slovenian: *transseksualen_na*) and "transgender" (Slovenian: *transspolen_na*). The *Priročnik* uses the former, although the letter is broader and more inclusive and would be preferable. It has used the tag in no more than three instances, combining them consistently with "differentness": Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* (Luna, 2004, ST Anja Kokalj, 2007), Anna Woltz and Vicky Janssen's *Dekle z Marsa* (*Meisje van Mars*, 2011, ST Katjuša Ručigaj, 2011) and for the 2014 reprint of Suzana Tratnik's *Ime mi je Damjan* (My Name Is Damjan, 2001, 2014) (*Priročnik*, 2008: 88, 2013: 102, 2015: 150). On the other hand, Chrissie Glazebrook's *Norolescenti* (Madolescents, 2001, ST Irena Duša, 2003) and Lesley Choyce's *Konec skrivalnic* (Identify, 2017, ST Brigita Orel,

2018) both address trans topics, but neither is given any tags to suggest gender or trans issues (*Priročnik*, 2004: 22, 2019: 106).

In the US American context, Peters's *Luna* (2004) has been described as "the first young adult novel to address transsexual/transgender issues" (Cart and Jenkins, 2006: 138), but the first young adult novel with a trans protagonist to be published in Slovenia was Tratnik's *Ime mi je Damjan* (2001), which predates Peters's novel by three years (and its Slovenian translation by six). In 2014 it was included in a nationwide reading project, reprinted by a major Slovenian publisher and distributed to all first-year secondary-school students; it has since been generally perceived as a young adult novel, despite the author's initial intention (Tratnik, 2014).

Set in the mid-1990s, the novel features Damjan, a nineteen-year-old first-person narrator and a badly adapted young man. When he was seventeen, Damjan adopted his current name, but he does not say that it was because he also adopted his current gender expression. Although some readers may not be aware in the first half of the book that Damjan is a trans man (Zupan Sosič, 2006: 328; Borovnik, 2012: 108; Koron, 2014: 227; Kos, 2015: 75), Tratnik asserts that it was never her intention to write a novel with a twist. Hence, *Ime mi je Damjan* was not written as a coming-out narrative (Tratnik, 2014: 61) or a Bildungsroman (Tratnik, 2015: 85). Tratnik (2014: 60–61) describes Damjan's gender identity as "somehow undefined, fluid, perhaps multifaceted, he does not have a special name for it, nor does he want it".

Damjan was ascribed different tags by the *Priročnik* for its first and second editions: "family, homosexuality, boys, adolescents, abuse, violence" versus "differentness, family, boys, violence, self-image, gender, transsexuality, abuse" (*Priročnik*, 2002: 65, 2015: 150). The amendment from "homosexuality" to "gender" and "transsexuality" shows an increased awareness and understanding of LGBTQ categories. Nevertheless, opposite forces had also been at work: "differentness" was absent in the *Priročnik*'s first annotation, but it was applied thirteen years later. Criticism, too, used to describe *Damjan* incorrectly as homoerotic, homosexual, lesbian, transvestite (see Zupan Sosič, 2006: 305; 2017: 179; Picco, 2011b: 14; Tratnik, 2014: 60).

Another example of the difficulty in naming gender non-normativity in children's books explicitly is the picture book *Šlik šlak* (Leru leru, 2017, ST Barbara Pregel, 2019) by Susana Aliano Casales and Francesca Dell'Orto (illustrator). The *Priročnik* (2020: 41) gives it the tags of "brothers, differentness, family, remorse, bullying, violence, ridicule, sisters, schools, peers". Although its 2020 edition includes the tags "gender identity" (for three books) and "gender roles" (for one book), the *Priročnik*'s labels for this book are non-specific about what lies at the root of the bullying and what the

"differentness" is – although the first sentences of the book make this clear: "His name is Pedro. He's a boy, but he looks like a girl. The exact opposite of his sister Valeria, who looks like a boy. They are the strangest at school." (Aliano Casales and Dell'Orto, 2019: n.p.) It is animosity towards gender non-conformity that drives violence against Pedro.

On the other hand, Alenka Spacal's picture books *Mavrična maškarada* (Rainbow Masquerade, 2013a) and *Kako ti je ime?* (What's Your Name?, 2018a) are appropriately tagged with "gender" and "gender identity", respectively (*Priročnik*, 2014: 106, 2019: 75). *Mavrična maškarada* is a modern fable in picture-book form in which anthropomorphized animals are preparing for a party where they will play with genders. The author made a conscious decision to avoid LGBTQ signifiers at the textual level (Spacal, 2013b: 72), but her illustrations include an abundance of LGBTQ symbols that the readers with an awareness of the concepts of gender performativity, feminism, sexual identities, camp and kitsch will find easy to decode. Typically for the topic and target readers, the book has met with opposing views. For some, the book's target audience are too young to understand the notion of playing with genders (Kos, 2013a); for others, the picture book is an important contribution to (crossover) texts about genders (Oliver 2014). *Kako ti je ime?* is a prequel to *Mavrična maškarada*, focusing on the hermaphrodite snail Hermi (*nomen est omen*), who is one of the characters in the book. Spacal continues with consideration of (gender) normativity, albeit less directly, in her third picture book *Modre ptičje misli* (Blue Bird Wisdoms, 2018b). Spacal's picture books are a rare exception to this the rule of linking non-normative gender to mental-health issues and abuse, preferring to highlight the playful aspects of gender identities, roles and expressions.

It is impossible to exclude the *Priročnik* reviewers' personal views from the equation and there is bound to be some inconsistency in the tags and annotations due to the manner in which it is put together. Nonetheless, it is essential for everybody working in the field of children's and young adult literature in any capacity to be aware that "different" and "problem" are not neutral labels and using them is not a neutral act, either. Thus, when discussing LGBTQ topics as "different" and/or "problematic", there are important questions to ask: what exactly is the problem, why is it a problem and for whom? This brings up the related question of labelling – homosexuality or homophobia, bisexuality or biphobia, transgender or transphobia? The theme of Vidmar's novel *Fantje iz gline* is generally said to be homosexuality, yet Dragica Haramija (2010: 88) is right in asserting that the main theme of the novel is homophobia. Shifting the focus from "the other" to the discrimination of "the other" is the approach that should be adopted in other instances, too.

Problems and taboos

The topics frequently appearing together with, or as part of, "differentness" are, for instance, special needs, diseases, addiction, crime, violence, dysfunctional families, migration, death, suicide, multiculturalism, (in)tolerance, gender and sexual non-normativity. "Differentness" is thus closely related to what critics analysing literature for children and young adults term problems and taboos (Lavrenčič Vrabec, 2001; Jamnik, 2003, 2011; Haramija, 2003, 2009, 2010; Jamnik et al., 2006; Saksida, 2009, 2014; Blažić, 2011; Kos, 2013b, 2014, 2015; Pezdirc Bartol, 2016; Vidmar, 2017).

Igor Saksida (2005: 213), an authority on children's and young adult literature, contributed the afterword to Janja Vidmar's *Fantje iz gline*, arguing that the novel addresses "a taboo topic" and that it is "a literary provocation". In an article on taboos in literature for children and young adults, the same author writes that "problem topics include portrayals of marked differentness, e.g. disability or homosexuality, since they act as a departure from the (most common, traditional) depictions of growing up and relationships" (Saksida, 2014: 27). Another expert in the field, Dragica Haramija (2009: 173), similarly includes homosexuality among "dark topics".

Commenting on the picture book *In s Tango smo trije* (And Tango Makes Three, 2005, ST Matej Krajnc, 2010) by Justin Richardson, Peter Parnell and the illustrator Henry Cole, Saksida (2014: 29) notes that the book is "about happiness in an unusual family". Whether the adjective "unusual" is used descriptively or qualitatively, the message conveyed to both those who live in such ("unusual") families and those who do not cannot be neutral. It may seem ironic, then, to say that, as depictions of families go, *Tango* can easily be understood as a conservative, normalizing piece: the protagonists, penguins Roy and Silo (a couple) do not want to be "unusual"; they want a child and to be like all other families.

The other side of the same coin is universalization. Reproducing the dominant culture, universalizing interpretations view a topic that they understand to be "different" as a metonymy or metaphor for something else; the "true essence" is elsewhere and is "universal". Not only does universalization generalize and/or neglect individual characteristics and forcibly appropriate the unfamiliar, subordinating it under the guise of the universal (Virk, 2007: 129), it also disregards the fact that "normality" is "always a particular social construct" (Kovač Šebart, 2017: 19). Accordingly, "the particular, even if it is the majority" ought not to be seen as universal (Kovač Šebart, 2017: 23).

Broader social developments, more acceptance of and smaller social distance towards LGBTQ have resulted in a modification of the discourse. In 2006, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (2006: 166) called for "more stories about young people whose homosexuality is simply a given and who are dealing with other issues and challenges" and, seven years later, B.J. Epstein (2013: 245) similarly insisted it was time for books "that treat being queer as a fact rather than as an issue". In Slovenia, Gaja Kos (2015: 32) refers to Cart and Jenkins in her revision of the definition of problem novel, but she keeps using – notwithstanding the quotation marks – the very categories that continue to other heterodoxy: "For example, if authors write about a 'different' protagonist (gay/lesbian, handicapped, pregnant teenager, etc.) whose life is not emphasised as troubling, nor does the writing focus specifically on 'differentness', we clearly cannot speak of youth problem novels."

That the awareness of the negative aspects of othering has increased is further illustrated by the *Priročnik*'s (2020: 83) annotation for the fantasy duology *Vranja šesterica* and *Pokvarjeno kraljestvo* by Leigh Bardugo (Six of Crows, 2015, Crooked Kingdom, 2016, ST Andrej Hiti Ožinger, 2019). It praises the books' value-neutral use of otherness: "for example, neither homosexual nor heterosexual love stands out". However, the immediate context re-establishes the connection between LGBTQ and dark, problem or even money-making topics: "Prostitution, the slave trade and refugees are also part of everyday life, as are greed, violence and lies; yet none of this is in the book to improve sales, but as an important part of the story and the world." (*Priročnik*, 2020: 83)

Plot and character

Othering is occasionally amplified through character and plot development. Neli Kodrič Filipić's *Kaj ima ljubezen s tem* (What's Love Got to Do with It, 2009) is an example of this. In addition to Lusi the narrator's mother, who returns in a lesbian relationship after a year of unexplained absence, Lusi's friend Rok comes out as gay, too – only to reveal, in the end, that he is not gay after all (when he once failed sexually with a girl and she accused him of being gay, he thought it best to adopt the position and avoid the shame of being seen as an impotent straight man), and he ends up in a satisfying relationship with Lusi. In this manner, the book provides some sympathy for assumed non-normativity only to reinstate the norm as a precondition for a happy ending. This makes it somewhat anticlimactic for the gay readers who may be looking for literary characters to identify with. It seems to imply that it is okay to be gay – if you are not. The laboured plot twist requires that the

"gay" in the novel, one of the few unimpeachably positive characters in the entire book, offers readers a positive identification model, but he can only do so by eventually coming out as straight.

Comparably, Vladimir P. Štefanec's *Sem punk čarovnica, debela lezbijka in ne maram vampov* (I'm a Punk Witch, a Fat Lesbian and I Don't Like Tripe, 2014) is a pro-acceptance book with a lesbian in its title, but no lesbian among its characters. It is narrated by thirteen-year-old Daša, whose schoolmates are filled with hate for gays and lesbians, which she counters by signing up on Facebook with a fake profile (Fat Lesbian), but since there is no suggestion that she herself is anything but straight readers expecting to find a lesbian represented in the book may be let down. The possible presence of intersectional fat shaming would also be worth considering.

"Different" characters must often prove themselves to be worthwhile members of mainstream society in order to be eligible for acceptance or tolerance. This is the case across the board; hence, immigrants must be non-threatening to indigenous cultures, children with special needs useful to their peers, etc. In A.M. Homes's *Jack* (Jack, 1989, ST Simona Cesar, 2011), the protagonist's acceptance of his gay father corresponds with the collapse of his friend Max's family. The implicit comparison, the brutal benchmark of an abusive straight family is required for Jack (and, presumably, the general public/reader) to accept LGBTQ parenting.

An example of how acceptance tends to be more or less explicitly conditional upon the homophobe's benefit is the grandmother in Cvetka Sokolov's *Bo res vse v redu?* (Will Everything Really Be Alright?, 2019). The story is about Bor, a ten-year old boy, and his divided loyalties. His father lives with a male partner, and everyone in Bor's family is supportive of him and his partnership, except for Bor's paternal grandmother, who is explicitly homophobic and does not accept her son, his partner or their relationship. At last, she starts questioning her homophobic beliefs when she and Bor get lost during their mountaineering trip and Bor challenges her attitude towards her (absent) relationship with her son, but it is only when her son's male partner is part of the Mountain Rescue Team who rescue them that she seems to start looking beyond her prejudice.

This is party related to the fact that LGBTQ characters in children's and young adult literature only rarely make part of an LGBTQ community, where they might not be othered in the same way as they are in majority cultures. Cart and Jenkins (2006: xix) suggest three stages in the development of LGBTQ literature: "homosexual visibility, gay assimilation and queer consciousness/community". In the first stage, LGBTQ characters come out (voluntarily or not) and become the other. The characters in the second stage "just happen to be gay" and their sexuality ceases being an issue. The third

stage equips them with LGBTQ communities and families of choice (Cart and Jenkins, 2006: xx).

Isolating LGBTQ characters and denying them a sense of community, while putting them at the mercy of othering, has a parallel in the publishing world. Alenka Spacal (2014: 53), the author of the picture books discussed above, argues against including LGBTQ themes among problems, although she accepts that they are still represented as such. She also observes that there is no escaping the fact that LGBTQ topics still need a certain amount of "detabuization"; it was therefore her explicit wish to publish *Mavrična maškarada*, the first originally Slovenian LGBTQ picture book for children, in the Škuc-Lambda series (Spacal, 2014: 59). The specialised LGBTQ series (1990–, edited by Brane Mozetič, over 150 books published to date) plays an important role in original and translated LGBTQ literature in Slovenia as well as in the country's LGBTQ community. It has published a number of books for children and young adults, too, among them several important firsts for the Slovenian literary system: in addition to Tratnik's *Ime mi je Damjan* (2001), Walker's *Peter* (2007) and Spacal's *Mavrična maškarada* (2013a), its backlist includes the first picture book about a family with gay parents (Lawrence Schimel and illustrator Sara Rojo Pérez's *Sosedje in prijatelji* (Amigos y vecinos, 2005, ST Marjeta Drobnič), 2008), the first picture book about same-gender love in the preschool period (Brane Mozetič and illustrator Maja Kastelic's *Prva ljubezen* (First Love), 2014), the first picture book about same-gender love in mythology (Brane Mozetič and illustrator Ana Lucija Šarić's *Ahil in Patrokles* (Achilles and Patroclus), 2020) and the first (non-fiction) LGBTQ history book for young readers (Brane Mozetič and illustrator Ana Lucija Šarić's *Rožnate zgodbe iz neheteronormativne zgodovine (za mlade)* (Pink Stories from Non-Heteronormative History (for the Young), 2020).

As a contrast, a commercial publisher that has brought out quite a few LGBTQ books for young adults, all of them translations, has done so in its series named Na robu (On the Margin/Edge), thus implying – with prominent typography – where it believes the topics belong.

Empathy and pedagogy

It seems commonplace to associate literature for children and young adults with pedagogical aspirations for acceptance, empathy and tolerance, the notions that are both noble and problematic.

Nik's father, in Aksinja Kermauner's young adult novel *Orionov meč* (Orion's Sword, 2008), is outed as gay. Whereas Nik has always accepted, mistakenly but without much difficulty, that his father had an extramarital affair with his secretary, he seems to struggle significantly more with the men he believes his father is seeing. He insists that it is his father's hypocrisy that he despises, not his sexuality or the shame it may bring on the family, but he does so by echoing many stereotypes: "Of course I'm not angry at him for possibly damaging our reputation. Today being gay really isn't unusual at all. Personally, I don't mind homosexuals in the least. It must be just terrible to fall in love with a soul that inhabits – according to our outdated norms – a wrong body." (Kermauner 2008: 57) Mini-lectures like this are common. When Barnaby, the eponymous hero of John Boyne's *Osupljiva zgodba Barnabyja Brocketa* (The Terrible Thing that Happened to Barnaby Brocket, 2012, ST Jure Potokar, 2013), learns that the elderly lesbian couple who saved him had been sent away from their families "because they were different", he cannot understand why, as they "seem perfectly normal" to him. A friend explains: "Their idea of normal just happens to be different to some other people's idea of normal. But this is the world we live it. Some people simply cannot accept something that is outside of their experience." (Boyne, 2013: 106)

Published more recently, Cvetka Sokolov's book *Bo res vse v redu?* (2019) indicates that normalising didacticism has not faded away. The book reiterates the argument for acceptance by restating that LGBTQ people are not abnormal or unnatural – only "different". In the well-meaning narrative need to enlighten, the book's characters pronounce that while Bor's gay father is "different", gays are "part of nature", gay co-habitation is "natural" and homosexuality is "not contagious" (Sokolov, 2019: 95, 37). Furthermore, the ten-year-old narrator speaks with others' (othering) words: "If Daddy wasn't different, I wouldn't be different and Urban wouldn't call me 'faggot'." (Sokolov, 2019: 95) Although the boy certainly learns from others that his father is "different", making their words his, and although quoting problematic words or phrases from the novel with little context can be misleading, I would like to stress the cumulative effect that reading about being different, (un)natural, etc. will have on both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ readers. I suggest that these effects are not beneficial to either. Such

discourses involuntarily reaffirm prejudices, especially those surrounding the shame and trauma of being LGBTQ.

A common way of othering LGBTQ topics through appeals for acceptance is introductions, prefaces and afterwords. They are frequently written not by experts in literature but by psychologists and therapists, which is a sure indication of the didactization of literature. The Slovenian translation of Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* has an afterword written by a psychologist, which seems positive in intention, but problematic in terms of discourse and terminology, both of which are now very dated. Its title is "The Wrong Sex", the phrase it often repeats alongside "differentness", "deviation" and "sex change". Insisting on medicalization, it also notes that "mother nature has played a cruel trick" on trans people (Zirkelbach, 2007: 265). The same psychologist contributed the afterword to A.M. Homes's *Jack*. It conveys a positive, affirmative message of acceptance – except for its title, which lays heavy emphasis on the non-normativity of LGBTQ: "When Parents Are Different" (Zirkelbach, 2011). The afterword to Sokolov's book, written by a marriage and family therapist, strikes a very familiar pedagogical note in its stress on "accepting differentness" (Kreš, 2019: 122).

Constraining the individual to the personal circumstance that makes them different from the perceived norm turns the circumstance into "an issue that needs discussion, confirmation, and support" (Epstein, 2013: 43). LGBTQ individuals' sexual or gender non-normativity is "a defining feature of LGBTQ lives and personalities"; moreover, it is "a problem or causes problems" – and if it "has a cause, it can also have a cure" (Epstein, 2013: 75, 93). The process of othering includes "constantly emphasising the difference of LGBTQ people […] through the guise of confirming their normality despite their difference" (Epstein, 2013: 45). Although these books "didactically work against homophobic discourse", they sustain the normality of the norm. For them "queerness is not an identity but an issue" (Epstein, 2013: 27–28; also see Kokkola, 2013: 97–98).

The notion of "differentness" (including its use as a synonym for LGBTQ) has been challenged, in particular because it can lead to marginalization and patronising (for some Slovenian authors, see Hrženjak, 2003; Založnik, 2004; Šlibar, 2006; Kuhar, 2013; Pezdirc Bartol, 2016; Zupan Sosič, 2016; Zavrl, 2018). In practice, though, it keeps being used, and this is partly due to the fact that children's and young adult literature inevitably finds itself at – or is pushed to – the intersection of literature and pedagogy.

It has been argued that broader social changes have led to the introduction of the topics that had previously been taboo and to the depedagogization of children's and young adult literature (Lavrenčič Vrabec, 2001: 41–42).

However, the introduction of "taboos" in itself does not necessarily equal depedagogization; it can also be the opposite. If the issues remain being othered, not least by being called taboos and problems, the pedagogization, didacticization and moralization persist. As for "controversial" texts, whichever side is argued for, in most cases the difference between supporting and opposing individual texts is merely in judging their educational (in)appropriateness, not in the underlying belief in the educational potential and mission of literature in general.

As already indicated, bibliopedagogical contexts often associate "differentness" with the concepts of "tolerance" and "education for tolerance" (e.g. Saksida, 1994: 64–67; Batič and Haramija, 2013; Haramija, 2017; Vidmar, 2017). Literature is identified as a good medium to elicit sympathy for others, and empathy is seen as "a path that allows us to approach the feelings of the other with a desire for understanding" (Zupan Sosič, 2017: 302–303; also see Sklar, 2013: 2). There is no reason to suggest that arguments for sympathy or empathy are anything but well intentioned and well meaning, but they are often advanced from a superior position. Sympathy for those who are "different" necessitates a clear division of power between those who accept and those who are accepted, between those who offer sympathy and those who are worthy of it (or not). In the same way, readers can be "literary voyeurs who, in their desire to be omnipotent, feel the need to be superior by judging the weaker" (Kos, 2015: 90). To sum up: "Sympathy is no guarantee of non-discriminatory education." (Kovač Šebart, 2017: 19)

Despite the fact that literature is habitually given the cloak of a teacher of tolerance and respect for human and children's rights (e.g. Jamnik, 2009; Blažić, 2011: 173–184), it is important to highlight that literature and its uses can "promote negative stereotypes" (Virk, 2008: 5). Even if a little dated, the *Priročnik*'s handling of Marliese Arold's *Sandra ljubi Meike* (Einfach nur Liebe: Sandra liebt Meike, 1996, ST Andrea Švab, 2002) is a classic example of the dilemmas presented above. The tags the novel is provided with are "girls, differentness, homosexuality, love", and the content summary is: "The book raises the question of our attitude towards those who are different and who are shown here in all their likeability and defiance of 'normality'." (*Priročnik*, 2003: 23) The semantically hollow tag of "differentness" has no function other than that of othering, and "the question of our attitude towards those who are different" unambiguously denotes power relations.

Writing, describing, entitling, marketing and/or interpreting a book, character or theme as "different" unavoidably means raising the pedagogical finger. This is related to the question of who the target audience is for the books. Are they intended to broaden the horizons of "us" or help "them"

(while simultaneously cementing the division between the two)? Are they didactic materials or texts distinguished by literariness?

Finally, an important question remains: can a "literary text which does not conceal its ethical purpose but instead emphasizes it" still function "as first and foremost a literary text" (Matajc, 2013: 5)? A badly written book can be "doubly harmful" – as low-quality literature and "as a reinforcement of existing prejudices" (Vidmar, 2017: 64). Therefore, to shun trivial, black-and-white representations, quality literature ought to develop the ethical dimension in complex literary and aesthetic structures that go beyond schematic moral conventions and cliches (Virk, 2008: 10; Matajc, 2013: 8–10; Pezdirc Bartol, 2016: 77). This means that the problem of the underrepresentation, misrepresentation and othering of LGBTQ characters and topics should not be resolved through naive representation in cliched, superficial and predictable LGBTQ-affirmative texts. On the other hand, the criteria of literariness, though paramount, are not absolute. Given the power imbalance between the (adult) writers and (underage) readers of children's and young adult literature, as well as the literature's inescapable educational aspect, all agents in the literary system should take account of the values inscribed in the framework of children's and human rights, LGBTQ rights among them (Kovač Šebart and Kuhar, 2009; Todres and Higinbotham, 2016).

Conclusion

Since the 1960s, sex and sexuality have been gradually excluded from the list of unwelcome topics in children's and young adult literature and since the 1980s, LGBTQ topics have been more widely addressed (Epstein, 2013: 18). In Slovenia, this came about with a decade's delay (Lavrenčič Vrabec, 2001: 44; Bartol, 2016: 71).[3]

Today, there is still a lack of books with LGBTQ topics and characters, but the discourse attached to the existing ones can be just as problematic. The topics continue to be identified as "problems" and "taboos"; instead of being called by their name, they are given the euphemism of "differentness". Rather than disassociating stigma from LGBTQ topics, ill-considered emphases on otherness (*vulgo* "differentness") only further strengthen it. It is unquestionably commendable to discuss the issues and teach empathy, but the way it is routinely done is in effect conservative because it consolidates

[3] LGBTQ literature, including for children and young adults, emerged with the LGBTQ movement, but it also "predates it considerably, in the form of homoerotic and homosocial narrative" (Kidd, 2011: 185).

the status quo. The difference in "being different" – in the "differentness" that is applied to a number of topics and issues dealt with by literature for children and young adults and beyond – is founded on a more or less explicit opposition to the non-different, that is, to something that is considered to be the norm, even when it remains unspoken. It is, in short, ideology – and ideology is at its strongest when it appears as if it were natural, self-evident and indisputable.

In a thoroughly performative manner, othering (re-)establishes and emphasises difference. As such, it is a type of Orientalism, an exclusionary discourse that determines why and how we approach others through relationships "of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said, 1979: 5). Labelling others as different "depends for its strategy on […] flexible positional superiority" (Said, 1979: 7), where the in-group reserves for itself the right to accept, tolerate or reject out-group members individually or collectively. Whereas the in-group seeks homogeneity within itself and disregards the fact that the differences within it may be greater than those between the in- and out-groups, it also perceives itself "as rich and diverse" and sees "the 'others' as monolithic, with their representatives reduced to a few typical and 'different' features" (O'Sullivan and Immel, 2017: 8). Moreover, it is repeatedly said that individuals fear the unknown and the different, but the supposed "'fear' of the Other" is often "merely another name for discrimination and exclusion" (Kovač Šebart, 2017: 12).

Just as neither the Orient nor the West can exist outside the discourses that shape them (Said 1979), there is no pre-social, non-discursive "differentness" inherent in othered issues and circumstances. Despite a growing awareness of the problems of othering, literary and critical practice continues to reveal that the road to marginalization is often paved with good intentions.[4] Indeed, the othering strategies discussed in this article – but not limited to either LGBTQ or (children's and young adult) literature – frequently lead to the very exclusion they profess to be challenging.

[4] No such intentions are discernible in the anti-gender movement operating through well-connected civil-society initiatives, the Catholic Church and online portals and focusing predominantly on LGBTQ and abortion (for more on the anti-gender movement in Slovenia, see Kuhar, 2017). That, however, is outside the scope of this article.

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