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Monsters at bedtime: managing fear in bedtime picture books for children

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Monsters make frequent appearances in bedtime stories for children, where they represent a range of common childhood fears, in particular those associated with night-time. In this article, the role and nature of 'bedtime' monsters is explored with reference to picture book examples from 20th to 21st century children's literature. The ways in which they help children to manage fears are shown to be through a combination of both psychological and literary strategies, drawing on examples of English language picture books for children aged 2–5 years, but with a particular focus on three contemporary texts: Molly and the Night Monster; Bedtime for Monsters and The Wardrobe Monster. It is argued that these texts often mirror coping strategies preferred by young children, in particular positive pretence, where threats are minimised or eliminated by mentally changing or altering perception of them. However, in addition to positive pretence, fears are further managed by literary and visual devices employed by the picture book creator/s, in particular in the presentation of images. The article concludes by noting that this is a group of texts which is now sufficiently established to be open to self-reference and parody, and consequently new and playful variations on the bedtime monster story will continue to emerge and evolve.

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Introduction

In the final pages of *Bedtime for Monsters* (Vere, 2011), tension mounts as the monster, having travelled across swamps, deserts, snowy mountains and rooftops, approaches the child's bedroom, climbs the creaky stairs and places his clawed hand on the doorknob. 'Do you think he is licking his lips because he wants to gobble you up?' the narrator asks. The question addresses one of the deepest of human fears, that of being eaten, and is asked as the monster is poised to enter the safest of spaces, where it might be hoped that the scene is set for calm, rest and a good night's sleep. The discomfiture between monster and bed is familiar from classic literature. Frankenstein's horror when the monster holds up the curtain of his bed is expressed through his strong physical reactions which remind us of the vulnerability of the human condition (Shelley, 1818). In bed, in the state of sleep, humans are especially weak and defenceless. In this state every parent would want to protect and remove their child from the threat of a monster. Yet monsters in children's bedrooms are a familiar feature of many picture books for children which could be described as 'bedtime' stories. This article discusses the nature and role of monsters in bedtime stories; explores some of the ways in which authors and illustrators manage children's fears through the use of coping strategies, language and image, and considers monster bedtime stories as a distinct group of texts for young children with its own particular expectations and boundaries. These themes are explored through a range of picture book texts with a particular focus on three contemporary examples: *Molly and the Night Monster* (Wormell, 2018), *Bedtime for Monsters* (Vere, 2011), and *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018).

Bedtime stories

Books which are selected by adults or children to be read at bedtime have a special significance and value. For many families with young children bedtime is regarded as a special and quality time which has a significance beyond the practical routines which need to be completed such as bathing and teeth-brushing (Costa, 2012). Although the reality of bedtime may differ from this ideal, since it is often a time of conflict between tired parents and children who are refusing to go to bed, in Western culture bedtime has assumed an almost ritualistic significance. The bedtime story has a particular place in this ritual, serving both a social and educational function. Brice-Heath's (1982) study of families in America highlighted that whilst the bedtime story is by no means universal, it is commonly perceived as a natural way for parents to interact with their child before sleep, simultaneously supporting early language development, introducing children to literature and literate behaviours and reinforcing the emotional bonds between parent and child. More recent UK research (OUP, 2013) has demonstrated a decline in bedtime story reading and parents are urged to read bedtime stories: with the implication that the bedtime story is a mark of good parenting.

Pereira (2019) identifies particular stories as 'bedtime' books. As with all attempts to categorise or offer a typology for picture books, his definition is open to debate: as a fluid and evolving art form they resist categorisation. Moreover, most picture books will have 'crossed the threshold of…a bedroom more than once' (Moebius, 1991, p. 53), so in one sense all picture books can be described as possible bedtime stories. However, Pereira argues that 'bedtime' books are those which deal specifically with bedtime activities, or with themes associated with bedtime. Bedtime themes identified by Pereira include 'the terrors of separation, ego loss, and death; the comforts and satisfaction of rest; the strangeness of dreams and nightmares; the excitements and anxieties of a new day to come' (2019, p. 156). To make the bedtime

connection explicit, bedtime stories often feature images of the child's bedroom, either throughout the whole story; framing the beginning and end of the story, or as a final destination.

Pereira's list includes some of the fears and anxieties familiar to childhood. Muris and Field (2010) list typical fears for children between the ages of 2 and 5 years as being connected with animals, medical interventions, situational and environmental challenges (such as fear of the dark or of heights) and separation from loved ones. However, these fears are not experienced by everyone, since children fear different things at different ages (Mercurio and McNamee, 2008) and individuals will also experience different fears to different degrees of intensity (Sayfan and Lagattuta, 2009) cutting across age boundaries. Muris and Field (2010) argue from an evolutionary perspective that typical childhood fears may be innate survival mechanisms to help them avoid physical dangers, but response is also learnt from children's experiences in the 'real' world through a variety of sources, including the views of parents and carers who will have their own set of fears conveyed through their parenting style. However, this group of fears seems to be particularly associated with night-time and the moments before going to sleep, and these fears frequently form or underpin the narrative in bedtime picture books for children aged 2–5 years.

The role of the monster in the bedtime story

Cohen asserts that the monster always 'signifies something other than itself…is always a displacement' and that the monster's body 'quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy' (1996, p. 4). Cohen argues that monsters are always symbols for something else, they 'serve' a role (Lawrence, 2015) and the monsters which appear in bedtime stories for young children are no exception to this rule. According to Taylor (2010) monsters in children's books act as metaphors or embodiments of all that is to be feared, whilst Papazian (in Weinstock, 2014, p. 85) suggests that monsters have a distinct function as 'psychological tools', to help children cope with problems and anxieties common to childhood such as separation and loneliness, facing new experiences or feeling different. Not all bedtime books which address bedtime fears feature monsters: but when monsters do appear they often seem to embody not one particular fear but a range of possible fears, including some which are difficult to articulate. In books specifically aimed at bedtime reading, the monster's role as embodiment of fears is particularly apt at night-time when those fears become imminent. The bedtime story offers a safe context in which to simply acknowledge or share and discuss fears and worries within the comforting dyad of child and an adult, who is usually the parent (Mercurio and McNamee, 2008).

Monsters have been variously defined, but one straightforward definition is as supernatural creatures of the imagination who do not exist (Taylor, 2010). This definition works well in the context of picture book monsters since it excludes humans who act in monstrous ways (Ormandy, 2017), an interesting and distinguishing departure from other forms of children's literature. In traditional tales for example, it is often the human step-mother or human-like witch who poses the greatest threat to the child, whilst other contemporary forms such as horror stories typically present threats from internal or familiar sources (Reynolds, 2010). Monsters have always had a part in the traditional tales of cultures around the world, and, presented within a scary story, were frequently made use of to manage and shape children's behaviour, warning them to keep away from physical danger or cautioning them about the risks of naughtiness or over-indulgence (Reynolds, 2010). However, Papazian (in Weinstock, 2014, p. 87) notes that monsters have recently 'proliferated' in literature for children of all ages. She argues that these monsters

are 'the same as monsters in any other sorts of texts' (2014, p. 84), suggesting a cultural stock of monstrous beasts which can be drawn upon for a range of purposes and contexts. The monsters who appear in picture books for children certainly include a wide variety of recognisable creatures such as dragons, trolls, goblins, giants, mythic, supernatural and hybrid beings which could be termed monstrous. However, since the 19th century the growth of fantasy as a genre of children's literature has given rise to notable new monsters created especially for children: the Jabberwock in 1871 (Carroll, 1994); the Psammead in 1902 (Nesbit, 2012) and the Grinch in 1957 (Seuss, 2016) being particularly notable examples. Contemporary picture books seem to favour non-specific monsters possessing characteristics such as horns, fur or long hair, claws and fangs, who are recognisable as monsters but do not conform to a particular type. Gilmore (2002) categorises monsters as possessing predatory features or by their size, strength and capability to change from one state to another. This predatory nature of the monster may explain why dinosaurs and wild animals are sometimes presented in picture book texts as monsters or possessing monstrous properties which conform to these features. Occasionally picture books feature monsters whose presence is felt but who never appear. In *A sound like someone trying not to make a sound* (Irving and Hauptmann, 2004) the sounds in his bedroom lead Tom to imagine a monster which he describes vividly to his dad. It is a 'monster with no arms and legs', who 'slides on its fur' and 'pulls itself along on its teeth', but as there is no picture of it, it remains in Tom's imagination and that of the child reader.

Despite possessing such scary features, many monsters in recent children's picture books present neither danger or threat, and cute, cuddly and appealing monsters are increasingly common. Willems (2007) for example presents Leonardo, a monster who is not capable of scaring anyone, a common theme in recent picture books. Whilst threats to children and childhood are seen to abound in wider society, within the confines of the picture book the extent to which children are permitted to be scared is increasingly limited and minimised. Vacklavik (2016) argues that whilst scary stories with dark themes have an important place in children's reading, most parents are unwilling to disturb the intimacy of the bedtime story and want to share something 'stupid or funny or beautiful' before their child goes to sleep. Monsters in bedtime stories are therefore required to work within certain boundaries, they must represent worries and anxieties in order to address children's fears, but must not add to or worsen them.

The monster from Vere's *Bedtime for Monsters* (2011) fulfils this role well and the book demonstrates how image and word work together in the picture book format to enable the reader to 'piece together the meaning of the text' (Lewis, 2001, p. 32). Vere uses this interplay skilfully to manage and undermine fear throughout the book through creating a dissonance between the pictures and the story. Whilst the narrator warns the reader about a monster whose behaviour sounds typically monstrous, from our very first encounter with him on the front cover, holding a knife and fork and a small teddy, the images reassure the reader that this is a story about a monster, but not a scary one. The monster's physical features such as sticking out ears, huge eyes and a wide mouth with a very pink tongue are exaggerated and simplified to render him ridiculous. Above all it is the sheer enthusiasm of the monster as he sets out supposedly to eat the child reader which minimises any sense of threat from him. By the time the monster's hand is on the doorknob and he is about to enter the safe space of the bedroom, the reader already knows that the outcome is unlikely to be terrifying. Fear here is an emotion presented alongside humour to be enjoyed and relished. Vere relies to a certain extent upon the reader's intertextual knowledge, both to understand what to expect from the conventional concept of a monster and to know that this monster does not fulfil those conventions. The contradiction creates humour and irony which will be appreciated by the adult reader as much as the child. Vere is thus acknowledging the triangular relationship between narrator, child and the adult who, especially in the context of a bedtime story, is sharing or reading the book to the child. The child is addressed as 'you' throughout, encouraging an intimate and personal telling between parent and child. Similarly, in *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018), the monster who bursts from the wardrobe and lands on top of Dora is large, green and fluffy in appearance, with simple facial features which clearly convey its emotions. When sitting alongside her toys it appears as just a larger version of one of them. In Wormell's (2018) *Molly and the Night Monster*, the night monster appears only once, at the climax of the story where Molly confronts it and covers it with her bedsheet. Unusually for a picture book, the monster could be described as having a truly scary appearance, with staring eyes, fangs and sharp claws. The monster's face is more animal than human and consequently its emotions are less easy to interpret or empathise with, which makes it appear more frightening.

Managing the monster: coping strategies

Children's fears may be discussed and clarified through sharing bedtime stories but they cannot simply to be managed for the child by adults. Many fears are too abstract for young children to express and may be experienced simply as overwhelming feelings which threaten to engulf them (Taylor, 2010). Imaginary fears are particularly difficult for adults to appreciate since they may not be able to recall the immersion in imagination which a child experiences in play, particularly pretend play (Kayyal and Widen, 2013). In play children become absorbed in imaginary worlds for sustained periods of time and this makes imagined situations and creatures accessible, and almost tangible. Consequently, young children find these fears more difficult than adults or adolescents to extricate and distance themselves from. Sayfan and Lagattuta (2008) argue that young children who engage in fantasy play are both more likely to experience imaginary fears and are also less skilled, due to their age and inexperience, at managing those fears. Children learn to manage their fears through a process of emotional regulation, which occurs as a result of both neurological development and social factors such as seeing adults model behaviours which help to control and cope with fear, but this process takes time. As Papazian argued above, monsters teach strategies for coping with fears, but in picture books these are modelled gently from within a rich and engaging context which gains the interest and attention of the child without being overtly didactic.

Many of these coping strategies relate to the instinctive behaviours which children use to soothe themselves. Sayfan and Lagattuta (2009, p. 1770) identified three common strategies used by children between 4 and 7 years old to cope with fears: behavioural strategies; reality affirmation and positive pretence.

Behavioural strategies are visible in children from infancy, and are a natural and often involuntary way of managing a fear through engaging in actions which distract from it. Children might seek to avoid or 'disengage' from the fear (Sayfan and Lagattuta, 2009, p. 1765), for example by physically moving away from it, taking up a different, more enjoyable activity, or seeking the support of a parent. Avoidant and distracting behaviours are sometimes depicted in bedtime picture books, typically at the beginning of the story when the child is first trying to manage the fear of the monster. For example, Tom, in *A Sound Like Someone Trying Not to make a Sound* (Irving and Hauptmann, 2004) calls for his dad when he hears a scary noise in the middle of the night. In *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018), when bedtime

looms, Dora engages in a series of distracting activities such as bathing her toys, having a snack, or reading stories, in order to avoid the monster who lurks in the wardrobe in her bedroom.

Behavioural strategies can also include comforting activities such as self-talk, thumb-sucking and/or cuddling a teddy (Sayfan and Lagattuta, 2009). Cuddly toys, blankets and night lights are often provided by parents for reassurance and distraction from fears at bedtime, and the frequent appearances of these objects in bedtime picture books attest to their universality. Most children in Western culture will recognise them as familiar bedroom features, and will associate them with soothing and comforting routines and behaviours. Some or all of these features can be seen in the children's bedrooms depicted in the texts discussed here, notably in *Mr Underbed* (Riddell, 2011), *Bedtime for Monsters*, (Vere, 2011) and *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018). An image of the child asleep and cuddling a toy frequently concludes the texts, demonstrating the symbolic nature of this activity as one which represents peace, calm and the restoration of order (*I love you bunny*, Surnaite, 2018; *Molly and the Night Monster*, Wormell, 2018).

The study by Sayfan and Lagattuta (2009), and studies of children's responses to screen-based media by Gotz, Lemish and Holler (2019), found that, whilst children employed behavioural strategies which were mainly avoidant of the fear, as discussed above, they also sometimes did the opposite by engaging directly with the fear itself. The authors categorise this as an 'approach strategy'. Gotz, Lemish and Holler found that children faced the fears brought on by watching a scary programme or film, by asking questions of adults; by watching the programme or film again, or by engaging in checking behaviours such as looking under the bed or in the wardrobe before going to sleep (2019, pp. 38–39). Facing and defeating the monster is a common theme in monster stories (Ormandy, 2017) and, as discussed below, forms a pivotal moment in *Molly and the Night Monster* (Wormell, 2018) and *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018).

The other coping strategies which Sayfan and Lagattuta (2009) identify, reality affirmation and positive pretence, are psychological rather than behavioural. Reality affirmation involves mentally distancing oneself from an imaginary situation to recognise that something is not real and does not exist. This strategy is often used by parents to reassure young children who are scared of an imaginary place or creature, or when talking about past fearful experiences (Sayfan and Lagattuta, 2009). Typically, parents will dismiss a child's fears or, as in the case of monsters, tell them that it is just their imagination. This approach is humorously illustrated in *The Monster Bed* (Willis and Varley, 1986), where Dennis, the baby monster, is reluctant to settle down at night because he is afraid of humans under his bed. In order to quell his fear, his mother makes use of both behavioural distraction:

'there's nothing to fear, I've given you teddy, the light switch is near'

and reality affirmation:

Oh no,' said his mummy. 'I cannot agree,

There are no human beings, what fiddle-de-dee,

They are only in stories, they do not exist

Now get in to bed and be cuddled and kissed'

(Willis and Varley, 1986)

As the story progresses the reader sees that Dennis' fears are assuaged by neither strategy. In *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018) Dora's Bear argues that 'wardrobe monsters aren't real,

go back to sleep'. In the absence of parents, he is the one suggesting reality affirmation as a coping strategy. The narrator then comments that 'they sounded real enough', showing how unsatisfactory this strategy is from the child's perspective. As the story progresses he is proved to be wrong when Dora and her friends do open the wardrobe door and find a friendly, harmless, but real monster. Readers who are familiar with bedtime stories about fear of monsters under the bed, might expect that there will be nothing there, so when the monster tumbles out, the effect is surprising and moves the story in a new and humorous direction. Both texts demonstrate the limitations of reality affirmation as a coping strategy. Sayfan and Lagattuta (2009) argue that reality affirmation is a strategy which is more effective in children over 7 years. Children under 6 rarely appear to use this as a strategy themselves to calm their fears, preferring instead behavioural strategies or positive pretence.

In contrast to reality affirmation, positive pretence is a psychological strategy where the fear is not dismissed or denied, but acknowledged and its threat reduced. The imaginary scary event, creature or situation is recognised and accepted, but the characteristics or perception of it change, so that it is no longer a danger. A scary monster who initially seems frightening to a child is, for example, revealed as having different, less scary characteristics or properties than was previously supposed, or the child may acquire abilities or equipment to overcome the monster/fear, such as a magic blanket or shield. Sayfan (2008, p. 31) found that 3-year-olds would independently describe fearful creatures from television programmes, films or stories as 'nice' or 'friendly, really' and that this approach was also modelled by their parents to allay their fears. As a coping strategy, positive pretence requires mental effort from young children to change their thinking, but this effort may be less demanding and more appealing than reality affirmation which involves stepping out of the story world. This may explain why it is more often used by younger children. When engaged in a story it makes sense that a child does not want to pull away from immersion in the imagination, despite experiencing some fearful emotions.

Positive pretence is the strategy for coping with monsters most frequently mirrored in monster bedtime books for young children. Typically, either the monster changes in physical form or the reader's understanding of the monster changes. Sometimes the change comes about through revealing that the child protagonist has misunderstood or misinterpreted events or phenomena. A simple example of this is seen in *I love you bunny* (Surnaite, 2018) where the scary shadow which the child imagines is cast by a monster, turns out to be the cat. A more complex instance of misinterpretation is given in *I'm coming to get you!* (Ross, 1984). An alien monster sees little Tommy Brown from a distant spaceship, spying him through his radar. He then travels across many worlds to 'get' and by implication eat Tommy. We see the monster land in his craft on earth right outside Tommy's door and wonder how Tommy will escape his fate. As Tommy emerges from his garden gate, the picture focuses on his foot, and we see that in fact the monster is tiny and Tommy is about to squash it without even realising that it is there. The story is an excellent demonstration of the relative nature of scale since as readers we have, like Tommy, assumed (based on our previous knowledge of monsters) that the monster is large and therefore frightening. By placing the monster in physical proximity to Tommy, Ross reveals that Tommy is in fact the more powerful of the two and the monster's intention to eat him is absurd. The conclusion is both funny and satisfying since the monster is defeated and the threat removed, the change both physical and perceptual.

I'm coming to get you' (Ross, 1984) demonstrates positive pretence as a strategy for coping with fears which can be empowering since the child protagonist is frequently the active

party in minimising the threat. Empowerment is seen as a key and lasting benefit of monster stories according to Taylor (2010), who argues that the monster story can offer children a way to see that they can calm and manage fears for themselves without needing to rely on adults. Dora, in *The Wardrobe Monster* (Thomson, 2018) and Molly in *Molly and the Night Monster* (Wormell, 2018) both face their fears without an adult's help. Dora and her toy friends hear noises coming from the wardrobe. Eventually they open the wardrobe door to reveal a monster. Dora is forced to summon up courage: 'I'm brave', Dora told herself, 'really, really brave' (Thomson, 2008). The Wardrobe Monster turns out to be friendly and scared of the noises *outside* the wardrobe, and joins her and her cuddly toys in her bed. Molly listens to the noises outside her bedroom door with increasing fear, until she eventually gathers enough courage to approach the door and throw the bedsheet over the monster as it enters. The monster turns out to be her mother, come upstairs for a goodnight kiss. Both texts exemplify the 'approach' behavioural strategy described by Sayfan and Lagattuta (2009) and carry an implication that the monster/fear cannot be overcome until it is faced, the threat can be revealed, and action is taken: in Dora's case by opening the wardrobe and in Molly's by throwing the bedsheet. Both texts use this point to reach a climax, but once action is taken fear is minimised through a reversal of expectations, since the monsters are not what they seem, again a transformation or change which aligns with positive pretence as a coping strategy. They also exemplify the ingenuity of picture books: use of humour, image and irony engage the reader and help him or her to feel superior to the characters in the story who have the imaginary fears.

Managing the monster: image and word

In addition to the use of positive pretence, fears are further managed by the author's or illustrator's use of image and language. Wormell creates a visual structure which is maintained throughout *Molly and the Night Monster* and both presents and frames Molly's bedtime fears. Each image is set in a white border and the central gutter is used to signify the closed door between Molly's bedroom and the landing outside. The words are sparse, written along the bottom of both pages, separate from the images. On the right-hand side of the double-page spread we see Molly, who has woken in the night and can hear 'the sound of a step on a stair', in her bedroom. On the left-hand page, we see what Molly imagines: a procession of wild animals including a crocodile, bear, hippo, giraffe and elephant, climbing the stairs and moving along the landing. These are not monsters, yet their size and incongruity in the context of a domestic interior make them appear monstrous and disturbing. Suspense is built as each animal comes a little bit closer to Molly's bedroom door. They prepare the reader for the last visitor, the monster, who breaks the visual pattern which Wormell has created by opening the door in to Molly's room and crossing the gutter between the pages. This intrusion into Molly's bedroom marks the climax of the text and a demand on Molly to act or be eaten.

Wormell's text builds tension and suspense but these are managed carefully through skilful presentation of the images. The use of a white border throughout 'contain[s] or confine[s]' the action of the story and creates a distance between reader and text (Painter et al., 2014, p. 105). The reader faces the action directly from a fixed point which does not change. The characters are unaware of the reader and absorbed in their own activity: the reader is therefore spectator rather than participant, as if watching a film, further enforced by seeing the images through the lens of the muted blue colours. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) describe this kind of image as an 'offer' as they suggest that the reader is invited to view the

action from the perspective of a detached observer rather than being asked to enter the story themselves. The reader witnesses Molly's growing anxiety through her expressions and movements as she moves between her bed and the bedroom door, but knows more than Molly does through being able to see what is on the other side of the door. As well as serving to diminish the sense of fear, this knowledge is empowering since it gives the child reader some superiority to Molly and expectation of what is to come.

In *The Wardrobe Monster*, Thomson also uses the presentation of images in the text to manage the reader's fears. On each page Dora is never truly alone since she is always accompanied by her cuddly toys: a lion, a penguin and a bear, who act as comforting companions and a means to articulate her thoughts and feelings. Together they peer into the darkness of her bedroom and stand, foreshortened, in front of the wardrobe, which looms banging and crashing above them. Before she plucks up courage to open the wardrobe, tension is built by three vignettes across a double page spread, showing Dora looking through the keyhole, touching the handle and then finally opening the wardrobe door. Perspective makes the wardrobe appear bigger and closer at each stage, emphasising the growing fear. Presenting a sequence of images on one page is a device used in picture books to represent different moments or stages of action simultaneously (Painter et al., 2014, p. 58), but it also an artificial construct, like the framing of the image discussed above, which distances the reader from reality, thereby lessening the fear. The absence of a background minimises the context of the physical environment in which the events take place, and this helps the reader to focus on the important characters and action (Painter et al., 2014, p. 78), but the lack of context also creates a different reality in which the characters operate, again distancing them and their fears from the child reader.

Both Vere and Thomson use fonts creatively in various styles and sizes and in upper and lower cases to highlight particular words, represent noises and emphasise actions in the texts discussed here. The visual use of typography assists and guides meaning-making (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) and can help the (usually adult) reader when reading the story aloud, but it is also a device which draws attention to the constructed nature of the image and so helps to keep the reader somewhat removed and detached from the action of the story and possible associated fearful emotions.

The discussion above reinforces the integral nature of word and image in the picture book and the capacity of the images to express feelings which may be more difficult to articulate and understand through words alone.

Positive pretence therefore involves a change or transformation either in the material nature of the monster or in perceptions of it. Molly's monster is transformed into her mother, Tony's alien monster is transformed in size and Dora's monster turns out to be friendly. In *Bedtime for Monsters* the reader's perception of the monster and his intent is changed when the last page reveals what the monster has been seeking all along, not to eat the child but instead something much, much worse:

'A disgustingly big

Goodnight kiss! Kissy, kissy, kissy'

(Vere, 2011)

Transformation is a significant feature of many literary monsters who have a 'propensity to shift' and reappear in another guise or at another time (Cohen, 1996, p. 5). Yet unlike many of the monsters from adult fiction, these monsters cannot rise from the dead since they are not destroyed or overcome. Instead they remain in their transformed state for as long as the story lasts. The story acts as a template for dealing with new, unfamiliar

monsters, a template which will be reinforced through re-readings and re-tellings of the story.

An interesting adaptation of the use of positive pretence is offered by *Not Now Bernard* (McKee, 1980). The story is a masterful text which can be read on many levels. It is highly debatable if it can be categorised as a bedtime story at all, (even though it ends at bedtime in Bernard's bedroom), or if it helps children to cope with bedtime fears (fear of monsters for example is hardly allayed as the monster 'eats' Bernard). Yet at the very end of the story a form of positive pretence is deployed in the way that the monster is undermined and rendered less of a threat. The monster (or Bernard-as-monster depending upon your inter-pretation of the character) is 'managed' in to bed by his mum. She treats him with indifference, with little respect or regard for its monstrousness, in much the same way as she has treated Bernard the boy. The final picture implies that even monsters have to behave like children and go to bed wearing pyjamas and with a drink of milk. This is a complex text with many layers, but it could be argued that one interpretation is that even monsters have to obey mothers and that mothers can wield power over them or, by implication, their monstrous kinds of behaviour. This reading of course disregards the pathos of the monster in the bed and his final words:

'But I'm a monster' said the monster.

'Not now Bernard,' said Bernard's mother.

(McKee, 1980)

Not now Bernard and all of the texts discussed above feature bedrooms which have many of the familiar characteristics described by Moebius (1991, p. 54): located at the top of a flight of stairs; a bed with a headboard and quilt or blanket; windows with flowing curtains; a bedside lamp; cuddly toy or toys and a door. The bedrooms frequently lack detail or individuality: they are recognisable as bedroom spaces but are sufficiently generic to be occupied by any child. They do not tend to reflect the child's gender: Molly and Dora for example have rooms which have no particular objects or indications that they are girls, and Jim's bedroom in *Mr Underbed* (Riddell, 2011) is similarly not noticeably male. Whilst this might reflect the authors' views on gendered bedrooms, the images provide a relatively blank canvas for the child reader who can empathise with the book character, substitute the child's bedroom for their own and enjoy a sense of shared experience. In the three texts which form the focus of this article the story concludes with the image of the bedroom which suggests 'calm and the absence of confusion and anxiety' (Moebius, 1991, p. 55). Whatever monstrous events have occurred in the story, the safe space of the bedroom has been restored.

One of the key benefits of positive pretence as a coping strategy is its ability to allow the reader to confront their fear whilst remaining in the story world. Unlike reality affirmation, this strategy offers no judgement of whether the fear is rational or irrational as all fears are acknowledged and accepted. As demonstrated above, it is a strategy which is familiar and parti-cularly appropriate to readers under 6, but is also used as one of a wider range of coping strategies as children move into middle childhood (Sayfan and Lagattuta, 2009). Consequently, it is age-appropriate to the main intended audience of young readers of bedtime picture books and also to older children. Since bedtime fears are likely to be recurrent and only resolved over time, the books provide a consistent context in which these fears can be revisited and discussion re-opened in the light of new experi-ences. A child who no longer experiences a particular bedtime fear can revisit the story with a sense of superiority and satis-faction that they have 'grown up' and moved on.

Monster bedtime stories: familiarity and self-reference

The features of monster bedtime stories which have been discussed above suggest some characteristics which they hold in common. Yet generalisations and conclusions should be treated with caution as the picture book is an art form which is continuously evolving and chafing at boundaries. The current upsurge in picture books featuring monsters which Papazian (in Weinstock, 2014) noted, and the emergence of cute and cuddly monsters, demonstrate this process of evolution. Monster bedtime stories are sufficiently established to invite the sort of playful, self-referential and meta-fictive parody characteristic of the post-modernist picture book (Sipe and Pantaleo, 2008). Multimedia influences, especially from film, feed in to and inspire new texts. *I need my monster* (Noll and McWilliam, 2008) is an example of an irreverent post-modernist approach to the monster bedtime story which demonstrates how once they are recognisable, conventions can be played with. When Ethan finds that the monster who lives under his bed has gone on holiday, he realises that he can't sleep without an under-bed monster, and so he interviews a range of monsters to see who is best suited to the job. The story assumes a knowledge of the typical bedtime monster book in order to appreciate the humour in the reversal of power between boy and monster. New variations on the bedtime monster story are likely to continue to emerge as authors adapt and play with familiar themes and reflect the social and cultural contexts in which they are created. *I need my monster* suggests that bedtime monster stories, despite their diversity, are a form sufficiently established and recognisable to be parodied.

Conclusion

This article has focused specifically on the monsters who appear in bedtime picture books for young children. Although monsters in children's literature may symbolise many different things and serve many different functions (Cohen, 1996; Ormandy, 2017), it is widely acknowledged that the monsters in bedtime stories act as a means to help children cope with night-time fears (Mercurio and McNamee, 2008; Papazian in Weinstock, 2014; Taylor, 2013). Yet beyond this common purpose, less attention has been given to the explicit ways in which picture books work to assuage or eliminate those fears. In the stories cited in this article, fears are addressed and tackled through tapping in to the psychological strategies adopted by young children when facing fears on their own, and the skill of the picture book author and illustrator in shaping and manipulating the reader's response through the text and images. A key feature of all the texts discussed is that the threat of the monster must be eliminated quickly and in such a way as to bring about a positive outcome, ensuring a settled bedtime and a good night's sleep. Monsters are therefore rarely killed or banished using violent means, but are rather transformed and reinterpreted, a process which, as has been demonstrated, aligns well with young children's preference for positive pretence as a coping strategy in managing their fears. In monster stories intended for bedtime, use of the strategy necessitates a change either to the monster itself or to the child protagonist's (and by implication the child reader's) perception of it. This is not to suggest that picture book authors set out to present coping strategies in their stories in a didactic manner, rather that these strategies are instinctive and therefore authentic to the child's experience. Positive pretence enables the child to encounter and overcome the fear whilst remaining within the world of the story and, more indirectly, the implication of these encounters is that it is possible to manage and have control over powerful emotions. A happy resolution to the threat enables the ideal of bedtime and the child's bedroom as a space of emotional security, to be maintained.

The ways in which fears are managed and controlled through the authors' and illustrators' careful crafting of word and image,

demonstrates how essential the pictures are to these stories. Through the pictures, children are subtly and unconsciously supported to see and cope with their fears: for example, the presentation of a bedroom scene, the use of framing, colour palettes, characterisation and the context in which the monster is introduced all contribute to the affect experienced when viewing the image. These bedtime monsters occupy a particular time and fulfil a particular need, and as the child moves away from night-time terrors to new fears and monsters, they can be seen as amusing markers of 'progress' and maturity. Contemporary monster bedtime picture books have come to exploit this know-ingness, and often to feature monsters (and children) who deliberately react against the norms of the monster bedtime story to subvert and undermine 'fear of the monster'.

However, the monster should have the last word. At the end of *Bedtime for monsters* (Vere, 2011) the monster settles down to rest in the child's bedroom. The line of zzzs rising from the child's bed suggest that he or she is asleep at last. Just before the story concludes the narrator cannot resist one final jest at the reader's expense. After all, aren't monsters supposed to be scary?

> Did you really think he would eat you up?
>
> Don't be silly!
>
> Although you could leave out a little bedtime snack…just in case

(Vere, 2011).

Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during this study.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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