

# In Their Own Way

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

## **Heather Has Two Mommies: 20th Anniversary Edition || And Tango Makes Three || In Our Mothers' House**

by Lesléa Newman || Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell || Patricia Polacco

Alyson Books, 36 pp., \$12.95 || Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 32 pp., \$16.99 || Puffin, 64 pp.

**Twenty-first century** American families come in a dazzling array of sizes, shapes, colors, and gender-slash-generational patterns. This reality deserves to be reflected in the literature children read. Until fairly recently, however, children's books have privileged a paradigm of homogeneity and heterosexuality. Typical of these traditional attitudes of intolerance is Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Foreign Children", from 1913, in which an English child asks, with no irony: "Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,/Little frosty Eskimo,/ Little Turk or Japanee,/ O! don't you wish that you were me? ... You have curious things to eat,/ I am fed on proper meat:/ You must dwell beyond the foam,/I am safe and live at home..." But lately a number of children's books that reflect existing diversity have been steadily appearing under the imprints of both smaller and now even the most established presses.

When I opened the new twentieth anniversary edition of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, I could not suppress a gasp. The original black and white illustrations are now in full color! This deceptively simple percept marks a two-decades-long saga of social change: when *Heather* first saw the light of day, it had been rejected by over fifty publishers, was eventually printed through donations, and the four thousand dollars that were raised proved insufficient to produce a colored picture book. Yet the story, simple in format, was passionate and brave: two women, one a doctor, the other a carpenter, fall in love and decide to bring a child into the world and raise her together.

Beyond the addition of color, the new *Heather* has been otherwise altered or, I should say, expurgated. Eight crucial pages are missing—a cut that goes back, in fact, to the book's tenth anniversary edition. Disappointingly, these pages have not been re-instated—but they are the very core of the narrative, emotionally, aesthetically, and politically. A note by author Lesléa Newman in the edition that appeared in 2000 acknowledges their omission. A great many people, she claims, advised her to eliminate them. Their reasons ranged from the notion that they were a "deterrent" to introducing the book into classrooms, to the (preposterous) idea that the book had "too many words" for a young child. The principal message of her book, Newman insists, remains intact despite the omission of these eight pages, and she acquiesced in the change solely in order to help the book "reach as wide an audience as possible."

I cannot applaud her choice or her reasons, because the eight rejected pages matter. Warmly and tenderly, they recount, in words and in pictures, the friendship of two women, Kate and Jane—their growing love for one another, the joining of their lives, their desire for a child, the pregnancy of Jane, and the birth of little Heather. All of this is in the excised material. Clearly it is germane, even indispensable, to the ensuing narrative. By leaving it out, the anniversary edition eviscerates and impoverishes the work, and its glowing re-touched illustrations do not make up for the loss. Something that matters far more than color has been jettisoned here. To reject these pages is to forgo the

haven, the nest, the matrix that the expectant partners first wish for, and then prepare for their child. One enduringly memorable image that was omitted shows Kate stroking her partner's distended abdomen and feeling the thump of the unborn baby's kick.

Later in the story, something occurs that disturbs Heather. Owing to the mood that was established by the missing pages, we resonate with it and share her shock and dismay. Heather is sent out of her home into a playgroup, where for the first time she meets children from other homes. The teacher reads them a story that includes a father, and a couple of the listeners interrupt to tell about their fathers. Heather grows anguished and confused. We are with her in her crisis because the preceding pages have prepared us for it. Stricken, the little girl's face, ringed with tousled curls, is rendered unforgettably in black and white by the artist Diana Sousa, whose poignant drawing fills an entire page: "I don't have a daddy," she says.

A denouement follows this climactic moment. Swiftly, the teacher takes Heather into her arms and explains to her that every child comes from a somewhat different family constellation: one has just a mommy and a baby sister; one has two daddies; another has a mommy, a daddy, and a big brother. The children draw pictures of their families. "Each family is special," the teacher affirms, and what is most important about any family is that "all the people in it love each other." But the removal of the pages I have described diminishes this significant lesson, robs it of its power, and makes it seem trite. The complexity and the depth of Heather's experience must be seen against the background of what has gone before. Loss and the abrupt experience of limits are a part of growing up.

Rather than pander to prejudice or to impoverished and benighted notions of what children can and cannot absorb, why not regard those extradited pages as occasions for learning? When 2014 rolls around, *Heather* will no doubt be readied for its twenty-fifth anniversary edition. For aesthetic, psychological, educational, and political reasons, the whole story should be republished. If we are ready to endow it with radiantly colored imagery, surely we are ready to allow it to relate—explicitly, here and now—the enduring love of two women for one another and their collaboration in the adventure of parenthood.

Another book that deserves mention in this context is *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole. It adapts a true story of a pair of male chinstrap penguins in the Central Park Zoo who, in 1998, begin increasingly to behave like a couple. They bow to each other, sing to each other, even build a nest of stones where they sleep together, as do the heterosexual dyads. The zookeeper observes them, intuits the nature of their relationship, and notices that, in trying to imitate the others by hatching an egg of their own, they poignantly experiment with a disappointing egg-shaped rock! He kindly offers them an extra egg laid by a fertile couple, and the male penguins take turns keeping it warm. (Some grown children may remember Horton the Elephant on his propped tree from Dr. Seuss's avant-garde tale of 1940.) They care for it tenderly until it hatches and their chick bursts forth. Henceforth, the baby (named Tango) and his two fathers form a jolly threesome frolicking together in Central Park's penguin house where they are observed daily by hordes of city school children. Like so much children's literature, the story here, because it occurs in the context of the animal kingdom, is a parable, and so it may prove less threatening to some who might be troubled by its human implications. (But only to people who have forgotten Aesop and La Fontaine!) What matters supremely is that Tango's story is actually—like Heather's—the story of a wanted child born to a set of parents who are devoted first to one another and then to him. Penguins, ahem, are black and white.

And a third book, *In Our Mothers' House* by Patricia Polacco, which appeared last year, merits attention because it adds a new dimension to the subject. Here we have a first-person narrative, the storyteller being an adopted child brought as an infant from Africa by two Caucasian-American women, a pediatrician and a paramedic, who subsequently adopt an Asian boy and a red-haired baby girl. The setting is Berkeley, California—a welcoming milieu. Exuberance and *joie de vivre* burst from the pages of this lively picture book with its double spread illustrations in bold color vibrantly executed in mixed media, graphite, paint, and brush. Its overall mood of festivity and pleasure is pervasive, conveyed not only by the bravura draughtsmanship but also by the ubiquitous smiles that adorn its characters, who beam out at us from every page. Once again, we focus here on the enduring nature of the same sex couple's relationship, and in the end we see the two women depicted in old age sitting peacefully together and caressing one another or playing with a grandchild.

But there is a dissonant note, simultaneously brave and cowardly. We meet a blonde fair-skinned neighbor who hates the family. She is depicted three times, each time with her two blond sons, who seem less prejudiced than she is. When the narrator's little brother asks his lesbian mothers why this woman slams the door in their faces on Halloween, the mothers do not respond. The narrator herself wonders why the blonde neighbor dislikes them. When she asks, one mother says simply: "I like you, baby" and gives a hug. Finally, we see the blonde witch snarl at the lesbian couple in public, point her finger accusingly at them, and hiss: "I don't appreciate what you two are." To which the only explanation made to the three shocked adopted children is: "She is full of fear, sweetie. She's afraid of what she cannot understand. She doesn't understand *us*." And also, "There seems to be no love in her heart, either."

To include such a homophobe and bigot in a children's book takes courage. People of this ilk certainly exist in children's lives, and it is important to acknowledge and represent them rather than pretend that we can wish them away. Yet the specifics raise concern. The idealized title family in this book experiences nothing but unending glee, without the slightest hint of normal conflict or aggression. All the nastiness is projected outward onto the unpleasant blonde, who conveniently serves as the mean loveless villain of the story. Simplistically, bad becomes good; good becomes bad.

Moreover, the two mothers, rather than answering their children's worries about unjustified hatred thoughtfully, in ways that open paths to greater understanding and mutual tolerance, ignore the children's painful questions or reply to them in ways that seem abstract, unsatisfactory, and pejorative. While the inclusion of a prejudiced character in a children's book takes pluck and merits praise, this theme needs to be explored more delicately, so as to reverse stereotypes and gradually uproot them. When we neglect children's questions, we risk the danger that they may stop asking them.

The lovely irony about each of these progressive children's books is that they are all of a piece with the tradition: they portray the child's need for security and love, and the adult's fidelity to the project of parenthood. These books strive valiantly to expand children's consciousness of what a viable human family can be, but when it comes to what really matters there is nothing subversive about them. And they surpass the traditional literature in a wonderful way: they exemplify the imagination to see difference not only as a fact to be tolerated, but as a genuine human opportunity.

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