

Spring 4-30-2015

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D. Claire Winkler

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BENDING GENDER: PERVERSIONS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

D. Claire Winkler

April 2015

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D. Claire Winkler
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04/30/15

Claire Winkler
English 491
Dr. Scanlon
May 1, 2015

Bending Gender: Perversions in Children's Literature

A boy who never grows up. A carpet that flies. A brand new world that can be created entirely with crayon. A little tomboy from Alabama who wins every fistfight she has. Numerous children's books are marked by what Nat Hurley calls "literary perversions" in her aptly titled article "The Perversions of Children's Literature." Literary perversions are, essentially, textual moments that violate or are somehow at odds with what we have collectively agreed is "normal," and they exist under the larger umbrella of queer theory. "Queer" as a literary term has two separate meanings. The first refers to sexual or gender identities that fall outside of accepted heterosexual, cisgender, and related categories. The second refers to things that are, quite simply, strange. Queer theory seeks to unite these meanings by focusing on the ways in which general strangeness can be informed by those outsider sexualities and gender identifications, and vice versa. Literary perversions are an example of what can come out of this merging.

Some perversions are more than accepted in children's books; in fact, they are celebrated. Peter Pan, for instance, is a young boy who never grows older. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max sails for weeks without ever having to leave his bedroom. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the titular heroine falls down a rabbit hole and finds herself in another universe. At one point in her article, Hurley explains: "These are what we might call the normative perversions of dailiness within children's literature: the kinds of perversions that contravene our usual ways of thinking but that we have delighted in accepting as features of the genre"

(119). Because these perversions are so fun, fantastical, and—most importantly—so far removed from our version of reality, they are safe.

This, of course, brings up the question: what about those strange moments, those perversions, that are not fanciful? The ones that could—and do—appear in reality? Hurley addresses these perversions as well, explaining that they “do more to unsettle the comfortable ways we have come to think about texts for young people” (119). Because childhood is supposed to be a time of purity, it is unnerving to stumble upon textual moments that confirm one of our worst anxieties: that, truly, childhood is just as strange, dark, and uncertain an era as adulthood. Children are not now nor have they ever been utterly shrouded in innocence, though we like to pretend they are.

These sorts of perversions manifest in different ways. For instance, Hurley spends a good deal of her article analyzing perversions of sexuality, which—to be brief—are found in characters whose expressions of their sexuality fall outside of the established heteronormative standard. However, she also examines perversions of gender, and it is on gender that this paper will be placing the majority of its focus. Gender flexibility during childhood is a generally accepted fact: children have not been alive long enough to truly know where they fit on the socially constructed gender spectrum, a discovery process that can last years. Many famous protagonists of children’s books spend their narratives suspended in that state of not-yet. A perfect example is the titular protagonist of Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy*. Harriet roundly rejects activities associated with traditional femininity, most notably dance lessons. The adults in Harriet’s life are tolerant of her behavior. But they also continually remind her that—like it or not—she will still have to become a lady someday, indicating that her chosen gender expression falls outside of the realm of acceptability. *Harriet*, naturally, is not the only book in which

gender perversions occur. The other instances are many and varied (the Baudelaire children of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Caddie Woodlawn of *Caddie Woodlawn*, Scout Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Coraline Jones of *Coraline*, etc.), though the two books at the heart of this paper are E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Published in 1952, *Charlotte's Web* is a story of love, loyalty, and the power of the written word. The book opens with a little girl named Fern saving the runt of her father's litter of pigs from the chopping block. Fern names the pig Wilbur, and raises him on a bottle until he becomes too big to keep. She then sells Wilbur to her uncle, who owns a large farm. Though rather sensitive and emotional, Wilbur still lives peacefully in the barn and makes friends with the other animals, forming an especially intimate bond with a spider named Charlotte. Upon discovering that he will be butchered for meat come Christmas time, Wilbur must look to Charlotte to save his life. Charlotte tricks the small town in which they live into believing that Wilbur is a special pig by creating a series of "miracles": she writes words that describe him in her web, in an attempt to trick the human characters into believing it is a circumstance of divine intervention. Charlotte's tricks work flawlessly, and Wilbur's life is eventually spared. Late in her life, Charlotte builds an egg sac and has her children, and though everything seems like it is going to end happily for everyone, that is simply not meant to be. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Charlotte dies, leaving Wilbur to mourn her and come to a better understanding of the facts of life and death.

Though published in 1977, twenty-five years after *Charlotte's Web*, and about human characters—not animals—*Bridge to Terabithia* still bears similarity to *Charlotte's Web*. Like *Charlotte's Web*, *Terabithia* features co-protagonists: one of them is a male character, Jess Aarons, and the other a female character, Leslie Burke. Jess is a ten-year-old boy from a

working class family in rural Virginia. Like Wilbur, Jess is sensitive and a bit shy, but unlike Wilbur, he is misfitting and unhappy. That is, until Leslie Burke moves in next door. Leslie is smart, funny, and dynamic, and the first person with whom Jess makes a genuine connection. Together, they create the magical land of Terabithia, a place where they can be both together and fully themselves. But the denouement mirrors the one in *Charlotte's Web* in some ways: just as Jess is starting to find true happiness, Leslie dies in a tragic accident, and Jess is left isolated and lonely once more. Following that event, the rest of the book is about Jess's journey to rejoin a world without Leslie, a world he feels has no place for him.

Gender perversions occur frequently throughout both of these books. To begin with *Charlotte's Web*: Charlotte, for example, is a female character who is masculine and feminine simultaneously. In her article "The Reproduction of Mothering in *Charlotte's Web*," Lucy Rollin expounds upon this idea: "Charlotte...escapes female stereotyping by combining masculine with feminine traits. Her scheming, trapping, bloodthirsty nature coexists with peaceful nurturance. The text describes her as 'bold' and 'cruel,' yet she draws support from her relationships with her female ancestors, her cousins, Wilbur, and the other animals. Language, in the dichotomy between nature and culture, is usually associated with culture and hence with maleness. Yet Charlotte is both 'a good friend and a good writer'" (Rollin 8). Charlotte is described as being kind and graceful. She also functions as a mother-figure, for Wilbur especially. However, Wilbur himself does muse that Charlotte is "fierce, brutal, scheming, and bloodthirsty--everything I don't like" (41). These traits do not belong to male-identified persons exclusively, but they are generally associated with masculinity more so than they are with femininity. What is fascinating about Wilbur's assessment is that it reveals just as much about

him as it does of Charlotte. Though a male character himself, he is made anxious by Charlotte's more masculine characteristics, and comforted by the more feminine ones.

That is because Wilbur is more feminine than he is masculine: he is shy, gentle, and very emotional. He is also physically small. Because of this, from the very beginning of the book Wilbur functions as almost a damsel in distress: Fern rescues him from being killed when he is just a baby, and later Charlotte has to do the exact same thing. Within these relationships, then, Charlotte and Fern are the dominant ones, the role models. They also are very motherly; they are caretakers. In fact, they are so influential in Wilbur's life that it is likely they both play a role in informing Wilbur's more feminine personality. The relationship that Wilbur has with Charlotte and Fern both is not atypical in works of the bildungsroman¹ like *Charlotte's Web*: in these books, young characters often have mentors who help to usher them into maturity. However, *Charlotte's Web* is an anomaly in that the mentors are female characters, and the mentee is a male character. Generally, the mentors are the same sex as their mentees: Jonas has The Giver, Matilda has Miss Honey, Harry Potter has Professor Dumbledore, Anne Shirley has Marilla Cuthbert, and so on. This way, male characters can be guided into proper masculine maturity, and female characters can be guided into proper feminine maturity. Wilbur's experience, though, is fundamentally different. In a hypothetical world in which Wilbur's role model(s) are male characters, there is a greater chance of him "growing out of" his more feminine behavior. Instead, with the role models he actually has, that behavior is only reinforced.

In *Terabithia*, the characterizations of Jess and Leslie are quite like the characterizations of Wilbur and Charlotte. Jess, as mentioned, is shy and sensitive. He is also extremely artistic,

¹ The bildungsroman is a literary genre native to Europe. The term literally translates as "novel of development," meaning that it is, then, a coming-of-age novel. The term is a relatively recent facet of American literary theory, as it was not introduced until the mid-1950s (Moretti 5). Because many children's books are about children, the maturation of a young protagonist is a frequent concern—meaning that many children's books, like *Charlotte's Web*, fall under the bildungsroman categorization.

though he experiences anxiety about that because he understands all too well that adults and his peers view it as being “girly.” Much of this anxiety stems from the stern disapproval of Jess’s father, who—though frequently absent—is still the most prominent male figure in Jess’s life. Jess wishes to show his father his drawings, but does not. He tried to, once, when he was younger, but his father rejected him: “When he was in the first grade, he had told his dad that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. He thought his dad would be pleased. He wasn’t. ‘What are they teaching you in that damn school?’ he had asked. ‘Bunch of old ladies turning my son into some kind of a—.’ He had stopped on the word, but Jess had gotten the message. It was one you didn’t forget, even after four years” (11-12). This demonstrates that Jess—at the very least—is conscious of the role he is truly playing, versus the role he must appear to be playing. Jess makes efforts to prove his masculinity by trying to be the fastest runner in his elementary school. Running is just as important to Jess as art, but—unlike art—Jess feels comfortable being open about how much he loves to run, since athletic prowess is an “appropriate” masculine characteristic. Caitlin Ryan and Jill Wilmarth-Hermann point this out in their article “Already on the Shelf: Queer Readings of Award-Winning Children’s Literature”: “Where art is his private desire, to be shared only with those who will not judge him...running is public” (165). Jess’s feminine interest (art) is kept secret to everyone but the people he trusts most (like Leslie), while his masculine interest (running) is allowed to be brought into the open.

Leslie, too, violates the rules of gender—she is quite masculine—but unlike Jess, she is at ease with the fluidity of her identity. Ryan and Wilmarth-Hermann state that “Leslie seems unencumbered by the notions of boy and girl, and what is expected of each” (163). This is first made apparent on a surface level: Leslie’s appearance is far more boyish than girlish. This is a concern specific to *Terabithia* in some ways: because Charlotte and Wilbur are both animals,

their appearances are naturally fairly androgynous; they have no means of expressing themselves through dress or hairstyle. Leslie wears her hair cut very short and favors jeans over dresses. In fact, Leslie is so androgynous that when Jess first meets her, he is unsure of Leslie's gender: "The person had jaggedy brown hair cut close to its face and wore one of those blue undershirt tops with faded jeans cut off above the knees. He honestly couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl" (22). The one time Leslie does wear a dress—when she attends Easter mass with the Aarons family—her "usual sparkle" (82) is diminished, proving—as Ryan and Wilmarth-Hermann put it—that "the more complicated 'Leslie' subjectivity [is what] makes her who she is" (165). Leslie's selfhood is dependent on her ability and willingness to exist in-between these two very different gender roles.

That leads us away from the relatively simple discussion of the ways in which physical appearance can be linked to gender expression, and into the more complex one of how gender expression is often a vital component of one's inner being. The fundamental pieces of Leslie's personality lean towards the masculine, same as her physical appearance: she is outgoing, a planner, and—though she and Jess are technically co-leaders of Terabithia—her leadership is strongest. Additionally, Leslie is extremely courageous, whereas Jess is more skittish. While Jess is frightened by activities like swinging over the gully that separates the "real world" from Terabithia and venturing into the deeper parts of the forest, Leslie is not. Moreover, the essay Leslie writes about scuba diving frightens Jess so much that he, in an instance of internal monologue, directly compares Leslie's bravery to his own lack thereof: "Suppose you went under and your mask filled all up with water and you couldn't get to the top in time? He was choking and sweating....This was Leslie Burke's favorite hobby....That meant Leslie did it a

lot....Lord, he was such a coward” (43). This, again, shows that Jess understands that he is somehow falling short of the expectations society has for him.

Finally, Jess and Leslie’s relationship never moves beyond platonic friendship. This, again, is an issue specific to *Terabithia*; because Charlotte’s relationship to Wilbur is so markedly maternal, a romance between them would be disquieting². The lack of romance in *Terabithia*, though, is unusual. Because Jess and Leslie are both human characters of different sexes on the cusp of puberty, most books would eventually pair them as a romantic couple. Indeed, Jess’s older sisters and peers regularly refer to Leslie as his “girlfriend,” a notion at which Jess scoffs: “Gary Fulcher, like [Jess’s sisters], took great pleasure in teasing him about his ‘girl friend,’ It hardly bothered Jess. He knew that a *girl* friend was somebody who chased you on the playground and tried to grab you and kiss you. He could no more imagine Leslie chasing a boy than he could imagine Mrs. Double-Chinned Meyers shimmying up the flagpole” (55). A desire for a romantic relationship (typically heterosexual)³ is used as a maturity marker in numerous children’s (and young adult) books⁴. Instead, Paterson has her two protagonists grow and mature through the power of friendship, thus debunking the heteronormative standard set by so many other books.

These perversions, then, undeniably exist, but what do they mean? To what grander meaning do they contribute? To answer these questions, one must be willing to read these books perversely. This is a type of reading that Hurley discusses at length in her article, and she uses

² That Charlotte and Wilbur are different animals is worth considering, though. In some ways, this queers even the maternal. Not only is one of Wilbur’s primary mentors of a different sex than his own; she is also of a different species.

³ Gender expression does not necessarily inform sexuality, and vice versa, though this is an instance where the two things are linked.

⁴ E.g.: *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume, *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot, *The Slippery Slope* by Lemony Snicket, *Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception* by Eoin Colfer, the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer, and anything by John Green.

Little Women as an example: “What might it mean to read *Little Women* for what I like to think of as the murky middle of the book—those delicious places where Jo has fully organized an alternative world for herself where she alone gets to play the parts of boys and speaks in slang?” (124). Essentially, when you read perversely, what you are doing is establishing notable perversions as being vital to the narrative at hand, instead of just being mere outliers. It is an extremely fruitful exercise. It is especially fruitful when it comes to children’s books like *Charlotte’s Web* and *Terabithia*, because even though gender flexibility is accepted during childhood, children are also being prepared for the roles they will be expected to fill once they are older. Moments of gender subversion in these books, then, rarely get more than a cursory admission: these characters cross established boundaries, but only because that is a natural life stage. Like any other life stage, it will end. Perverse readings ask: what if, though, these characters’ atypical navigations of gender are intrinsic parts of their existences, and therefore *our* existences, along with the narratives they inhabit?

Because *Charlotte’s Web* and *Terabithia* are so similar, reading them perversely in relation to each other elicits fertile and fascinating results. Jess and Wilbur are both feminine male characters, and this enables them to form the relationships that are at the emotional center of each book. On a surface level, this is partially because Leslie and Charlotte offer a protection that Jess and Wilbur need. Jess and Wilbur’s femininity makes them vulnerable, precisely because they are not supposed to be vulnerable; according to the rules of the society in which they live, they are supposed to be tough and strong. Moreover, the male figures who are present in Jess’s and Wilbur’s life regularly prove themselves to be either untrustworthy or unreliable: because Wilbur was born small and weak, Fern’s father was going to kill him. Because Jess is

shy and interested in art, his father is not invested in spending time with him. It takes Charlotte and Leslie—those who see the value inherent in femininity—to see the value in Wilbur and Jess.

To push this perverse reading even further: because Jess and Wilbur navigate gender differently, that enables them to see and interact with the world differently as well. Jess's peers and siblings, as mentioned, all assume that Leslie is his girlfriend and subsequently tease him for it. Jess's parents, though—his mother especially—do not think Leslie is Jess's girlfriend; they know that she is just a friend, and this worries them: “[Jess's] father had seen Leslie only a few times and had nodded to show that he had noticed her, but his mother said that she was sure he was fretting that his only son did nothing but play with girls, and they were both worried what would become of it” (59). Jess, however, is unconcerned. He describes Leslie as his “other, more exciting self” (59), illustrating that he not only appreciates and respects her friendship—he needs it. It is a part of him. And Wilbur's femininity combined with his deep love for Charlotte enables him to carry their relationship forward even after Charlotte dies: he becomes a surrogate mother for her children. It is Wilbur who brings Charlotte's egg sac home from the fair:

“[Wilbur] carefully took the little bundle in his mouth and held it there on top of his tongue....And [Charlotte] knew her children were safe” (170-171). This mothering role is literally passed on to Wilbur, who is the only character in the book who is gentle enough and close enough to Charlotte to take on the responsibility. Most of the spiders leave shortly after they hatch, though three stay. Wilbur names the three that stay—Aranea, Joy, and Nellie—which is a more symbolic act of mothering. He continues to care for “Charlotte's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, year after year” (183), indicating that Wilbur's role of metaphorical mother carries him through the rest of his life.

Charlotte and Leslie's behavior and navigations of gender can also be given a perverse reading. Their shared ability to embody femininity and masculinity all at once is why they are able to save the lives—in Charlotte's case literally and in Leslie's case symbolically—of Wilbur and Jess, respectively. Were Leslie and Charlotte to possess traditionally feminine traits only, they would be hyperfeminine: that is, they would be too feminine. They would not be able to offer Wilbur and Jess the strength and protection they need; they would need protection, themselves. Conversely, if Leslie and Charlotte were to possess traditionally *masculine* traits only, they would fall into the literary trap that is hypermasculinity: that is, they would not be feminine enough. They would be aggressive, tough, and pushy. It is by combining traits from both that Charlotte and Leslie become the heroes that they are. Indeed, it is almost a requirement that Leslie and Charlotte navigate gender in this way to become the beloved characters that they are, and therein lies a fairly major problem.

No matter how fruitful perverse readings may be, there are still numerous challenges one must face when doing them. One that arises when reading *Charlotte's Web* and *Terabithia* has already been briefly touched on: the ways in which Charlotte and Leslie navigate gender. They both refuse to fully adhere to their prescribed gender roles, and in many ways this is a positive thing. Even though gender is a fairly nebulous social construct, it is still seen as something firm and unchanging. Therefore, *deconstructing* it is valuable work. However, Charlotte and Leslie's inherent value as characters is still, in many ways, tied to their gender expression. Just being feminine was never going to be good enough, and fully embracing masculinity would have been equally bad. They are forced to be everything, all at once.

An additionally absorbing element of both *Charlotte's Web* and *Terabithia* that ties into female characters being made to be both masculine and feminine is that neither book has solely a

male protagonist. In an article titled “‘They’re closin’ up in girl land’: Female Masculinities in Children’s Fantasy,” author Ann Balay explores the ways in which female protagonists of children’s fantasy novels do not just try on masculinity—they allow it to become an intrinsic part of their identity, while at the same time preserving some of the key things that make them feminine. Towards the end of her article, Balay writes: “Yet these books give girls an expanded sense of imaginary options: not only to choose masculinity instead of femininity, but also to persistently, deliberately choose both” (34). This article and Hurley’s article are both primarily invested in scrutinizing the ways in which female characters subvert gender roles. They are both in favor of this happening. That makes sense, seeing as gender is a social construct that should absolutely be explored and subsequently *deconstructed*.

However, it is almost always female characters that choose to do—or, rather, are *made to do*, as evidenced by Leslie and Charlotte—this type of subverting and exploring. There are very few male characters who behave in this manner; Wilbur and Jess are two obvious examples, but they are also rarities. It is also worth noting that Jess and Wilbur’s most meaningful relationships are with female characters--Wilbur has Fern and Charlotte, and Jess has Leslie. This holds true in other books featuring feminine male characters as well: gentle Charles Wallace Murray has his older sister Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*, for instance, and bookish Klaus Baudelaire has his sisters Violet and Sunny in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. On the other hand, in books where a male protagonist’s life is populated primarily with male characters, that protagonist tends to be thoroughly masculine. For example, in Joseph Krumgold’s *...And Now, Miguel*, the most important people in twelve-year-old protagonist Miguel Chavez’s life are his father, brothers, and uncles; he has a mother and a sister, though they are almost never mentioned. Miguel spends most of the narrative preoccupied with what it means to “become a

man,” and does not feel that he can grow up until he is appropriately masculine. These examples highlight a frustrating fact: that unless male characters have feminine influence, it is unlikely that they will interrogate their gender role.

There are specific textual moments that resist perverse readings, too. In fact, there are moments in both *Charlotte's Web* and *Terabithia* that must conform to a more traditional narrative, because that narrative is vital to the story at hand⁵. Charlotte's status as a mother/mother-figure is a perfect example of this. Studies have shown that the ideal father is someone who is noticeable, whereas the ideal mother is almost completely invisible; she is there with love and comfort before you even realize you need anything⁶. From the moment Charlotte becomes part of the narrative, her role is caring for other people. Indeed, the first words she speaks are words of comfort to the lonely Wilbur: ““Do you want a friend, Wilbur? I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you”” (31). Almost immediately it is established that Charlotte is likely going to be defined in terms of her relationships with other characters, much like how mothers are often defined by their relationship to their children.

Following her debut, Charlotte does much more than simply befriend Wilbur. She becomes a catalyst for nearly every major event that occurs in the book, including its climax—the saving of Wilbur's life. However, Charlotte never once gets credit for all that she does, nor does she ever ask for it. For instance, when several human characters go out and inspect the first

⁵ Interesting to consider, though perhaps beyond the scope of this paper, are the relative merits of doing revisionary readings of texts. When faced with the argument I presented--these books must unfold the way that they do in order to preserve the integrity of their narratives—one could always argue back: well, what harm is there in the narrative changing? This is shaky, largely theoretical ground to be on, and the only real answer to that question is: there likely would not be any harm done, and the books would just be different. But it is also impossible to truly know what the outcome would be, because that is not the outcome we—the audience—have been given.

⁶ See article “Why Mom's Time is Different From Dad's Time,” by Jennifer Senior--which was adapted from her book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*--for additional details and examples.

“miracle”—Charlotte wrote “some pig” in her web—they dismiss Charlotte as merely being “just a common grey spider” (81). On top of all the big things she does, Charlotte also takes time to help in smaller ways; she tells Wilbur stories and sings him lullabies to help him sleep, even when “she is...quite tired” (102). Perhaps the most major example of Charlotte’s self-sacrificing nature, though, exists in these two heartbreaking sentences: “Nobody, of the hundreds of people who had visited the fair, knew that a small, grey spider played the most important role of all. No one was with her when she died” (171).

It is easy to dismiss this moment as nothing more than a rumination on the nature of mortality. It is that, of course, but it is also much more. Not only did Charlotte sacrifice her time and energy for Wilbur, she also sacrifices her entire life for her children. Towards the end of the book, Charlotte makes an egg sac in which she lays her eggs. She refers to it as her “*magnum opus*...[her] great work” (144-145) and states that it is “the finest thing [she has] ever made” (145). This is notable because Charlotte has made numerous things throughout the book, many of them viewed as miracles. But it is her egg sac—the item that contains her future children—that is the most important to her. Moreover, Charlotte does this towards the end of her life, and she is well aware that it will be one of her final earthly acts.

An anonymous death is perhaps not an entirely satisfying conclusion for Charlotte, but it is also the only conclusion possible in order for the book to have a rewarding ending as a whole. This is true logistically—in order for Charlotte’s plan to have succeeded, she needed to trick people into thinking that the words merely appeared in her web. The web is her great triumph, yes, but if she had lain claim to that triumph, it no longer would have been perceived as a miracle. Finally, though the circumstances surrounding Charlotte’s death might be slightly unsatisfying, the other option—Charlotte surviving—is even worse. After all, *Charlotte’s Web*

is about the everlasting powers of friendship. Had Charlotte lived, one of its primary messages would have been totally undermined: that love can transcend anything, death included.

Leslie's conclusion as a character is similar to Charlotte's—she dies, so Jess can grow as a character. Unlike Charlotte, Leslie does not martyr herself for Jess; her death is a tragic accident. Still, it is worth analyzing all the same. Paterson spends the entire book building a deep relationship between Jess and Leslie, only to kill Leslie off with just two chapters to go. The death of a character is unnerving anyway, and Leslie's death is especially so. For instance, it is largely why Jess begins to lose his more feminine characteristics, and more fully embrace his masculine ones. Following Leslie's death, Jess has a conversation with his father, and the way in which his father addresses him makes Jess think: "It was the kind of thing Jess could hear his father saying to another man. He found it strangely comforting" (147). Jess's father has been largely missing from Jess's life up until this point, and it takes the loss of Leslie for him to show interest in his son; as long as Jess had a female role model, there could not also be room for his father. Additionally, Leslie's death means that Jess is left the sole leader of Terabithia, though the final paragraph of the book implies that his younger sister will eventually take Leslie's place as queen. This trope—a female character's story ending so that the male character's story can grow and continue—is one that frequently appears in books, television shows, and movies. It also perpetuates a very harmful notion: that narratives with male characters at the center are more important than stories with female characters at the center.

This trope is problematic, but even still, it manages to work here. Like *Charlotte's Web*, could this book have ended any other way? Though Jess and Leslie do function as co-protagonists, a major plot arc of the book is still Jess's personal and emotional journey. Of course, one could always argue: why not make Leslie's personal and emotional journey the plot

arc? But if this were to happen and Leslie's character were preserved as is, what more does she have to learn? She is already confident and fulfilled. What could Jess have possibly taught her? Conversely, if Leslie were to fill Jess's role and take on his traits, Jess would take on Leslie's traits, and then Terabithia wouldn't have any of the fascinating, gender perversions that it has now. Jess would be traditionally masculine, and Leslie would be traditionally feminine, and that would be that.

It is clear, then, that one must occasionally be willing to accept that while books might have moments that complicate perverse readings, those moments are essential to preserving the integrity of their stories. This is not to deny the importance of reading perversely, though. It is still a vital act. Rather, one must be willing to accept a balance. This may make the reading experience difficult, but that is precisely the point. In order to give these books the analysis they deserve, it is vital to explore the depths that are so often left untouched.

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