Scenes from the Class Struggle in Picture Books: Depictions of Housing and Home in Books for Young Children

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Accepted: 15 June 2021 / Published online: 1 July 2021
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Abstract

While there is still much to be done, there have been tremendous strides made in increasing the diversity of children's literature; however one area that is often overlooked in these conversations is social class. From years of providing picture book story time to young children living in homeless shelters, it became obvious that picture books being published in the U.S. privilege the experiences of middle- and upper-class people, especially in their depictions of home and housing. Based on analysis of 185 picture books published in the U.S. between 1999 and 2019, I argue that home as typically represented in children's picture books presents a limited and privileged view that normalizes single-family homes, material possessions, and related middle-class experiences. Further, these books do not reflect the lived experience of the millions of American children in the United States experiencing homelessness and housing instability, as well as those who live in apartments, trailers and other types of homes that contemporary picture books would have us believe do not exist.

Keywords Picture books · Home · Homelessness · Socioeconomic status · Class

Watching a child connect with a book recommended by a teacher or librarian is deeply gratifying. We understand the need of children to see themselves and their

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families depicted with respect and accuracy in the books to which they are exposed, and while there is still much to be done, there have been tremendous strides made in increasing the diversity of children's literature. One area that is often overlooked in the conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion is social class, perhaps because Americans are still uncomfortable with the idea that we live in a classed society (Pascale, 2005), perhaps because socioeconomic class is often entwined problematically with race and ethnicity (Jones, 2008). In this context, children's picture books, like so much of mainstream U.S. culture, often present subtle but pervasive messages that normalize middle- and upper-class experiences while virtually ignoring those of people from working-class and lower-income backgrounds. This privileging of some lived experiences over others is ideologically troubling, but also has serious consequences in practice. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) argued,

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (para. 4).

Too often, books that address issues related to class or socioeconomic status, are relegated to "problem" books, often with a moral or solution (Kelley and Darragh, 2011).

According to Lawrence R. Sipe (2011), "One of the aspects of the art of the picturebook that we must address, therefore, is how the modes of representation in picturebooks are necessarily freighted with sociocultural and political significance" (p. 244). While Sipe addresses race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, he does not mention socioeconomic class as an area of needed diversity of representation in picture books for children. Similarly, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003) explain that

Picture books both depend on and teach such conventional assumptions. Simply by depicting details to be taken for granted, they provide young viewers with ideas and attitudes about matters such as beauty and ugliness, cleanliness and filth, and vice and virtue, and confirm ideas about normality that may or may not be desirable (p. 288).

Thus, books for young children that include images or narratives around poverty, social class, hunger, or homelessness may replicate widespread culture messages about deservedness, work, and capitalism. Because of this, "Children reading these books may gain the misunderstanding that middle- and upper-class families are the norm, and that all people who are poor do not know how to manage their money" (Kelley and Darragh, 2011, p. 266).

Perhaps the most obvious way that picture books reproduce class assumptions is in their depictions of house and home. Over many years sharing picture book story times with preschool children living with their families in homeless shelters, I was intentional in my selection of books so that the kids could see characters who looked like them. People of color are vastly overrepresented among those who are unhoused (de Bradley, 2015); thus I looked for picture books with

Black and Latinx characters as much as possible. Eventually, even in books with diverse characters, I noticed how common things like vacations and trips, backyard swimming pools, and huge bedrooms cluttered with clothes and toys were in picture book illustrations and became increasingly careful about not including books that featured these things, as well. I began to recognize that most picture books featured large, single-family homes, spacious private bedrooms, and an array of other signifiers of class status vastly different from the lived experiences of the children in my programs. At the same time, I started to reflect on my own experiences as a reader of books for children and recalled just two times when I recognized my childhood class experiences in a book. Even now I can recall a book I read as a child where the family had no living room furniture because the mother had yet to decide on it for their new home; we also did not have living room furniture but because we could not afford it, and this shared experience with the story has stayed with me for decades, imperfect as it is. I was an adult the first time I read a book for young people where the characters had socioeconomic class circumstances similar to mine as a child (Sara Zarr's *Story of a Girl*) and had a visceral response to reading a setting that felt familiar. Based on these experiences, I designed a formal study to uncover what images of home children in the United States are exposed to through picture books.

Using the Marantz Picturebook Collection for the Study of Picturebook Art in the Reinberger Children's Library Center at Kent State University,¹ I explored representations of home in 150 picture books published from 1999 to 2015. To complete the study in 2020, I read and reviewed an additional 35 picture books published between 2015 and 2019. Based on my outreach work and my long experience as a librarian, I speculated that picture books published (originally or in translation) and sold in the United States would privilege representations of home that signify middle class experiences, including single-family dwellings, yards, private bedrooms, and large spaces. The books studied during the Albers Fellowship support this: 91 (83%) of the 110 books that feature a home in any way show clear evidence in their illustrations that home is a single-family dwelling. The more recent books also follow this pattern, although to a lesser extent: 15 (54%) of the 28 books featuring some sort of home depict a single-family residence. Thus, I argue that home as typically represented in children's picture books presents a limited and privileged view that normalizes middle-class experiences, and does not reflect the lived experience of the millions of American children who live in apartments, trailers and other types of homes, as well as those children experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

¹ Most of the research for this study was conducted through the first Jacqueline M. Albers Guest Scholar in Children's Literature Fellowship at Kent State University, which I received in 2015.

The Study

The purpose of this research was to examine a sample of picture books published from 2000 to 2020 and widely available in the U.S. to determine how home is represented in these works. The assumption was that in most cases, home settings would be just that, settings that were not necessarily integral to the story but took up significant visual space in the illustrations. These settings are often ancillary to the words and story and therefore left to the illustrator's imaginings. As children read or are read picture books, the pictures play a significant role in their understanding of the story's world. As Nodelman and Reimer (2003) explain,

everything in such pictures is less important as a source of aesthetic delight than as a source of information about a story. However pleasing they are, their shape, their style, their composition are also means of conveying information about how viewers are being invited to respond to the story (p. 277).

As the results of the study show, what viewers are invited to respond to in most picture books are home settings that are decidedly middle-class and feature material possessions that reflect particular class signifiers and norms.

The picture books studied were culled from a list that included winners and honor books from the following awards from 2000 to 2015: Caldecott, Coretta Scott King (illustrator), Ezra Jack Keats (writer and illustrator), Golden Kite (picture book text and picture book illustration), *Boston Globe-Horn Book*, Wanda Gág Read Aloud, Pura Belpré (illustrator). In addition, I included starred picture book reviews from *School Library Journal* for the first half of 2015, as well as ALSC's Notable Books for Younger Readers for 2014 and 2015. While the goal was to review only picture books, a few early readers in picture book-like format were included as they had received notice as picture books. This resulted in a list of 336 unique titles. I opted to include all of the Caldecott Medal winners and honor books and the Wanda Gág Read Aloud books on my list of books to review since these titles are more likely to be introduced to children in school and library settings based on their recommendations from the awards. I also added the *Boston Globe-Horn Book* winners to the list on the assumption that those might have some level of popular appeal to parents and other caregivers. In addition, I included books that seemed likely to offer depictions of home based on their titles (i.e. reference to mowing a lawn, chairs, and family relationships). Using these criteria, I had a sample of 133 books to review. Finally, I sorted the remaining list of 203 titles by illustrator, numbered them in order from 1 to 203 and used an online random number generator to randomize the list of numbers. I reassigned each of the remaining titles the corresponding randomized number and re-sorted the list based on their randomly assigned number. I then included the first 42 books on that list to complete a list of 175 books, with the goal to physically review 150 books, assuming not all of the titles would be available in the Marantz collection.

For books published between 2015 and 2019, I used a similar strategy, collecting the winners and honor books from the following awards during those

years: Caldecott, Coretta Scott King (illustrator), Ezra Jack Keats (writer and illustrator), Golden Kite (picture book text and picture book illustration), *Boston Globe-Horn Book*, Wanda Gág Read Aloud, Pura Belpré (illustrator), a list of 149 unique books. The original review list was created in the same way as the list for the Albers fellowship, prioritizing the same awards and randomizing the remainder of the list to obtain a booklist of 50 titles. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change in procedure. I was able to read and review ten print books from the list of 50 before New York City public libraries closed for the pandemic (I had six additional titles on hold at the time of the closure). Only nine of the remaining 40 books were available as e-books from the public library and those were reviewed in digital format. However, in order to reach a reasonable sample, I went back to the original list of 149 books, and checked for digital availability. Subsequently, I was able to review ten more titles as e-books from the public library; six additional books were selected at random and purchased in print format for a total sample of 35 books. Because there are so few books that depict childhood homelessness, I also reviewed three books² that feature families in homeless situations and will discuss them separately.

To determine if the books featured home as a setting and to determine further the type of dwelling, the illustrations were examined for indicators. These included exterior views of the dwelling, the inclusion of a yard or other outdoor space around the dwelling, as well as interior spaces, specifically individual rooms and furnishings. If there were illustrations of interior spaces that signified home but not clear indicators of the type of dwelling, those spaces were counted as having a home setting but not as being single-family. In addition to determining the type of home featured in the illustrations, I also looked for indicators of class status including the presence and abundance of material objects such as toys, clothes, books, decorations, and artwork in the interiors (Sano, 2009). It should also be acknowledged that in the vast majority of these books, home was a setting that was not particularly important to the development of the story; the rooms and material possessions were background, part of the books' landscapes.

Using these methods, I found that of the 185 picture books analyzed, 138 (74.59%) feature some type of depiction of house or home. Whether the main characters are human or animal, home as a setting was common: of 114 books with human characters, 96 (84.21%) depict house or home; of 33 books with animal main characters, 22 (66.67%) include homes; of the 34 books where the main characters are both human and animal, 19 (55.88%) show house or home. For animal characters, the homes that are illustrated are often anthropomorphized spaces with rooms, furnishings, and decorations rather than realistic animal homes (nests, dens, burrows, etc.), adding to the normalizing of middle-class homes within the context of picture book illustration. In the four books where the main characters are identified as "other" than human or animal (a punctuation mark, a mythic creature, an anthropomorphized cake, and animate vegetables), only one has a home depicted, but it

² The most well-known picture book about family homeless, *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting, illustrated by Ronald Himler, was published in 1991 and is thus outside the scope of this research.

is unclear if this is a single-family or other type of dwelling. The majority of the picture books in this sample (106 or 76.81% of those that featured a home) feature homes that appear to be single-family dwellings based on signifiers including the architecture of the house and/or the presence of a yard or other open outdoor space separating the house from other buildings. Of the 32 books that feature homes that are not obviously single-family, 13 feature homes that are identifiable as apartments and two feature homes that are trailers. For the 17 remaining books, the illustrations and textual cues do not provide enough information to determine what type of dwelling is being depicted.

The Nature of Housing and Home

To better understand why diverse representations of home are needed in books for young children, we need to understand where children call home in real life. Many young children live in stable home environments that are not single-family homes. According to Census data, 61% of housing units in the United States were detached, single-family dwellings in 2018 (United States Census Bureau). The remaining 39% of units included attached homes, apartments/condos/co-ops, mobile homes, and boats, RVs, and vans. Yet, as we will see, these types of dwellings are depicted infrequently in books for children, and when they are, are often illustrated in ways that are more reminiscent of a single-family home than the type of unit they are. Additionally, homelessness and housing instability impact preschool aged children at higher rates than any other group of children. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), “Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children’s well-being” (n.d.). That the families of 43% of American children are low-income, including 21% of children who live with their families below the federal poverty level (NCCP) is deeply concerning. One way that poverty impacts children’s lives is through housing instability and homelessness. Housing instability can be “defined as having difficulty paying rent, spending more than 50% of household income on housing, having frequent moves, living in overcrowded conditions, or doubling up with friends and relatives” (Kushel et al., 2006, p. 71). Poverty is highly correlated with housing instability, although determining the number of Americans who experience unstable housing has proved challenging (Frederick et al., 2014). As defined by various federal laws, being homeless means lacking “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (USC02) and includes those living in shelters, doubled up with family or friends,³ living in motels or campgrounds, in cars or on the street or public spaces. As of 2014, homelessness among American children had reached an all-time high, with nearly 2.5 million children (or 1 in 30) experiencing homelessness at some point in their childhood (America’s Youngest

³ Living in a doubled-up situation falls under the definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act, which mandates educational protections for school-age children and youth, but is not typically considered homeless by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other agencies.

Outcasts). Of particular concern to the study of picture books is the awareness that at least half of the population of children who experience homelessness are under the age of six (Child Trends). Ralph da Costa Nunez (2010) argues that the lack of commitment to low-income or affordable housing in the United States has created a situation where for many young children “for the duration of their childhoods, a shelter may be their only home” (p. 1). These circumstances are sociopolitical as well as being socioeconomic; thus, the collective discomfort of viewing shelters, overcrowded apartments, trailers, motels, or campgrounds as “home” contests the reality that they are for millions of children.

Developmentally, a stable home is considered a basic need, part of the foundational necessities that allow humans to develop relationships, self-worth, and ultimately self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). In American culture, home is intrinsically linked to positive feelings of safety and stability, perhaps best illustrated by the well-known and beloved quote from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), “there’s no place like home.” Matthew Desmond (2016), in his seminal work on eviction, makes several claims about the importance of stable and secure homes that are in line with these cultural norms and assumptions about home, arrived at as the result of his research and experiences around housing instability in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He points out that

The home is the center of life. It is a refuge from the grind of work, the pressure of school, and the menace of the streets...The home is the wellspring of personhood. It is where our identity takes root and blossoms...In languages spoken all over the world, the word for “home” encompasses not just shelter but warmth, safety, family—the womb...America is supposed to be a place where you can better yourself, your family, and your community. But this is only possible if you have a stable home. (Desmond, 2016, pp. 293–294)

Clearly, these comments are meant to support Desmond’s policy recommendations around eviction protections and other strategies to keep low-income residents in their homes. That some people who lack the stability and safety of home in childhood are able to have success and stability as adults is obvious. At the same time, there is abundant evidence that the social and cultural capital of privilege make academic and career success much more likely. This becomes a slippery slope; we lionize stable middle-class home and family, demean those who are poor or working-class, and glorify examples of rugged individuals who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and completed their rags to riches stories. Poverty and homelessness thus become personal obstacles to overcome, rather than systemic forces to be dismantled.

These messages are often reproduced in literature for children. In their study of homelessness in American picture books, Jinhee Kim and Su-Jeong Wee (2020) observe that “The analysis showed that homelessness was described as a personal choice and individual responsibility rather than as being determined by sociopolitical circumstances” (p. 372). However, the authors continue with a problematic point: “The characters were described as inferior or passive subjects who needed and received help, rather than as active beings who tried to work hard to escape their difficult situations” (p. 372). This notion that hard work is enough to “escape” homelessness, which the authors have already framed as the result of “sociopolitical

circumstances” perpetuates the very idea they seem to argue against in the first point. Examining how poverty is depicted in picture books, Jane E. Kelley and Janine J. Darragh (2011) observe that most of the books feature some type of action, and note that,

While it is good to see portrayals of individuals enacting change, this does have potential for being problematic as it can reinforce the notion that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and that poverty is an individual problem that can be solved with some effort by individuals, rather than that poverty is a national, structural, and systemic problem. (p. 277)

Thus, in the context of neoliberal Capitalism, divorcing poverty and homelessness from personal choice and responsibility seems nearly impossible.

There are also cultural assumptions about the ubiquity of comfortable middle-class homes, which show up in texts in many ways. As Grace Enriquez (2014) points out, “the constructed nature of texts [is] informed largely by the author’s and illustrator’s assumptions and outlook on the topic, as well as the reader’s sociocultural interpretation” (p. 29). A striking example is the 2007 American Library Association’s May Hill Arbutnot Honor Lecture by award-winning children’s book author and illustrator Kevin Henkes, who uses home as the framework for his speech. He notes the worry he and his wife felt for their preschool aged son when the family moved from one house to another just a few blocks away: “he was sensitive and did not like change” (Henkes, 2017, p. 17). While sharing the angst his son experienced during this move, Henkes does not acknowledge that for many children, the difficult transition of moving is not one where they get to take their own bed and toys into a new room they have had the privilege to plan and decorate with their parents ahead of a carefully planned move. Further, Henkes makes what he clearly sees as an unequivocal statement: “A hallway is not a kitchen, nor a bedroom” (p. 19). However, for many people, including children living doubled-up with friends or family, or in temporary shelters, these middle-class distinctions are not a universal truth. Perhaps most troubling of all is that Henkes (like so many of us with positive experiences) equates home, in this case a single-family house, with safety and permanence without ever questioning what the inverse of that might mean, especially for children.

According to Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2019) “little is known about when exactly children acquire and understand the concept of ‘home’ and whether picture-books might enhance this process” (p. 121). Within early childhood education, the concepts of house and home are considered benign and age-appropriate themes for exploration in lessons with young children (Soundy, et al., 2007). Further, the books children read or have read to them in care settings, schools, and libraries represent narratives approved and perpetuated by the dominant culture. Smiljana Narančić-Kovač (2019) argues that “children’s fiction influences the lives of children to help them understand the world and behave in the society according to adopted values and conventions” (p. 50). Thus, the images and words children see and read in books let them know in both subtle and blatant ways what is valued by their culture, what is normal and worthy of being included in a book. But as Stephanie Jones (2008) argues, the homes and family experiences young children see in books may not be representative of their lived experiences: “What kinds of economic lives are

presented as *normal* and therefore *desirable* in children's picture books? Where are the picture books filled with trailer park homes? Barrio lives? Communal living? Joblessness? Homelessness? Simple living? Blue- and pink-collar employment? Government assistance?" (p. 43). More recently, the film adaptation of J.D. Vance's memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy* raised similar questions about how the disconnect between the creators of media and the lived experiences of people from rural, working-class, and/or lower-income backgrounds leads to those lives being distorted or misunderstood on the rare occasions they are made visible (Pruitt, 2020).

Home as a benign thematic topic for young children surfaces in picture books that explore home as a broad concept, not surprisingly in ways that privilege certain experiences of home over others. Aggregated representations of home were present in a number of books in the sample of this study, including in *Mama Built a Little Nest* (2014) by Jennifer Ward and Steve Jenkins, and Carson Ellis's *Home* (2015). Accompanying a two-page illustration of a bird in a nest looking into a child's private bedroom, Ward writes "You have a nest—your very own!/A place to rest you head/with pillows soft and cozy thoughts—." The assumption here is that any (every) child being read this book will have their own room and bed; this is expected, normal, and unassailable. Ellis describes and illustrates an array of homes, mostly single-family houses, although she does include an apartment, a band's tour bus (a nod to her involvement with the band, "The Decemberists"), a raccoon's burrow, and even a shoe. The implication is that whatever it looks like, everyone has a home, which may support the idea discussed above that children experience anywhere they live as home, or more likely, indicates a lack of understanding and awareness that in fact, not everyone does have a home.

A Room of One's Own

In her overview of a recent European project that explored the evolution of depictions of home in picture books after World War II, Carla Callegari (2019) explains that "The picturebooks...also give an account of how domestic spaces contribute to forming children's sense of identity, and their family and social relations" (p. 205). One finding noticed across the individual national studies in the project:

The bedroom and playroom are the children's private spaces. The bedroom, in particular, was interpreted by all six researchers involved in our project as having symbolic meaning. It represents the children's belonging to the home. The bed in their room is one of the items of furniture that appears in every country's picturebooks (Callegari, 2019, p. 226).

Large, private bedrooms are common in American picture books, represented in nearly a third (or 44 titles) of the books that feature any type of home, often depicted across a two-page spread. For example, in *The House in the Night* (2008) by Susan Marie Swanson and Beth Krommes, the child's bedroom is illustrated across a double spread, with a bed, a bookcase, dresser, an armchair and a rocking chair in the room. A violin is on the bed and a music stand is nearby. Similarly, in Bob Graham's "Let's get a pup," said Kate (2001), a scene of young Kate asleep on her bed with

her dogs covers two pages. The bedroom features a wardrobe, dresser, bookcase and play table, with an abundance of toys, books, and clothes. There is a window that opens to a moonlit, fenced yard. Even when it is unclear if the characters live in a single-family home or another type of dwelling, the illustrations of the interior rooms are quite spacious and include many class-signifying features. In *Lena's Shoes Are Nervous: A First-Day-of-School Dilemma* (2018) by Keith Calabrese and Juana Medina, Lena's bedroom is shown across two pages and includes her bed, a large bookcase, long dresser, a beanbag chair, and a large window with a telescope pointing through it. The illustrations of the interior of where Penelope, a young dinosaur, and her family live in Ryan T. Higgins' *We Don't Eat Our Classmates* (2018) follow the same pattern. Penelope's bedroom is illustrated across two pages and features a bed, large bookcase, play table, and assorted toys. Even in the modest 1950s coastal home in *Town is by the Sea* (2017) by Joanne Schwartz and Sydney Smith, the interior spaces are surprisingly large. The bedroom of the boy narrator fills the double page layout, with a broad span of open floor between the dresser and bed, and a window so wide it looks to be twice the child's height. There are exceptions, and interestingly, in both *Charlie & Mouse* (2017) and *First Day in Grapes* (2002), siblings not only seem to be sharing a bedroom, but also appear to be sharing the same bed.

As noted in the discussion of space, many of the interiors are illustrated with plentiful possessions, most notably a variety of toys and books in the children's bedrooms. The toys are charmingly old fashioned: teddy bears and other stuffed animals; balls; toy cars, planes and boats. As Sano (2009) notes, looking at visual and textual representations of children's material possessions in books can be a means for identifying characters' cultural capital. Consumption and other indicators of cultural capital are also indicative of social class (Aydin, 2006), thus, looking at material possessions and consumption are ways to determine social class status. Both the spaces and the belongings that fill them in the picture books in this study reinforce middle-class normalizing ideas of home as well as of childhood. The material possessions emphasize the family's valuing of play, creativity, and education, as suitable for the young characters. Books are plentiful, with bookcases standard features in most of the bedrooms. This alone may be an indication of the presumed socioeconomic class of the characters, as the number of books in the home has been correlated with income (Neuman and Celano, 2001) and the prevalence of "book deserts" in lower-income communities (Neuman and Moland, 2019).

Kitchens Are the Heart of the Home

The other interior home space that is often fraught with emotion and symbolism is the kitchen. In her study of Italian picture books, Marnie Campagnaro (2019) describes how the illustrations of full refrigerators and tables covered with food have an affective role, representing love and nurturance at a time when domestic spaces and family dynamics changed dramatically. Thirty-nine of the books in this study include illustrations of kitchen spaces or families eating meals together; in some, the visual clues do not provide enough information to determine if the family

is eating in the kitchen or at a table in a dining room. Like the protagonists' bedrooms, kitchen spaces and family tables are often drawn across double-page spreads. For example, in *Lena's Shoes Are Nervous: A First-Day-of-School Dilemma* (2018) the family kitchen is shown across two pages and includes vast counter space, open shelving, and a kitchen island with stools. The kitchen in *We Don't Eat Our Classmates* (2018) is also large, with a table and chairs and a door to the outside.

Interestingly, while the books in the Italian study used abundant food to denote familial affection, in the U.S. books the same is achieved through images of shared meals. Human characters are shown in double-page spreads of dining tables in *Momma, Where Are You From?* (2000) by Marie Bradby and Chris Soentpiet, *Mari-sol McDonald Doesn't Match* (2011) by Monica Brown and Sara Palacios, and *Not Afraid of Dogs* (2006) by Susanna Pitzer and Larry Day. Even a bear family enjoys a shared meal at a large table across a two-page spread in *Baby Bear's Chairs* (2005) by Jane Yolen and Melissa Sweet. These illustrations show only modest amounts of food, including what is on individual family members' plates, and occasionally, pots or bowls being used for preparation. Thus, in the aggregate, these kitchen scenes reinforce middle-class values and norms around the nuclear family, the kitchen as shared and communal space, and even about appropriate food consumption.

Apartments and Trailers

Only eight percent of the books in this research sample included home settings that were clearly something other than single-family homes, in this case apartments or trailers. This is a rather small number considering that more than a third of U.S. households reside in settings other than single-family homes. How apartments are illustrated in this sample is also troubling. In both Jonathan Bean's *At Night* (2007) and John Rocco's *Blackout* (2011), the families live in what seem to be apartments—spaces within multistory buildings in urban settings, with architectural features connoting multifamily dwellings (flat roof, brick or stone exterior). Yet in both cases, the interior spaces more closely resemble single-family houses. In *Blackout*, the illustrations of the exterior of the building where the family live show that they occupy two floors of the building, with each of the four family members shown in a window, two upstairs, two downstairs. The young boy who wants to spend time with his family is shown taking a board game and walking down a flight of stairs to where his father is cooking and his mother is on the computer. In *At Night*, we see a staircase banister inside the family's dwelling, and the main character takes her bedding upstairs to the building roof which is furnished with plants, chairs, and a table. Thus, the access to and use of this outdoor space as a personal or private space aligns more closely with the spatial norms of single-family homes.

Perhaps the most realistic depiction of apartment dwelling in the sample is Meg Medina's *Tía Isa Wants a Car* (2011), illustrated by Claudio Muñoz. The young narrator and her aunt and uncle live in a multi-story apartment building. We see the narrator and Tía Isa outside the building, climbing the interior steps to their apartment, in the bedroom they share, and see Tío Andrés admiring their new car from their balcony. While the interior rooms are illustrated with décor items like area rugs,

pictures on the walls, drapes and knick-knacks, the rooms are realistically sized for an apartment. The family's kitchen, for example, is illustrated with just enough room for the characters to barely move between the table and counters. In contrast to so many of the other books in the sample, the illustrations of the interior spaces in the apartment are drawn on single pages.

In two of the books in the sample, the families live in a trailer. The family in *I Know Here* (2010) by Laurel Croza and Matt James lives in a community of trailers in Saskatchewan, Canada, while the narrator's father is working on a dam construction project. When the project is complete, the family will move to Toronto. There are no illustrations of the trailer's interior, but there is a double page spread showing the different types of trailers the workers live in, with a comparatively larger illustration of a fox in the foreground because someone is keeping a fox in a cage behind one of the trailers. In a strange coincidence, Rosemary Wells' *Stella's Starliner* (2014) is the story of a young fox who lives with her parents in a silver trailer. The illustrations show the trailer's sleeping area, living room, and kitchen space, as well as the family enjoying meals together. Stella loves her home until several weasels tease her about it. After sharing what was said and her hurt feelings with her mother, her parents respond by hitching the trailer to her father's truck and "flying...far away through the night." In their new location, Stella meets two young rabbits who think the Starliner is amazing and tell Stella that she "must be a millionaire to live in a silver house." There are deeply troubling messages about housing and shame at play in *Stella's Starliner* (2014) and that Wells opts to relocate the family rather than have Stella or her parents confront the weasels about their teasing is especially concerning. The implication is that living in a trailer is something shameful and that only when validated by others as seeming like something wealthy people do, is it not.

Family Homelessness in Picture Books

Because much of the impetus for this research project was my own work doing library story times with children in transitional housing shelters, I also examined the very few books for children that are about family homelessness. In their study of homelessness in American picture books, Kim and Wee (2020) reviewed 25 books published between 1990 and 2016 that deal with homelessness, were written for preschool to early elementary audiences, and were still in print. They found that "the representations of homelessness in children's picture books were described largely in stereotypical ways [and] retained negative and outdated portrayals of homelessness" (p. 368). Specifically, characters experiencing homelessness are depicted overwhelmingly as adults living in public spaces, and their appearance and behaviors are often described using negative and stereotypical language. Kelley and Darragh (2011) reviewed 58 picture books published after 1990 that have poverty as a central theme and a (presumed) setting in the U.S. A few of the books in their sample depicted homelessness explicitly, and the authors note that "Although these stories depict sad situations, they do represent reality for many homeless children in American schools today" (Kelley and Darragh, 2011, p. 273). There were only three

picture books about families experiencing homelessness that were widely available at the time of the study.⁴

In *A Shelter in Our Car* (2004) written by Monica Gunning and illustrated by Elaine Pedlar, Zettie and her mother live in their car while her mother attends school and looks for work. Zettie is also in school and the family uses the facilities at the local park and shares their food with other people experiencing homelessness there. Pedlar's illustrations of the family readying for bed inside the car are done across the double-spread and stand in strong contrast to the spacious and possession-filled private bedrooms in books throughout the sample. At the end of the story, Zettie's mother has found a job and the family moves into a hotel, also shown across two pages. In *Still a Family* (2017) by Brenda Reeves Sturgis and Jo-Shin Lee, the nameless narrator and her mother stay in a women's shelter, while her father has to stay at a nearby men's shelter.⁵ The illustrations are meant to mimic a child's crayon drawings and show the dormitory sleeping arrangements of the women and children's shelter where the child and her mother stay, as well as the family eating together at a soup kitchen. The final book, *A Place to Stay: A Shelter Story* (2019) written by Erin Gunti and illustrated by Estelí Meza, includes many of the same interior features of homes in the broader sample within a family shelter. In this book, a young girl (also nameless) and her mother arrive at the shelter and use their imaginations to transform the experience into something wondrous. Yet the interior spaces are drawn as very welcoming and homey even without having to reimagine them. There are shared living spaces for watching television, as well as a room filled with books and toys. The common eating area features a cafeteria-style line and tables. The room the child and her mother share is illustrated across two pages; with two beds, artwork on the wall and a shared nightstand, it resembles a hotel room. Each of these three books includes notes for readers about homelessness, all with a call for action and activism to address homelessness. As Kelley and Darragh (2011) found in their study, these books put the emphasis on charitable and personal action rather than on systemic change to address housing deprivation.

Conclusion

Social class and economic privilege remain elephants in the room of children's literature. While completing this project in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges children in low-income and homeless situations face in terms of education and access became ever more apparent, as did our collective assumptions about class and privilege. While it goes without saying that housing insecurity and homelessness are urgent social issues, they are also the lived experiences of millions of

⁴ Susin Nielsen-Furland's *The Magic Beads* (2007) is out of print in hardcover and unavailable; it is being rereleased in paperback in August 2021.

⁵ This is a common practice in many shelters. Often even older male children are excluded from staying in family shelters. Families thus face difficult decisions about splitting up and may refuse shelter to avoid those separations.

American children and despite the traumas and challenges associated with unstable housing, children in these circumstances still experience childhood with all of its joys and heartache unrelated to housing. What might it look like if books for young children simply featured home settings that were not large, well-provisioned spaces, but rather cramped apartment, trailers, or shelters, without making these living situations the center of the plot and thereby implying they are inherently problematic? There may be a fear that including these types of housing in books for young people sends a message that childhood homelessness is acceptable, that their inclusion in media would normalize these settings and situations. I argue that the array of housing lived in by young children and their families, including those substandard conditions and temporary shelters that constitute homelessness, have already been normalized by neoliberal capitalism, while also being shrouded in shame and stigma directed at families rather than at the systems that force so many into untenable situations. The array of experiences children bring with them to classrooms, libraries, and all of their interactions with books and literature must be acknowledged and validated by educators and ultimately by authors, illustrators, and publishers. The continued absence of diverse socioeconomic class experiences in picture books, or the relegation of the experiences of people from lower-income or working-class backgrounds to “problem” and “issue” books is unconscionable and needs to be recognized and addressed so that all children may see reflections of themselves, their families, and their lives in the books we offer them to read. Thus, the goal of this research is not to advocate for more and better quality “homelessness” books for children (although they are certainly needed), but rather to argue for the inclusion of an array of housing settings in books where home is merely background rather than integral to the plot.

Acknowledgments I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support for the initial research for this project provided by the Kent State University School of Library and Information Science’s Jacqueline M. Albers Guest Scholar in Children’s Literature Fellowship and conducted in the Marantz Picturebook Collection for the Study of Picturebook Art in the Reinberger Children’s Library Center.

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