Queer (and Not-So-Queer) Childhoods

—Peter E. Cumming

Bruhm, Steven, and Natasha Hurley, eds. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. 338 pp. US $24.00 pb, US $72.00 hc. ISBN 0-8166-4202-8, 0-8166-4201-X.

Setterington, Ken. *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* Illus. Alice Priestley. Toronto: Second Story, 2004. N. pag. $14.95 hc. ISBN 1-896764-84-3.

Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia (T.E.A.C.H.). *Hear Me Out: True Stories of Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia*. Toronto: Second Story, 2004. 197 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-87-8.

A century since Freud declared children sexual beings and three decades since Stonewall began to awaken North Americans to the public existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual beings, discussions of children, sexuality, and non-normative sexualities are still—not surprisingly, given Western culture's complex investments in childhood "innocence"—scarce, cautious, and fraught. As Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley observe, the current dominant narratives about children are that "children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires . . . [and] children are . . . heterosexual" (ix); to associate children with sex and, in particular, queer sexualities, is "tantamount to invading the innocent, pristine body of the child" (xxxiii). However, literature for children and adult studies of it, whether in deceptively simple word-and-image stories told by adults *to* children in picture books, adult-centric stories told *about* children and childhood in criticism and theory, or adult-mediated stories told *by* children and adolescents about themselves in life writing, are beginning to take, as it were, more-than-baby steps in exploring childhood sexuality and queer childhoods.

Three texts published in 2004—*Mom and Mum Are Getting Married!*, a children's picture book by Ken Setterington with illustrations by Alice Priestley; *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, an anthology of critical essays, including adult memoirs of childhood, edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley; and *Hear Me Out: True Stories of Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia*, a collection of first-person accounts compiled by Planned Parenthood of Toronto—all variously participate in this new engagement with children, sexuality, and queer sexualities. *Mom and Mum*, in its earnest attempt to naturalize same-sex marriage and parenting for its young readers, ironically ends up, in text and illustrations, both stereotyping and desexualizing its lesbian parents and inscribing a resolutely heteronormative narrative for its child characters. *Curiouser*, in its earnest attempt to do the opposite—to *queer* cultural representations of childhood—challenges its adult readers to attend to "the figure of the queer child . . . which doesn't quite conform to the wished-for way that children are supposed to be in terms of gender and sexual roles" (x), even if that results in "the explosive potential of conjoining discourses of childhood with the discourses of a sex that does not trade in the same-age, same-class, same-race, same-sexuality, other-gender marketplace" (xxxiii). In so doing, the editors of the anthology take a major risk: that of assuming and perhaps reinforcing stereotypes that link queer sexualities with adult-child sexual relations. For its part, *Hear Me Out*, in spite of adult mediation of its text, enables its young contributors to relate their particular experiences as queer youth to their young audience; because of the book's polyphonic form, this text most convincingly represents and articulates the complexities of the lived experience of queer children and adolescents. As opposed to adult-authored texts for and about children, such as *Mom* and *Curiouser*, in which ultimately "the child is a placeholder for adult desire" (Bruhm and Hurley, (xxxiv), texts such as *Hear Me Out* open up the possibility that texts by youth and for youth—books in which "the child" is speaking subject rather than studied object—may embody and give voice to queer childhoods that inform, rather than feed the fantasies of, adults.

I first want to distinguish between two key meanings of the multi-faceted term *queer* that I am deploying from current discourse. Particularly as a *straight* reader of these texts, it is crucial that I locate my vantage point, recognize the dangers of speaking for and about others, and specify the meanings of *queer* that I am using. On the one hand, for convenience, I am using *queer*, despite attendant problems, as a non-pejorative, umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual people, including children. More strategically, though, I am using the term, as both

adjective and verb, in the sense that Michael Warner calls "resistance to regimes of the normal" (qtd. in Hall 15); as Alexander Doty states, "[Q]ueerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (qtd. in Tierney 29). Thus, while *Mom and Mum* represents queer characters in its two lesbian mothers, its verbal and pictorial depictions inscribe a narrative that does not "confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" nearly enough: as a result, its project is not very *queer*, demonstrating that "homonarrative" can be just as conservative and conventional as "heteronarrative." *Curiouser* and *Hear Me Out*, by contrast, in their more self-conscious projects, are *queer* precisely to the extent that they interrogate and destabilize readers' heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

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With Canada becoming one of the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex marriages in July 2005—legislation it is considering revisiting in 2006—*Mom and Mum* is nothing if not timely. However, the publisher's claim that the book is "groundbreaking" is hyperbolic. American picture books such as Lesléa Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and Michael Willhoite's *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Daddy's Wedding,* and the Canadian picture book *Asha's Mums* by Rosamnund Elwin and Michele Paulse broke the ground for same-sex parents and "commitment ceremonies" more than a decade ago, even if *Mom* gets the first "real wedding." Indeed, an Amazon-hosted "Listmania!" list by "rainbowheart, Grew up in a two dad family" boasts twenty-five picture books with same-sex parents. Important battles on this front, including a Surrey, B.C. skirmish, from 1997 to 2002, that entailed "more than $1 million in legal costs and a Supreme Court of Canada ruling" (Sin), have already been waged, and, presumably, lessons have been learned from these early forays into representations of families with same-sex parents.

Alas, *Mom and Mum* is a reprise of many shortcomings of these earlier books, both in its relatively safe and reassuring representations and in its resulting narrative flatness. Bruhm and Hurley's criticisms of *Mom*'s precursors—that they represent "bland children" in a "sanitized middle-class world" where anxieties "about their queer domestic configurations . . . are quelled by the assurance that they are just like everyone else, that love makes a home" (xii)—apply only too easily to *Mom* . . . except that the narrating protagonist Rosie and her brother Jack, perhaps strategically but also unrealistically, demonstrate no anxieties whatso-

ever about their queer domestic configuration. Kenneth Kidd's criticism that "[s]uch picture books typically downplay even adult sexuality in favor of a normalizing rhetoric of family values" (114) highlights the chaste restraint of *Mom and Mum*: although the textual description of the wedding climaxes with "Then they kissed," the illustrations only go so far as hand-holding and a stiff wedding embrace. Criticisms of *Daddy's Wedding* (1996) in particular seem made-to-measure for *Mom*—simply replace "father" with "mother," "gay" with "lesbian," "Nick" with "Rosie," and "best man" with "flower girl": "Nick is the 'best man' at the commitment ceremony of his gay father and his partner, Frank. Nick's mother, stepfather, and grandparents are delighted by the celebration, which takes place in a backyard . . . [with] multiracial attendees, who include other same-sex couples. The only dramatic conflict comes when the dog eats part of the wedding cake" (*Kirkus Reviews*); "[R]esponses to this book will center almost exclusively on its politics, not its artistic merits. . . . [W]ith same-sex marriage such a hot topic . . . the one thing the book won't be is ignored" (*Publisher's Weekly*); and "The subject of same-sex marriage deserves better than this. Consider for purchase where material on the subject is needed, but let's hope something better comes along soon" (Rochmann).

What the narrative of *Mom* lacks most is . . . well, narrative. The back cover claims that "[w]hen Rosie finds out that her two mothers are planning to get married, she has only one worry . . . will she get to be a flower girl?" But there is another, earlier, more substantial worry of Rosie's that the book fails to unpack. When, at the story's beginning, Mom announces "Mum and I are getting married," Rosie responds, "Married, like a wedding? How come? Why can't we stay the way we are? I like us like this." The illustration of Rosie on the opposite page shows one of the few worried expressions in the whole book. Given that everyone in Mom and Mum's extended families seem unproblematically happy with the status quo of Mom and Mum and Rosie and Jack, and given that gays and lesbians are far from unanimous in wanting to stake their political hopes on winning access to the flawed, heretofore heterosexual institution of marriage ("Some of [the] biggest opponents to same-sex marriage are themselves gay or lesbian" [Alderson 114]), Rosie's question deserves a better answer than Mom's "We really want to celebrate how happy we are together—and we want everyone we love to celebrate with us." What story, one wonders, remains buried in the comma breaks of Rosie's ambivalent response, "Well, okay, I guess," and her abrupt shift of focus to the conventional trappings of weddings?

In making a "charming and inclusive story" (publisher's press release), in fact, the book's author and illustrator seem to have abandoned almost all

semblances of narrative conflict. Apart from a few furrowed brows when the rings are mislaid, all the characters in the book beam continuously with smiles. "Perfect" is the book's textual mantra: on the first page, Mom says that the day Rosie was born was her "best, perfect day" (does Jack know?); Rosie claims she would be "perfect" as a flower girl; Uncle Peter puts a flower in Rosie's hair and says she is "perfect"; at the wedding, Uncle Peter and Rosie solve the problem of the rings with a "perfectly" wrapped little present in each basket; and the wedding ends with "'A perfect day,' said Mom. / 'The best,' said Mum." Everything, it seems, is rosy for Rosie—perhaps too rosy to make a satisfying narrative. As Gwyneth Evans writes in *Quill & Quire*, "All this warmth and acceptance borders on the saccharine; a bit of conflict would have made the story more interesting as well as more credible" (34). Although Uncle Peter (who owns a flower shop with Mike) concludes the book with "You can never have too many flowers," at least some child and adult readers may not find a story that is all "flowers," however happy and colourful, riveting.

Although *Mom* is about a lesbian marriage, the book, and its child characters in particular, are not very *queer*. By that, I do not mean that Rosie and Jack ought to be lesbian and gay, although they could be: indeed, if this picture book were to be truly groundbreaking, they might be—as Kidd notes, "as yet we have no picture book about a lesbian or gay child" (114), or at least none that advertises its characters as out. Rather, by *queer*, I mean what Bruhm and Hurley describe as "its more traditional sense, to indicate a deviation from the 'normal'" ("Curiouser" x). In its well-intentioned attempt to normalize families with same-sex parents, *Mom* (like *Heather* and *Daddy's* and *Asha's* before it) scrupulously avoids any suggestion of sexual or gender "difference" in relation to the children. Although Rosie has been brought up in a non-conventional household and although Mom and Mum want "a small wedding," "a simple" one, "[j]ust a Saturday party at the cottage. No fuss, nothing formal," Rosie's ideas about weddings are remarkably conventional: bridesmaids, wedding cake, and flowers (one of the National Library of Canada's subject codes for the book is "Flower girls—Juvenile fiction"). Granted, Rosie's concern soon shifts to whether she and Jack

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will be allowed to carry the wedding rings, but even that tiny child-centred task is taken back from the children by Mom and Mum to be granted again to the children only through the help of another adult, Uncle Peter.

Reminiscent of the two mothers in *Heather* (Ford 129), Mom and Mum are depicted as *femme* and *butch* (why can they not both wear dresses or pants to the cottage wedding?), while Rosie and Jack are depicted, in names, dress, and demeanour, as unambiguously gendered and resolutely heterosexual. Rosie says, "I got new shoes and a beautiful dress. Jack got a T-shirt with a suit painted on the front." Although Jack's outfit might be intended to parody conventional masculinity, it seems instead, particularly in its prominent foreground position opposite Rosie in her dress on the front cover, to reinforce conventional masculinity. Rosie adopts women's civilizing roles ("I made Jack practice scattering petals"), while Jack, as a male, needs to be civilized ("But Jack only wanted to pick the scab on his knee"). Mum braids Rosie's hair, and Uncle Peter puts a flower in Rosie's hair, but nobody is concerned about Jack's hair. Mom and Mum touch and embrace Rosie, but Jack runs through the book with outstretched arms. Although the final illustration of the whole group at the wedding dutifully depicts multiracial families of a variety of family structures, the book nonetheless insistently maintains traditional gender distinctions between its child characters. Why, one wonders, particularly when, as Julie Traves suggests, research demonstrates to the contrary that "children with same-sex parents . . . have more fluid ideas regarding gender. Children raised by lesbians engage in less stereotypically masculine/feminine play and boys are often more sensitive" (17)?

In "H/Z: Why Lesléa Newman Makes Heather into Zoe," Elizabeth A. Ford offers one answer, arguing that to sell children's books with "gay/lesbian themes," authors and illustrators must make "the gender identity of [their] young protagonist . . . unambiguous . . . [maintaining] narrative and visual distance between theme and child" (132). Mom and Mum's wedding and the conventional gendering of Rosie and Jack seem, in fact, to be part of what William G. Tierney calls "assimilationist strategies that only serve to reproduce the existing social order" (9): "to be able to fit in, the straight majority needs to see that we are similar to themselves in all aspects but one—with whom we sleep" (47). Thus, although Adam Peer claims that "Ken Setterington . . . is not afraid to tackle challenging topics," *Mom and Mum* seems instead to take an overly safe approach. In *CCL/LCJ* 108, Joanne Findon wonders "whether we who write for young people . . . are doing enough to offer imaginative possibilities for gendered behaviour in the books we write" or whether we are "still constructing the categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in rigid and

stereotypical ways" and whether "gay and lesbian characters [are] present at all—and, if they are, are they still represented as marginalized" (6); although *Mom and Mum* makes lesbian adults visible and central, it does so only while simultaneously insisting on asexual and conventionally gendered children. On the book's cover and in the book's penultimate illustration, in the background, Mom and Mum hold hands and embrace, in each case framed reassuringly in the foreground by Jack, an unambiguous boy, and Rosie, an unambiguous girl. Meanwhile, readers, like Rosie, may still not be quite sure why Mom and Mum wanted to get married—apart from wanting to have a party at the cottage—and except for a tense moment when the rings are misplaced, the boy Jack and the girl Rosie live perfect and perfectly "normal" lives.

If *Mom and Mum* studiously avoids *queer* children in every sense of the term, Bruhm and Hurley's *Curiouser* sets out precisely to focus on "the *queer* child, the child whose play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity" ("Curiouser" ix). Writing back to Lee Edelman, who "reads the child as the anti-queer" (xiii), Bruhm and Hurley argue persuasively that

> the narrative pressure on producing the proper ending of the story (the heterosexual adult) allows a little more play for the child prior to the moment of ascension into that heterosexual future. . . . Childhood itself is afforded a modicum of queerness when the people worry more about how the child turns out than about how the child exists as a child. (xiv)

Thus, while for Edelman "[t]he cult of the child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys or girls" (xiii), for Bruhm and Hurley "the children who populate the stories our culture tells about them are . . . curiouser than they've been given credit for" (xiv). Divided into "two sections that reflect the central tension between child sexuality and/as child queerness" (xxx), "Sexing the Child" and "The Queers We Might Have Been," the book offers a generic mix of "classic" (Bruhm and Hurley, back cover) essays (by James R. Kincaid, Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, and Michael Moon, for example) and "new" essays (by critics whose work is enabled by and often refers back to the work of these writers) ranging from 1987 to 2004.

Several essays in *Curiouser* perform close readings of representations of childhood in particular literary or film texts, from Horatio Alger to Henry James to Guy Davenport to *The Exorcist*. However, although Bruhm and Hurley claim in their wide-ranging introduction that "[t]his book is about stories: stories we tell to children, stories we tell about children, stories we tell about ourselves as children" (ix),

the only texts included that are "stories we tell *to* children" are Alger's books for boys, brief gestures in the introduction to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* (hence, *Curiouser*), and same-sex-parent picture books (including *Mom and Mum*'s progenitors). This is an unacknowledged gap: the volume strangely skirts children's literature as a site for queer childhoods. Another group of essays sheds valuable light on particular queer identities that have been suppressed or marginalized. For example, Judith Halberstam's "Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy" analyzes the asymmetries of female "tomboy" and male "sissy" and distinguishes between sanctioned and unsanctioned tomboys. And Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys" damningly demonstrates how psychoanalysis and the gay movement itself suffer from "effeminophobia," failing to "attend to issues concerning effeminate boys" (141).

Although several essays in *Curiouser* are "theoretical memoirs" (xxxii) of queer childhoods, the anthology tellingly makes only the briefest of acknowledgements of the voices of queer children and adolescents themselves (the voices that are raised so powerfully in *Hear Me Out*, for example)—in one brief section of the introduction focusing on the narratological problems of recording those voices in a single text (xi–xii). Again, more reflexivity about not just the stories that "we" adults tell to children and about childhood but also about stories that children and young people themselves tell would add a crucial dimension to this valuable anthology. Still, recognizing the limitations of adult remembrances of childhood and adolescence—see, for example, Neil Sutherland's cautions elsewhere in "When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood, How Much Can You Believe?"—*Curiouser*'s memoirs offer sharp insights into particular lived experiences of queer children and adolescents, insights that complement the more immediate first-person "stories" of queer youth in *Hear Me Out*. For example, in the most humorous essay in the volume, "Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood," Michael Warner traces his journey from being "a teenage Pentecostalist" to being a "queer atheist intellectual" (215), reflecting on intersections between religion, sexuality, and identity: "Jesus was my first boyfriend. He loved me, personally, and he told me I was his own. This was very thrilling, especially when he was portrayed by Jeffrey Hunter" (221). And Kathryn R. Kent's "'No Trespassing': Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of the Counterpublic Sphere," not only "outs the Scouts" (186) by analyzing how "Scouting rewrote as 'natural' relationships and interactions between women that 'outside the camp' might signify as 'homoerotic' or 'homosexual'" (177), but also frankly reflects on the implications of this: "if what I believe . . . that I

was 'taught' to be a lesbian . . . has resonance, then counterpublic spaces such as Girl Scout camp may tell us something about how gay, lesbian, and queer identities and practices have been replicated and sustained. . . . [T]he terror/fantasy of gay and lesbian 'recruitment' takes on new meaning in this context . . . " (185).

Finally, several essays present broader, theoretical, cultural analyses of queer childhoods. Paul Kelleher reads Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* as "an exemplary instance of heterosexual noelization, a cautionary tale that opens with an obligatory bad example—the essay on 'the sexual aberrations'—and proceeds to install a vision of healthful sexual normality as two modes of uninterrupted serial (re)production: heterosexuality and narrativity" (155); although there is no dimension of "cautionary tale" to *Mom and Mum*, Kelleher's linking of heterosexuality, narrativity, and "healthful sexual normality" seems an apt description of the forces at work in that picture book. Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests that "All children are Q[ueer]" in order to "[view] the child as a species of strangeness . . . [so] we may excavate, and so reveal, the layers of violence in 'our' culture's most cherished ideal . . . 'the child'" (282), reflecting the project of *Curiouser* as a whole. And James R. Kincaid advocates "narratives other than the gothic" about children and sexuality, narratives that will "[abandon] stark essentialist notions of sexuality and sexual behavior in favor of the idea of a range of erotic feelings even within and toward children" (15), paving the way both for the narratives of actual queer youth in *Hear Me Out* ("a range of erotic feelings . . . within" children) and, perhaps more dangerously, some narratives in *Curiouser* about children ("a range of erotic feelings . . . toward" children).

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In these close readings of cultural representations, focuses on marginalization and invisibility, theoretical memoirs, and broad cultural analyses, both editors of and contributors to *Curiouser* raise many pressing issues about children, sexuality, and queer childhoods. For example, Bruhm and Hurley argue admirably that "we cannot and must not try to predict in advance what psychological, emotional, and political stories will arise from childhood sexual engagement" (xxx). However, there is one "story" that the text, or, more correctly, Bruhm and Hurley's introduction, seems to "predict in advance" and this is a story that the editors themselves recognize as a minefield: the relation of adult-child sex to queer sexualities. The longest section of Bruhm and

Hurley's introduction is the cleverly, if troublingly, titled "For the Love of the Child; or, Sticking It to the Kid" (xxii–xxx). In that section, Bruhm and Hurley acknowledge that "[d]iscussions of queerness and child sexuality all too quickly invoke the specter of the pedophile, which all too quickly destroys one's political credibility" (xxiii). Despite this recognition, however, Bruhm and Hurley go beyond merely positing that intergenerational sex has become "what [Adam] Phillips calls a narrative interest that is 'stuck'" by always assuming "that sex between a child and an adult, regardless of the gender of either party, is inevitably traumatic and debilitating for the child" ("Curiouser" xxii). Indeed, they seem to assume, without offering supporting evidence, that intergenerational sex is a marker of queer sexualities, which clearly risks coinciding with widespread stereotypes that link queerness and pedophilia. Occasionally, they even appear to adopt a wistful, nostalgic stance toward intergenerational sexual relations. Neither of these are substantially supported or amplified by the essays in the anthology.

At one point, for example, Bruhm and Hurley write of "those gay men and lesbians (and, *as this collection shows, they are legion*) who got their starts in movie theaters, at church camps, or in locker rooms, initiated into sex by older figures who were not necessarily exploitative or harsh" (xxix; my emphasis). In point of fact, the collection does not show that such non-exploitative, intergenerational relationships are legion, at least in life: while several essays question the assumptions about and hysteria surrounding childhood sexuality as being necessarily traumatic (see, for example, Kincaid's "Producing Erotic Children" and Kelleher's "How to Do Things with Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the 'Child in Danger'"), most of the essays in the volume, rather than being about "gay men and lesbians" and where and with whom they "got their starts," are cultural analyses which do not focus on non-exploitative intergenerational sex; indeed, only one of the fourteen essays in the volume, Kent's "'No Trespassing': Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of the Counterpublic Sphere," explicitly addresses non-exploitative intergenerational relationships in its study of "intense attachments between young girls and between full-grown women" (177), and even that essay focuses on "lesbian pedagogy" in general rather than specific instances of adult-child sexual relationships. It is possible that Bruhm and Hurley are alluding to non-exploitative intergenerational sex as represented in texts (see, for example, their own discussion of Peter Straub's "The Juniper Tree" that "recounts the childhood experiences of a now adult writer who frequented a movie theater in his youth . . . with a molesting wino named Jimmy" [xxvii–xxviii] or Andre Furlani's "Guy Davenport's Pastorals of Childhood Sexuality" in which "[d]istinctions of

age or sexual orientation are never drawn in Davenport's stories of childhood and youth, consent alone determining sexual relations" [226]), but, if so, surely there is a slippage from fiction to life in their statement about "those gay men and lesbians . . . who got their starts."

While I am sympathetic to Bruhm and Hurley's argument that "the history of ideas about intergenerational sex and the idea of remembering one's personal experiences of intergenerational sex are often much more complicated than we have allowed ourselves to think" (xxiii), as a reader I want to know more clearly who that "we" and "one" are, how widely that "we" is cast, and whether there is something distinctive about queer sexualities and intergenerational sex that would not also apply to heterosexual relationships. Indeed, there seems to be more than a little utopian longing for acceptance of adult-child sex as an integral part of queer sexualities. For instance, Bruhm and Hurley write, "While Foucault spells out a positive and mutually beneficial pedophilia in the Greeks, no such optimism is possible in our contemporary moment" (xxiv) and "We lack the possibility to narrate a pedophilia that will have been benign (let alone benevolent, in the Greek way)" (xxix). Occasionally, the editors even seem to adopt a cavalier attitude towards intergenerational sex: "the girl becomes a Scout by eating her first Brownie" (xxxii), they write of Kent's essay on Girl Scout Camp; "And so the child who wants sex with an adult is back to where he started, with no theoretical pegs to hang his hat on, no homo to go home to" (xxvii), they write of Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

To be fair, the editors of *Curiouser* state that "remembered childhood sexual experiences can be traumatic *or* pleasant; the problem that interests us most here is how to make sense of the child's pleasure without pathologizing it or reducing it to 'trauma'" (xxix). However, Bruhm and Hurley's admirable determination not to prejudge children's stories about their sexuality might better be balanced with a more nuanced consideration of the prevalence (or not) of adult-child sex in the formation of and experience of queer sexualities and a more detailed, explicit, political acknowledgement of the dangers and destructive potential of adult-child sexuality (whether homosexual or heterosexual) in this cultural moment. See, for example, Annamarie Jagose's discussion of intergenerational sex in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (70–71) or Tierney's in *Academic Outlaws: Queer Theory and Cultural Studies in the Academy*:

> We . . . know that adult and child relationships have occurred in other cultures and other centuries without harm to the child. However, we do not live in other cultures and other centuries,

> and we know that terrific physical and emotional pain has been done to children who have been molested by adults. Consent is essential to a fulfilling relationship, and I do not believe that in general children can provide meaningful consent for a sexual relationship with an adult. (52)

Moreover, despite Bruhm and Hurley's desire to "unearth the queer child of narrative" (xxxiv), apart from briefly outlining the narrative problems of doing so in Robert Owens's attempt to "'let [gay, lesbian, and bisexual] youth speak for themselves'" in his *Queer Kids* (xi), there seems little attention paid in *Curiouser* to hearing queer children's stories directly—that is, to unearthing the queer child's narrative.

. . . the volume is largely successful in "hearing out" the stories of its young authors because of its multivocality, its groundedness in the complexities of individual experience, and the astute self-reflexivity of some of its contributors, including about the nature and limitations of the "stories" they tell.

What makes *Hear Me Out: True Stories of Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia* stand out from both *Mom and Mum* and *Curiouser* is precisely the extent to which queer young people are telling their own stories directly to adolescent and adult readers, as opposed to having adult authors and illustrators and critics telling stories to and about children: as the book's back cover exclaims, "Lesbian, gay, transgendered, bisexual and transsexual young people are having their say!" Of course, all texts are mediated, and this text, like most other texts by and for teens, is also substantially circumscribed by adults: through the training the T.E.A.C.H. (Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia) volunteers receive, what they are allowed to say and not allowed to say in the school presentations on which the book is based, the "special editorial committee" that anthologized the book, the sponsoring agency Planned Parenthood of Toronto and how its funding affects its programming, and, indeed, the fact that some of the contributors themselves are adults, more in the position of adult writers in *Curiouser* who are writing memoirs of their queer childhoods than teens who are telling more immediate stories from the vantage point of adolescence. In spite of this mediation, though, the volume is largely successful in "hearing out" the stories of its young authors because of its multivocality, its groundedness in the complexities of

individual experience, and the astute self-reflexivity of some of its contributors, including about the nature and limitations of the "stories" they tell.

Hear Me Out presents some twenty first-person accounts about homophobia and transphobia "to educate and change negative attitudes about gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered people" (1). The contributors— "who range in age from fifteen to twenty-three," graduate students, undergraduate students, dropouts, artists, and activists who "identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and straight allies" (4)—share "personal, sometimes intimate moments that demonstrate how homophobia hurts and how being different is empowering" (6). While not as generically diverse as, for example, Amy Sonnie's *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology* (2000)—the selections in *Hear Me Out* are almost exclusively "stories," though artist Jim Lemoire includes mixed media photography (123–27) and a video *Grade 12 Queer* (75–76)—*Hear Me Out* demonstrates exemplary diversity in terms of its contributors' genders, sexualities, ages, ethnicities, religions, educational levels, classes, and individual experiences. Indeed, what is most impressive about these anti-homophobia stories is a diversity, complexity, sophistication, and self-reflexivity lacking in *Mom and Mum*, also published by Second Story Press.

Despite the clever title, the cover illustration of a dark (closet?) door opening to let out light, and story titles such as "Coming Out in the 905," the collection is much more than just a series of "coming out" stories; indeed, another story is entitled "This Is Not a Coming Out Story." There are at least a couple of dangers of collections of coming-out stories: (1) patterns of questioning, denial, hiding, running, passing, lying, identifying, finding support groups, coming out, rejection, acceptance, pride, relief, and so on, could become formulaic, even boring; and (2) the narrative form of "conversion" could downplay the difficulties and risks involved with coming out and put undue pressure on queer youth to come out at all costs. While the desirability of honesty should never be underestimated, neither should real-world consequences of such honesty. As Gilad Padva writes,

> In problematizing . . . glorification of asserting youth's queer identity, Rob Cover points out that the pressure for young people to come out and state a definitive sexuality commonly leads to homelessness, educational and social problems, violence, and . . . death. Cover argues . . . that "what should instead be advocated by a lesbian/gay discourse is the idea that a person should state her/his sexuality only in strategic ways." (362)

Hear Me Out largely avoids both dangers of coming

out stories through the particularity of its various stories, their dialogic interaction with each other, and their self-conscious awareness of the consequences of coming out in a homophobic culture.

Collectively, the contributors nuance "coming out." For Emmy Pantin, "Queer is not a visible marker. One must articulate it. . . . I come out every day" (30, 35), but for Shawn Fowler, who is "visibly queer" (84), "It's not my coming out story. It's a story about other people . . . and . . . the absolute terror I felt going to school" (83–84). For Ariel Vente, "this is not only my coming out story, but also my mother's coming out story, the story of her coming out as having a gay son" (186), while Makeda Zook, as a more realistic "Rosie," "comes out" in high school about her mothers, one of whom works at the school: "most people don't have two moms and most moms aren't lesbians" (164). M. Francino is "in the process of rewriting my story for the nth time . . . first . . . coming out as a dyke . . . [then] when I came back out to both my friends and myself as a tranny boi" (117–18). For Anna Penner, coming out entails confronting internalized homophobia when she recognizes her own self-loathing: "In the same moment I knew I was gay, I knew I was homophobic" (20), while ayden isak hoffman-scheim is surprised to encounter transphobia "in the queer community" of which s/he was a member (56). Amina Jabbar doesn't "come out to myself" until she can reconcile her Muslim and Arab identities with her sexuality once she stumbles "onto an article about being LGBTQ and Muslim" and listens "to an out Muslim woman speaking" (11–17). In an Internet "support group for gay, bi, and questioning boys aged eighteen and under," Andrew Standell Mills realizes "that I was not the only guy in the world going through this weird thing called coming out!" (61), only to encounter "the dark side of the Net" as his first e-mail "love at first . . . write" (62) turns out to be a thirty-nine-year-old teacher posing as a sixteen-year-old (67). And Mark Sundal tragically tells of "a lifetime of coming out," as he comes out only to retreat to the closet after being assaulted only to come out again: "coming out is not a moment in time at all or even a single story. . . . And so, as I tell yet another tale of violence, homophobia, hate, anguish, pain, anger, struggle, healing, growth and hope, we come full circle: coming out, back in, and coming out . . . again . . . " (80–81).

Far from romanticizing coming out, as Anna Penner observes, "There are no true stories with completely happy endings" (28): in fact, in their individual voices, the contributors to *Hear Me Out* resist narrative expectations of "the coming out story" to give readers a complex picture of queer childhoods and homophobia. Thus, in "The Woman of My Life," Johan Kim comes out to his mother, only to discover that life is not like the movies: "Then, I thought, maybe if I hugged her things would turn to be

just great. It would be exactly like those after-school movies. Everyone hugs at the end and things turn out all right. . . . [but to] hear these words from the lips of my mum, 'Don't touch me'. . . . All of the sudden I was a fourteen-year-old, Korean, gay high-school student who had just left his home and family" (175–76). Yet even here, there are complexities: although his mother leaves him and his brother becomes violent, "my father turned out to be quite supportive and we became quite close, more than we had ever been before" (177).

In fact, several contributors to this volume are astutely self-reflexive, recognizing both the potential healing power and limitations of the "stories" they tell. For Jenn F., who "told my parents that I wanted to join Brownies. Instead, they sent me to Boy Scouts" (111), "stories can be powerful things" (109): "My name is Jenn and I'm a woman. . . . I want to put a human face on the word 'transsexual'" (116). Njeri-Damali Campbell transforms her past struggles with the school system into deciding that "I will one day teach students to teach . . . challenging them to tell their stories . . . like I do" (161). Stephen Wei recognizes that his story functions differently depending on his audience:

> When I tell my story to a straight audience . . . it is purely a coming out story. . . . When I tell it to gay white men, race is at the forefront. . . . When I share it with gays of color, there are usually two reactions: the first is a sense of solidarity in the double oppression we face; the second is one of denial that . . . racism within the gay community even exists. (103)

J.T.S. Berrigan is suspicious of "the limits of the written word. . . . Important information has also been left out, not because it has been forgotten, but because it may be too painful to retell. . . . So this story is only a piece of how i experienced coming out" (69). Anthony Collins recognizes stories' formulas—"We repeat [the coming out stories] so many times, we often joke that we could tell each other's stories as easily as our own"—but also recognizes their power: "we learn to use our stories strategically" (37). He also knows that no story can tell the whole truth: "like all other versions, this retelling of my coming out is incomplete. The story was heavily edited long before it reached this volume, even before I said the words in a classroom for the first time" (49). Above all, he identifies a crucial gap in T.E.A.C.H. and *Hear Me Out*:

> we cannot make any explicit mention of sex in the classroom. We have to separate our work from sex education in order to preserve our mandate to do anti-discrimination work. . . . But so much of coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual—or, for

that matter, of being heterosexual—is about sex and our desires and feelings surrounding it. (48)

In spite of this very significant limitation—stories about identity, indeed, adolescent identity, that cannot include sex—the stories in *Hear Me Out* provide thoughtful and moving insights into the lives of twenty generous and courageous youth for readers young and old, for readers queer and straight. Like the peer-based T.E.A.C.H. program of storytelling on which it is founded, this book begins the process of combatting homophobia and transphobia. As Hazelle Palmer, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, suggests, "The real challenge is for all of us who read this anthology to face our own homophobia and take a leadership role in demanding personal and systemic change" (7). Indeed, in *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities and Youth: Psychological Perspectives,* Julia A. Graber and Andrea Bastiani Archibald go so far as to argue that "the most difficult hurdle to overcome is not implementation of programming that provides support and resources to lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents but the initiation of prevention efforts that reduce the culture of homophobia in schools" (19).

. . . this very significant limitation—stories about identity, indeed, adolescent identity, that cannot include sex

The collection's greatest strength is the particularity of the stories of these youth themselves. In "At a Messy Intersection," ayden isak hoffman-scheim tells of coming out to her mother at the age of fourteen as a bisexual, coming out a week later as a lesbian, and then coming out "as trans [queer boy] a few months before turning sixteen," leading to the understatement, "Coming out is an ongoing process" (55). The final "story" in the book, while not by or about a teenager, is about a same-sex marriage, bringing us full-circle back to *Mom and Mum*, only in the case of Ariel Vente's "Ariel's Story—A Remembrance in Five Parts," with much more narrative complexity, more power to effect change, and a strong sense of the particular cultural moment from which all three of these books arise. When, at age twenty, Vente, a "gay Filipino" (179), is distraught and unforthcoming, it is his father who articulates that Vente is gay (180). If his father is "supportive and understanding," though, his mother is "in complete and utter denial." At age twenty-six, Vente meets "a wonderful man named Tim" who is in remission from cancer: "my entire family liked Tim. Six months later, I officially moved in with him and we lived happily ever after . . . sort of. . . ." Tim's cancer returns. "During Tim's battle, a huge event happened in Ontario. Gays and

lesbians were allowed to marry!" (181–82). Vente marries Tim, who dies two weeks after the hospital wedding, leaving Vente "a gay widower at twenty-seven" (185).

My revisiting Vente's story is not intended to fall into a trap described by Ford—that, "paradoxical though it may seem, disease and death . . . are safer territory for authors of children's fiction [about queer characters than] the theme of [queer] love and commitment" (130). To the contrary, I am arguing that Vente's "story" for adolescent readers grounds the difficult practice of acceptance and love in complex particulars of human interaction: what Vente ultimately recalls is "the picture of my parents smiling, specifically of my mother smiling, so proud to see her gay son married to a wonderful man like Tim. . . . I remember my mother saying, '*You just have to marry a good woman!*' You're sort of right, ma. Her name was Tim" (185–86).

Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley end their introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* by welcoming "the possibility of both *identifying* and *articulating* queer child life" (xxxiii). For them, *identifying* queer child life is a matter of knowing where to look in "the stories that have already been told about children and even the stories we tell to children" (xxxiv): these are the queer children who are sorely absent from *Mom and Mum*. For Bruhm and Hurley, *articulating* queer child life can "force us to imagine where the desire of the adult and the desire of the child might diverge. Only then can we conceive of children as desiring creatures who, although tough to access in theory, exist and make stories beyond the simple ones adults see in them" (xxxiv): these are the stories queer youth are telling themselves in *Hear Me Out*. Finally, Bruhm and Hurley suggest that "[t]o unearth the queer child of narrative may well be to make the child as utopian as do discussions of childhood innocence, but in doing so, it . . . enables us to analyze our own nostalgia and to begin relinquishing our idealized stranglehold on innocence and children alike" (xxxiv). While Bruhm and Hurley's assumptions about intergenerational sex in relation to queer sexualities may comprise yet another "nostalgic stranglehold," the editors, contributors, authors, and illustrators of all three of these texts are indeed contributing to the important, ongoing task of "unearthing the queer child."

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