

Review of

Mom and Mum are Getting Married!

by Ken Settrington (September, 2004) and illustrated by Alice Priestley
Toronto: Second Story Press. 23 pp. hardcover.

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Mom and Mum are Getting Married!, a royal blue hardcover emblazoned by a flurry of rose petals and smiling faces, can be read in a variety of ways. It is the genre of fairy tale where challenges arise that must be overcome in order for the happy couple to wed. It is the genre of instructive children's literature, offering a guide to common preparations for weddings: rings, flowers, cake, special clothing, as well as the family arguments that reveal conflicting notions of what these common preparations should be. It also holds a place in children's equity and social justice writing, demonstrating that the institution of marriage is available to lesbian parents who wish to celebrate their love and commitment in a public forum.

As fairy tale, Settrington does not provide the most engaging plot. The challenges are few and relatively easy to overcome: figure out how to carry a ring so that it will not be lost, and convince Mom to let you be a flower girl. As instruction guide *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* takes the reader through a number of procedures: practice carrying rings, braid hair, observe nervous parents, throw flower petals, observe the couple's kiss, cheer, drive away in decorated car. It would be just as informative as a book entitled *Mom and Dad are Getting Married*. The real drama of this book arises precisely within this ordinariness, and ultimately in what is not said.

Before same-sex couples began being issued marriage licenses at Toronto's City Hall in June 2003, few people outside of LGBT(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) communities had considered the possibility or rel-

evancy of gay and lesbian marriages. With same-sex marriage having since taken centre stage in the courts, political campaigns, and the media, *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* is a timely publication. Where the question rarely arose before the change in law, it has become open season for asking same sex couples if and when they will marry. In addition, because progress with human rights is often coupled with backlash, both sides have felt empowered to voice their positions on television, on the playground, and around the dinner table. It follows that the children in these families in particular will hear opposing statements as well as face questions of their own. Concern over the well-being of these children has even led to research on their experiences sorting through conflicting information, to be conducted by the Wellesley Central Urban Health Grants Initiative in Toronto. It is in this context that *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* is being read. This simple story, portrayed through Priestly's warm illustrations that are surely inviting to young readers, emerges within a climate of controversy over fundamental human values.

I emphasize the heated context because to some degree it is the main gag of the book, the unspoken elephant in the room. As the back cover proclaims, "When 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?" If the only worry when two women marry is a daughter's role in the ceremony, Setterington has imagined a new world for us. It is one where social justice activism has fulfilled its promises, homophobic hatred and the resulting hurt having been eliminated. It is one in which LGBT families celebrate marriage without anyone batting an eye; the entire family appears to have no additional concerns than those heterosexual families would around the issue of marriage (and maybe fewer). It is one that probably reflects that of very young children who have yet to discover that the world outside their homes is structured any differently. It is also one where the concerns of children are granted precedence over the concerns facing their LGBT parents.

In children's books containing LGBT family, there are three popular routes chosen by authors: 1) LGBT issues overtly drive the storyline (Vigna, 1995; Willhoite, 1990), 2) LGBT issues manipulate the storyline with clever twists (Valentine & Sarecky, 1994; Valentine & Schmidt, 2004), and 3) there are LGBT characters but no mention of LGBT lives encountering any distinct consequences (Harding, Harding, & Bray-Cotton, 2002; Hoffman & Henriquez, 1999; Newman & Romo, 2002). These three strategies each have pros and cons in their capacity to produce texts that are meaningful to children as stories and as motivators for social justice. With the first strategy, LGBT issues are clear and available for children as they construct knowledge of social relations, but the message may over-power the story. With

the second, LGBT issues may or may not be evident to children, but the story may be more engaging and over time weave itself into children's understandings of LGBT issues. With the third strategy, LGBT issues are the most hidden, subliminally informing children that LGBT peoples need not have issues, leaving them free to focus on the story.

Settingington's utopic vision is an example of the third approach. The general message is, "We (LGBT peoples) are just like everyone else and when the public comes to recognize this, we will be understood and treated equally." As with any distinct group of people, there are advantages and disadvantages to losing a cultural specificity. LGBT peoples obtain membership in the mainstream, weakening the exclusive benefits for those who have traditionally enjoyed power (and in this case the families appear to be white and middle-class as well). For children, this straight-forward story of two joyful women celebrating marriage surrounded by family offers a powerful addition to their ongoing learning about gender and family. I have no doubt that Settingington's gentle plot coupled with Priestly's soft, endearing portraits could profoundly widen children's imaginations. On the other hand, by choosing marriage, a long-standing social institution, an author forfeits the opportunity to show LGBT relationships celebrated in alternative ways, and by extension, to show a couple of any sexuality alternative ways to celebrate their relationships. Perhaps the most radical statement in Settingington's story is spoken by daughter Rosie when she asks, "Married, like a wedding? How come? Why can't we stay the way we are? I like us like this." The child appreciates her mothers' relationship outside of formal public recognition, only to be quickly redirected into her mothers' plan.

Another significant contribution to anti-homophobia pedagogy is embodied in the drawing of Mum. Mum is a butch woman, that is, she definitely appears to express nonconforming gender. In children's books with LGBT family, I am not aware of any other figure portraying nonconforming gender, no obvious feminine men nor masculine women. Even though LGBT communities are full of nonconforming gender expression, even though the feminist movement was supposed to allow women of all sexualities the opportunity to trade their dresses in for suits, lesbians trapped between the covers of LGBT children's books have mostly endured compulsory dress-wearing. My point is not that something is wrong with femininity in women, I just think that masculinity should be embraced alongside it. Priestly's style, using colour pencil drawings, clear large faces with glowing expressions, set into rich blue and yellow backdrops, offers an intimate connection to Mum. Priestly courageously shows a loving butch wife and mother; Mum is characterized by her caring glances at family members. Most poignantly,

she is shown braiding her daughter's hair shortly before the ceremony. Again, this is a powerful moment because there are rarely ever, (if any?), images of butch women mothering children anywhere. It is such a relief to open this book and find her. In this case, alternative realities of gender in LGBT lives are available for expanding possibilities in mainstream living.

However *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* is read it will surely evoke critical discussions among children and adults alike on "love and family in a changing world" (back cover).

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