

Space for LGBTQ+ Children in Jessica Love's *Julián is a Mermaid*

by Jessica Bumgarner

In 2017, a mere 3.7% of the 3,700 children's books published contained "significant LGBTQ+ content" (Tyner). An even smaller percentage, 1.7%, featured an LGBTQ+ character as a primary character (Tyner). These statistics reveal an incredible deficit in literature portraying the experiences of LGBTQ+ children. Recent polling suggests that the LGBTQ+ population in the United States is 4.5% although this statistic excludes anyone under 18 (Gallup). This number may also be higher as the poll does not reflect those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community but may feel uncomfortable answering "yes" on the poll for any variety of reasons. As the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights continues, many advocates for the LGBTQ+ community are calling for an increase in LGBTQ+ representation, whether in politics, on TV, or even in children's books. *Julián is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love may be attempting to remedy this deficit and provide a positive story for LGBTQ+ kids. This picture book, published in 2018, explores the gender expression of Julián, a bilingual, racially ambiguous child who identifies with the characteristics and appearance of mermaids. Julián specifically uses mermaids to express his gender identity. This book also examines the relationship between gender identity and the spaces queer children occupy. *Julián is a Mermaid* displays the home, LGBTQ+ community, and greater world as places with the potential to curate and support gender expression in children.

At its core, *Julián is a Mermaid* is about a boy who wants to become a mermaid. The book begins with Julián sitting on a train with his Abuela and reading a book. Julián's love of mermaids is immediately introduced as he admires a group of people dressed as mermaids. This pivotal moment causes Julián to realize that he too can become a mermaid. From this point forward, Julián's story revolves around his outward transformation into a mermaid and his

interactions with the places he travels to. In each place, Julián encounters acceptance, love, and resources that help him feel secure in his identity and expression. The significance of Julián's desire to become mermaid has led the book to be classified as a piece of LGBTQ+ literature. Love herself has mentioned that the inspiration for the story was a significant other's transgender brother (Jules), confirming that it is a LGBTQ+ story. The word "mermaid," then, is used as a substitute for Julián's gender identity. This begs the question, what does being a mermaid mean to Julián? One perspective of Julián's identity is that he identifies as male, but enjoys expressing femininity through mermaid drag. This is supported by his traditionally masculine appearance and the first line of the book: "This is a boy named Julián." (Love n.p.) His pronouns, then, may indicate a male gender identity. A second reading is that Julián is transgender. This is indicated by the growth of his hair when he becomes a mermaid, his admiration of extremely feminine figures, and his desire to strip off his "masculine" clothes, an event that occurs twice in the book. The most fully supported conclusion, however, is that being a mermaid indicates a nonbinary gender identity. On one page a large, blue patterned fish presents Julián with a necklace. This pattern returns on Abuela's dress when she adorns Julián with a similar necklace. Because of Abuela's role as an unambiguously female and feminine character, it can be interpreted that, to Julián, femininity is symbolized by fish. Mermaids, then, represent Julián's nonbinary identity. Just as a mermaid is both fish and man, Julián is both female and male. Finally, when Julián becomes a mermaid in his daydream, his tail is purple and yellow, colors represented in the nonbinary flag.

Julián is a Mermaid follows Julián through several spaces including a train station, Abuela's home, and a mermaid parade. In each of these places, Julián's gender is expressed or considered in a unique way; his level of comfort and confidence depends greatly on his

proximity to the home or Abuela's support. In fact, his journey of self-expression begins in the home. As Julián reaches the front door of Abuela's house, he announces "Abuela, I am also a mermaid" (Love n.p.). Until this point, Julián has only indirectly hinted at his gender identity. As Julián spends more time in the home he "has a good idea" (Love n.p.) and uses items in the house to achieve an outward mermaid transformation. Metaphorically, this scene indicates that the home should equip children with the tools to express themselves. This also displays the home as a secure place for children to explore and express their gender identity. Julián evidently feels safe in this environment, waiting until this point to dress as a mermaid. This positive depiction of the home indicates that Love believes the home should function as a secure base for all children, LGBTQ+ or otherwise, to explore their identity.

The role of family is also mentioned in *Julián is a Mermaid*. Initially, Abuela appears angry at him for destroying her plants, using her makeup, taking down her curtains, and perhaps even for his gender expression. This initial reaction is enough to invoke self-consciousness in Julián. He forlornly examines his tail and headdress, appearing to believe that his expression was inappropriate. This is the only time where Julián experiences such feelings; prior to this moment, he was confident in his mermaid identity, even striking a pose. When Abuela returns, adoring him with a necklace, his confidence is bolstered. From this moment forward, Julián expresses pride in his mermaid attire, holding his head high even as he travels into the street. Abuela's role in Julián's self-image displays the importance of a supportive family in the development of a child's identity. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ children who may not receive such support elsewhere. When faced with even a bit of rejection by family, children like Julián may shut down and attempt to smother their true identity, damaging their ability to grow into well-adjusted adults. This idea is supported by the Human Rights Campaign which claims that "family

acceptance is an important predictor of how well an LGBTQ+ youth will fare as an adult” (“Info For Foster and Adoptive Parents of LGBTQ Youth”). Because of Abuela’s role in encouraging Julián’s gender expression, *Julián is a Mermaid* stresses the role of the family as a vital source of support for young LGBTQ+ children.

In *Julián is a Mermaid*, the LGBTQ+ community is depicted as a space for children. At the end of the book, Julián joins a parade of people dressed as different sea creatures. Considering what mermaids represent to Julián, it can be interpreted that the spectacle is a pride event. Additionally, many of the parade attendees exhibit characteristics of drag such as incredibly long, colorful hair, exaggerated feminine figures, and heavy makeup. When he first arrives at the parade, Julián is awed by the number of mermaids. After a moment of hesitation, he joins the parade, dancing in exuberance. While *Julián is a Mermaid* presents a positive portrait of pride, many people believe that pride parades or similar events are not appropriate for children and, by extension, neither is the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. A quick Google search of “children and pride parades” returns results such as “Are Pride Parades Appropriate for Children?” and a petition to “Ban the Presence of Children at Gay Pride Parades.” This reaction is often due to the perceived inappropriate nudity and sexual expression at pride events. *Julián is a Mermaid*, however, dispels these negative connotations of pride parades through subtle elements of its illustrations. First, Love normalizes the “skimpy” clothing of those in the parade by depicting the event on the beach. In this context, the clothing is viewed as acceptable rather than as too revealing or sexually explicit. This calls the reader to question why bikinis (and other similar articles of clothing) are permissible as a beach accessory, but not as expressions of femininity in other settings. Second, Love depicts children throughout the parade in noncontroversial costumes that indicate children can participate in pride without being

sexualized. For example, when Julián and Abuela first arrive at the parade, a child in a body-covering lobster costume stands behind them. On the next page, a child in a pufferfish costume plays with two dogs. On the final page of the book, another child, one with long pink hair, is dressed in a one-piece leotard or bathing suit. By representing children besides Julián in the parade, Love suggests that it is perfectly acceptable for children to participate in pride events.

Julián is a Mermaid also presents Julián's greater community as an accepting place. When Julián steps outside in his mermaid attire, his neighbors and fellow community members do not react to the unabashed expression of his identity. He passes three people on the way to the parade, all of whom simply watch him pass without any indication of judgment. They do not seem to find his costume “odd” or “offensive” or even unordinary. This normalization of gender identity is incredibly important to encouraging LGBTQ+ children to express themselves. In most picture books tackling similar issues of gender identity, a male child encounters ridicule from his peers because of his gender expression. In *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino and Isabelle Malenfant, the main character, a boy named Morris, wears a tangerine dress. Unfortunately, “sometimes the boys make fun of Morris. Sometimes the girls do, too” (Baldacchino n.p) because of his penchant for a singular piece of “feminine” clothing. Eventually, the bullying becomes so incessant that Morris stays home from school. Morris’s distress is perfectly captured in the line “when he thought of all the kids in his class and all the mean things they did and said, his tummy ached for real” (Baldacchino n.p.). This is a stark contrast to the acceptance Julián experiences. A similar narrative is portrayed in *Sparkle Boy* by Leslea Newman and Maria Mola. Casey, a boy who enjoys all the feminine, sparkly things his sister Jessie does, experiences rejection from both Jessie and his peers. While visiting the library, an older child approaches Casey and says, “dude... you can't go around wearing a skirt”

(Newman n.p.). Morris and Casey have vastly different experiences in public places (and in the home) than Julián. Where Julián finds approval, these children face ridicule and bullying. Love's choice to portray the world in a positive way is a message to genderqueer children that their identity is not shameful and never warrants abuse from others. It also may alleviate parental concern by assuring them that the world is not always a terrible, stressful place for LGBTQ+ children and that there are places where their identities are accepted without question. This aspect, however, has also become a point of contention.

Since its release, *Julián is a Mermaid* has been plagued by controversies surrounding its depictions of the queer experience. The first involves Jessica Love's identity and her right to tell Julián's story. Love is a white, cisgender, English-speaking woman telling the story of a genderqueer, bilingual, young person of color. By speaking for people who are of color, bilingual, and genderqueer she may be appropriating their voice. Kinga Varga-Dobai, a professor at Georgia Gwinnett College, claims that, "in order to present a true picture about a particular group of people... there is a need for an insider perspective: the real experiences of the author" (Varga-Dobi). Love's identity is also the cause for several other controversies of the book. Some readers have claimed that "The transformation of the body is a huge fixation, almost a fetish, for cis folks. We just can't seem to get that it isn't only about changing the body" (Jimenez). It is undeniable that Love gives special attention to Julián's body throughout his gender journey. This choice, however, is valuable to conveying Julián's identity to her audience. According to recent research, "Appearance... is often used by young children to describe the self, as they tend to focus on concrete, observable features" (Halim). Considering this, Love's attention to Julián's physical transformation and appearance is warranted. The physical changes he undergoes are the best indicator to children that he is expressing a different identity. Another perspective is that

Love's treatment of Julián's interaction with the world is too optimistic and that it "negated the real struggle so many Latinx LGBTQ people must go through" (Jimenez). Love's choice to not include LGBTQ+ struggles is not an oblivious mistake or a negation, but rather chooses to focus on the positive experiences that queer kids can experience. She also likely recognized that she would be unable to describe LGBTQ+ struggles accurately. Despite these flaws, Love's representation of the spaces queer children occupy focuses on the potential these places have to encourage queer kids in an attempt to convey a new narrative.

In a time when LGBTQ+ children lack meaningful representations in literature, books like *Julián is a Mermaid* are vital to helping queer kids feel visible and normalized. While *Julián is a Mermaid* is not without flaws, its role as a valuable piece of LGBTQ+ children's literature is undeniable. Love's carefully curated depictions of space fill a gap in the current narratives of the LGBTQ+ genre, as well as in all of children's literature. Though her positive portrayal of space, Love suggests that the LGBTQ+ experience is about more than its struggles; it is also about its triumphs and its communities. Diverse representations of the LGBTQ+ experience such as this are vital to curating a rich pool of children's books. By employing space to encourage children to express their identities, Love creates an unassuming but powerful picture book about identity. Hopefully, Love's accomplishments, or the book's controversy, will spark a conversation about LGBTQ+ children's literature and diversify the genre.

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