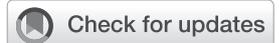


# Contemporary monster theory: How monsters promote kindness and allyship in picturebooks



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Children's picturebooks can significantly influence how young readers perceive the world around them. Despite the common perception of childhood as a time of innocence and fragility, themes involving fear, monsters, and frightening scenarios are surprisingly widespread in literature for young audiences. Drawing on recent developments in contemporary monster theory, this study explores the meaningful and symbolic presence of monsters in Western society. These figures function as cultural constructs that help define social boundaries – clarifying who belongs and who is marginalised as 'monstrous'. This research involved a surface reading and broad analysis of eight picturebooks by three different authors to examine how monsters are portrayed in children's literature and what roles they serve. The findings reveal that monsters are frequently depicted as sympathetic beings who seek love and acceptance. Their portrayals offer young readers accessible models of inclusion, such as practicing kindness and allyship. Ultimately, the study shows that monsters in the selected picturebooks challenge rigid ideas of normalcy, encouraging children to embrace diversity rather than fear it.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to a growing body of research around inclusive children's literature and the importance of children's picturebooks as social teaching tools. It expands contemporary monster theory into the realm of early childhood and contributes to the knowledge that monster theory is an indicator of culture and society.

**Keywords:** Monster theory; contemporary monster theory; monsters; picturebooks; children's literature; inclusion; allyship; childhood.

## Introduction

The books that young children read can have a powerful impact on the way they view the world. Although it may seem incongruous with the conception we have of children as innocent and vulnerable, tropes of fear are a surprisingly common feature in picturebooks, both historically and in the most contemporary books on the market. Monster theory, as described by Cohen (1996), and expanded on as contemporary monster theory by Weinstock (2020), offers a fascinating and in-depth explanation of the meaningful roles monsters have in society, and the importance they carry for cultural identity. Monsters are a cultural construction that delimits how society creates unity within groups, and what they deem unacceptable, or turn into the monstrous. The purpose of contemporary monster studies is to investigate the origin of these monsters, demask their purpose, and reveal the biases behind them. In this article, we discuss three popular Western authors of children's books – Julia Donaldson, Mark Sperring and Claire Freedman – and offer a broad analysis of two or three of their picturebooks (eight picturebooks in total) to explore the kinds of monsters represented in children's literature of the Global North and the roles these monstrous figures play. Analysing monsters broadly through a Western lens, we argue that monsters are shown to stand in for vulnerable persons in need of love and inclusion. Furthermore, their representation gives children practical ways of accessing ideas of inclusion, such as showing kindness and being an ally. Monsters in children's picturebooks break down the harmful purist notions of control by raising important questions about what is seen as different versus what is seen as monstrous and whose agenda this promotes. Monsters in these picturebooks enable children to see that difference is not to be feared but celebrated.

## Monster theory

Monster theory, as originally described by Cohen (1996), and expanded on by many researchers over the years (Mittman 2012; Weinstock 2020), is a noteworthy theory to use when looking at frightening elements in picturebooks because it is a helpful tool to question biases and existing

societal norms (Weinstock 2020). Monsters allow children who have access to these texts to start questioning the biased standards that classify difference as monstrous and may help children who are ostracised to feel seen and accepted for their difference.

Since Cohen (1996) first described monster theory over 25 years ago, an entire field of study has grown from his original seven theses, including contemporary monster studies (Mittman 2012; Weinstock 2020). The original theses as set out by Cohen (1996) are:

- Monsters are cultural.
- Monsters cannot be trapped.
- Monsters cannot be categorised.
- They are different (yet in some ways like us).
- Monsters are impossible (yet, believable).
- Monsters are attractive.
- Monsters are desirable.

Essentially, Cohen (1996) focuses on the origin of the monster and deciphers why people create them on a narrative or symbolic level. Starting with the etymology, Cohen (1996:4) explains that the original word *monstrum* means, 'that which reveals'; effectively, the monsters reveal some truths about humankind. Monsters have remained ever present in popular culture over the centuries. Cohen and the researchers after him (Christie 2020; Mittman 2012; Mustola & Karkulehto 2020; Weinstock 2020) have attempted not only to explain societies' morbid fascination with the monstrous, but also why this field remains valuable today.

The trope of the monster often takes on forms such as giants, ogres, vampires and dragons. These tropes are figurative human creations existing outside of the real world, which means that they are borne out of culture (Mittman 2012). As Weinstock (2017:275) aptly puts it, 'It takes a village to make a monster'. Studying monsters forces us to study the humans who made them and who continue to be fascinated by them. Cohen (1996:20) explains that 'they ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them'. Monsters function to explore themes of otherness. Bevins (2020:1) believes this is a 'complex system of social control'. Monsters may influence the way people see difference and treat others who display physical or cultural differences. Depictions of monsters are thus a commentary on how difference is perceived, whether it is race, class, sexual orientation or other marginalised positionalities. As McCormack (2018:162) states, 'Certain terms, such as "monster" itself, is frequented with sexist, racist, and ableist connotations[,] which must be constantly challenged and undone'. When analysing a specific monster, there is a history that can be traced to a real person, or category of persons (Mittman 2012), usually marginalised or oppressed. This is, according to Mittman (2012:27), 'how cultures define monstrosity from within'.

## Picturebooks: The didacticism of children's literature

Considering the entrenched symbolism of monsters, it is surprising that monsters are popular characters in contemporary children's picturebooks. Books for young children are often described as 'picture books' (two words) and rarely given the same importance as literature for adults and young adults (Arizpe & Styles 2016; Danko-McGee & Slutsky 2011). Pollard (2019) sets out a clear definition of what a picturebook is. Unlike illustrated novels, a picturebook is a book in which the story and illustrations bear the same importance in creating meaning (Pollard 2019:5). Hodges (2000:10) maintains that picturebooks are anything but simplistic and undemanding, but rather 'intellectual interactions between reader, writer and artist'. The picturebooks explored in this study are created for young children to actively engage with the monster figures in the images and the story.

Although picturebooks are clearly intended for young children, it is necessary to investigate the real consumers of these books. The notion of a young child (aged 3–7 years old) is shaped by society and culture. Children lack purchasing power; thus, the target audience for these books is caregivers (Mickenberg & Vallone 2011). Adult expectations regarding children's learning and exposure significantly influence children's literature and broader literary culture. Families and communities employ various instructional modes – alongside schooling, media and literature – to shape children's identities, cultures, self-talk, and ultimately, their thoughts. This idea is based on Lev Vygotsky's theory of social learning, which dictates that a child becomes who they are perceived to be by their family and direct social others (Locklear 2020; Schachter & Ventura 2008:440). Schachter and Ventura (2008) support this in their findings, arguing that a child's identity, including language, culture and religion, is directly linked to their parent's. Schachter and Ventura (2008:449) describe this as the 'parents' roles as active and reflective agents vis-à-vis the identity formation of their children'. Vygotsky also refers to the concept of 'self-talk', which is the way in which children engage in dialogue about their thoughts. In early childhood, they often start off by doing this out loud before their thoughts are internalised. The language, tone and content of this self-talk is wholly influenced by the child's direct caregiver, as Flanagan and Symonds (2022:2) have found. Therefore, the purpose of children's literature includes teaching them and shaping their cultures and values (Brown 2012). Anstey (2002:446) writes about the didacticism of children's literature, stating that all 'texts are consciously constructed and have particular social, cultural, political, and economic purposes'. Monoyiou and Symeonidou (2016:2) agree with this as they believe that the stories children read shape their identities: 'Indeed, through children's books children shape their thinking about themselves, their peers, and society, they sense what is expected from them'. The picturebooks that authors and publishers create for young children are important cultural influencers.

In our contemporary society, many caregivers and schools would like their children to be exposed to multicultural, multiracial and inclusive literature to advance ideas of inclusion and antibias, and to raise kind and accepting children. Inclusive and diverse representations in children's literature have important implications for this study. Children's literature that integrates ideas of inclusion and antibias challenge the status quo by promoting social justice and acceptance of differences (Mickenberg & Nel 2011:445) and can promote actionable discussions about social issues in communities (Norris, Lucas & Prudhoe 2012:60). The books in this study show that the role of the monster serves the purpose of promoting inclusion, social justice and contributes towards acceptance of differences.

## Analysis

This study consists of a surface reading of eight selected picturebooks. A surface reading looks at 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible' in a text instead of 'what we must train ourselves to see through' (Best & Marcus 2009:9). We investigate how the characters and plots of these stories clearly align with monster theory, what value these monsters bring to the story, and how they could support emotional development. Within the eight picturebooks, monsters are used to promote messages of social inclusion to those who may feel marginalised or different. Unlike the monster in the traditional fairytale, such as the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* or the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, these monsters are not killed or banished; instead, the authors show specific social values that promote inclusion.

The picturebooks by Donaldson are *Wake Up Do, Lydia Lou!* (2013), illustrated by Karen George; *Zog* (2010), illustrated by Axel Scheffler; and *The Smartest Giant in Town* (2002), illustrated by Axel Scheffler. Next, we examine Mark Sperring's books *The Sunflower Sword* (2010), illustrated by Miriam Latimer; *Santa Jaws* (2020), illustrated by Sophie Corrigan; and *The Don't Panic Gang!* (2021), illustrated by Sarah Warburton. Lastly, we analyse Claire Freedman's picturebooks *Monstersaurus* (2011), illustrated by Ben Cort; and *The Great Snortle Hunt* (2011), illustrated by Kate Hindley.

## The kindness of Julia Donaldson

Philosophers have long debated the nature of kindness and whether it is a natural behaviour or something that is taught (Rowland 2009). The origin of the word traces back to 'kin', or family, relating to the idea that people should treat others like they are family (McCormack 2018). In modern capitalist society, where success is tied more to economic status than to familial or social ties, traditional values appear less crucial for survival. Kindness itself is a contested concept, often perceived differently across cultures and contexts (Rowland 2009), and its overlap with basic morals and ethics remains debatable – for instance, whether sharing food with the hungry is an act of kindness or a moral obligation. Nevertheless, caregivers have strong reasons to teach children kindness and compassion. Exposing them to

literature that advances this idea from a young age is an effective way to do this. Donaldson's story, *Wake Up Do, Lydia Lou!*, is about a ghost trying to scare a young child. Despite being confronted by a fearful situation, the child protagonist chooses to laugh; she chooses positivity and kindness as opposed to fear or violence. The ghost tries to wake Lydia Lou and scare her – 'Wake up do, Lydia Lou/wake from your dream and scream' (Donaldson 2013:1) – but she does not wake up. The ghost calls in a whole host of noisy animals, repeating the phrase 'I need some more help' (Donaldson 2013:4). He calls in a cat that meows, a bleating cow, a hooting owl, and even a crying baby to try and wake Lydia Lou. In the end, a feather tickles the noses of all the noisy animals, which then causes them to sneeze. Finally, Lydia Lou wakes up, but instead of screaming, she laughs. The monster figure in this book is a ghost, which is of significant human interest because it reflects our fear of being dead and forgotten (Blanco & Peeren 2010). This fascination and fear make ghosts one of the most popular monsters represented in literature and films. Even though the ghost is a symbol of death, this does not seem to be the case with the main character in *Wake Up Do, Lydia Lou!* (Donaldson 2013). The little ghost in this story indeed wears a shroud and makes a 'who' sound, but there is no mention of death or decay. The illustrations in this picturebook can be described as cute and playful, with details that are relatable to a young child, such as a messy bedroom. The illustrator pays particular attention to the facial expressions of all the characters, showing Lydia Lou as peaceful and content in her sleep and the ghost growing increasingly perplexed as he fails to scare her. Even Lydia's teddy bear has a fearful expression, allowing children to visually experience the emotions described in the story. When considering the argument that the violence monsters display can be perceived as a retaliation for the violence inflicted on them, this picturebook is a turn in the opposite direction. It shows that, even though Lydia Lou is being scared, violence (albeit a booing from a ghost) does not need to be met with violence. The book circumvents the expected response of violence or horror in the face of difference.

Donaldson uses various figures to represent monsters in different books. The protagonists in *Zog* are a dragon and a princess. Although the ghost in the story of Lydia Lou initially appears fearsome, there is nothing negative about the dragon Zog; he is depicted as the 'keenest dragon by far' (Donaldson 2010:1). The story shows how Zog learns different things that dragons need to know in dragon school, such as flying, roaring and breathing fire. Zog unintentionally hurts himself instead of succeeding at these tasks. He meets Princess Pearl, who, it is suggested, provides assistance to him when he has been injured. The story progresses over years of dragon school, until the dragons learn more violent skills associated with being a dragon, such as catching princesses and fighting other dragons and knights. Princess Pearl agrees to be captured despite Zog's lack of violence or force. The theme of medical care is visible throughout as Princess Pearl tends to all the sick and injured dragons. A knight 'rescues' Princess Pearl while Zog defends her.

However, in a twist on the traditional fairytale (in which patriarchal values are reinscribed and the dragon is cast as the villain), Princess Pearl says to the knight:

Don't rescue me, I won't go back to being a princess and prancing round the palace in a silly frilly dress. I want to be a doctor, and travel here and there, listening to people's chests and giving them care. (Donaldson 2010:14)

This book contains a monster figure in the form of a dragon as well as references to violence, such as kidnapping and fighting.

Dragons vary significantly in different cultures, yet the similarities across the world are that dragons are always bigger and stronger than humans and able to outwit humans with not only physical strength but also cunning and stealth (Tueller 2013). Despite the popular dragon figure being the protagonist, Princess Pearl's gentleness and determination become the main theme in this picturebook. Through being kind and caring, she manages to diffuse the violent situation each time. Princess Pearl's strength and authority can be seen in the way most images are positioned. When Zog meets her each time he is hurt, he (the huge, strong dragon) is always on the floor or under the mud, and she is poised on top of him, taller and stronger, offering him a hand. This image shows the feminist message that the princess is stronger than the dragon. The monster figure itself is also depicted as being kind throughout as he does not resort to violence, despite being encouraged to do so, and he takes care to be a friend and ally to Princess Pearl. This is a powerful message of challenging the status quo and confronting the expected norms which children of all genders can internalise (Monoyiou & Symeonidou 2016).

Donaldson's *The Smartest Giant in Town* (2002) depicts the kindness of the protagonist, George, and how the characters thank him for it. George the giant is introduced wearing old, patched clothes. He wishes to look better, so he buys himself a new, formal outfit, including a collared shirt, a tie, a belt and shiny shoes. However, as he walks home, he finds different creatures in need. This includes a giraffe with a cold neck, a goat with a broken sailboat, and a mouse without a house. George assists each creature in need by donating his new clothing to help them. In the end, he is back in the rags he started with, and he finds them much more comfortable. The story concludes when all the creatures he helped come together to make him a paper crown to thank him for his kindness. Even though George wanted to look the smartest, by the end of the story he is lorded with a much better title: the kindest. A valuable conversation to have with young readers relates to why they chose to describe George as a giant at all – it could as well have been 'the smartest person in town'. Even so, monster theory and the fact that George the giant is a monstrous figure serve a valuable purpose. There is a good lesson in the way George's differences – his huge size, and his scruffy clothes, for example – are completely accepted and no one treats him any differently for it. He is seen as a friend and the anthropomorphised animals celebrate with him. This speaks to the theme of fairness

sensitivity (Liu, Chai & Yu 2016). The illustrations show that there are giants everywhere in town and the shop where George buys his clothes advertises 'new giant sizes' – the internal logic of this story is therefore a world where accommodations are made for all different needs and George is treated fairly as he gets to buy clothes just as anyone else who is a 'normal' size. A key aspect of monster theory is that monsters can represent a marginalised group or be symbolic of those that are ostracised due to their differences (Cohen 1996; Mittman 2012; eds. Mittman & Hensel 2018). Through intentionally displaying figures that people fear as the most loving and kind characters, Donaldson sends a powerful message about inclusion and kindness.

## The allyship of Mark Sperring

The concept of allyship has been in the spotlight of social studies recently in relation to marginalisation and the exclusion of vulnerable people. People who form part of a minority group, or who experience social or economic exclusion, do not have the necessary platforms or resources to speak about or fight against their exclusion and marginalisation (Greenberg 2014; Knudsgaard 2019). An ally refers to someone who forms part of the majority, or privileged group, who uses their platform and power to advocate for marginalised people. The picturebooks of Mark Sperring particularly demonstrate allyship to young readers. *The Sunflower Sword* (Sperring 2010) depicts a monstrous dragon as well as a war that is being fought against these monsters. In the story, a little boy wishes to fight dragons, but his mother bans him from doing so, saying he may not have a sword. Instead she gives him a sunflower. He pretends that his sunflower is a sword and when he accidentally comes face to face with a real dragon, the sunflower is his only weapon. When he holds the sunflower up, the dragon sees this as a peace offering, and the child and monster become friends. This inspires a nationwide movement for all soldiers to lay down their weapons, pick flowers and befriend their enemies. The story allows children to critically think about this and examine their own actions as reflected by others. It teaches them that all that is monstrous is perhaps only made so by our own actions and perceptions. Cohen (1996:20) observes that monsters bring into question our perceptions of the world, our cultural understandings of gender, sexuality, race, and our tolerance towards the expression of these differences. This is an accurate description of the monster in *The Sunflower Sword* as it was created by the knights and their violent behaviour towards a dragon that turns out to be a sweet and placid dragon in need of an ally.

*Santa Jaws* (Sperring 2020) is a Christmas tale set in an undersea world where sea creatures are anthropomorphised and shown to celebrate Christmas in a secular way. The main character, Shelly the shark, wants to take part in the celebrations by making a 'Santa's grotto' where she wants to pretend to be Santa and give young fish sweets and gifts. However, because she is a shark, all the fish are scared of her and swim far away from her grotto. One little squid enters, but swims away in horror when he sees she is a shark.

Eventually, she is able to convince Sid the squid that she wants to do good, and she does not intend to catch and eat the fish, and together the unlikely pair of squid and shark swims around giving presents and wishing everyone a 'merry fishmas' (Sperring 2020:22).

A shark is, of course, a very real creature and not a monster in the sense used by Donaldson. However, when all the fish in the sea avoid Shelly simply because they assume she wants to eat them and exclude her from the Christmas festivities because of who she is and what she looks like, they turn her into a monster. The illustrations show how the other creatures have fearful expressions, they swim away from her and hide behind pillars and under shells. Sharks are considered monstrous in popular culture due to the notable film *Jaws* directed by Spielberg (1975), based on the novel by Benchley (1974), which is one of the main reasons that sharks are more feared than other ocean creatures in Western media. This clearly aligns with Cohen's thesis that monsters are cultural, and although a shark is real, its monstrous side is completely imaginary and made up by popular media and the culture surrounding it. A similar comparison can be made between Shelly and other marginalised groups. The only way Shelly was accepted was to associate herself with an ally, a 'normal' fish, in this case Sid. Because of her ally, Shelly is finally able to take part in the festivities. This is a striking similarity to how marginalised people are better able to find acceptance or be included when they are associated with an ally, someone who is more accepted than they are and able to share their space with the marginalised other. This relates back to the didacticism of children's books and how parents act as allies when exposing their children to books such as these.

*The Don't Panic Gang!* (Sperring 2021) tells the story of an odd and unexpected band of creatures: a cat, a little blue bird and a worm. They purport to be 'here to help' (Sperring 2021:2) and in the events of the story, they respond to calls of distress from a bathroom. When they enter the bathroom, the illustrations show a person and a spider in the shower. The gang puts up a big fight and it is revealed that the person is the one who was chased away, and the spider is the innocent victim who was crying for help. The story ends with the gang offering the spider a safe place to stay, making her part of their team. At first it seems as though the spider is the monster in this tale. Spiders are often presented as monsters in popular media simply because of their fear-provoking popularity – arachnophobia is statistically the most common fear worldwide (Landová et al. 2023). However, the real monster in this picturebook is revealed to be a human turned monstrous for the fact that he wants to kill the spider. Discussing the definition of a monster, Mittman (2012:6) notes that 'the monster is known through its effect, its impact'. Considering this definition, the fact that the person in the picturebook is so big (compared to the tiny spider), and trying to kill the spider with a newspaper, his impact on the spider is monstrous. However, with the help of *The Don't Panic Gang!*, the little spider is saved and has a home to live in. This is a clear example of how an ally offers up their space to those that need it. The book can be read and analysed by young children and their caretakers to explore the themes of

inclusion, empathy and allyship within the story, empowering children to notice their own biases and patterns of exclusion and become allies instead.

## The humour of Claire Freedman

The picturebooks authored by Claire Freedman contain monsters and humour, often invoking fear and laughter simultaneously. The ways in which monsters are constructed and depicted in a society reveal many things about the society. What a particular group of people finds monstrous, why and how the monster is treated, is based on culture and shows the values and ideals of any given population. It is interesting to note that humour plays a similar role. What people find humorous is dependent on their culture and reveals much about their attitudes to otherness and their understanding of what is normal and what is laughable (Attardo 2017).

The picturebook, *The Great Snortle Hunt* (2011), by Claire Freedman and illustrated by Kate Hindley, is an emotional story that accumulates feelings of fear and suspense until the last pages and ends the tension with a seemingly humorous conclusion. The book describes a creepy house on a hill and a group of anthropomorphised animal friends who want to visit the house. It states that a 'Snortle' lives in the house, but no description of what a Snortle is or does is given as it only says 'Now, nobody's been, so nobody's seen' (Freedman 2011:3). After a suspenseful journey, the group then disturbs the Snortle in his sleep and escape via a drainpipe. Up to this point, the story is filled with suspense and action. However, as he wakes up and chases them, it is revealed that the Snortle only wants to play and uses his tummy as a trampoline for them to bounce off the drainpipe. The story ends with the Snortle inviting them for tea. The 'Snortle' turns out to be a hybrid monster, simply feared because he is unknown, outcast and different. Although the picturebook starts out with little to no description of the Snortle, the creature is revealed in the last few pages as a strange, furry creature. He has some human features (he is bipedal with arms and hands, his face is detailed with rosy cheeks, freckles and eyebrows all showing expressions of emotions), some animal features (he is furry, has horns, claws and long ears) and some completely animated features, such as a very round belly. This is a clear encapsulation of the 'category crisis' that monsters offer us (Cohen 1996:43). There is nothing scary or violent about him and the fear and monstrosity he elicits are because of his difference. Just as the Snortle is a monster for his differences, there is also humour in his incongruity. His difference makes him an outcast and a symbol of fear or ridicule. This clearly shows how fear and humour can play the same role in a cultural context of making us question what is different and why. Relief theory is a theory of humour which purports that this conclusion is even funnier because of the relief the reader feels when the fear is dispelled and the release of emotions through laughter is healthy and constructive (Wilkins & Eisenbraun 2009). This picturebook enables children not only to question what we label as monstrous, but to identify and name feelings of fear and discomfort and release them in a safe and emotionally mature way.

In *Monstersaurus* (2011), Freedman also makes use of humour to depict a new relationship between a monster and a child. The storyline purports that the main character, a child called Monty, is an inventor whose inventions often go wrong. He finds a mystery book with a recipe to create a 'monster friend, but only if you dare' (Freedman 2011:4). His recipes go wrong at first, and he creates a dust monster and a 'bogablob'. The two creations start fighting, after which Monty manages to make the *Monstersaurus* appear and chases them away by threatening to kiss them. When *Monstersaurus* rescues Monty in this way, they become best friends who go on many fun adventures together. *Monstersaurus* is a cuddly, friendly monster who hugs Monty and becomes his friend. The illustrator conveys the full effect of the size and impact of the monster by drawing him on a double page, requiring the reader to turn the book to see him the right way up. Again, as in the previous story, the monsters are hybrid beings. Although there are some scary scenes in the book of monsters fighting, and of the 'big, bad *Monstersaurus*' (Freedman 2011:7) himself, the humour throughout the book helps to keep it light-hearted and provides relief to some of the big, fearful feelings that children may experience throughout the story. In the end the message communicates that peace and love prevail. Often, books depicting monsters have themes of exclusion, fear and violence and are the opposite of the message that *Monstersaurus* communicates.

## Conclusion

At first glance monsters seem to be something we would like to shield our children from, a horror that is best to be censored. However, when looking into contemporary monster studies and the trope of the monster, it can function in positive ways as a 'hopeful monster' (McCormack 2018:153). Although monsters might invoke feelings of horror and abjection, they do the 'cultural work' that Mittman (2012; 16) refers to. Monsters enable us to question our biases, teach us how to react to differences, and at the very core, monsters teach us who we are (Mittman 2012; Weinstock 2020). In this article, we identified three ways in which the monster figure in selected contemporary children's picturebooks functions to do this 'cultural work' to support inclusion. Through concepts such as kindness, allyship and humour, authors Julia Donaldson, Mark Sperring and Claire Freedman use the monster figure in their picturebooks in positive and affirming ways. The horrific monsters described in Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), such as vampires, the undead, aliens and Frankenstein's abhorrent creation, do not seem to be what one would find in children's picturebooks. However, as seen in these picturebooks, dragons, giants and hybrid monsters relate to Cohen's seven theses as much as the 'adult' monsters do.

The books that young children read can have a powerful impact on the way they view the world. By simply reading about monsters, Reynolds (2007:1) believes that it could impact 'the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by, for instance, encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change'. Discussing monsters for adults,

(Mittman & Hensel 2018:1) maintains that 'monsters do a great deal of cultural work. But they do not do it nicely'. This cultural work is similar to the role that radical children's literature plays in today's picturebook market without the need for it to be labelled as radical (Mickenberg & Nel 2011). When it comes to monsters for children, monsters also do a great deal of cultural work – but they *do* it nicely.

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## Authors' contributions

J.R.Z. is the principal author. Authors D.E.R. and C.W.K. are co-authors and made substantial contributions to the conception, design, and interpretation of data. Authors D.E.R. and C.W.K. critically revised the article for important intellectual content and approved the final version to be published.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

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