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Building Bridges to Intercultural Understanding: The Other in Contemporary Irish Children's Literature

Patricia Kennon

Novelist and critic Ralph Ellison once said, 'education is all a matter of building bridges' (1963). This sentiment is at the ideological core of the illustrated Bridges series, published in 2009 by Irish children's publisher, The O'Brien Press. In light of the recent increase in immigration into Ireland since the 1990s, the resultant rapidly multilingual, ethnic, and heterogeneous growth of the 'new Irish' arrivals and the Irish government's subsequent policies for inclusion and multicultural equity, this educational series of four picturebooks (*Olanna's Big Day, I Won't Go to China, The Dreaming Tree* and *The Romanian Builder*) was commissioned and created by The O'Brien Press with the explicit agenda of providing a platform for multicultural education through 'accessible' stories based on relatable everyday situations for Irish readers aged six years onwards. Examples of Chinese, Nigerian, Brazilian and Romanian characters, workers and families living within urban Ireland were chosen as representative scenarios for exploring issues of belonging, difference, migration, and nationhood. Throughout the series, the various young Irish-born and new Irish protagonists are confronted with collisions between the familiar and the unknown, their origins and their new homeland, posing questions around what determines 'being Irish' in the twenty-first century.

In today's ethnically diverse classrooms and learning communities, it is crucial that the texts which children have access to and engage with should reflect and honor the range of these students' own experiences. Intercultural children's literature, affording valuable opportunities for promoting dialogue and reflection around issues of social justice and citizenship, can help young readers recognize and critically engage with 'the status quo of the more traditional canon, and thus further challenge the social structures embedded within schooling and creating

a potential model for social justice' (Gates and Mark 5). By providing a forum for discussing identity and power, authentic and reflective literature can help readers become engaged in critical discourses of ideology, thus developing children's critical thinking skills about their own understanding of identity in the 'search for justice and equity by reading the meanings behind the text' (Stevens and Bean 6). According to publicity material on The O'Brien Press website, the aim of the Bridges series was explicitly committed to these ideals of empowerment, integration, and citizenship education: exploring 'sameness and difference; bridging cultures; building reading success' ('Bridges'). Given that the series explicitly emphasizes inclusion, the books' negotiation of the liminal subjects of these new Irish groups in relation to conventional understandings of 'normal' Irish nationhood poses valuable questions about the presence, absence, and regulation of plurality and experiences within Irish youth culture and the potential for polyphony within Irish children's literature.

The O'Brien Press is Ireland's leading independent publisher, having published over 1350 books for adults and children by the end of 2012. Founded in 1974 and evolving out of a family-run printing and type house, it publishes a wide range of fiction and nonfiction for adults and children. This coverage of many genres (such as humor, cooking, travel, crime) is common across Irish publishers given the relatively small scale of the Irish publishing community. Their children's program, addressing the continuum of age range from toddlers to teenagers, forms a major part of their publication list and has attracted commercial and critical success, with their books regularly appearing on Irish children's bestseller lists and winning local prizes such as The Children's Books Ireland Awards. While other publishers have recently created Irish imprints of children's books and Irish-based offices (for example, Little Island by New Island and Puffin Ireland by Penguin), The O'Brien Press is generally regarded as the most established Irish publisher of Irish children's literature. Attending the Bologna Children's Book Fair every year, the company combines a dedication to publishing Irish authors with foreign rights and the international market. Prior to 2013, the Bridges series has been translated, for example, into Korean. The company demonstrates their commitment to promoting children's development and learning, both socially and educationally, through their repository of educational resources, lesson plans, cross-curricular materials, author interviews and teaching guides, designed to support teachers' use of The O'Brien Press children's books in the primary classroom, on the schools section of their website (www.obrien.ie/schools). While other Irish

educational presses such as Folens and EdCo have published individual books addressing issues around identity and relationships as part of Social, Personal and Health Education (a subject at primary level in Irish schools), The O'Brien Press is the first Irish children's publisher to commission and publish a series specifically aimed at intercultural and citizenship education for this six–twelve year-old age group.

The O'Brien Press, up until the time of publication, seems to be focusing the majority of their upcoming children's literature publications to synchronize with significant anniversaries in Irish politics, such as the centenaries of the Dublin Lock-Out in 2013 and The Easter Rising in 2016. In light of this apparent privileging of Irish cultural heritage and nationalism, the company is therefore unlikely to expand the Bridges series with further installments or to create books on similar intercultural themes in the near future. Nonetheless, even if the Bridges series comprises only four works, these books remain ideologically situated within the latest swing of the ongoing pendulum of the Irish diaspora and flows of emigration and immigration since the nineteenth century. Over the 15 years of the apparent economic growth of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' since the 1990s, Ireland moved from a nation formerly renowned for its emigrant outflow to one that for the first time became the destination of immigrants. With the recent downfall of the Tiger economy, and in the context of both the Irish and global recession, the Irish people and government have been increasingly challenged to respond to and accommodate newcomers and the concurrent ripple effect problematizing notions of citizenship, national identity, inclusion, and cultural cohesion. Critics have emphasized the significant changes that have occurred in conceptualizations of Irishness due to the increasingly heterogeneous, multilingual, and multi-faith socio-cultural landscape over the last two decades. As Roy Foster argues: 'there has been a rewriting of the language of national identity, and the parameters within which it was inscribed, or imposed, by the [Irish] state have either expanded or broken down' (64).

Although the Irish Government has pledged its commitment to cultural plurality and a respect for the increasingly heterogeneous nature of twenty-first-century Ireland (for example, through recent White Papers on Education and the 2005 Intercultural Education in the Primary School guidelines), this official discourse of interculturalism does not seem to have extended to the presence and inclusion of minority cultures and characters in contemporary picturebooks for young audiences. While picturebooks by Irish and Irish-based authors, such as Niamh Sharkey, Chris Haughton, Martin Waddell, and Oliver

Jeffers, richly explore the complexities of childhood relationships and experience, they have not yet engaged or seemed interested in engaging explicitly with discourses of diversity, socio-cultural differences and ethnicity. Their stories tend to be located within unrealistic or allegorical worlds of imaginative journeys which do not connect with the turbulence or globalized landscape of modern Irish society. As Sandra Beckett notes, 'the majority of picture books with Irish content are devoted to myth, legend, and folktale' (170). I would therefore agree with Emer O'Sullivan's assertion that the current challenge for Irish children's literature is to address 'the ambivalent relationships to the past and towards the many contradictions thrown up by the rapid process of modernisation. It has to provide a place in which the past can be interpreted and preserved but in which the changing conditions of living can also find thematic and aesthetic expression' (199).

In this sense, contemporary Irish children's literature can function as a valuable barometer for gauging the prevailing ideological climate of the Irish nation. As Declan Kiberd has observed, only 'a people secure in their national philosophy are capable of dealing confidently with those who come among them with deep commitments to alternative codes' (74). Over the last three years, the Bridges series and its educational goal of intercultural education has achieved both commercial and critical success since its publication, particularly when the series won a Special Merit Award at the 2011 Reading Association of Ireland Children's Books Awards. In his presentation of the award to The O'Brien Press, Finian O'Shea, chair of the Reading Association, stated: 'These books are true to their title ... bridges! These bridges have two-way traffic: the bringing of other cultures into the Irish classroom with an authentic voice of Irishness and also the voice of new Irish cultures, which are becoming part of who we now are so that books build on mutual acknowledgement and respect' ('News Release').

However, I would argue that the metaphorical 'bridges' which are built in these books are embedded and complicit in the agenda of absorbing minority groups into the Irish mainstream. While this series is well-intentioned in its attempt to recognize and affirm multiple traditions, populations, and ways of knowing within modern Irish society, the building of bridges is insufficient if these crossways are not utilized for developing mutual understanding, discovery, and collaboration. While there are occasional gestures of inclusion and acceptance in the books that foreign-born characters and other cultures might possess some valuable talents or experiences, ultimately, the emergent relationships depicted are more concerned with assimilating

the foreign protagonists, rather than gaining a reflective understanding of the power relations and potential for intercultural enrichment and interchange between the established majority culture and minority communities. This assimilationist and appropriation ideology is similar to that of Lucy Fitch Perkins in her Twins of the World series, as discussed by Jani L. Barker in an earlier chapter in this collection. While Barker notes Perkins's 'goodwill and progressive agenda' (see Chapter 5 in this volume), which was admirable during a time of prejudice and reactionary US children's literature and media in the early twentieth century, I do not believe that redeems or alleviates the normalizing trajectory of Perkins's conceptualization of the pre-eminence of America and being American. While set nearly a century later, the Bridges series does share an affinity with some aspects of the 'cultural gifts movement' which Perkins drew upon in her project to inspire world harmony and citizenship though her foreign-land books. Both series ultimately prioritize hegemonic concepts of national identity – whether American or Irish – and the importance of newcomers to adapt to the majority culture's ways of knowing and doing. In the Bridges books, the characters associated with other cultural groups demonstrate an ongoing openness to the values and practices of their new homeland and a strong desire to make resonant connections with Ireland yet, disappointingly, the Irish characters never express curiosity about or attempt to travel and potentially learn from encounters and discoveries abroad.

There is a disturbing difference in the Bridges series between how the new Irish and the 'native' Irish are depicted in their respective responses to such challenges for exchanging knowledge and revising ideas around identity. Critics on globalization such as Annabelle Sreberny have challenged the idea that the diasporic experience necessarily has to incorporate a nostalgic, backward-looking imagination of the homeland. Instead, she argues that the experience of migration and diaspora is not simply a matter of 'looking back' to the homeland but also of 'looking around' at other possibilities, 'a scoping all-round gaze, [that is] multidirectional' (182). While the newcomers – whether Chinese, Romanian, Brazilian, or Nigerian – are all depicted as actively engaged in this multidirectional project, desiring to join, learn about, and respect the local traditions and values of Irish society, such as St. Patrick's Day (Mac a'Bhaird and Forkan), the characters of Irish origin display a significant lack of a reciprocal interest and active participation in the ways and customs of 'Others.' Each book sets a different invitation and challenge to both Irish and new Irish characters for embarking on the flow of ideas and cooperative participation in

cross-cultural activities. However, it is disappointing that despite the overt agenda of inclusion in the Bridges series, its acknowledgement that immigrant characters possess distinct cultures and that they are capable of existing and participating in the flow of the contemporary urban landscape, minority groups in the books are still predominantly focalized through the majority hegemonic culture.

One telling example of this relates to the question of authenticity and credibility of the series' various storytellers to depict the particular culture portrayed in that book. The ambition of the series to adequately represent experiences and perspectives from Nigeria, China, Brazil, and Romania in one 32-page picturebook per country seems naive at best, especially considering that none of the illustrators or authors commissioned for the books actually comes from or shares that particular ethnic or socio-cultural origin or background. The ongoing debate over cultural appropriation and 'cultural authenticity' (Bishop 46), which questions whether an author outside of a culture has the 'authority to write' a story about that group, is both recognized and neatly sidestepped in a blog item by The O'Brien Press announcing their plans for the series: 'We ... had to ensure that the images thus produced were examined by people who knew what they were doing to check for cultural gaffes – they simply have to be right!' (O'Brien). This informal and all-too-brief comment is the only paratextual evidence available on the publisher's website, blog, teaching guides, or the books themselves that there has been any explicit consideration taken regarding the measure of responsibility on behalf of the writers, illustrators, or publisher around issues of research, authenticity, and the attendant perpetuation, or possible interrogation, of stereotyping in the series. Readers are asked to believe and accept that 'people who knew what they were doing' have acted in a reflective and accountable manner and have made valid decisions in mediating, representing, and honoring the realities of the different national groups. However, this glossing over of the power dynamics involved in such work cannot be taken lightly, especially from a producer of narratives intended to develop young audiences' sensitivity and awareness around diversity, inclusion, and social equity. As John Stephens argues, 'we need to ask what kinds of meaning are being produced and from what position or standpoint in space and time? What cultural work do these meanings perform? ... How effectively do they engage with the semiotic bricolage of a changing society, where local and global struggle to transform one another?' (92).

All four books share the same repetitive template design of endpapers: a pale green background (a subliminal allusion to the Irish national

color of green) bordered on the top and bottom of the page by an interwoven decoration of triangles and circles which is suggestive of both Celtic patterns and international folk art. A square made up by postage stamps from different countries dominates the center of each endpaper page. Despite the official bilingual status of Ireland, the series assumes an Anglophone register and outlook and there is no reference to Gaeilge, the Irish language, throughout the series except in one case. The names of all countries are given in their English versions and not in their local languages, except for Ireland which is represented using the Irish-language name for this state: Éire. Images of nature, animals, artwork, and traditional objects of manufacture and transport (such as spinning wheels, tractors, and propeller planes) are used to denote each country. Intriguingly, the top-left stamp (the first one that the eye might be drawn to assuming an Anglophone reading pattern from left to right and from top to bottom) is from Mars with a picture of a Martian, with blobby eyes, open mouth, and a rather surprised expression. This could be taken as a playful but also serious statement of challenging norms and extending the metaphor of inclusion to the ultimate example of an 'alien' – the extraterrestrial. While postage stamps afford a framing device which would be accessible for young readers about the importance of communication and also of the iconography of nations, the strategic placement of the stamps in a row, but never in actual direct connection with each other indicates that the fundamental premise of the series as being more invested towards multiculturalism where cultures coexist side by side, stratified around a hegemonic hub rather than interculturalism which involves true reciprocal enrichment and mutual expansion. The underlying static nature of the series is further demonstrated in the repetition of the same template front endpapers and final endpapers so that there is no pictorial depiction of characters' potential for and achievement of learning and growth within the arc of the books.

This arrangement of postal stamps is an intertextual reference across the series to the first book in the sequence, *Olanna's Big Day*, by Natasha Mac a'Bhaird and illustrated by Ray Forkan. Nigeria-born Olanna is delighted to bring the stamps from the postcards her world-traveling uncle sent her to her teacher to pin on the classroom map. In the peritextual summary of the book on the publisher's online teaching guide, the 'rationale and themes' of the story emphasize:

> the belief that everyone has a contribution to make, irrespective of ethnic circumstances and that this contribution can, given the opportunity, contribute in a lively, joyful and entertaining way to everyone's success. The story also illustrates that while cultural and ethnic traditions may differ and seem confusing, there will always be unexpected connections if we look for them.
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> ('Teaching Guide: *Olanna's Big Day*')

While the story does indeed focus on the importance of cooperation for the benefit of 'everyone,' the 'we' in the second sentence is predicated on the perspective of the Irish mainstream culture, which is privileged as the most important system of values and the arbiter of what is considered to be a valuable contribution. The book starts with Olanna eagerly greeting Paddy, the generically named postman, on his daily rounds with an apparent celebration of transmission of ideas and objects across geographical territories and cultures, yet the book repetitively affirms conformity and assimilation. Olanna is a member of the school band and plays the tin whistle, a popular instrument taught in Irish primary schools and closely associated with traditional Irish music. While the illustrations of the band present a multi-ethnic group (Mac a'Bhaird and Forkan 8), there is no mention of any Nigerian music or international music throughout the book and the mantra of the band leader is 'line up in your places. All together now, keep in step!' (7) so that 'round and round the hall they marched' (8).

The band has the honor of marching in the Saint Patrick's Day Parade, informally named 'Paddy's Day' in the book. Familiarity with this Irish national tradition is, of course, assumed by everyone in Ms. Carr's class. Olanna is initially confused and is surprised that 'Paddy the postman had a special day?' After the event is explained to her, she 'thought it sounded like Independence Day in Nigeria, when there were parades and everyone celebrated together' (Mac a'Bhaird and Forkan 14). Olanna decides to wear her favorite scarf, a long green and white one in the colors of the Nigerian flag, given to her by her grandmother, 'because she wanted Mama-Bayo to be part of the parade too' (19). While she is not supposed to wear anything apart from the standard uniform, she justifies wearing the scarf to her friend since 'green and white are the Nigerian colours ... but they're the right colours for Saint Patrick's Day too!' (20). The illustrations and text denoting the parade incorporate a juxtaposition of traditional Irish culture and the twenty-first century: leprechauns dance alongside futuristically dressed stilt walkers and the multiethnic, and presumably multi-faith, band rehearse in front of a stone church (19, 20). When disaster strikes and the strap holding the main drum breaks, Olanna is the only one with some

creative problem-solving to save the situation: her friend, Tommy, can use her scarf to carry and play the drum. While Olanna's intervention and the similarities between Nigerian and Irish codes of national identity in their respective flags and cultural motifs help the success of the event, Olanna ultimately takes a subordinate place, marching behind Tommy and acceding to the dominant regimes of religious and national traditions.

Despite the tacit presence of the Christian church in the background on page 20, there is no explanation or discussion of the religious aspects of this Catholic saint's festival during the book or any recognition of the biased presumption of the reader's familiarity with, if not membership of, Christianity. To be Irish used to be considered synonymous with being Catholic, or at least, Christian. Although religious adherence has decreased, religion is still a significant marker in Irish society with over 90 percent of primary schools managed by Christian denominations. Change is happening (for example, Islam is the third largest religion in the Republic of Ireland, according to the 2006 census), but it is only gradually being addressed in official policies, legislation, and the media. While Tom Inglis states that Irish children 'are still socialised into a Catholic habitus and sense of self' (251), he goes on to acknowledge the shifts in Irish society and the potential for resultant transformation and heterogeneity they bring: 'Irish is becoming mixed with a multitude of other cultural representations, practices and lifestyles' (3). Yet contemporary Irish children's literature has been slow to recognize and represent this rich diversity and range of belief systems and world views. Valerie Coghlan has noted the lack of socio-cultural detail in representations of the new Irish and how Catholicism is 'invisibly present but not discussed' in much of Irish children's literature:

> The reticence of many [Irish] children's authors is in marked contrast with Irish writers for adults for whom religion, and frequently rejection of religion, especially Catholicism, is a prevailing motif .... The lack of signifiers of religious identity in Irish writing and publishing for young people raises questions about whether depictions of Irish childhood are somehow airbrushed and, if so, whether the self-image presented to young readers short-changes them.
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> (59, 66)

This lack of important contextual information about cultural differences and glossing over of religious diversity recurs in the next book in the series, *I Won't Go to China!*, by Enda Wyley and illustrated by Marie Thorhauge. Chang-ming has long been embarrassed by his 'stupid' Chinese name (5) and how it has to be sequenced in a different way than that of the other children in his class. Instead, he wants to be called 'Conor or Barry or Jack– something *normal*' (7). Bitterly disappointed that he will miss playing in his school's football team due to a family visit to his grandmother in Beijing for the Chinese New Year, his feelings of resentment against his Chinese identity are only assuaged when his teacher asks him to take notes during his trip so that upon his return, he can share with the class all he has learned about Chinese life and society. This story promises a tantalizing exploration of hybridity, the Othering process, and the conceptualization of multiple national allegiances. While the emotional tone and illustration style of the narrative is warm and constructive, and the book sincerely attempts to encourage readers' empathy with Chang-ming's dilemma, there is minimal recognition or engagement with the reality and diversity of 'China' or the experience of being 'Hiberno-Chinese.'

Mandarin characters are sprinkled throughout the book's illustrations – during phone conversations between Chang-ming and his grandmother (8) or on buildings and objects during the visit to Beijing (Wyley and Thorhauge 27) – yet these words and phrases are left untranslated with the implication that they are merely serving as an unnecessary ornament for illustration purposes and the 'normal' Irish reader would not need to understand this extraneous dialogue or information. Moreover, while the reader is told that the family speaks 'Chinese' at home (8), the generalization of 'Chinese' as a language is used throughout with no acknowledgement that there are many different languages spoken in China. The various objects and furniture in domestic scenes of Chang-ming's home in Ireland (tea cups and a decorated carpet) are stereotypical shortcuts and visual markers for establishing the family's suitably 'Chinese' home. While the picture of the Chinese zodiac (17) around a globe positioning China at the front with an arrow stretching into the far back of the globe to a much smaller scale Ireland ostensibly seems to foreground China as a hub of attention and respect, the wispy smoke which surrounds the zodiac undercuts this privileged status through its evocation of myth, exoticism, and atemporal fantasy rather than supporting the metanarrative's relevance to and resonance for Chinese culture today.

The story concludes during the New Year Festival when Chang-ming learns that his school was successful against their rival school in football and he will play in the next game. Delighted he can be simultaneously 'an Expert Reporter *and* a footballer' (31), he tells his parents, '"I'm

glad to be Chinese"' (32). The final page finishes with a Happy New Year greeting in Mandarin from his grandmother and then this phrase's translation into English. While the book does provide a brief retelling of the story of how different animals became associated with the zodiac and some details about the sequence of festivities and different rituals during the Chinese New Year, the reader's attention is overtly guided towards Chang-ming's gradual emotional development from hostility and confusion to happiness rather than a true immersion in Chinese traditions and beliefs. The emphasis is on the newcomer's acclimatization process, not on encouraging young Irish readers to critically reflect on their own sense of belonging and how concepts of Irishness might be interrogated, revised, and expanded. Although Chang-ming's teacher, Mrs. Pepper, reassures him that his work as 'Expert Reporter,' 'was very important – as important as the football match' (18), and that 'in my class we love to talk about how people live in different places' (13), there is no actual evidence or depiction of any Irish adults or the remaining children in the class paying attention to, being interested in, learning about, or being influenced by Chinese customs or culture. The 'we' in Mrs. Pepper's class is the positing of a collective identity which is assumed to be inclusive, yet which is predicated on a normative and normalizing white and conservative viewpoint. Despite Mrs. Pepper's rhetoric of an inclusive community enthusiastic about learning about the world, it is significant that the illustrator has represented all the Irish-based characters in the book, apart from Chang-ming and his family, as white and, as with the dominant pattern in Irish children's literature, tacitly Christian (15, 16).

While the plots of *Olanna's Big Day* and *I Won't Go to China* occur within the arena of the school environment and its explicitly educational remit, *The Dreaming Tree*, by Eithne Massey, and the second book in the series illustrated by Marie Thorhauge, explores the feelings of isolation and loneliness of new Irish children outside the formal space of the school day and the sphere of the home. In this slight but poignant story, Roberto and his sister Anna, recently arrived in Ireland from Brazil, have just started at a new school. While Anna is settling in smoothly and making friends, Roberto is not adjusting or being accepted so easily. When the siblings walk home from school, they see the same group of boys playing football, under the captainship of the biggest boy, Fergus, and his brother Shane: 'They were always there. They never asked him to come and play' (Massey and Thorhauge 5). All these boys are pictorially depicted as white, despite the irony that they are eager to play the various international teams of the World

Cup. According to the publisher's teaching guide, this 'gentle story … examines how insecurity in a new and strange environment can limit the opportunities for integration and participation' ('Teaching Guide: *The Dreaming Tree*'). Yet again, the emphasis is on the arrival's capacity for adaptation, resilience, and commitment to integration into Irish mainstream culture rather than via the local Irish characters' active, welcoming, desire for true collaboration with, and learning from, newcomers.

The series' pattern of including some tokens of a foreign language, but not translating them, continues in this book, where Portuguese phrases are included in typography suggesting handwriting during the illustrations of Roberto's telephone conversations with his grandmother in Rio de Janeiro. His grandmother tells him the story of a boy who discovers the Dreaming Tree with many animals asleep around it. After falling asleep, he dreams that he meets the Jaguar King, who teaches him how to get his heart's desire. Roberto, heartened by this reassurance and traditional story from home, goes to the park, locates the highest tree and falls asleep in its branches. In the blurry moments after waking up, he mistakes a cat on a branch beside him for the Jaguar King and he asks for his own heart's desire: 'I want a friend' (Massey and Thorhauge 23). From high up in the tree, he hears Fergus calling for his lost cat, Snowy. He climbs down to return the cat to the brothers and asks them why they called their pet Snowy when she is a black cat. The boys' reply that the name is 'a joke' (31) is an opportunity for the children to bond and laugh together over a shared sense of irony. However it is also an indicator of the Irish children's flippancy and privileged treatment of race and difference. The assimilationist and normalizing impulse of Irish nationhood is further demonstrated when Fergus claims that Roberto can play with them since his grandmother's name is Jacinta and '"I have an auntie called Jacinta. It's an Irish name. You can play for Ireland"' (31), despite the fact that Jacinta is of Spanish and Portuguese provenance. Although previously 'Roberto hated to look different from anyone else' (16), he now proudly takes off his sweater to reveal the Brazilian green- and yellow-colored shirt that his grandmother had given him and joins them in the game.

The new Irish protagonists of the three books so far all may be termed transnational hybrid characters who negotiate between and across cultures and languages. According to Clare Bradford, 'consciousness of the intersections of power and knowledge' involves the challenge to 're-think our agency,' in a 'posture of respectful acknowledgement of difference' which relies 'on our willingness to critically scrutinize our

own histories of selfhood and scholarship and their influence on how we understand the "other"' (33). However, the fourth and final book in the series, *The Romanian Builder* by Peter Prendergast and illustrated by Ross Stewart, revolves around the perceptions and cultural judgments of Joe, an Irish child, and his encounter with Radu, the Eastern European builder building a playroom extension for Joe to Joe's family's house. The opening page shows a shadowy figure at the end of the garden path walking towards the reader while Joe, hovering in the liminal space of his home's doorway, looks outwards. Joe, disappointed because the builder does not live up to his expectations and does not have sufficient English to answers his many questions about construction work, initially conducts disapproving surveillance of the builder from the safety of his bedroom window.

After this discomfiting scenario of an adult laborer being appraised by a fellow European, though young child, his mother urges him to go and talk with Radu. Joe argues that the builder '"won't be able to understand me"' but she replies '"that doesn't mean you can't be friendly"' (Prendergast and Stewart 9). A friendship develops via smiles, sign language, and rudimentary English which Joe teaches Radu while Radu constructs the extension. The online teaching guide states this book's treatment of diversity is

> viewed through the filter of Joe's enthusiasm and curiosity. Joe learns to adapt to the differences between himself and Radu and together they achieve a fulfilled and sustained relationship. Their relationship inevitably enriches Joe and equips him with new and transferable skills which he is able to use in school. ... Joe's relationship with Radu is based entirely on sharing.
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> ('Teaching Guide: *The Romanian Builder*')

I would strongly disagree with this premise that the power dynamic between the two characters is one of sharing, mutual learning, and equity. While the symbolism of the Irish boy and the Eastern European working together to expand the home of the Irish domestic space is obvious, Joe is only interested in acquiring knowledge about the building process and at no point shows any interest in Radu's different cultural background or values. While saddened by the departure of his friend upon the completion of the room, there is no evidence of a 'fulfilled and sustained relationship' beyond the gift of a measuring tape which Radu gives Joe. Moreover, the 'new and transferable skills' which Joe is said to develop are merely rehearsals of the same conservative

and complacent attitudes which he always possessed. Although the book finishes with the ostensible 'enthusiasm and generosity' which Joe shows to a new arrival at his school, an Estonian boy named Edgar who has the same color and style of brown hair as Radu. Joe shows the boy his measuring tape and they measure the schoolroom and yard together. At no point is Edgar depicted as speaking for himself, making his own decisions or having the capacity or opportunity to do so. Later, on the final page of the book, the teacher asks Joe where he learned Estonian in order to communicate with Edgar. With Edgar sitting silently beside him, 'Joe decided to let her in on a little secret. "I didn't ... but I guessed it was probably a bit like Romanian"' (31).

Despite the Irish teacher's approving expression and apparent light-hearted closure to the story, the self-satisfied conflation of all Eastern European cultures and languages as so easily interchangeable is difficult to accept. On a linguistic level alone, Romanian is a Romance language of the Indo-European family while Estonian belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic languages. While the book promotes a message of friendship and acceptance, this 'little secret' of the insidious nature of Othering reveals a subtext with an ugly dimension to the series' assumptions around the uniqueness and distinctiveness of international cultures. Perry Nodelman's argument about the Orientalist project inherent in the power relations of Eurocentric children's literature is pertinent here in relation to the book's assimilationist treatment of national groups juxtaposed between Western Europe and the Balkans: Europeans 'must try to make Orientals more like themselves in order to prevent Orientals from making Europeans more like them, and therefore weakening Europeans' (31). The conclusion of the series aligns with Phil Cohen's argument about the 'multicultural illusion,' 'that dominant and subordinate can somehow swap places and learn how the other half lives, whilst leaving the structures of power intact. As if power relations could be magically suspended through the direct exchange of experience, and ideology dissolve into the thin air of face-to-face communication' (13).

The arena of Irish children's literature needs to engage with and formulate concepts of Irishness which provide a secure sense of self for young audiences but which are also significantly more flexible and critically reflective. As Ireland reels from the current economic crisis, it has yet to be seen whether this will result in increased assimilation and conservatism towards newcomers or whether the death of the 'Celtic Tiger' may trigger the birth of a greater understanding and potential for true intercultural respect and mutual discovery. In light of the rapid changes

and resulting socio-cultural challenges which Ireland faces, Fionnuala Waldron and Susan Pike have asked provocative questions which this series does not satisfactorily fulfill: 'how does one define citizenship in a pluralist society? Can one balance the need to accommodate difference with the desire for social cohesion and solidarity?' (231).

While the Bridges series is an appreciated and timely addition to Irish children's literature in its commendable intentions to raise awareness and promote opportunities for dialogue and exploration of contemporary discourses of nationhood, sameness, and difference, ultimately its conservative and essentialist ideology undermines any potential for achieving real socio-political transformation and critical reflection. Although there are occasional glimpses which suggest counter-narratives around concepts of hybridity, belonging, and national identity which might problematize this system's totalizing boundaries and yield potential for meaningful intercultural education and reflection, the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of traditional Irishness and the assimilationist praxis of Irish children's literature remains secure.

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