

The Beautiful, the Impossible, and the Queer: Three Novel Readings of Paul Kor's *The Elephant Who Wanted to Be The Best*

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Introduction: Queerness in Hebrew children's literature¹

Israeli children's literature has not yet come of age as far as queer themes are concerned. Although a queer corpus has been gradually consolidating since the 1980s, the progression is slow and sporadic, and the number of explicitly queer texts is miniscule. Research in the field is accordingly limited, and queer re-readings of canonical texts, which have become a staple of Anglo-American research in the field of children's literature, have not yet been conducted.² In this regard, the present essay, which offers a queer reading of a well-known and popular Israeli picture book for children, is a novelty.

Paul Kor's *The Elephant Who Wanted to Be the Best* has recorded steady sales ever since its initial publication in 1993.³ The story describes a young elephant who wishes to become colorful, achieves his goal (the elephant is gendered male in the Hebrew text), and then gives it up in order to join the larger elephant community. It has commonly been read as a coming-of-age story, in which the anthropomorphic elephant comes to terms with his natural gray color, accepting himself as he is, and by implication assuming his elephant identity (Meltzer, 1994, p. 76).

1 I.e., children's literature written in the Hebrew language.

2 Shai Rudin (2013) and Gilad Padva (2014) have provided perhaps the only detailed accounts of queer literature for Israeli children so far.

3 Typical of the later period in which it was written, the book does not engage in national, collective themes that were prevalent in earlier (i.e., from the establishment of the state to the 1970s) Israeli children's literature (Baruch, 1991; Cohen, 1988). Nevertheless, its protagonist is not a fully independent individual but is, rather, still under the powerful hold of a collective community, as I will soon demonstrate.

However, the book's presumptive message of self-acceptance and community is undercut by its demand for compliance with rigid, binary gender norms. This manner of reading is supported when one pays close attention to the book's accompanying illustrations and unique palette, which thus far have been overlooked. Not only does this reading accentuate an oppressive streak in the book's storyline, but it also forcefully demonstrates how this oppression specifically targets the elephant's gender identity. The effect of the consequent awareness generated by this type of analysis is dramatic; once the previously unmindful reader notices the fictional elephant's momentary liberation, it transforms the current conservative reading and frees the reader from the tyranny of the normative.

Complicating the traditional reading

From the opening page of the book, the tale's third-person narrator conveys a strong impression that the elephant is moody, or "sour faced." Describing the elephant moaning his misery daily in front of the mirror—"Poor me, I'm so miserable!"—the same narrative voice implies that the elephant is an eccentric and grumpy narcissist, whose peculiar behavior sets him apart from the lot of happy elephants.

However, even at this early stage, the elephant's acute dissatisfaction suggests that his problem is more than one of mere vanity. In fact, his unusual distress and ensuing passivity—he never does anything to improve his plight—become worryingly conspicuous when considering his young age. The elephant's passivity is uncommon in children's stories, where heroes are usually portrayed as active and resourceful, more like the bird in the story rather than the elephant protagonist (Nodelman, 2008, p. 77; Shulevitz, 1985, p. 53).

Nevertheless, the initial impression is largely sustained until a third of the way into the book, when a curious blue bird asks the

elephant about his bad mood. In his first response, the elephant is able to delineate only a vague and limited version of his wish: "I want to be the handsomest/ of all, but ALL, the elephants."⁴ The bird's puzzled insistence—"What is so wrong about the gray color?"—forces him to concentrate his idea further, until he eventually conveys a coherent and assertive declaration of intention: "No, no, perhaps gray is wonderful/ but...I want to be colorful"⁵ Speaking allows him to figure out, and thus spell out to the bird, the reader, and to himself, the exact nature of his quest. This simple statement has a forceful effect, which is further augmented by its visual location at the bottom of the page. No wonder the elephant is so upset when we first see him.

Two things become apparent here: First, the title of the book is rather misleading. In the original Hebrew, the superlative "the best" ("hakhi") is not followed, as it normally would be, by a noun or adjective that defines or delimits the elephant's hopes. This wording creates an early impression of vanity and arrogance. Yet we see that the elephant's wish, far from being grand, is in fact rather focused and modest. Unlike Kor's *A Fish Story (Hadag She'lo Ratza Lihiyot Dag, 1985)*, for example, or like a host of other young protagonists that follow Hans Christian Andersen's archetypal model of the ugly duckling, he does not ask to change his elephant identity altogether. In contrast to the grand aspirations implied in the title, it turns out that the elephant is not at all as conceited or as competitive as the title suggests.

In addition, it is clear that this is certainly no ordinary child-elephant, and that this is no ordinary quest, or coming-of-age narrative. Kor's elephant knows exactly what he wants. This is most evident from his response when he witnesses his colorful image in the mirror the moment his wish comes true: "Look at me,

4 Since the book is not paginated, page numbers are not provided after quotes.

5 All translations are mine.

how wonderful/ Being myself so beautifully colorful!"⁶ The accompanying picture enhances the effect of the text and attests to its authenticity: The elephant's body language is jovial, and his expression utterly cheerful. Nowhere else in the book does he look or sound so happy as during this moment, when his self-fulfilled colorful identity is reflected in the mirror

פילוני פיל כולו נרקש
 מניד את הראי ונש
 והוא התפעל והתפעל
 וזו התריו כסודי צוחל:
 ראו קשה לזה אני
 פילוני פיל המצויני

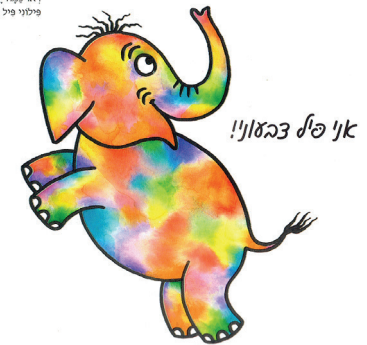


Illustration 1

(Illustration 1).

The elephant's achievement signifies the book's climax on various levels. It is the peak of the artist-bird's successful effort to paint her elephant friend. It is also the high point of the illustration itself and of the book as a picture book, since the use of color will only diminish now that the elephant's coloration is full and complete. Mainly, however, it is an unparalleled personal apex for the elephant, marking the completion of his process of individuation, the event that enables him to experience and express a clear sense of self.

This reading is of vital importance, as it sheds new light on the reasons for the elephant's predicament and may also account for his initial melancholy. According to this reading, the elephant's apathy at the beginning of the story is suggestive of a severe state of mental distress; the elephant is so emotionally unwell, perhaps even depressed, to the extent that he becomes dysfunctional. The sensitive blue bird is the only one who takes the elephant's

6 See footnote 4.

crisis seriously—“Dear little elephant/ what is so awful?/ You look absolutely dreadful!”—thereby validating what otherwise could be perceived (and dismissed) as the elephant’s mere childish complaints and narcissistic behavior: “Poor me, I’m so miserable!”⁷

If every story is about change, as Uri Shulevitz maintains (1985, p. 46), then the story of the elephant that has grown and achieved a desired change would end here. However, Kor’s story is apparently less a fairy tale and more a fable, which tends to be about “how characters are wrong to want what they want and learn their error by getting the object of their desire” (Nodelman, 2008, p. 81). Accordingly, the young elephant’s happiness is short-lived. While there are no negative or harmful consequences to his achievement, he is told that it is not right simply because elephant society deems it ridiculous. This is simply not how things are, nor how they should be, among elephants. The fact that the elephant does not look entirely unhappy at the end of the book—although never as happy as when he was fully painted—suggests his acquiescence to the realization that individuation cannot be gained outside society, and that socialization is as basic an existential need as individuation. While this may seem to come into conflict with the general ideal of individual liberation in contemporary Western society, it was a highly prevalent theme in Israeli children’s literature until the 1980s, and constituted a reasonable didactic and satisfactory ending within that genre (Baruch, 1991; Cohen, 1988).

Whose story is it?

Silence and speech are major factors affecting the unfolding of the story and the eventual fate of the elephant. The elephant’s silence, a sign of his inertia, allows his story to be defined by the third-person narrator and in turn by any character who is engaged in his life.

Thus, in speaking with him, the compassionate bird will help him fulfill his dream, whereas the collective elephant community will defeat it.

Language, and emotional language in particular, is associated with the bird, who is described as “wild” and “wise”; in other words, as another outlier, like the elephant: “A little wild, a little different/ But very wise, very intelligent.”⁸ It is the bird’s expression of concern at the sight of the miserable elephant that takes him from passive grousing to communicating his dream, prompting the entire plot that follows. The elephant’s explanation stirs the bird to action in turn, and she responds by soliciting the animals and flowers she encounters to contribute colors—also through speech, which is, significantly, never judgmental of the elephant. For example, when the beetle inquires further about the bird’s awkward request for the red color, the bird retorts: “It’s for the little elephant that I implore/ He doesn’t want to be gray anymore.”⁹

By contrast, if the other elephants are concerned about the young elephant (as the perplexed expression in the opening scene of at least two of them, perhaps his parents, suggests), they never voice their concern, either because they fear the elephant’s response or because they are not accustomed to expressing feelings. Their silence, however, is ineffective. The elephant does not give up his wish, and his mood doesn’t change.

By contrast, when the elephants use words to re-enforce gray uniformity on the deviant elephant, they too change the course of the plot and ultimately lead to its resolution. This is, in fact, the only occasion where the elephants speak in the story, and in so doing, they refrain from using any first-person pronouns (“I” or “we”; even as a community), but speak (and laugh) in unison, using the second person pronoun “you” instead: “Hi hi hi, ha ha ha!/ Little bloke, you

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ See footnote 4.

⁹ See footnote 4.

are a joke!"¹⁰ This humiliating speech act is disturbingly effective, and the elephant soon yields to it by letting the elephants wash the colors off his skin. Thus, the elephants' identical speech act, like all direct speech acts in this narrative, eventually determines the fate of the elephant and decides the moral of the story. Although the heartrending expression on the young elephant's face as he stands opposite the crowd of rejoicing elephants and watches the colors wash off his body speaks volumes (Illustration 2), no speech act follows that can change the course of events, and the book ends with the authoritative, third-person narrative assertion: "Gray is the color for all elephants/ You know, for them it is just right!"¹¹

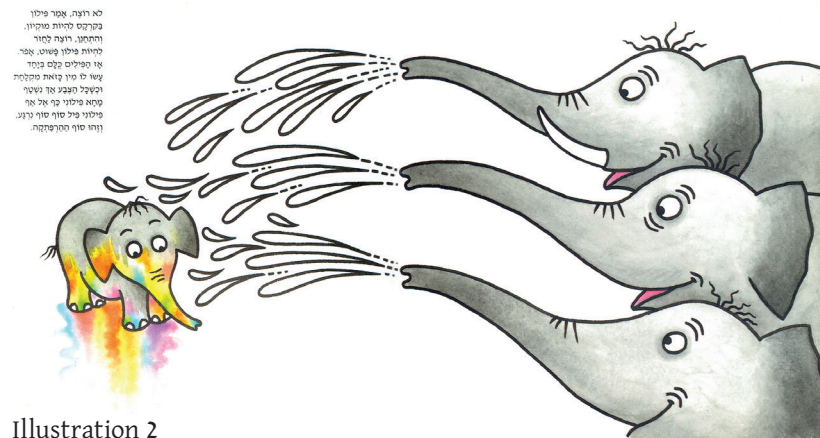


Illustration 2

The beautiful

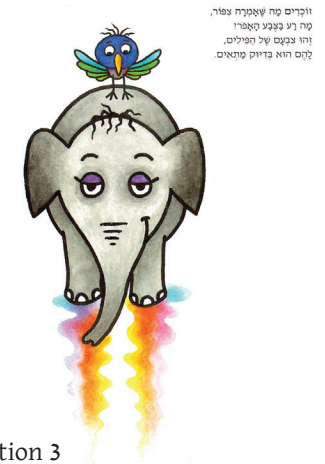
The final picture, however, does not seem to support this assertion (that gray is the only option for elephants) and is in fact telling a different story (Illustration 3). Here for the first time, the story that the picture tells deviates from the text or completes it in the manner

10 See footnote 4.

11 See footnote 4.

of a true picture book (where the picture says what the words fail to convey). Indeed, *The Elephant Who Wanted to Be the Best* is a picture book in disguise. Although pictures are dominant in the book, they do not participate in the story's meaning-making in the public consciousness. The yarn is spun with words, which the pictures only demonstrate or amplify (Shulevitz, 1985,

Illustration 3



p. 15). Thus, although the text suggests that the elephant returns to the herd after accepting its terms, his reception never gains visual representation, and there is no homecoming picture to match the opening communal scene; no image of the integrated elephant seals the book. The story offers no pictorial closure to match the closure provided by the final textual assertion ("Gray is the color for all elephants/ You know, for them it is just right!"). Instead, the final scene shows the elephant with his bird friend perched on his head, both standing in what seems like two puddles of fading colors. Stripped of his beloved colors and devoid of the one passion that marked his individuality (as well as his quest for it), the elephant looks defeated, and the bird once again looks concerned. The discrepancy between this final image and the narrator's assertion that gray is the right color for all elephants is no less than striking. It implies that the elephant's concession comes with a heavy personal price.

All the same, this incongruent aspect of the ending has been overlooked in most conventional readings. Instead, the ending has been perceived as marking the elephant's successful readjustment

to the norms of his society and his reintegration into it. Thus, both elephant and readers learn a lesson in conformity, which is nevertheless interpreted as a sign of maturity and coming of age, and the story achieves its didactic purpose: to help a young member of society come to terms with his identity, whose main feature, according to this story, is grayness.¹²

Interestingly, however, Kor's nameless elephant is not the only one who finds grayness disturbing. Paul Kor himself seems to share a similar dislike for gray elephants, along with a host of writers and illustrators who have anthropomorphized elephants in children's books over the years. Prevalent among these writers is a tendency to avoid the monochromatic grayness that is identified with elephants in favor of a more colorful palette. In *A Fish Story* (1985), also by Paul Kor, a fish contemplates the possibility of becoming an elephant (among other options). Kor's illustration in this book depicts an elephant that is relatively colorful, with its big ears and fingernails painted shades of blue, its teeth yellow and white, and its eyes a purplish hue. In this story, the elephant's distinctive size and body parts—the trunk and teeth—are described as onerous to the extent that they threaten the elephant's steadiness. Here, size and consequently clumsiness, rather than color, serve as the elephant's defining features. Size rather than color is also the main elephant feature in Ayin Hillel's *From Fly to Elephant* (*Mi'zvuv Ve'ad Pil*, 1977), in which illustrator Alona Frankel (who is also a renowned children's writer) painted Hillel's elephant purple. Meanwhile, in her own highly popular *The Book of Little Elephants* (*Sefer Ha'p'ilp'ilim*, 1978), which she both wrote and illustrated, all the elephants are white.

12 This is, in fact, not entirely accurate in regard to elephants. White elephants, although rare, do exist, or at least used to exist before they became extinct. In Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," they are metaphorically used to indicate an imaginative horizon (that is nevertheless eventually suppressed).

The tendency to imbue elephants with color seems ubiquitous. The American author and illustrator of the popular "Little Elliot" series (2014-2018), Mike Curato, has likewise chosen to illustrate Elliot the elephant in white, with a colorful addition of soft blue and pink dots, while British David McKee's patchwork elephant Elmer (of the "Elmer" series; 1989-2018) is as colorful as can be.

Kor's artistic background and career suggest he was particularly prone to colorful design. Born in France in 1926, Paul Kor (Kornowski) studied art first at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva (during WWII) and then at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After settling in Israel in 1948, he became an internationally renowned graphic designer. Kor created distinctly colorful posters, as well as Israeli stamps and banknotes, and exhibited worldwide. From 1986 and until his death in 2001, he wrote and illustrated 15 children's books, many of which have become bestsellers and have won awards.¹³

When the illustrations are treated as the book's primary storytelling mode, the impact is rather different. The picturesque drama in *The Elephant Who Wanted to Be The Best* resembles a triptych, where the gray-dominated opening is ultimately balanced by a grayish closure, and both frame a middle section that is replete, simply bursting, with color. The gray bookends, depicting rising and falling action respectively, function as a visual counterpoint that focuses interest on the middle parts of the book. Even the immense size of the elephant functions as canvas and is instrumental to the painter's performance, as it enables him rather large strokes of brush.¹⁴

13 Kor was awarded first prize at the Fourth International Tourism Posters Competition in Italy in 1966 for a poster promoting tourism to Israel. In 1968, he was awarded the "Beautiful Book" prize in France for his wordless book of lithographs, *Tête-à-Queue* (Tartakover, 2001, pp. 15-18).

14 See Wassily Kandinsky's "On the Spiritual in Art" on counterpoint in painting.

The impossible

The fact that books for the very young (both picture books and story books) are bright and colorful is almost always taken for granted. Objects and settings for children, like toys or kindergartens, are often (though not always) designed to be excessively colorful. Architects similarly tend to associate children with colors almost intuitively (Setter, 2018; Shein, 2018). The roots of this association of children with color go back to the Romantic idealization of childhood. The Romantics associated childhood with flamboyant colorfulness and perceived children's fascination with color as a sign of their artistic genius: "The child sees everything as a novelty; the child is always 'drunk.' Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels drinking in shape and color," wrote Charles Baudelaire (1863/1995, p. 3). Many philosophers share the notion that color is linked to the senses and "to an innocent state that preceded academic philosophy...[and] did not become trapped in the logical schemata of a fallen age" (Riley, 1995, p. 63). Theodor Adorno, for example, associated chromatic aesthetics with the innocence of the child, and Søren Kierkegaard similarly associated chromaticism with childhood. Charles Riley thus maintains that color entails "the notion of impossibility and a certain nostalgia for childhood, or at least for the color sense of the child," and concludes that both topics are clearly linked "in that the return to childhood, or the primitive color sense, remains an impossibility no matter how strongly it is desired" (1995, p. 16).

Viewed in this light, our elephant's obsession with colors may be viewed as an adult representation of the nostalgic yet futile attempt to adhere to childhood. On the one hand, the elephant's pleasure in his colorful body can be indeed evocative of Baudelaire's description of the delight of children who are "full of the joy of life and proud as peacocks of their pretty clothes" (1863/1995, p. 8). At the same time, however, and as the adult author well knows,

maintaining this flamboyant splendor is an impossibility in the face of the inevitability of growing up. Either the real world cannot contain the imaginative elephant, or the imaginative elephant cannot exist in the real world. In both cases, childhood is, according to this view, short-lived, and its imaginative outlook is destined to be contained and suppressed by society.

The queer

Kor's choice to focus on the elephant's gray color as a distinctive marker of elephant identity stands out among the numerous anthropomorphic elephants prevalent in children's literature, many of whom have become popular due mainly to their unimposing enormity and cute clumsiness, so evocative of the delightful awkwardness of toddlers. Kor's elephant's more serious journey does not seem to emerge from entirely the same tradition; color in particular plays prominently in the story in a manner that is counterintuitive to its traditional role. Rather than making him accessible, the young elephant's colorful dream marks him as an Other. In this way, his flamboyant tendencies, to which the collective elephants strongly object, have real-world parallels in the socially sanctioned performance of masculinity. Their use as markers of the elephant's alterity associate them with deviancy, alienation and suppression, as the aggressive act of washing up at the end of the story suggests.



Illustration 4 and 2 (an item)

With this in mind, one may notice a striking similarity between the book's palette and the iconic rainbow flag, whose many colors have famously symbolized the manifold diversity of the LGBT community since the late 1970s (Illustrations 4 and 2). Although it is likely that the comparison with the rainbow flag was not intended, once evoked it is very hard to ignore.

This reading provides a satisfactory explanation (perhaps *the only* satisfactory explanation) for the many points of aporia in the text. It clarifies what otherwise may read like an odd inconsistency between text and illustration. The association of the elephant's Otherness with queer sexual identity may explain both his clear purposefulness and his acute distress. Indeed, it can shed light not only on the elephant's awkward behavior but also on the other elephants' final harsh response to the not merely strange, but the socially unacceptable.

According to this reading, it is likely that the elephant is aware of the nature of his alterity (at least to some extent), but knowing no better, believes that it is hopelessly incorrigible; hence, his distress and ensuing apathy, as well as his conservative community's unequivocal objection to his "unnatural" transformation. The elephants, who seem to abide by the tyranny of nature, respond with violent mockery to the rainbow elephant. Thus the elephant, and the readers who follow him, are able to experience the oppressive power of "the *idea* of nature that has been established for us" (Wittig, 1997, p. 220; italics in original) and learn its inevitability, leaving neither the elephant nor the readers any choice but to yield (or risk excommunication).

Still, for a brief moment, the book succeeds in exploring and accentuating a queer emotional space and representation. Although the image is immediately withdrawn, as the elephant, somewhat alarmed, resorts to the normative, conservative visual image that eventually seals the book, this is not altogether an insignificant

experience. For, during that brief moment, some readers might realize that—to paraphrase Judith Butler—the term *elephant* does not necessarily denote a common identity, and that perhaps the tyranny of nature can be overcome.¹⁵

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¹⁵ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity" (1999, p. 6).

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