

Childlike Parents in Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* Series and Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum*

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INTRODUCTION

With its roots in education, children's literature is an ideological discourse that relies on age for its definition and characterization.¹ The role of the adult in the production process of children's books has been widely studied, as has the construction of childhood in this kind of literature.² In contrast, the age norms governing the construction of adulthood in children's books have received relatively little scholarly attention (Joosen, "Second Childhoods"). This lack of attention can be explained by the fact that—some exceptions with adult protagonists notwithstanding—the majority of children's books feature adults only as secondary characters that are described from a child's selective point of view (Nikolajeva, *Character* 115). Some family stories form an exception to this convention, taking the relationship between child and adult as the central focus and having the child protagonist reflect extensively not only on the adults in their surroundings, but also on the notion of adulthood itself. In *The Family in English Children's Literature*, Ann Alston observes that many children's books since the 1970s have asked the child reader "to sympathize and relate to adults' problems" (59). In this article, I will analyze the demarcation of childhood and adulthood in two such narratives, Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* series (1999-2001) and Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* (1999).

In my analysis of the construction of adulthood and age norms in these narratives, I will rely on Margaret Gullette's tenet that age is a cultural construct and refer to trends in the contemporary understanding of the life course as identified by two leading sociologists working in age studies: Harry Blatterer and Jeffrey Arnett. That is not to suggest,

however, that children's books reflect social tendencies directly. First, the ideological and didactic impetus of this type of literature means that authors can construct characters in order to influence their readers' worldviews; the stereotype of the idealized "all-giving mother" as discussed by Lisa Rowe Fraustino is an example. Second, certain narrative requirements and conventions influence the construction of adulthood in children's books. In order for fictional children to be able to start an adventure, for example, it is often necessary that adults lose control over them: either they are (temporarily) physically removed, or they prove to be so incompetent that the children have to take care of themselves (Trites 54-69; Nikolajeva, *Character* 117). Yet, although children's literature does not reflect social reality directly, age studies can provide a social framework that helps contextualize the features of adulthood as they appear in children's books. Sociologists track how adult norms evolve, and one may wonder if and how children's literature responds to these social changes—which is what this article intends to do for the two contemporary family stories under analysis.

"[T]he image of adulthood as life's centre stage, flanked by dependent childhood and old age, is difficult to dislodge from the social imagination," argues Blatterer ("Adulthood" 46). Yet, at the same time, this traditional understanding of the life course is continuously challenged by crossover phenomena such as kidults, adultescents, twixters, and so forth ("Adulthood"). Across most of the twentieth century, Blatterer identifies a set of "core social markers of adulthood," i.e., "a family of one's own, permanent living arrangements and full-time work for the (usually male) breadwinner" (47). Where there was once a high predictability of people in their late teens and early twenties attaining these benchmarks, since the 1970s, the life course has become increasingly diversified and unpredictable and "flexibility has superseded stability as the marker of successful adult life" (Blatterer, "Adulthood" 49). Flexibility is both understood as a necessity in the current economic and social climate and perceived as a desirable quality, a feature of youth that can be retained in adulthood.

Given Alston's claim that "the depiction of the family in children's

literature is, at the heart, deeply conservative” (1), one may wonder whether children’s books address, on the one hand, the increasingly muddled demarcation of childhood and adulthood, and on the other, the new ideal of adulthood that Blatterer describes—that is, adults whose lives and behaviors are marked by flexibility and unpredictability rather than stability. In countless contemporary children’s books, the adult characters still conform to the core social markers that Blatterer lists as being traditionally attached to their stage of the life course, depicting adults with stable families, houses, and jobs. Yet, a growing number of children’s books feature adults who do not meet all the traditional criteria for adulthood, and whose lives are marked by instability, whether by choice or not. How do these children’s books reflect on the adults who transgress the traditional features attached to their stage of the life course? And do these books communicate value judgments about which model of the life course is preferable—the traditional or the flexible model?

To answer these questions, I am exploring a corpus of books written for children up to the age of twelve, written in the mimetic (as opposed to the fantastic) mode. My case studies, Kuijer’s *Polleke* series and Wilson’s *The Illustrated Mum*, are exceptional for discussing features of adulthood in considerable detail.³ In other books for children, similar parental features are suggested but not elaborated to the same extent,⁴ either because the parent is a very marginal character, or because he or she is absent from the child’s life altogether. In addition, the books under discussion in this article were selected because the authors and titles have gained considerable acclaim. The five titles in the *Polleke* series were published by the Dutch author and Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award winner Guus Kuijer. My main focus will be on the first two parts, *Voor altijd samen amen* [*Forever Together, Amen*], first published in 1999 (Kuijer 7-94), and *Het is fijn om er te zijn* [*It’s Nice to be There*], which appeared in 2000 (Kuijer 95-192). The former won two of the three most important awards in the Netherlands and Flanders: the Gouden Uil [Golden Owl] and the Gouden Griffel [Golden Slate]. Parts of the series have been translated into French, Danish, Swedish, German, and other languages, but not

into English.⁵ *The Illustrated Mum*, by Jacqueline Wilson, won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. The *Polleke* series was adapted into a movie and *The Illustrated Mum* into a television drama series. Both are popular with child readers and have been reprinted several times.

THE DEMARCATION OF CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD IN POLLEKE

"Human beings are aged by culture," Margaret Gullette stresses (12), and the social construction of age affects the way the human life course is perceived. Reflections on social trends such as "the disappearance of childhood" (Postman), "extended adolescence" (Blatterer), "emerging adulthood" (Arnett), and "queer temporality" (Halberstam) show that divisions between the stages of the life course are prone to debate and change. The distinction between childhood and adulthood, for example, is drawn differently according to (sub)culture, historical period, and location, and further varies if it is considered in legal, biological, pedagogical, and social terms. The variables in the demarcation of childhood and adulthood, and the rights and responsibilities that come with each stage in life, are explicit themes in the books under discussion.

The protagonist and first-person narrator of Kuijjer's series, Polleke, is eleven at the start of the first book. Whereas in the later volumes she evolves into an adolescent, in the first parts she perceives herself and is perceived by others as a child. Various characters reflect on what is typical and appropriate behavior for adults and children. Polleke's generalizations about the life course usually originate from situational observations and small generational conflicts, and are marked by irony: "Grown-ups like it when things are not allowed" (17), Polleke claims early in the book, implicitly distinguishing herself as a non-adult.⁶ About walking, she says: "I don't see the point, but grown-ups love it" (33).⁷ Wouter, Polleke's teacher and her mother's boyfriend, makes a more traditional distinction that is devoid of irony but that originates from his frustration with Polleke's father: "Grown-ups should take care of themselves" (72),⁸ he claims, reflecting Blatterer's finding of "a tacit understanding that *responsibility* and *commitment* [are] central notions in the cultural vocabulary of adulthood" (*Coming of Age 16*; emphasis in original).

Wouter is presented as the character who believes most in the traditional demarcation between the adult's and the child's knowledge, allowed behavior, and responsibility. As a teacher, he can be interpreted as a literal embodiment of Nikolajeva's concept of "aetonormativity," which sets the adult as norm and the child as deviating from that norm, to which it must ultimately learn to conform (*Power*). More specifically, as a teacher, Wouter is a gate-keeping adult, determining to a great extent what facts and skills the children learn in his class. Hence, he also sets boundaries on what children are allowed to know and hear, as one conversation in the series makes particularly clear:

"Everybody has the right to grow unhappy in their own way," my mother says.

Teacher jumps up. "Tina!" he calls out. "You don't say that to a child!" [. . .]

"Why can't mum say that?" I ask.

"Because," Teacher says.

"Are you not saying some things because there are children around?"

"Course," Teacher grumbles.

"What sort of things?" I ask.

"There you go, Wouter," my mother says. "Now you can have a ball!"

"About sex?" I ask.

"For example," Teacher says.

"And what else?"

"Now that's exactly what I'm not telling," Teacher says. "You're not ready for some things yet."

"What sort of things?" my mother asks teasingly.

Teacher shrugs and sips his beer.

"I'm going up," I say, "so you can talk about whatever you like."

"No Polleke," my mother says. "You are staying here. We are going to have fun talking about forbidden things."

But I don't feel like teasing teacher. I get up and leave the room. (Kuijer 135-36)⁹

In this conversation, Polleke does not display the irony that marks parts of her narrative, but instead seems genuinely interested in the fact that the adults keep things from her. The discussion between Polleke's mom and Wouter makes clear that the demarcation between adults' and children's

knowledge is subject to debate. The teacher represents Neil Postman's argument that childhood can only be preserved if certain knowledge is kept from children and reserved for adults exclusively. For Postman, revealing the secrets of adulthood means the end of childhood: "It is clear that if we turn over to children a vast store of powerful adult material, childhood cannot survive. By definition, adulthood means mysteries solved and secrets uncovered. If from the start children know the mysteries and secrets, how shall we tell them apart from anyone else?" (88). Since the invention of television, "the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is rapidly eroding," Postman laments (xii), arguing that "without a well-developed idea of shame, childhood cannot exist" (9). That idea of shame, or rather discretion, is more developed in Wouter than in Polleke's mother. She, in contrast, represents a more liberal education that retains fewer taboo subjects. Her concept of childhood is rooted in the emancipation of the child that was propagated by neo-enlightened Dutch educators in the 1970s and 1980s. They criticized the Romantic construct of the child as an innocent being who should live in a so-called *heile Kinderwelt* or childhood arcadia, and instead constructed an image of the child as a person who lives in the same world as adults and also needs to know about the harsh facts of life. Only then can the child develop into a rational, emancipated person with agency.¹⁰

The discussion concerning what a child is allowed to know about adult life not only takes place on the fictional level, but is also at play in the relationship between the adult author and the young reader. By addressing—and partly revealing—within the boundaries of a children's book the secret knowledge that adults withhold from children, Kuijer at first seems to side with the liberal position that Polleke's mother represents, opposing the teacher's and Postman's more conservative view that the young's innocence should be protected in order for childhood to be maintained. The author provides his readership with a narrative that not only addresses (formerly) taboo topics (such as child abuse, drug abuse, and death) and challenges adult authority, but also contains narrative insecurity, conceived by Polleke's ironic, and at times unreliable,

narration. In the conversation above, the taboo that Polleke's teacher and mother argue over is a nihilistic, cynical view of life that implies that all people grow unhappy. This nihilism is in conflict with a common childhood ideal, in which adults associate children with hope and optimism. Ironically, the reason Polleke leaves the room is because she does not want the two adults to get into a fight—she has already seen quite a few adults “grow unhappy in their own way” (47).

In having Polleke refrain from exploring certain issues—for instance by leaving the room, as in the passage cited above—Kuijer sets boundaries to the adult subjects that he shares with his readers. Kuijer thus addresses the fact that adults withhold knowledge from children, but does not disclose all this knowledge to his young readers. He constructs Polleke as a child who is curious at times, but also scared or disgusted when confronted with too much “adult” knowledge. On the level of sex, for example, Polleke emerges as a fairly innocent child. Sex is something she wants to keep far from her own life. That she is still fairly ignorant about it can be derived from the fact that when boys and kissing are mentioned, Polleke usually declares that she wants to be a lesbian. For more informed readers, this is a marker of her sexual innocence: apparently she doesn't realize that lesbians kiss and have sex too.

Kuijer's *Polleke* series presupposes literary competence and agency in the implied child reader, who has to be able to read between the lines, come to grips with conflicting messages, and negotiate the lack of hope or easy answers in the story. The explicit and implicit messages are frequently at odds. When the expressions of characters are compared to their actions, a further destabilization of the boundary between childlike and adult behavior becomes clear. A good example is the two characteristics that Polleke deems typical of adulthood: prohibitions and walking. Although she sometimes comments that it is an activity that adults like, Polleke herself does a lot of walking and talking in the books, with both other children and adults. As for the former distinctive feature of adulthood, Polleke herself holds several norms about appropriate adult behavior, which result in a number of commands and prohibitions. When it

turns out that her mother and teacher are falling in love, for example, she exclaims the opposite of her previous assertion: “Why don’t grown-ups understand what can be and what can’t? Don’t they have any decency, for goodness’ sake?” (53).¹¹ Mimicking the teacher’s previous assertion, Polleke seems to be performing as an adult here—confronting the actual adults with their own norms. According to her self-invented criteria, Polleke acts and thinks more like an adult than she may want to admit, and the narrative thus constructs the demarcation between childhood and adulthood as inconsistent, arguable, and performative.

A similar ambiguity arises when it comes to the ideal of the “flexible” adult that Blatterer identifies as a recent norm. In the analysis of adult features, it is important to keep in mind that many children’s books are written from the perspective of the child, yet one that is constructed by an adult. What these books thus present is an adult writer’s fictional construction of a child’s perspective on adulthood. In Kuijer’s books, the fictional child Polleke is better able to grasp and appreciate the lack of stability in adult life than characters in most of the titles that Alston has analyzed; yet, as in the demarcation of childhood and adulthood, the books are somewhat ambivalent in their overt and passive messages on this topic. Stable norms for parenthood are deconstructed in playfully postmodern fashion at the beginning of the series, when Polleke claims to be convinced that “normal” fathers no longer exist: “All Dutch children have a Complicated Dad, I believe. My mother says that there used to be a Normal Dad as well sometimes. He came home, watched TV, and drank beer. I don’t believe such dads exist anymore” (20).¹² Traditional families seem to have become myths in Polleke’s flexible, postmodern world, where “Complicated Dads” (gay fathers, sperm donors, divorced fathers, lesbian couples, and so forth) are no longer the exception, but the rule. At first, Polleke accepts this flexibility of fatherhood without problematizing it. As the series develops and the flexible lifestyle of Polleke’s father increasingly makes her unhappy, however, the former ideal of “Normal Dad” re-emerges. Polleke’s teacher conforms to the three features that Polleke lists for this traditional father: he has a job,

watches television, and drinks beer (134). Although he is not Polleke's biological father, he is the adult who is presented as coming closest to "normal," old-fashioned fatherhood. Polleke herself is also more influenced by that traditional model than she admits. When she is upset about people gossiping about her mother and teacher, for instance, Wouter suggests that they should get married. Polleke is surprised to find out that he has never been married:

"Yeah yeah," I said chewing a slice of bread way overdue. "Then you'll first have to get a divorce."

Teacher looked at me in surprise. "Divorce?" he asked. "I'm not married at all, weirdo."

I almost fell off my chair in astonishment. I had never heard anything like it. A man his age. Not married! [. . .]

"And no children either?" I asked.

"NO silly!" my mother cried out. (54)¹³

Although Polleke's ignorance is arguably exaggerated to allow for a humorous passage, the dialogue constructs her as a child whose mental image of adulthood is still determined by the traditional benchmarks, attaching Teacher's adult age to expectations of marriage and parenthood—albeit with some flexibility, allowing for divorce and remarriage.

FAILING ADULTHOOD IN THE ILLUSTRATED MUM

Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* is narrated by ten-year-old Dolphin (Dol). The tone and subject matter of this book are more serious than *Polleke's*. In *The Illustrated Mum*, Dolphin's thirteen-year-old sister Star constantly reminds her mother and little sister what is appropriate adult behavior and what is normal for a mother. While the traditional benchmarks for adulthood have lost widespread acceptance, sociologists such as Arnett argue that attaining adulthood is now understood as a state of mind, measured by "individualistic *qualities of character*," most importantly "*accepting responsibility for one's self* and *making independent decisions*" and also "*becoming financially independent*" (472-73; 473; emphases in original). An absence of the expected qualities of responsibility and commitment outlined in these tacit understandings of adulthood—which are even more relevant to parenthood—is the issue in Wilson's

family story, which explores the psychological implications for children growing up with a parent whose life is marked by instability. Marigold, Dolphin's mother, suffers from bipolar disorder and is cast as failing in motherhood. She acts on impulses and can rarely provide food, care, and safety for her two daughters. As a consequence, for Star, Marigold fails in adulthood altogether. "When are you going to grow up, Marigold?" (11), Star rhetorically asks her mother at the beginning of the book.

Marigold is described as constantly transgressing age norms, often being more childish than the children. This becomes particularly clear in the presence of other adults, who are constructed as contrasting figures who conform more to traditional adult norms.¹⁴ When the family pays a visit to Hamley's with Star's father, Micky, Marigold is described as behaving like a "little girl," becoming all frenzied when she sees the toys: "Marigold was rushing round all the Barbies, talking in a high-pitched over-excited way, like she was a little girl herself. She was worse down in the toy animal department, picking up bears and lions and monkeys and making them growl and roar and gibber" (118). In contrast to other instances in the book, when Dolphin enjoys playing with Marigold in private, her description here is marked with embarrassment. The presence of other adults, such as the shopping assistants, makes Dolphin nervous. Tellingly, the scene contrasts Marigold's compulsive behavior with Micky's more conscious performance of a childlike role: "He seemed surprised but was quite cool about it. He even did a spot of animal talking himself, making a big gorilla lunge at Star, so she squealed. I hung back" (118). When Marigold behaves like a child in the presence of other adults, it makes the children tense and scared, but when Micky does so, it reassures them. The difference lies in what Peter Hollindale has termed "childness," a feature that is not only present in children. In *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997), Hollindale describes the childness of Polixenes, a character from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, who is playing with his son Florizel:

In playing with Florizel, Polixenes is not ceasing to be an adult; he is not playing as a child plays, any more than adults read as a child reads. But

there is a transaction between them, a shared set of pleasuring beliefs about childhood and child behaviour, in which the adult can engage—in our contemporary phrase—as a participant observer. [. . .] For the boy it is the presentness of his condition; for Polixenes it is participant reconstruction, made up from observation, play, and memory, and values and hopes which he invests in childhood and the future represented by this son. Childness, the quality of being a child, is shared ground, though differently experienced and understood, between child and adult. (Childness 47)

In this quotation, the adult does not completely converge with the child. *The Illustrated Mum* celebrates this sense of childness, describing how children enjoy adults who engage with them in play in the scene at Hamley's. Micky is like Polixenes: they are adults who consciously perform a child-like role, and can cease to do so when it is appropriate that they take on a more adult role.¹⁵ Micky only does “a spot of animal talking” and is by no means as manic and overexcited as Marigold. With her, childness is not a performative role that can be assumed and cast off easily, but a state of mind that causes the family severe stress.

Moreover, not only childish playfulness, but also vulnerability is projected onto the character of Marigold. When she is hysterical at another point in the book, she is again described as remaining stuck in the role of a child, and again to a pathetic effect: “She cried like a little girl, her mouth open, snot running down her nose” (141). Dolphin can only get her home by means of a role-playing game, in which she (Dolphin) plays the mum. It is striking that Dolphin asserts: “It was a game she [Marigold] sometimes liked to play” (141), excluding herself. The role reversal is presented as a performance that is forced upon the child: she has to act like an adult because her mother is unable to do so. The passage highlights the need for control and responsibility in adulthood that is still a tacit norm, according to Blatterer.

“Parentification” is a thread throughout *The Illustrated Mum*, with the children taking care of their mother more often than vice versa. Dolphin feels ambivalent about being cast in an “adult” role. When, in the beginning of the book, Marigold takes her to the tattoo shop and asks to hold her hand, Dolphin comments: “I was worried but I also felt

very grown-up and special” (188). Yet, Wilson’s novel mainly highlights the downsides of Marigold’s instability. The children suffer from severe neglect and are often left alone, hungry, bored, and scared. When Star moves in with her father and Dolphin refuses to leave her mother, the situation escalates. Marigold ends up in a mental hospital and the children go to a foster family.

The novel *The Illustrated Mum* thus depicts the need for control and restraint in adulthood from the child’s perspective. The way transgressions of age norms are valued in children’s literature depends on the genre, on the narrative perspective, and, within realistic fiction, on the relationship between the child and the adult depicted (a childlike uncle can be fun throughout, but a childlike parent less so). Three features distinguish *The Illustrated Mum* and *Polleke* from classics whose adult protagonists are also childlike, such as Hugh Lofting’s *Doctor Doolittle* or Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad*: the mode in which the stories are written (mimetic as opposed to fantastic), the target readers (school children rather than toddlers), and the fact that the fictional childlike adults have children, and thus parental responsibilities. This means that the two narratives I’ve discussed take advantage of the combination of adult features (independence, lack of supervision) and childlike features (playfulness, creativity, innocence) not to construct an adventure, but rather to explore the psychological consequences for the young protagonist of living with a childlike parent.

ADOLESCENT AND EMERGENT ADULT PARENTS

In both Kuijer’s and Wilson’s books, characters reflect on the distinction between childhood and adulthood, and both feature adults who transgress against the features that Blatterer describes as being traditionally attached to their stage of the life course. Although *Polleke* does not suffer the kind of neglect that Marigold’s daughters are subjected to, self-sufficiency and responsibility are traditional benchmarks that few adults in Kuijer’s series live up to. It is by no means true that the adults take care of themselves, as teacher Wouter thinks they are supposed to, and Blatterer argues they are tacitly assumed to. Spiek, *Polleke*’s dad,

resembles Marigold in his whimsical behavior and insistence on a flexible lifestyle. Spiek and Marigold are both cast as parents with psychological issues for which they are reluctant to seek help, causing financial problems and emotional distress to their relatives. Although Spiek has reached most of Blatterer's traditional benchmarks for adulthood, he has proved unable to maintain any: at the end of the first book, he has no home, no job, and no money, and he is unable to provide for the various children that he has conceived with three different women. He is still searching for a purpose in life: "What I am I don't know. I'm not sure if I want to know. Maybe I'm afraid I'm nothing. I don't say that to look pathetic. I'm a nice man I believe. But I don't know what to do in the world" (138).¹⁶ Again, the narrative confronts the child character and its readers with adult problems, and the inability of children to intervene. Polleke does not understand her father's identity crisis: "What should someone do in the world? Well, it's simple, walk and play and learn and laugh and do-I-don't-know-what" (139)¹⁷—she depicts his possible life like that of a child, devoid of responsibilities. Kuijer here deconstructs a trope that appears in some adventure stories, in which an adult's problems can be the start of an adventure through which the children seek a cure or solution. Although the character of Polleke can be situated in a long tradition of children as symbols of hope and redemption for adults struggling with life (think of *Polyanna* and *Anne of Green Gables*), the solutions or moments of optimism that she offers are always temporary, and she is unable to influence her parents' actions more permanently. While granting the figure of Polleke agency in some situations, Kuijer thus confronts his readers with children's powerlessness in light of adult problems.

As the *Polleke* series develops, the demarcation of childhood and adulthood is thus shown to rely, to a great extent, on power and self-determination. It also addresses the fact that some adults' lives are marked by flexibility rather than stability—although it is left open to what extent that is a matter of choice or an incapacity to do otherwise. Spiek's identity crises are reminiscent of adolescents and emergent adults trying to

find their way in life, as described most influentially in Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (1950) and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). As Jeffrey Arnett and Malcolm Hughes summarize his views, "Identity formation [in adolescence] involves reflecting on what your traits, abilities and interests are, and then sifting through the range of life choices available in your culture, trying out various possibilities, and ultimately making commitments" (210). Although Erikson acknowledged that identity issues can appear in every stage of the life course, he considered them to be most prominent in adolescence, a conviction that has determined Western thinking about this stage in life to a great extent. Arnett describes the extension of adolescent features—most notably experimentation with life choices—into the stages of what he calls "emergent adulthood." Wilson and Kuijer's novels, constructing a child's perspective, highlight the problematic combination of such an extended adolescence with parenthood.

Marigold, too, is depicted as being in the process of discovering who she is and wants to become. "I feel like I'm at a crossroads in my life" (8), she tells Dolphin at the beginning of the book, which is a reason she decides to get a new tattoo. This crossroads suggests that she feels ready to make the kind of decisions that lead to enduring changes in her life. Where exactly she is going, however, remains unclear. Various previous crossroads have been marked all over Marigold's body. Marigold and the children have a history of countless boyfriends, odd jobs, and dwellings. She holds many psychological features traditionally associated with childhood and adolescence—short-term, egocentric thinking, creativity, and a search for the meaning of her life¹⁸—but at the same time has reached an age where she has the ability and legal capacity to make a number of decisions for herself and her children. That is also true for Spiek. Both characters have reached the legal age and status of adulthood, and are no longer subject to parental or other adult supervision (at least until Spiek is imprisoned and Marigold hospitalized). On the whole, their lives thus resemble that of emergent adults more than that of adolescents. Arnett describes "emergent adulthood" as a relatively new period in the

life course, extending from age eighteen to twenty-five, that is, between adolescence and “full” adulthood. This new category, which can itself be seen as a construct to contain and impose order on what has become a more flexible or disjointed life course, is “characterized by change and exploration of the possible life directions” (469). Emergent adults have “left the dependency of childhood and adolescence” but not yet “entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood” (469). People in this life stage “explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world-views” (469), since they do not have any “enduring role commitments yet” (474). Arnett and Hughes attach to emergent adulthood features such as identity explorations and instability, calling it a “self-focused age” (12). Spiek and Marigold behave as emergent adults, enjoying the freedoms of adult life, but not accepting the responsibilities. Taking a child’s point of view, the narratives assess the refusal or failure of adult responsibility in negative terms, highlighting that the child is the direct victim of the parents’ need for freedom, adventure, and change. It should be noted that both narratives employ an extreme form of this need for flexibility and lack of responsibility by staging two adults with clear pathological disorders (Spiek is a drug addict and Marigold is bipolar). The use of these characters allows for a gripping plot, but at the same time makes relative the contribution of those children’s books to the broader sociological trend of emergent adults.

That being said, Kuijer’s and Wilson’s narratives do help deconstruct the discourse that identity crises and the need for freedom and flexibility are exclusive to adolescents or emergent adults. In *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality*, Lydia Kokkola argues, too, that it is an illusion to think that identity confusion is limited to adolescence only: “By configuring adolescence as a period of *sturm und drang*, the periods of time on either side of the teenage years—childhood and adulthood—appear stable and less stressful” (6). Demarcating adolescence as a period of stress and turmoil thus serves to strengthen the ideals of childhood innocence and adult maturity and stability, Kokkola stresses. She adds: “I am not claiming that adolescents’ movement towards autonomy and finding a place in the

wider society are actually stress-free, but I am suggesting that issues such as identity formation are presented as being greater problems for teenagers. [. . .] All phases of life bring their own challenges. By exaggerating the *sturm und drang* experience, adults privilege adulthood as a period of balanced maturity and maintain the Romantic myths of childhood” (6). As the traditional boundaries dividing childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are deconstructed, flexibility, as well as its downside aspects of turmoil and stress, are admitted as essential parts of adult life. Recent children’s books for readers younger than twelve such as Kuijer’s and Wilson’s are certainly part of this discourse, although they portray the lack of stability in some adults’ lives as harmful to children. Does this mean that these children’s books plead for a return to old times, when childhood and adulthood were clearly demarcated from one another, and when the mature adult was the child’s reliable guide through its development from innocence to experience? The books under discussion are highly ambivalent about this.

LOOKING FOR STABILITY

Both *The Illustrated Mum* and *Polleke* feature not only unstable adults, but also contrasting figures who reflect the traditional adult norms. In Polleke’s life, there is only one place that is particularly stable and predictable: her grandparents’ house in the country. It is a relic of a past life, where work, religion, and fixed gender and age roles provide for a steady routine. *Polleke* thus conforms to a popular trope in children’s literature, in which other adults tread *in loco parentis* because the parents are unable to provide proper care (Nikolajeva, *Character* 118). It is with her grandparents that the girl is described as experiencing true happiness. From her regular visits to this place of stability, Polleke draws strength that helps her through daily life with her parents. This suggests that tradition is preferable to modern flexibility for adults who are caring for a child. Polleke’s teacher, Wouter, is staged in the series as a contrasting figure to Spiek and as a further stabilizing factor.¹⁹ He is a reliable and sensitive man, who also shows his authority. In spite of the fact that Wouter initially displays some childlike features,²⁰ he ultimately comes to define

adulthood for Polleke: “He is an adult. Spiek is not. Spiek is a poet” (72). Traditional adulthood, the text implies, is marked by responsibility, but by no means lives up to the glory of being a poet. A critical reader might observe that Spiek calls himself a poet without ever actually producing any poetry, but Polleke—as an unreliable narrator—fails to see that. As Wouter gradually plays an increasing role in their lives, Polleke admits that it is better for her mother to be with her rather “boring” teacher than with her appealing but unreliable father. The increasingly frequent and sometimes intimate conversations they have testify to Wouter’s positive effect on the entire family. The traditional adult (teacher) thus fulfills the role of a father *in loco parentis*, with beneficial effects for the fictional child.

It is striking that *The Illustrated Mum*, like *Polleke*, describes a family with an unstable parent and puts forward a similar, traditionally adult and male character as a positive role model. In Wilson’s book, Dolphin’s father, Michael, appears boring at first but proves to be the only reliable adult around. Whereas Star’s father, Micky, is immediately fascinated and thrilled by the fact that he has a daughter, Michael’s calm and balanced reaction is a disappointment for Dolphin. Ultimately, however, the narrative endorses Michael’s style of parenthood: he does not forsake his responsibility. In contrast, being a father was an idea that Micky liked to entertain for a while, but then, like a so-called “emergent” adult rather than a “full” adult, abandons: “Micky seems to have a habit of rushing in—and then rushing off, leaving all kinds of havoc behind him” (237). The social worker, who is constructed in the narrative as a reliable and caring adult and thus functions as a voice of authority, confirms for Dolphin—and the reader—that she is better off with steady Michael: “Your dad is serious about all this. That’s why he wants to do it all by the book” (251). Michael is constructed as a traditional adult who has reached and maintained all of Blatterer’s benchmarks. He has a job and is able to provide for himself and his family. Arguably, the narrative does not portray Michael as a round character to the same extent as it develops Marigold. There are several reasons for this: he arrives rather late in the novel, and

his lack of spectacular traits does not provide much material for interesting scenes or plot developments. However, Michael's predictability, together with his kind nature, are put forward as the source of stability that Dolphin has been lacking and as requirements for successful adulthood and parenthood.

One could deduce from these two examples that Kuijer and Wilson's stories conform to a traditional form of "hegemonic masculinity" (Stephens, *Male* ix). Stability is offered in the stories by two middle-class men with mental stability, authority, and economic power. However, in the larger corpus that I have studied, stability and traditional adulthood can be embodied by women as well as men,²¹ and the parent with adolescent features is as often a man as a woman. The difference is that immature fathers are often absent altogether in these books.

CONCLUSION

Children's books such as Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* series and Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* feature adults whose lives and behavior are marked by unpredictability rather than stability. Through these characters, the texts question the traditional demarcation of the life stages. Adults with childlike features are not unusual in children's literature, but in the book and series that I have discussed, some adults cannot cast off their immature features and assume a more traditional adult self. This distinguishes them from the performance of "childness" that Hollindale describes in *Signs of Childness in Children's Literature*, which is more commonly addressed in children's literature. The transgression of age norms is depicted as problematic, causing the children stress and grief, although the stories do not cast the childish or adolescent adult in fully negative terms either, but rather value their playfulness and creativity. Those features are not necessarily incompatible with the traditional benchmarks and features of adulthood that Blatterer describes; however, none of the books feature an adult who embodies such a successful combination.

Blatterer remarked that nowadays, "flexibility has superseded stability as the marker of successful adult life" (49; also see above). The books are ambivalent about the value of flexibility. On the one hand, adults

who can alternate between childlike and adult roles are depicted as fun; on the other hand, those adults who claim full flexibility are shown to be irresponsible, unreliable, and even pathetic and sick. The children are depicted as ultimately being best off with adults who fit more effectively into the traditional role of stable educator, partner, and breadwinner, and a traditional adult norm is thus reinstalled. Unable to restore a nuclear family with their parents, both girls settle for alternatives. Polleke accepts her father's alternative ways of life and settles into the new family that her mother and teacher are building. Dolphin's story is open-ended, but the reunion with her father, the nice foster family she and Star live with, and Marigold's willingness to receive medical treatment give reason for optimism. While Kuijer's and Wilson's narratives stress the intense and unconditional love between a child and a parent, no matter what form of adulthood the latter embodies, when it comes to raising a child, the traditional model of "full" adulthood is put forward as somewhat boring, but still healing and necessary, even if, for some, it may only be attained on a preliminary basis.

NOTES

- ¹ On children's literature as ideological discourse, see Hollindale, "Ideology and the Children's Book" and Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Literature*.
- ² On the role of the adult, see, e.g., Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*. On the construction of childhood, see, e.g., Natov.
- ³ Another exception is Jacqueline Wilson's *The Dare Game*. In Anna Woltz's *Mijn bijzonder rare week met Tess* [*My Very Strange Week with Tess*], Tess's father is marked by several childlike and adolescent features, but he is a special case, since he is not aware that he is a father.
- ⁴ For example, Simon's father in Anne Fine's *Flour Babies* has left the family because he could not deal with the responsibilities of fatherhood. Hilde Vandermeeren's *Camping Zeevos* describes how two small boys try to hide the disappearance of their mother, who suffers from bipolar disorder, from their surroundings. In Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker* and its sequels, the protagonist's mother is presented as a self-centered adult, who likes to play with and dress up her daughter, but is unable to provide sustained care for her.
- ⁵ All translations from the *Polleke* series are my own.
- ⁶ "Grote mensen houden ervan dat er dingen niet mogen" (17).
- ⁷ "Ik vind er niks aan, maar grote mensen zijn er gek op" (33).
- ⁸ "De grote mensen moeten maar op zichzelf passen" (72).
- ⁹ "Tedereen heeft 't recht om op zijn eigen manier ongelukkig te worden,' zegt mijn moeder. De meester schiet recht overeind. 'Tina!' roept hij. 'Dat zeg je toch niet tegen

een kind!?' [. . .] 'Waarom mag mamma dat niet zeggen?' vraag ik. 'Daarom niet,' zegt de meester. 'Zeg jij sommige dingen niet omdat er kinderen bij zijn?' 'Tuurlijk,' gromt de meester. 'Wat voor dingen dan?' vraag ik. 'Daar ga je Wouter,' zegt mijn moeder. 'Nou kan je je lol op hoor!' 'Over seks soms?' vraag ik. 'Bijvoorbeeld,' zegt de meester. 'En wat nog meer?' 'Dat vertel ik je nou juist niet,' zegt de meester. 'Aan sommige dingen ben je nog niet toe.' 'Aan wat voor dingen?' vraagt mijn moeder pesterig. De meester haalt zijn schouders op en neemt een slok bier. 'Ik ga naar boven,' zeg ik, 'dan kunnen jullie praten over wat jullie maar willen.' 'Nee Polleke,' zegt mijn moeder. 'Jij blijft hier. We gaan lekker over verboden dingen praten.' Maar ik heb geen zin om de meester te pesten. Ik sta op en ga de kamer uit" (135-36).

¹⁰ For more on this notion, see Joosen and Vloeberghs (111-12).

¹¹ "Waarom begrijpen grote mensen nooit wat wel en wat niet kan? Hebben ze dan geen fatsoen in hun donder?" (53).

¹² "Alle Nederlandse kinderen hebben een Ingewikkilde Pa geloof ik. Mijn moeder zegt dat je vroeger soms ook een Gewone Pa had. Die kwam thuis, keek televisie en dronk bier. Zulke vaders bestaan geloof ik niet meer" (20).

¹³ "Ja, ja,' zei ik kauwend op een veel te ouwe boterham. 'Dan zult u toch eerst moeten scheiden.'

De meester keek me verbaasd aan. 'Scheiden?' vroeg hij. 'Ik ben helemaal niet getrouwd, rare.'

Ik viel zowat van me stoel van verbazing. Daar had ik nog nooit van gehoord. Een man van zijn leeftijd. Niet getrouwd! [. . .]

'Ook geen kinderen?' vroeg ik.

'NEE suffie!' riep mijn moeder" (54).

¹⁴ For example, Marigold is opposed to the traditional, responsible mothers who care for their children and manage their own feelings and lives according to prevailing social norms. It is an ideal that Marigold is aware of when she sees Dolphin's drawing of herself: "These aren't mumsie things. Dol should have drawn [. . .] I don't know, a kitten and a pretty frock and [. . .] and Marks and Spencer's. That's what mums like" (82). Responsible though these mothers may be, they are to Dolphin immensely dull. Her best friend Oliver shares her admiration for Marigold: "She looks amazing. Like a comic. I'd give anything to have a mum who looks like that" (235).

¹⁵ At this point in the story, Micky is still perceived as a respectable adult by the first-person Dolphin. At the end of the book he is revealed to be someone who is only capable or willing to assume the responsibilities of fatherhood on a short-term basis, handing over his daughter Star to social services when parenthood becomes too complicated: "It was all too much hassle for Micky" (274). See also discussion below.

¹⁶ "Wat ik wél ben weet ik niet. Ik weet niet zeker of ik het wíl weten. Misschien ben ik bang dat ik niks ben. Ik zeg dat niet om zielig te doen. Ik ben een aardige man geloof ik. Maar ik weet niet wat ik moet doen op de wereld" (138).

¹⁷ "Wat moet iemand doen op de wereld? Nou, gewoon, lopen en spelen en leren en lachen en weet-ik-velen" (139).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Arnett and Hughes (107).

¹⁹ The stability that Teacher provides has a clear economic dimension. Both Marigold and Polleke's mother are unemployed single mothers with limited financial means.

Whereas Spiek steals from Polleke and her mother, Wouter increasingly provides financial care for them; one can read between the lines.

²⁰The fact that he eats with his mother three times a week raises surprise (30). Polleke's friend Caro is absolutely shocked, claiming that she didn't even know teachers had mothers (105)—a passage that humorously illustrates the child's selective point of view when it comes to viewing adults.

²¹See for example, Kuijer's *Madelief* series, Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, or Anna Woltz's *Mijn bijzonder rare week met Tess*.

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