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Negative Agency in Children's Picture Books. Non-Empowering and Ethically Dubious Agency

Abstract

Child agency has emerged as a key concept within both child studies and children's literature research. In the latter, agency is commonly regarded as something inherently positive. This article zooms in on the other side of the spectrum to explore negative agency in two picturebooks: Dorthe Karrebæk's *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* (1996) and Anders Sparring's and Per Gustavsson's *Vi är pirater* (2024). Karrebæk's picturebook invokes notions of the competent child, but agency emerges as burdensome and solitary; Sparring's and Gustavsson's picturebook portrays child agency as ethically dubious and as undermining any clear moral message. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential impact of negative agency in children's literature and beyond.



Keywords: child agency; negative agency; children's literature; picturebooks; child studies

To address, or at least acknowledge, the concept of agency has become almost ubiquitous within child studies. The often-cited first chapter of *Constructing and Re-Constructing Childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (1990) outlines some key features in what has come to be known as the »new« sociology of childhood with emphasis on children as active agents and participants rather than as »passive subjects of social structures and processes« (James & Prout, 2015, p. 7; see further Qvortrup 1994). In *Theorizing Childhood* (1998), the importance of seeing the child as a being rather than a becoming is stressed. Later, David Oswell suggests children are specifically »doings« and therefore he characterizes the period from the previous century onwards as the »age of children's agency« (Oswell, 2013, p. 3). Nevertheless, a broader theoretical discussion about child agency remains in demand (Punch, 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and this article contributes to such discussions by approaching child agency as represented in children's literature, specifically the picturebooks *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* (1996), by Dorte Karrebæk, and *Vi är Pirater* (2024) by Anders Sparring and Per Gustavsson. Sharing the conviction that children's literature is part of the discursive construction of childhood (Hunt 2009) the aim is to explore how agency is portrayed in these picturebooks and how this can spur further discussion of the concept of child agency.

Much as in child studies, agency has emerged as a key concept in children's literature research (Castro, ed., 2021; Castro & Clark, eds., 2019; Christensen, 2025; Coste, 2025; Kostenniemi 2017). Yet, there is little agreement on what constitutes agency. A basic dictionary definition is that it is the »[a]bility or capacity to act or exert power« (Oxford University Press) and Allison James and Adrian James define agency as »the capacity of individuals to act independently« (James & James, 2012, p. 3). Allison James further emphasizes the capacity of agency to influence not only the individual's own life but societal structure as well (James, 2011, p. 41). When explored in children's literature and culture, child agency tends to be regarded as something essentially good (Buckingham, 2019; Castro, 2021) and as a potentially subversive force for societal change (Kelen & Sundmark, eds., 2017; Nikolajeva, 2009). Yet agency is neither necessarily »good« (Punch, 2016, p. 185), nor does it hold any intrinsic ethical value (Gallagher, 2019), and the notion that agency liberates children from structural constraints »sometimes verge[s] on romanticising children's actions, making it more difficult to see how agency is ethically ambivalent« (Gallagher, 2019, p. 191). Drawing on a relational approach to agency from child studies (Gallagher 2019; Raithelhuber 2016; Spyrou 2019) and children's literature research (Christensen 2025; Coste 2025) this article further scrutinizes the meaning and impact of agency in children's literature. This article addresses two research questions: 1) how child agency is portrayed in the two aforementioned picturebooks, and 2) how these portrayals problematize normative conceptions of the nature of child agency.

The negative side of the agency spectrum

Nina Christensen (2021) identifies three main research areas for approaching agency in children's literature: the amount of agency attributed to fictional child characters; the amount of agency attributed to the implied child reader; and the role of children's agency in the production and distribution of books (p. 11; see further Christensen, 2025). Even though this article focuses solely on the first of the three, surveying the research field is difficult. Children acting independently and/or exerting power are omnipresent in children's literature

and therefore constitute a major area of research regardless of whether agency is treated as a designated theoretical approach. However, several anthologies overtly centred on the subject suggest the prominence of child agency as a specific research subject in children's culture: *Representing Agency in Popular Culture. Children and Youth on Page, Screen, and in Between* (2019), *Child and Youth Agency in Science Fiction. Travel, Technology, Time* (2019), *Childhood Agency, and Fantasy. Walking in Other Worlds* (2020) and *Child as Citizen. Agency and Activism in Children's Literature and Culture* (2025).

To facilitate child agency in children's literature, child characters (or their proxies) are temporarily disconnected from adult authority, which enables what John Stephens refers to as the child's »time out« (Stephens, 1992; c.f. Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 10). This has been explored in relation to power, where child agency is understood as signalling autonomy, emancipation, and empowerment with the potential to subvert societal structures (Kelen & Sundmark eds., 2017; Nikolajeva, 2009). Agency has also been associated with the strengthening of a sense of self (Seelinger Trites 2000, p. 2–3), individual growth (Nodelman, 2008), and children's participation as a means of fostering citizenship (Fenech ed., 2025). Agency is thus considered liberating, as character-building, and as a subversive force. However, as argued by Ingrid E. Castro (2020), not all children »employ agency in the spirit of goodwill toward constructive betterment of themselves or others or in pursuit of more utopic societies« (p. 21). Apart from assuming agency to be ethically good or beneficial, the emphasis on subversion also promotes child agency as resistance to adult structures. This tendency is partly inherited from child studies, where there is often an assumption that adult-imposed structure is something »that children should assert their agency to resist or counteract« (Punch, 2016, p. 185). To further scrutinize these assumptions, the emphasis here is on representations of child agency when they appear as ethically ambiguous and/or do not comply with the notion of child agency as resistance to (adult) structures. Furthermore, any conflation of agency with individual autonomy, emancipation, empowerment, or growth is eschewed. Taken together, this constitutes what I refer to as *negative agency*.

When used as an adjective, negative denotes something disadvantageous, rejecting, or critical, whereas as a noun it refers to a photographic image in reverse. There are similarities between the former meaning in connection to agency with what Lorenzo I. Bordonaro and Ruth Payne terms ambiguous agency, in an editorial in *Children's Geographies* (2012). This refers to »agency amongst children and youth which is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people would demonstrate« (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012, p. 366). However, negative agency does not necessarily exclude the presence of normative conceptions, but rather shed light on their reverse image, hence the inspiration from negative as a noun. Whilst the photographic negative and its diapositive are different, the object (the picture) remains the same. Negative agency, thus, highlights a different side of the agency spectrum without ruling out the possible presence and impact of such things as autonomy, emancipation, empowerment, and growth in the portrayals of child agency. These, supposedly positive aspects (in the sense of being ethically good and subversive), are regarded as intertwined with their reverse image. What might appear as positive in one context, e.g. empowerment, carries with it a potentially negative side whilst some acts performed challenge ethical norms and expectations.

Methodologically, the article draws on motif analysis in combination with a discursive understanding of children's literature in relation to non-fictional conceptions of childhood. While the portrayal of child characters remains important, the primary focus is on the relations and connections of which they are part. The analysis examines various instances of agency as portrayed in the picturebooks, more specifically »how they are being exercised, through which bodies, through which relations and assemblages and with what effects« (Gallagher, 2019, p. 197). By foregrounding relations and connections between child characters and other elements depicted in both text and pictures, the analysis places emphasis on interaction. This makes it possible to move away from viewing agency as something that resides solely in, or exclusively emanate from, the individual. Instead, a relational approach is favoured which stresses hybridity and understands agency as flowing between various human and non-human agents in fluid networks (Gallagher, 2019; Prout, 2000; Oswell, 2013; Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2019).

Differences notwithstanding, relational agency eschews the structure/agency dualism and the notion of agency as mere individual intent. Prout emphasizes that children are »participants shaping, as well as being shaped by, society« and suggests viewing agency »less as an essential attribute of children and more as an effect of the connections made between a heterogeneous array of materials, including bodies, representations and technologies« (Prout, 2000, p. 2). Oswell similarly argues that agency is not centred on human reflexivity but is rather distributed »across human and non-human arrangements and infrastructures« (Oswell, 2013, p. 7). In articulating this position, Oswell touches upon the post-human, an approach that Spyros Spyrou identifies is significant for understanding child agency:

»By decentring human beings, posthumanism challenges the humanist assumption of the autonomous, knowing subject who acts upon the world from a privileged position and introduces instead a relationality emerging from the encounter between human and non-human entities« (Spyrou, 2019, p. 316).

Decentring without deserting the human subject enables an understanding of child agency and as argued by Eberhard Raithelhuber (2016), one advantage of a relational approach to agency is to avoid the trap of locating agency either entirely in people's heads or completely outsourcing it to background forces (p. 99). He argues that agency »can only exist in interconnectedness and be brought about in relations« (p. 95–96): »Hence, agents are those human beings and things that have a specific status within a network of social relations, i.e. social positions that can originate causal events in their environment. In other words, if human beings or things inherit a status of this kind, they become instances of agency« (p. 97). Accordingly, it is impossible to assign individuals agency outside of context. Instead, as Christensen puts it, we need to »turn toward agency and subjectivity as being embedded in social interactions and relationships in specific social settings and contexts« (Christensen, 2025, p. 74). In this article, such networks of agency are approached through representations in which child characters are interconnected in various ways with their human and non-human surroundings.

Karrebæk's and Sparring's and Gustavsson's picturebooks differ in tone and aesthetics. *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* can be defined as a challenging picturebook, as it entails

aesthetic complexity as well as sensitive or disturbing topics (Ommundsen et al., 2022, p. 8); Christensen describes Karrebæk's book as a symbolic narrative about divorce (Christensen, 2000, p. 14). *Vi är pirater* has a lighter tone and uses humour and playfulness to portray children playacting. Nevertheless, both focus strongly on child agency and are chosen because they foreground its ethically dubious and non-normative dimensions. *Vi är pirater* enters into dialogue with ethical and traditional expectations on children's literature, while *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* challenges notions of agency as synonymous with empowerment, competence, and emancipation. In the analysis, both verbal text and pictures will be taken into consideration, with particular attention paid to the iconotext (Hallberg, 1982, 2022), i.e. the interplay between the modalities. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential impact of cultural representations of negative agency.

Non-subversive agency in *Pigen der var go' til mange ting*

Pigen der var go' til mange ting (hereafter *Pigen*) revolves around a girl whose parents are preoccupied with each other, staying up late, sleeping in during the mornings, arguing, and drinking. In the absence of parental supervision, the girl takes charge of domestic chores such as ironing, doing the dishes, and cleaning. The situation is far from ideal and in an attempt to improve it, the girl organizes a costume party at which her mother and father dress up as a cat and a dog. The implicit antagonism between them is symbolically reinforced, and even more so when they undergo a metamorphosis into the animals they initially impersonate. In the end, the girl accepts that one cannot change the nature of a cat and a dog and by her own choice she swiftly grows up and leaves home, entering a prosperous future as her competence also enables her to find her place in the world.

All but one of the double spreads in Karrebæk's picturebook consist of a white page on the left, carrying the verbal text, and a pictorial page on the right.¹ Her use of »innovative and highly dynamic instances of frame-breaking which carry subtle meanings« (Scott, 2010, p. 104) create complexity in the pictures and the iconotext. The first double spread after the title page introduces the girl, who is described in the verbal text as being good at many things and is depicted in the picture standing front and centre, wearing a red – verging on pink – dress with white dots and a bow in the same style. Her visual performance is girlish, even doll-like, and the frame surrounding her is a smaller frame positioned in the middle of the page. The frame-within-a-frame composition is repeated in most illustrations, but the girl is primarily positioned outside the inner frame which is instead partly or wholly occupied by her parents.

Whilst initially appearing passive, standing upright in the inner square and looking outwards, the girl is subsequently portrayed as physically active and competent. She has »taught herself everything by using first her eyes, then her hands – and sometimes her legs« [Alting havde hun lært sig selv ved at bruge øjnene først og derefter hænderne – og nogle gange benene].² However, her interactions are predominantly visualized in connection with non-human objects: her hands engage with the iron and ironing board, later with the dish brush, and her feet with a pair of scrubbing brushes. The girl's networks of agency thus emphatically lack immediate connections with other human beings, a condition that is further amplified by the visualization of her gaze. Christensen describes Karrebæk's picturebook as a narrative

seen through the eyes of the girl (Christensen, 2000, p. 14), yet this externalized perspective further prevents her from interacting with her parents. Instead, she is portrayed as an observer, and her parents never reciprocate her glances.

Scott argues that the interplay between the inner and outer frames creates a dynamic that suggests a »shifting relationship between the parents and child« (Scott, 2010, p. 104). The initial positioning of the girl and her parents in different frames does enhance distance, but the frame-breaking does not induce change. On the sixth double spread, all characters appear in the same frame, sitting at the dinner table. Yet the distance remains: the parents sit at one end, looking intensely at each other while the father strokes the mother's hand, and the girl remains shut out of their interplay. The only other human figure appearing in the picturebook is a woman on television, who serves as a source of the girl's knowledge about domestic chores. The girl's connectedness with other humans is thus mediated through technology or, later displaced onto the non-human when her parents look at her only after having transformed into animals. Not even in this instance is eye contact tied to connection. Instead, the roles are reversed, as the girl looks away when her parents become the observers.

Even though *Pigen* emphasizes a lack of interconnectedness between the girl and her parents, her agency is nevertheless entangled with theirs. The girl is portrayed as a hyperbolic version of the competent child, adopting a normative adult role, while her parents assume a normative child role (their inverted timetable, staying up at night and sleeping out in the morning, is no coincidence). Kristina Hermansson (2014) identifies a theme of adult incompetence in contemporary Scandinavian picturebooks, often juxtaposed with child competence, and reads this as a sign of a cultural concern about failing parenthood in the late modern society (p. 21). *Pigen* is not included in her analysis, but her conclusions are nevertheless applicable to it, as the verbal text stresses not only that the girl is good at many things, but that she needs to be since »there was so much for her to do« [der var så meget hun skulle lave].

Michael Gallagher (2019) suggests that agency can be divided into routine and inventive acts, where the former establishes and reproduces patterns, while the latter erupts them and reconfigure relations (p. 197). On the one hand, the chores undertaken by the girl (cleaning, doing the dishes, ironing) appear as routine acts but on the other hand they break established patterns when performed by the girl acting in loco parentis. This corresponds with the hegemonic construction of the self-regulating child in late modern society (Smith, 2014) and the girl's parents proclaim that »self-taught is well taught« [Selvlært er vellært]. However, instead of empowering the girl, her routine acts maintain a situation that prevents both empowerment and subversion. Agency thus appears as a burden the girl strives to rid herself off. The verbal text states: »Sometimes the girl thought of upbringing and she thought of changing things« [Engang imellem tænkte pigen på opdragelse og hun tænkte på at lave ting om]. Yet while the routine acts maintain the status quo, the aim to reconfigure relations by organizing the costume party (her inventive actions) fails. This suggests not only that the girl's agency functions as a burden, but also that her actions are ultimately non-subversive.

The ending of the book has been interpreted as altogether optimistic (Beckett 2012, p. 219) and as emancipatory, as the picturebook conveys the message that it is possible to influence the ways in which one shapes identity and gender (Christensen & Österlund, 2016). Karrebæk's pictures equate growth with becoming adult, most notably on the twelfth double spread

where the girl steps out through the roof of the inner frame (another example of Karrebæk's use of frame-breaking). The girl's long hair flows behind her, and the bow has transformed into a ladybug. Visual signals suggest that she is now a young woman, notably the way her elongated body makes the dress appear less childlike and reveals the outline of a bosom. The bow, another girlish attribute, gradually shrinks as she grows, only to be discarded in the end. To reconfigure relations the girl must step out of her position as a capable child, and in this sense she is indeed emancipated. However, neither this emancipation nor her empowerment is connected to *child* agency. In *Pigen*, empowerment is equated with growing up, and Scott goes even further in suggesting that the girl in Karrebæk's picturebook »has had no childhood« (Scott, 2010, p. 105). It may be more accurate to assert that the childhood she has performed diverges from normative representations in children's literature in which the child resists structural restraints (which the girl instead longs for), is granted a temporal »time out« (the girl is caught in it) and is empowered by agency (the girl is burdened by it). *Pigen* is thus a picturebook where child agency enhances exposure, appears as burdensome and as solitary, and where the only way to instil agency with emancipatory and empowering qualities is to detach it from the category child.

Agency as cruelty in *Vi är pirater*

In Sparring and Gustavsson's *Vi är pirater* (hereafter *Pirater*) the layout of the text shifts, and the pictures occupy half a page, a whole page, or an entire double spread. Whereas *Pigen* has an omniscient narrator, *Pirater* is narrated in first person by a boy who appears together with his sister on the front cover and on the first double spread. They wear eyepatches and shirts decorated with skulls and crossbones. The verbal text on the first double spread states: »We are pirates, me and my siss. That is, not fake pirates with fake swords and a fake eyepatch or a fake parrot on the shoulder. Real pirates with real swords and a real eyepatch« [Vi är pirater, jag och min syrra. Alltså inte låtsaspirater med låtsassvärd och låtsaslapp för ögat och låtsaspapegoja på axeln. Utan riktiga pirater med riktiga svärd och riktig lapp för ögat]. The siblings stand in front of a cardboard box marked »Pirate's nest« [Pirathålan] with various objects scattered on the floor including a small toy chest and a toy pirate ship. The claim made in the verbal text is undermined by the picture's emphasis on pretend play, but on the second double spread the siblings wield swords. Furthermore, they are contrasted with another set of children with neat hair and clothing, carrying wooden swords. The text states: »Pretence pirates pretend to attack. Real pirates attack for real« [Låtsaspirater anfaller på låtsas. Riktiga pirater anfaller på riktigt]. This is exemplified through a retelling of an attack on a young girl followed by other events, including theft.

Pirater follows the pattern of the journey away from home, in which the children enjoy their »time out« beyond adult regulation. However, the actions they perform are portrayed as cruel, involving bullying and theft. The girl they attack is depicted as smaller than the siblings, which corresponds with how victims of bullying are commonly portrayed in children's picturebooks (Esch, 2008, p. 380). The occurrence of bullying in children's literature often encourages reader alignment with the victim(s) in order to deter bullying, promote strategies for handling such situations, and offer solace to the implied reader (Esch, 2008; Flanagan et al., 2013; Freeman, 2013; Moulton, 2011; Oppliger & Davis, 2016). In *Pirater*, the siblings give their account of the episode in the verbal text: »She took it rather well« [Hon tog det

ganska bra]. The consequences of their actions are downplayed, once again stressing piracy as play, but the picture of the girl standing with her head thrown back, crying out with tears spurting from her eyes, suggests otherwise. The picturebook thus uses an unreliable narrator whose unreliability is exposed through the pictures.

Children who challenge ethical norms are common figures in children's books. A moral saintliness, associated with older children's literature, has been replaced by a contemporary emphasis on the justification of breaking rules and questioning adult authority for a greater good (Barker, 2014, p. 101, 102–106; c.f. Sainsbury, 2015, p. 192–193). According to Monica Flegel and Christopher Parkes (2018), children acting cruelly are positioned between evil and innocence. The evil child goes too far, while the completely innocent child appears equally problematic and in need of being »purged from society«; by contrast, cruel children are rendered intelligible as children navigating and negotiating the boundaries of their actions (p. 13). In *Pirater*, the reader is invited to partake in this negotiation by adopting the siblings' perspective through the first-person narrator while simultaneously observing a discrepancy between the verbal account and the visual representation of the events. This makes the portrayal of agency in *Pirater* appear ambivalent: playful on the one hand, and ethically dubious on the other.

After the attack on the girl, the siblings successfully rob candy from their neighbours. They then consume the loot, but the next morning they are awoken by their father shouting at them. They jump out of the window, steal a pair of bikes, and extend their »time out« by hiding amongst outcasts, imagined as grown-up pirates. In the pictures, they are surrounded with bottles, trash, and a dust bin with a burning fire, creating an iconography of exposure and addiction; once again, the reader is invited to see through the narrator's description. On the tenth double spread, the father appears visually, pushing the children in front of him. They are literally forced back home, thus ending their journey. So far, the traditional narrative pattern is followed to the letter, particularly in that the outer journey is combined with an inner, developmental journey. There is a lesson to be learned for the child protagonists (and presumably the reader), staged through a restoration of adult authority as the father informs them that they will have to apologize and replace the stolen candy.

According to Perry Nodelman (2008), children's literature often stages an inner journey that entails character development and individual growth. He identifies a didactic pattern in which »childhood desires stem from childhood ignorance, and the getting of knowledge will reveal the inadequacy of the desires and make children wiser and better by expelling the desires« (p. 49). The theft of the candy is seemingly subordinated this traditional pattern. The siblings' childish desire to act out their piracy and gratify a taste for candy (particularly chocolates!) is expelled as inappropriate. When they return to the scene of the crime, they are neatly dressed up in much the same fashion as the pretend pirates from the second double spread, and all pirate props have been left behind. The literal stripping of piracy conveys a clear-cut message: stealing is wrong and if you do wrong, you will suffer the consequences.

Even though the message appears overt, the ending overturns it altogether. After apologizing to the neighbouring children, the siblings notice a candy necklace worn by one of them. The protagonists' reaction is depicted on the last double spread: they glare sideways at each other with overtly sinister expressions, and behind them their shadows are shown wielding swords. The verbal text repeats the introductory words (and the title of the picturebook) »We are

pirates« [Vi är pirater]. Here, this statement does not merely declare that the children are pirates, but furthermore that they *remain* pirates. The verbal text and pictures thus converge to underline the implication that no moral lesson has been learned and that there is no higher goal in sight beyond further individual gain and pleasure. Instead of stressing the playfulness of the siblings' agency, the ending underlines its ethical dubiousness.

The significance of negative agency

The emergence of agency as a key concept in child studies coincided with the ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The convention lays down children's right to protection, but notably also their right to participation. Article 12 establishes children's right to express views and to have them acknowledged and taken into account, thus enhancing their active role in the construction of childhood. In article 12, and in the convention more generally, a tension emerges between the child's right to protection and to participation. A similar tension can be observed in children's literature, where it frequently manifests itself in the negotiation between »liberation (child rule) and control (ruling the child)« (Kelen & Sundmark, 2017, p. 9). This echoes of the structure/agency dualism, but Karrebæk's *Pigen* problematizes this as its portrayal of a lack of protection does not enhance participation. Rather, the girl appears as lost somewhere in between – neither participating, nor being protected. This provokes questions that extend beyond cultural representation, perhaps the most crucial being to what extent children strive to move away from adult authority and desire to assert their agency. After all, as stated by E. Kay M. Tisdall and Samantha Punch (2012) »[j]ust as children and young people should have the right not to participate, they should be able to choose not to assert their agency« (p. 256). As suggested in *Pigen*, the absence of adult surveillance and child agency may be less a matter of individual choice and more a position to which the child is involuntarily assigned. The portrayal of child agency corresponds to the discourse of the self-regulating and competent child of the 21st century, a discourse that presupposes both capability and the opportunity for children to interact with adults on equal terms. This, in turn, calls for adults to »renounce part of their authority, and instead, to become trusted friends« (Brembeck et al., 2008, p. 7–8; c.f. Cunningham, 2021, p. 165). However, in *Pigen*, the parents neither wield their authority, nor strive to become the girl's peers or trusted friends, and their refusal to negotiate her position is the reason she ultimately leaves childhood behind.

As Buckingham notes, agency is not solely a matter of activity and rebellion, it »can also be about choosing obedience, passivity, and conformity to adult authority« (Buckingham, 2019, p. 286). Passivity, on the other hand, tends to be associated with ideas of childhood innocence and with characteristics such as vulnerability, weakness and helplessness, traits commonly regarded as antithetical to agency; yet scholars may »simultaneously (and subconsciously) embrace childhood innocence as the reason for why they believe children will always be good and positive agents« (Castro, 2021, p. 21). In other words, child agency is often separated from passivity, i.e. from the choice not to assert their agency, and when children do assert their agency, their actions are expected to be morally good or at least beneficial for them and for others. Not only is the child at risk of being reduced to a dissident but, furthermore, to a dissident for good.

In *Pigen*, the protagonist fails to induce change (at least up until she leaves home, by which point she is no longer a child). *Pirater* by Sparring and Gustavsson, on the other hand, utilizes the traditional narrative pattern of children's literature in which, as Kelen and Sundmark (2017) put it, »the journey is the teacher« (p. 6). Moral norms are initially reproduced as the protagonists display remorse and apologise for their previous acts, but this is ultimately mocked. They do not succumb to the expectation that they have learnt their lesson; on the contrary, the remorse is as much a playact as their earlier piracy and through this, they add manipulation and deceit to their catalogue of ethically dubious characters traits. As suggested by Jani L. Barker (2014), children in works of fiction that defy adult authority and disobey rules tend to do so when these rules constitute obstacles to a higher moral purpose (p. 101). In *Pirater*, however, there is no such higher moral purpose. Even though the child protagonists are dissidents in relation to adult authority, they emerge as dissidents for bad.

In his exploration of agency among street children in Cape Verde, Lorenzo I. Bordonaro (2012) urges us to consider how our understanding of child agency changes when »their actions go against the grain of current morality, when their agency is not what it is expected to be« (p. 415). Tisdall and Punch (2012) emphasize the importance of contesting and scrutinizing conceptions of child agency rather than taking it-for-granted or assuming it to be »inherently [...] positive and desired by all children and young people« (p. 256). This point is just as pertinent to children's literature research since, as argued by Peter Hunt (2009), the relation between children's literature and childhood is symbiotic. Childhood in fiction differs from lived reality but is »imitated in real life« (p. 52). And vice versa, one might add. The picturebooks explored here draw attention to agency when it is not the child's obvious choice, and when it is chosen but enacted through activities that diverge from norms sanctioned by adults and society (and, not least, from common understandings of child agency in children's literature). Together, they serve as reminders that child agency is not »a fixed quality, but one that is actively produced in different social contexts and defined in quite different ways« (Buckingham, 2019, p. 285). Depictions of negative agency underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept and the need to acknowledge and further scrutinize images of child agency in children's literature and beyond, even when they diverge from norms and expectations and appear problematic, uncomfortable, or even disturbing.

Noter

1. Other exceptions are the title page, which appears on the right, and the colophon at the end, which appears on the left. Both are accompanied by the red endpaper.
- 2 All translations of quotations are by the author.

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Biography

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