



## Reviews



### **Cross-Border Bodies: How to Fit When Your Body Does Not**

—Leonor Ruiz-Guerrero

Brun-Cosme, Nadine. *Daddy Long Legs*. Illustrated by Aurélie Guillerey, Kids, 2017. 26 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 9781771383622.

Cali, Davide. *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea*. Illustrated by Sébastien Mourrain, Kids, 2017. 36 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781771388436.

Leng, Qin. *I Am Small*. Kids, 2018. 40 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781525301155.

Renaud, Anne. *The True Tale of a Giantess: The Story of Anna Swan*. Illustrated by Marie Lafrance, Kids, 2018. 32 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781771383769.

The societal and literary understanding of the non-normative body has evolved throughout history, from monstrous abnormality to corporeal diversity. The material turn adopted in recent years in several research scopes has contributed

powerfully to the shift (Nikolajeva 132-33). The emergence of new cross-border bodies in children's literature results from this change of paradigm.

Bodily borders depend on the pre-existence of a normal body. Power structures configure it through medical discourse, literature, and identity narratives, among others. A range of interrelated bodily markers, such as weight, height, skin tone, sex, or form, is used to judge the bodies. Sameness is the pattern. Therefore, any deviation is noted as abnormal. Normalization processes deny the humanity of different bodies, tagging them as pathological, monstrous, or other. In contrast, cross-border bodies challenge this denial by declaring their humanity without renouncing their non-normative features. This review considers four picture books that address the issue of embodiment and extraordinary bodies. The four texts put into question the borders of what a human being ought to be.

For a long time, deviant bodies suffered from isolation, rejection, and ridicule in spaces such as freak shows. *The True Tale of a Giantess* exemplifies these circumstances but with significant nuance. The protagonist participates in a Gallery of Wonders, not a freak show, where she is respected and not treated like a monster. As Nikolajeva asserts, "Physical deviation has traditionally been viewed as abnormality, be it anatomy, skin or hair colour, or disfigurement" (140). However, this perspective began to change during the second half of the twentieth century, as advances in medicine led to the understanding that these bodies were as human as any other. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, published in 1997 and reprinted in 2017, the term "normate" is coined to address the concern of the normativity-non-normativity binary. Garland defines normate as the privileged stance of a socio-cultural figure whose boundaries are drawn by deviant bodies (8).

The characters in the picture books taken up in this review might be considered non-normate but with some objections, as all of them are white, thin, without disabilities, and living in middle-class contexts in Western countries. The term normate is conditioned by both bodily configurations and cultural capital (Garland-Thomson 8). Thus, these bodies are partially normate.

The picture books in this review fall into two groupings: those that focus on small bodies—*I Am Small*; *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea*—and those that focus on large bodies—*Daddy Long Legs*; *The True Tale of a Giantess*. All stress the physicality of the body and how it takes up space in the world.

One might be tempted to argue that there is no real disruption of the norm in these books, since a size far from the standard is the only deviation rendered. There is no alteration of visible form that can lead to thinking about the dismantling of the characters' humanity. If these bodies were considered apart from the context of the stories, they would not differ from any normative body. The intent to challenge norms becomes blurred when the diversity appears as a single instance rather than a representation of human difference.

Bodily diversity has increasing visibility in children's literature, but with limitations: while more texts promote positive non-hegemonic bodies, other divergent bodies, such as fat bodies, are omitted.<sup>1</sup> In her study about the shame associated with body image in children's literature, Joy Mauldin highlights a tie between negative bodies and monstrosity, claiming that "[t]he use of body image shaming can have both the effect of sanctioning a character and his or her actions, and also gives the message that bodies that deviate from the 'norm' are something of which to be ashamed" (13). Despite their pretensions to deconstructing body norms, *I Am Small* and *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea* convey this message. The characters would be happier if they were bigger than they are. Although the texts do not ridicule their bodies, they seem to say that being small is not something desirable, at least in the normative world.

The authors avoid intentionally grotesque depictions of the characters. Moreover, they insert the extraordinary characters in ordinary, social-realist contexts. Yet this distancing from the monstrous appears to lead these works into a dilemma. The bodies in them may be non-normative, but they resist being seen as "other." All four texts talk about ordinary human beings who escape to the normate, although the mythological, extraordinary component disappears. These picture books position the anomaly in reality, showing the importance of finding a place in the world by learning to consider limits as an advantage. The relation of the characters with other bodies, normative and non-normative, is thought-provoking, as it serves to reinforce or blur borders.

### **"Too Small" Bodies**

*I Am Small* and *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea* talk about people smaller than usual, but from different points of view. The first, written and illustrated by Qin Leng, is her debut as a writer. Leng uses pen and ink and watercolor in her artwork to tell the story of a little girl, Mimi, who

<sup>1</sup> An example of a fat body in children's literature appears in *Abigail the Whale*, by Davide Cali and Sonja Bougaeva. It fits in Mauldin's theory, as the text invites the character to imagine she is not fat in order to face the bullying.

thinks her body is insufficient. She does not think that she can have a “normal” life like that of her family, classmates, and other people. The first-person narration has Mimi share her story and talk to the reader.

The book begins with Mimi introducing herself, merely saying, “I am very small.” She provides no further information, since, for the little girl, smallness is her most relevant feature because she cannot change or forget it. The text offers contextual comparisons of Mimi to other people, animals, and objects. The front cover shows her sitting in front of her house, not much taller than the boots sitting next to her. Indeed, she is so small that she can use her dog like a horse. The artwork renders the hard, everyday life of Mimi with a touch of humour. However, the girl does not have any physical disability; she is simply not average. Her size has shaped her identity, as she asserts that she “might as well be called Mini” (Leng).

The book is structured in four parts. In the first part, the main character exposes all the disadvantages of being small in various contexts: at home, at school, walking in the streets, and going shopping. She is aware that her size marks a border. She lives in one world, and bigger people live in another. There are two significant statements which reveal this awareness: First, Mimi states, “I wouldn’t be surprised if nobody noticed me.” Second, she asks, “When will I grow big enough to take up as much space in the world as everyone else?” She wants her body to cross the boundary between “too small” and “just right.” The first part of the book also alludes to different ways to increase one’s size, such as eating spinach or tying books to one’s feet. The second part of the book focuses on the advantages that Mimi’s friends and brother see in being small. In their opinion, they are the ones who have troubles. Mimi disagrees; she is frustrated. In the third part, Mimi thinks of some benefits of being small. The fourth part of the book features a surprise. The arrival of a new member in the family makes Mimi change her perspective, as she is now a big sister to a very tiny brother.

Readers can easily identify with the character, through the present-day setting, the everyday situations, and the subjective point of view. Despite her size, Mimi is not a victim: she does not suffer bullying, and she is heard in her environment. The internalization of the normative body sparks her conflict, as she judges herself according to the criteria of normativity. These parameters appear on the page as measuring instruments, like a ruler. For the small girl,

her limited body does not allow her to do “a lot of stuff” that the normative children can do. The frustration she expresses throughout the book marks her struggle as one that is internal—“being small really bugs me” and “[i]t’s annoying”—as well as external: “they just don’t get it!” In the end, Mimi is happy because, in comparison to her brother, her body is big now. She provides him with encouragement, as one day he will “be big, too!” The book conveys the message that size is always relative. The ending nevertheless reinforces the idea that being small is an adverse condition that should be overcome.

In contrast to *I Am Small*, *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea* features a character that is made to feel insufficient. This second picture book, written by Davide Cali and illustrated by Sébastien Mourrain, is nearer to a classic tale. It recalls the stories of Thumbelina or Little Thumb, while Spanish readers could be reminded of Little Chickpea. Both the text and the images convey the idea of smallness. In the covers, the character is introduced riding a grasshopper as if it is a horse. The other elements in the landscape further establish the size of Little Pea: flowers and insects are enormous, a tomato plant looks like a tree, and there is a cat which could readily swallow the little boy. Nevertheless, this is not the familiar tale of a small hero defeating big giant, since there is no ogre or thieves against which Little Pea has to fight. Instead, the pretty small boy has an ordinary life conditioned by his size. In this sense, this book is similar to Leng’s. However, the story instead focuses on an impossible human body.

In *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea*, the gap between normative and non-normative bodies is even more noticeable. To underscore it, the illustrator draws normative bodies in gray tones and the protagonist and his world in full color. The frontier is not only highly visible but even tangible. In this book, there seems to be a deeper reflection on the meaning of being small and, by extension, on how difficult it is to fit in the world when one is different.

In fairy tales, being big is associated with monstrosity and being small awakens tenderness. The direction in which characters cross borders affects their possession of negative or positive traits. While the four picture books reviewed here do not fall into the polarization of wickedness and kindness that is associated with size, *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea* echoes some of these ideas. Indeed, in this book, tenderness is awakened firstly by the language, as diminutives recall baby talk, while both the verbal text and the pictures render a helpless and vulnerable

character in the normative world. Lastly, the angles of the illustrations highlight the difference in size that makes normative people look monstrous. For instance, in a double-spread, readers see the protagonist surrounded by some giant legs which are about to crush him. This tiny person, Little Pea, is kind and a lover of nature. However, this story differs from other classical tales such as “Thumbelina” as Little Pea does not find other people like him. Instead, he prefers to live alone, devoting his time to growing tomatoes and drawing stamps.

The story begins, like that of *I Am Small*, describing the main characteristic of Little Pea: “When he was born, Little Pea was tiny. Teeny-tiny.” The narration is divided into three parts: early childhood at his mother’s house; joining the school; and the return to the house where he has grown up. Early childhood focuses on how Little Pea’s infancy is similar to, and different from, that of any other child due to ordinary situations being made exceptional; for example, Little Pea enjoys climbing LEGO® bricks. The character is happy and has no trouble with his size. He is always alone, is accompanied only by animals, and does not realize that he is small. Although the text mentions his mother, who is a normal size woman, she does not appear in the pictures. In his world, Little Pea is the only human, and he has no opportunity to compare himself to others.

Going to school marks a turning point, and it implies the beginning of a second part full of sadness. The text reads, “It wasn’t until Little Pea started school that he realized he was too small.” He definitely does not fit in at school, as he is too small to safely take part in activities. Instead, he spends his time drawing. Other children seem not to notice him, and his teacher feels sorry for him. It is the milieu that makes Little Pea uncomfortable with his body.

The third part begins when Little Pea grows up. He builds a house in his garden and a study in his mother’s wardrobe. Little Pea has a custom-made world again. He has a job as well: he draws stamps. As reflected in the narrator’s statement, he is happy: “One can never be too small to be a GREAT artist!” The emphasis in size throughout the book is counterbalanced by this assertion, as it stresses where greatness lies. In contrast to Mimi, Little Pea never wishes to be bigger. He does not need to change his size to have a complete life. *Little Pea* can teach readers that a society too focused on bodies and their normalization forgets people and their abilities beyond their size. Indeed, this picture book does not suggest that the non-normative

body must abandon its peculiarity to adapt to the normative world. *Little Pea* proposes another way to fit in, living in the intersection between the normative and non-normative world. The protagonist discovers the necessary strategies to inhabit the two worlds, making its size not an obstacle but the means of crossing the border.

### **Excessive Bodies**

The last two picture books, *Daddy Long Legs* and *The True Tale of a Giantess*, are about people bigger than the normate. First, *Daddy Long Legs* is a fantastic and tender account by author Nadine Brun-Cosme and illustrator Aurélie Guillerey. Its refusal of social realism makes this book close to *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea*, yet *Daddy Long Legs* offers imaginative solutions to the problem of being too big. To ground them in reality, it frames these solutions as ones that are interwoven with ordinary life. The daddy in this story does not need a new body to save a princess or kill a dragon, but rather to pick his child up from the kindergarten.

The cover of the book anticipates the story, as it renders a man with long legs carrying a little boy over his shoulders. In this book, the author and illustrator show how sometimes ordinary troubles require extraordinary solutions. Matthew is taken to the kindergarten by his father by car, but today the engine does not work well. The child fears his daddy is not able to fetch him in the afternoon. The father proposes several fantastic solutions, such as being carried by a big (teddy) bear, some birds or rabbits, or even by a dragon, which the boy rejects. Finally, his father decides to use his own body: "I will run as fast as my two long legs will carry me."

In the pictures, the father's legs lengthen. Daddy jumps over the mountains and in two strides reaches the kindergarten, where a tiny Matthew waits for him. When they arrive home, Daddy has regained his ordinary appearance and the car is parked outside. Nonetheless, the fantasy continues since the characters from the other suggested solutions are there ready to have tea in a scene reminiscent of the mad tea party from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: the teddy bear, the birds and the rabbits, the neighbour and the dragon are waiting for Daddy and Matthew. Brun-Cosme uses the third-person narration, as Cali does in *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea*.

*Daddy Long Legs* challenges fairy tale logic, as it suggests that human solutions are preferable to fantastic ones. A corporal mutation is the best choice, regardless of whether or not it is only imaginary and temporary. This unstable, changing, and unfixed posthuman body defies the essence of the normative, but unlike mutant bodies, it is not terrifying. Yet it is not the body of a superhero either. Daddy has the only mutable body in the four picture books, as he can modify his configuration at will. Children's literature has presented similar bodies, such as that of Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but they could not necessarily control the changes caused by magic. *Daddy Long Legs* reveals the postmodern idea that the body is a space of experimentation with boundaries.

The second picture book addressing large bodies is *The True Tale of a Giantess: The Story of Anna Swan*, written by Anne Renaud and illustrated by Marie Lafrance. This book tells the story of Anna Swan, a nineteenth-century girl from Nova Scotia who was taller than average. At the age of seventeen, she stood 2.4 metres tall. She moved to New York to take part in the Gallery of Wonders of Mr. Barnum, and later she travelled throughout North America and Europe. She gained a wide reputation as the Tallest Girl in the World. The character explains in first-person account how from her infancy to adulthood her body determined her relationship with others. Because readers know this kind of character, the title itself makes a joke: *The True Tale of a Giantess* hints that the other stories of gigantic people are false, while the use of "tale" admits that the text is also a story, a fiction. As the book ends with historical information and pictures of Anna Swan, the inspiration for this tale situates the fiction within historical fact.

Other paratexts, apart from the title, contribute to fostering the idea of gigantism. On the cover, only half of Swan's body is depicted, and it is surrounded by minuscule people, houses, and trees. She exceeds both space and her clothes, as if her body overflows normal limits. Nonetheless, this is a visual trick to engage readers. Lafrance provides a conventional image of a giant in order to dismantle it later. In her illustrations, she manipulates our view of the characters using distances or objects, so Swan does not appear as tall as she is. These visual strategies hinder the reader from considering the girl as monstrous.

Moreover, the main character is kind and not wicked, as the final Author's Note states: "the loving, kind-hearted giantess who touched the lives of many with her grace, dignity and



compassion.” This description contrasts earlier giants in children’s literature, like those of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Selfish Giant*, or the nine horrifying giants of *The BFG*. In showing Swan having love and family despite her mutant body, the book upends the fairy-tale convention that giants are wicked. Her kindness is valued over her non-normativity.

Renaud and Lafrance stress how other people see Swan. The book does not begin by introducing the girl, but the hearsay about her: they whispered, gossiped, snooped, buzzed, craned, oohed, aahed, and stared. As with *I Am Small*, but more intensely, the main character compares herself with elements of her life, like animals or objects, and with other characters.

The story is divided into two parts, with a central substantive point. The first part of the book shows Swan’s infancy and adolescence, with both happy and bad days, when she “did not have to squeeze in [her] world” and when she suffered from bullying by other children. Like Mimi or Little Pea, she was aware of some advantages, but also that she “simply did not fit.” The second part begins when, one day, Swan had the opportunity to find her place in the world. Making a brave decision, she joins the Gallery of Wonders of a museum in New York, travels, and meets other divergent bodies that are skinny, small, or plump. She falls in love with a man almost as tall as her, and they get married. They build a house adapted to both short and tall people. Thus, “at last, we had a life where everyone fit.”

*Daddy Long Legs* and *The True Tale of a Giantess* present two ways of fitting in the world: changing the body or changing the context. Changing the context contends that it is not bodies that are wrong but the societies that shun them. *The True Tale of a Giantess* addresses the issue of visibility. Swan is increasingly visible to other children and adults; however, she chooses to exhibit her difference. She decides to show her body as a wonder, allowing other people to see more than her size. She controls how her body is seen. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that throughout history, other non-normative bodies were forced to either exhibit themselves or hide. In both cases their dignity is ignored.

## Conclusion

Permeated by echoes of well-known figures of children’s literature to disrupt preconceptions about non-normative bodies, these picture books offer an updated outlook

on the body. They provide multiple perspectives on non-normativity, and they do so in a way that avoids moralizing speech. Whether employing conventions of realism or fantasy, these works promote debates about body acceptance and surveillance.

The characters are aware of the restrictions their specific bodies create. These books do not conceal that the path towards inclusion may be painful and even impossible. Whereas *Daddy Long Legs* and *The True Tale of a Giantess* offer a positive view of cross-border bodies, *I Am Small* and *The Tiny Tale of Little Pea* convey the message that it is better to have an average body size. The four picture books tell stories which a young readership may identify with, as the characters engage in ordinary lives.

These books also foster reflection on whether or not it is always necessary to fit in. Swan finds her place far away from her home, while Little Pea does the contrary. For Mimi, the solution is looking at herself with a new perspective; and Daddy adapts his body to space. All of them find a cleft in the borders imposed on their bodies by the normative frame.

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