



## Dispatch

### A Mad-positive Children's Book List

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Exploring disabled children's activism, resistance and presence perhaps ought to include some consideration of how adults can spark children's interest in activism, or at least offer them various critical, counter-hegemonic representations of madness, disability, and d/Deafness at an early age. In Canada, where I write from, it has become increasingly easy to find children's books that tackle all kinds of equity issues, from historical and present-day injustices to people's diverse ways of experiencing the world. There are countless lists of recommended children's books available online. Book lists, trips to the library, and thoughtful gifts from friends have led me to some of my favourite recent children's books on a wide range of topics. These include:

- *Beautifully Me* by Nabela Noor, illustrated by Nabi H. Ali, tackles fat shaming;
- *Laxmi's Mooch* by Shelly Anand, illustrated by Nabi H. Ali, is about embracing body hair;
- *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* by Kai Cheng Thom, illustrated by Wai-Yant Li and Kai Yun Ching;
- *Ho'onani: Hula Warrior* by Heather Gale, illustrated by Mika Song. Both books tell stories about growing up as a non-binary or gender queer kid;
- *We Move Together* by Kelly Fritsch and Anne McGuire, illustrated by Eduardo Trejos takes up accessibility and disability justice;
- *Can Bears Ski?* by Raymond Antrobus, illustrated by Polly Dunbar, is about experiencing deafness or being hard of hearing;
- *Milo Imagines the World* by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson, talks about incarceration and challenges the assumptions we make;

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- *Amik Loves School: A Story of Wisdom* by Katherena Vermette, illustrated by Irene Kuziw, is about residential schools and introduces one of the seven grandfather teachings.

Lists can be helpful for locating books that represent or are produced by particular communities. Recommended lists of children's books about disability can be found online, though I have yet to come across one on madness. By madness, I am referring to the political self-identifier, "mad," which has been reclaimed in mad movement organizing internationally and in the field of Mad Studies. Yes, "mad" is provocative, as language that comes out of social justice organizing often is – that's intentional. The term mad is politicized language. It has been reclaimed by mad people themselves, as a means of self-definition, to take back power and to disrupt dominant biomedical framings of mental illness and wellness. Although sometimes dismissed as being anti-psychiatry (Beresford & Menzies, 2014), the term mad implies an orientation that necessarily requires undertaking a de-centring process (rather than an outright disavowal) of dominant biomedical and psy-based knowledge of madness *as* mental illness and as the antithesis to wellness. This de-centring is necessary to make room for other forms of knowledge and experiences to be heard, particularly those of mad people themselves, and to counter the colonial imperative to individualize and pathologize experiences of madness. Talking about madness also connects to a much longer history, as madness has been documented for thousands of years, whereas a colonial framing of madness as a medical problem is a relatively new and western phenomenon. Using the language of mad or madness also connects us to mad communities and acknowledges histories of organizing and resistance undertaken by mad people.

As a mad-identified scholar and as a parent, I'm sharing the list I've patchworked together through my own attempts at locating what I consider to be mad-positive books for young children. These are stories that embrace, and at times grapple with, the everyday consciousness-raising experiences of mad activism that is, social justice activism led by mad-identified people and their communities who may describe themselves in many ways: psychiatric survivors, service users, mad, as having a psychosocial disability, among other descriptors. This activism involves ongoing work to decentre whiteness (Pickens, 2019), interrogate systems of past and present carceral segregation (Ben-Moshe, 2020), and engage in reproductive justice (Leblanc Haley, 2019), among other significant social justice moves that are, undoubtedly, relevant to the lives and experiences of children and youth. Writing from their experiences with young people involved in mental health and social services, Mad Studies scholar Bren LeFrançois (2008) has long asserted that we must acknowledge children's agency and support their collective action given that they face

denigration when situated at the crux of sanism and adultism.<sup>1</sup> From this vantage point, there is reason to pay attention to books that dwell on themes of interest for mad people and their communities. I've found children's books particularly useful for introducing my kids to difficult or heavy subjects, as a starting point for further questions, and to generate ongoing conversations. Children's books can also assist in translating complex issues into plain language and imagery, effectively conveying ideas in original ways. Following in the tradition of mad-affiliated scholarship that brings into question "the best interest of the child," (Mills & LeFrançois, 2018) the list curated below includes books that openly dwell in themes and issues that support children's agency from a mad-positive perspective.

Drawing on the field of Mad Studies, I understand the term mad-positive to mean the practice of being in alliance with mad people, mad communities or the goals of the mad movement. Mad-positive also implies accessibility for mad people and all that might entail. A mad-positive approach considers how mad people's experiences are shaped by political, economic, and social systems. For example, disabled and mad people often get positioned as being needy or as only recipients of care. This negates and erases the work that we actually do to collectively take care of one another. A mad-positive approach represents a resistance to the capitalist imperative that we constantly compete against one another for limited resources; it recognizes and values our many contributions, such as informal care work, and in turn challenges framings of mad people as burdensome. With that in mind, what counts as a mad-positive children's book? Here are some of the elements I considered when fabricating this list:

- Books written or illustrated by mad creators;
- Books published by mad-positive publishers;
- Stories that embrace and encourage the acceptance of many ways of being, behaving, and engaging with the world;
- Diverse and socially complex representations of madness, meaning stories that consider how madness intersects with experiences of poverty, colonialism, racialization, gender, sexuality, and more;
- Mad characters that are not tropes or two-dimensional; these characters do more than simply drive the plot or provide a laugh. Mad characters are depicted as members of our communities, as ourselves, as parents, as our family members – as characters worthy of care and love, even when these relations can be challenging;

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<sup>1</sup> Sanism, also at times called mentalism, refers to a "deeply embedded system of discrimination and oppression" of people who have received a mental health diagnosis or are perceived to be mentally ill (Leblanc & Kinsella 2016, p. 61). It assumes a pathological view of madness, and contributes to epistemic injustice by marginalizing the knowledge(s) of mad people. Sanism is largely invisible and socially sanctioned because it is based predominantly on common myths, stereotypes and superstitions about people who have a diagnosis or are perceived to be mentally ill (Perlin, 2006).

- Stories that tackle conversations about madness beyond or outside of dominant medical framings and diagnostic or normative language (for example, stories that discuss forced treatment, self-harm, suicide, hearing voices, hospitalization, etc.);
- Stories that do not reproduce or reinforce mental health literacy (the imperative to move from stigma busting to embracing treatment and labeling) or focus on “fixing” people by returning them to a “normative” state;
- Stories that model how to challenge sanism;
- Content that is accessible to children without romanticizing madness or painting complex issues in binaries;
- Stories that are not about glorifying individual figures from the past or present for their contributions. Although children’s books featuring prominent “heroes” from our collective past are quite popular, this form seems counter to the collective aims of mad people’s activism and politics;
- These stories don’t necessarily need to have a happy ending. Some may end on an ambiguous or unsettling note, aimed at getting the reader to question their own expectations or assumptions.

In the mad-positive children’s book list I have developed, below, I consider picture books geared toward children aged 10 and under, rather than longer chapter books or books for tweens and teens. This list focuses on books about madness, mad people, and mad experiences, as few children’s books take up madness and fewer still do so in ways that are humanizing and respectful of mad people. Each of these books discusses madness, sanism, or psychiatrization using a critical or non-medical approach. Books of this nature should, ideally, help kids to name, make sense of, or sort through feelings associated with what they are likely already noticing about madness in their worlds. Often considered too taboo to talk about openly, kids get shielded from conversations about madness, as adults presume kids can’t understand or would be harmed in the process. Most of these books have been published in the last five years, suggesting this may be an area of growing interest.

### **Why do we Need Mad-positive Children’s Books?**

At this point, you may still be wondering: can’t we just rely on children’s books about mental health? Why do young kids need to learn about madness anyway?

There are many books out there that promote and reinforce mental health literacy, but this mad-positive list has different aims altogether. Gathering it has been an ongoing process, since I have had children of my own. As a mad-identified parent who teaches in the areas of Mad Studies and Disability Studies, I’ve been looking for ways to talk to my kids about mad issues and

realities. As someone whose experiences were medicalized in my youth and young adulthood, I'm attuned to the need to have these conversations early. The work to undo sanism needs to start as soon as children encounter it, and by kindergarten, kids are already taking in sanist precepts and ideologies.

I built the list with two primary considerations in mind: first, the age categories provided below are rough estimates only; I've provided short summaries to help inform what might be appropriate for your child. Second, as children's books are not the only information children or adults receive about any equity issue, this list is intended as a starting place for children to learn about and discuss what it means to be mad-positive.



### **Mad-positive Children's Picture Books:**

*The Little Girl Who Was Afraid of Everything* (2020) by Aurora Cacciapuoti (author and illustrator).

This was the first book in our household to initiate basic conversations about madness. It is good for even young (three-plus-years-old) children. Kids can relate to the main character, Ami, and the visual representation of her fears, embodied in the creature she befriends. Rather than extending psy-based notions that suppress fearfulness, essentially the story gently encourages kids to face their fears.

*Small Knight and the Anxiety Monster* (2021) by Manka Kasha (author and illustrator).

This story about a non-binary child and their stuffed teddy bear charms while subtly addressing both mad and trans issues. The child encounters a monster(ous fear), specifically that they are not the princess they are expected to become. Instead, they see themselves as a small yet brave knight. Readers come to see how even well-meaning parents can contribute to the compounding of children's anxieties when they don't question gendered and sanist norms. For children, the message is that there may be a source for their anxieties and struggles beyond themselves.

*Scaredy Squirrel* (a series of books from 2008 to 2022) by Mélanie Watt (author and illustrator).

This silly and fun series follows an anxious and incredibly prepared squirrel as he tries to go about his life while straying from the comfort and safety of his tree as little as necessary. "Scaredy's nutty adventures" amuse me in part because they remind me of myself at times. The absurdity of a squirrel having an "in case of emergency" kit containing a hard hat, bug spray and rubber gloves (among other things), as well as detailed routines and exit plans, pokes light fun at embody/minded difference while showing the reader that perhaps some risks are worth taking in life.

*Bird Boy* (2021) by Matthew Burgess (author) and Shahrzad Maydani (illustrator).

This story introduces us to a wonderfully imaginative boy named Nico. It subtly suggests that Nico is different from other children, narrating how he gets teased for communing with birds. Cross-disability friendships are introduced to affirm the message that Nico can find happiness while being "completely, delightfully himself."

*The Invisible Boy* (2013) by Trudy Ludwig (author) and Patrice Barton (illustrator).

This book takes up themes of social exclusion, loneliness and the difficulties of making friends, as well as racism. The story follows an introverted boy named Brian, depicted in black and white when socially isolated and in colour when included, as he struggles to make friends at school. It depicts a number of micro-aggressions against Brian and his new classmate Justin, which open up the possibility for further discussion. Question prompts for adults are also included at the end of the book to get children talking about what was read.

*Whimsy's Heavy Things* (2013) by Julie Kraulis (author and illustrator).

We are introduced to Whimsy, a girl dragging around what looks to be five bowling ball-like rocks. She strategizes to try and rid herself of the weight of these undefined objects that are depicted as wearing her down physically and emotionally. She succeeds in dealing with the heavy things by tackling each one at a time, breaking them into smaller pieces and finding innovative uses for them (as steps up a wall, marbles for friends, seeds to plant, etc.). Although she achieves a new lightness, she chooses to keep pieces of the last heavy thing as a reminder not get weighed down. The dedication at the front suggests the author was inspired to create this book at least in part based on personal experience.

*The Bad Seed* (2017) by Jory John (author) Pete Oswald (illustrator).

Jory John's widely popular children's books take up some mad-positive themes, although arguably some of his other books (such as *The Good Egg*) follow more mainstream approaches to mental health. In *The Bad Seed*, the protagonist, a sunflower seed marked as "bad" by those in his community, notes how perceptions of his badness are shifting, as other characters remark on how maybe he isn't so bad after all. As the sole surviving sunflower seed, spat out when everyone else he knew and loved was chewed up, the story depicts themes of violent trauma and recovery in creative ways that even young children can handle. The questioning of characters as simply good or bad is refreshing. Rather, this book points out how it's really about the choices we make every day, to *do* good or bad in the world.

### **Books Specific to Particular Forms of Trauma:**

*Otis Doesn't Scratch* (2015) by Clare Shaw (author) and Tamsin Walker (illustrator).

This is a two-part resource: a storybook for children and a guide for adults. The story involves a boy named Ted, who notices his mother's injuries and is left unconvinced by the explanation she provides for their cause. He sets out to find answers for himself. The accompanying guidebook is helpful for adults looking to facilitate conversation with young children about people who are close to them who self-injure.

*Stolen Words* (2017) by Melanie Florence (author) and Gabrielle Grimard (illustrator).

This memorable story tells of a little girl who learns her grandfather can't speak their language, Cree, since it was stolen from him when he was taken away to

live in a residential school as a child. With beautiful empathy, the little girl helps her grandfather find his language again. The book conveys the trauma and violence of residential schools in a way that's age-appropriate even for kindergarteners. Integration of colonial violence in our stories about the world is an important part of taking a mad-positive approach.

*The Map of Good Memories* (2016) by Fran Nuño (author) and Zuzanna Celej (illustrator).

This is a story about a child named Zoe becoming a refugee and having to flee her home due to war. Before leaving, Zoe marks the places of her happiest memories on a map of the city. She recounts the meanings she associates with these everyday places and in doing so, makes a beautiful discovery.

### **Books for Older (eight-plus-years-old) Children:**

*The Sackclothman* (2008) by Jayasree Kalathil (author) and Rakhi Peswani (illustrator).

Written by mad researcher and activist Jayasree Kalathil, this book is a bit longer than most picture books (40 pages). The story is positioned from the vantage point of a child whose older sister has recently died. Her parents are struggling with processing grief in their own ways. The child strikes up an unlikely friendship with the local vagrant "madman." When the villagers aim to have him institutionalized, the child takes a stand against it, even as she is powerless to intervene. The story takes up issues of forced institutionalization, the medicalization of grief, and homelessness. It doesn't shy away from difficult subject matter and has an authentic feel, particularly in terms of taking up a child's perspective. I highly recommend this book, although it may be difficult to locate a hard copy in Canada.

*Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (2005) by Michael Rosen (author) and Quentin Blake (illustrator).

This story tells of a man enveloped by sadness following the death of his child. He shares his daily deep struggles with sadness, but also some strategies for living with it, such as by daydreaming about happy memories and by doing one thing a day that brings him joy. It ends on a sad, though fitting note, with the man sitting alone warmed by the light of one candle.

*Small Things* (2021) by Mel Tregonning (illustrator).

This wordless beautiful black and white story uses graphics to tell the story of the struggles of one young child. What gets described in the afterword as

“childhood anxiety” is depicted as a series of “small things” literally chipping away at this child. The child only manages to find some reprieve towards the end of the story, once their sister confides in them that they are experiencing this cracking or chipping away effect too. The message at the end is that the child needs to talk about and face their problems, and that we all experience this to varying degrees, so we need to be gentle with ourselves and others. No medical interventions are suggested, rather connection with and empathy from someone facing similar experiences is key.

### **Books About Emotions or Managing Big Feelings:**

This is a much larger category, for which many books exist. Most have only a peripheral connection to madness. However, a few books within this genre may be relevant. These include:

- *Listening to my Body* (2017) by Gabi Garcia (author) and Ying Hui Tan (illustrator);
- *I'm Happy-Sad Today* (2019) by Lory Britain (author) and Matthew Rivera (illustrator);
- *The Colour Monster: A Story about Emotions* (2018; as well as other books in this series) by Anna Llenas (author and illustrator);
- *The Boy with Big, Big Feelings* (2019) by Britney Winn Lee (author) and Jacob Souva (illustrator).

### **Conclusion**

In crafting this list, I do not mean to be prescriptive or suggest there is one right way to determine what counts as a mad-positive children’s book (or doesn’t), or to draw boundary lines around what they ought to be. Rather, I want to foreground books that tell meaningful stories and have opened up opportunities for dialogue with my children. In an effort to be transparent, I’ve outlined the process I used to determine which books were selected. I’m interested in dreaming up the possibilities of what future mad-positive children’s books could look like. Similarly, I hope that this small offering works to build a case for more children’s books that take up madness from a child’s vantage point, to help children learn about madness and mad people in critical and age-appropriate ways.

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