

ANALYSIS OF A CHILDREN'S BOOK: "ONE" BY KATHRYN OTOSHI

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Abstract

The author provides an analysis of the children's book "One" by Kathryn Otoshi. Otoshi writes the story, drawing from her childhood recollections of observing a girl, who is bullied by her peers because she is different. The analysis considers the story's progression, the changes in the hearts and minds of the characters, and their resulting transformation from a nondescript oval to a number that represents their self-confidence to stand up and be counted. Implications discussed include bullying to racism, and how diversified populations can extend beyond countering bullying, to preempting bullying.

Introduction

This paper analyzes Kathryn Otoshi's children's book "One." "One" is a story of bullying. It is the story of how one character took a stand against a bully who was intimidating others. Using simple illustrations, primarily composed of differing colors of oval shapes, Otoshi illustrates and conveys the message that everyone counts. Accompanying the illustrations, Otoshi uses just 461 words to tell her story.

The oval Red is the bully in this story. The oval Blue is the prime victim of Red's bullying. Encouraged by the character One, who is shaped as that number, each oval realizes they can count. Each oval transforms to become a number, while retaining their original color. As a group of transformed numbers, they stand up to Red's bullying. Red then retreats in defeat.

Led by One and Six, the group invites Red to join them. Feeling accepted, Red changes, and becomes the number Seven.

The analysis of "One" was conducted with the following considerations:

- How does the story progress?
- What is the change?
- The transition from existing ideas to new ideas. Is there a new paradigm?

Method

Literature Search and Study Selection

Literature searches are an integral part social science research and writing. Therefore, it is appropriate to literature about previous efforts to analyze this book.

Procedure

A cursory search of the Rivier University Regina Library's electronic databases was conducted, using standard literature review search techniques. Because the book was published in 2008, an integrated search approach of all electronic databases was the applied technique, as it was likely a search would

only garner minimal documents. All available databases were selected for searches, using the Boolean search string “otoshi AND one AND bull* AND child*”. The initial search included applying the “Peer Reviewed” option. The date ranges were 31 December, 2006 to 31 December 2012. New books are occasionally available in the year prior to their published release. Since the book’s publishing date was 2008, all of 2007 was considered by beginning after 31 December 2006. This was to ensure 1 January 2007 was considered in the search.

Table 1

Summary of Keyword Database Queries and Results

Date	Database	Keywords	Boolean Phrase	Search Options	Search Limits	Raw Hits	After Sorting
22 Aug 12	Integrated Search of Rivier University electronic databases	Otoshi, One, Bully, Children	otoshi AND on AND bull* AND child*	Peer Reviewed. 2007-2012		35	1
22 Aug 12	Integrated Search of Rivier University electronic databases	Otoshi, One, Bully, Children	otoshi AND on AND bull* AND child*	2007-2012		41	3

Table 1, shows the initial returns, or “Raw Hits” for the initial search results that yielded 35 “hits.” A “hit” is a potentially relevant document. A cursory search of these corresponding documents resulted in only one usable peer-reviewed article. A second search was conducted with the same date parameters, but the peer-reviewed limitation was not applied. This resulted in 41 hits, with 3 usable articles, including the peer-reviewed article from the original search. To be included as a usable article, the item must specifically discuss Otoshi’s book “One.” All keywords appeared in the each selected article.

A general Internet search was initiated for other relevant material, which could aid in analyzing the book. Emphasis was placed in multimedia settings, with refined searches on YouTube (www.youtube.com). This resulted in a video of Otoshi reading “One” aloud with primary school-aged children portraying the book’s characters. Another video, not directly related to Otoshi’s “One,” offered a different perspective on bullying. This video’s setting was a group of middle-school-aged girls bullying a peer; an inverse setting of Otoshi’s single bully.

Results

Both videos were retained and listed in this paper’s references, along with the three articles found during the integrated search of the Regina Library’s electronic databases. Of the three retained and referenced articles none discussed either a qualitative or quantitative study relating to the book.

Discussion

Neely, et al.’s article is a brief summary of Otoshi’s story. They describe Otoshi’s method of using oval shapes of different colors to represent different characters. Neely, et al. remarked about how the author

used select words, coupled with a combination of different brush strokes and alterations of the oval's shapes. These effects visually express the emotional responses of each oval's representative characters, when the bully oval (Red) exerts their will on other ovals. Eventually, the ovals transform into numbers, to illustrate Otoshi's main point that "Sometimes it takes just One" to counter adverse actions, and to facilitate positive changes. (Neely, et al., 2009, pp. 73-74) Cooper's review recaps each oval character's personality. (Cooper, 2008, p. 45) Cooper's comments expand on Neely, et al.'s mention of how the numbers transform into numbers. Cooper recaps a significant segment near the story's end, where the group of transformed numbers affords the defeated and deflated oval, Red, an opportunity to join the group, and be counted. (Cooper, 2008)

In her article "Stand Up and Count," Otoshi shares how her childhood experiences and her Japanese heritage influenced her book's theme. Otoshi's parents, who were interned in Japanese camps during World War II, moved to a predominately Anglo-Saxon neighborhood, possibly because they experienced what it meant to be considered different. (Otoshi, 2010)

Cooper's brief review offers a parenthetical comment about how the strength in numbers can facilitate both good and ill will. (Cooper, 2008)

Otoshi uses homonyms to relate the changing feelings of the story's two main characters, Blue and Red. For example, Blue has his identity color. Blue was also used as a homonym to relay that Blue, along with Yellow, Green, Purple and Orange, "...felt a little blue." (Otoshi, 2008, p. 13) In this context, "blue" is the reference to feeling unhappy, down, or depressed. Another instance is the homonym "hot." "Hot" is used to describe Red's feeling that he was superior to others. Later in the story, all characters transformed into numbers. In unison, they stood up to Red's bullying. Red then became "hot" as though he was angry. (Otoshi, 2008)

The character Yellow's identity color was also a homonym. After Red picked on Blue, Yellow comforted Blue, but Yellow did not have the courage to be the first to stand up to Red when he was picking on Blue. In this context, the color yellow is associated with being weak, afraid, or cowardly. The author's implied message is when you fail to act to defend yourself or others; you can lose a part of yourself. Likewise, if you pick on others as a means to boost your ego, the "color" reflecting your character, can lose its luster. (In this case "character" refers to a person's traits, such as honesty, integrity, ethics, etc.).

Once Grey stood up to Red, and showed it was possible to repel bullying, Yellow now felt brave. Her new-found bravery enabled her to transform herself; she emerged as the number Two. Two retained her color of origin; Yellow. Two's new form features into a shape with at least one straight edge.

Straight edges preclude a shape from easily rolling. While each character was oval shaped, their color represented the core of their identity. Each oval could take on different sizes, could stretch, constrict, or could assume an elongated look. With only round edges, each oval could roll. Rolling could be just to get along with others, be intimidated to the point of acquiescence, or, if humiliated, could roll away from an encounter.

Noting Yellow's becoming Two, the other oval-shaped characters changed themselves to become unique numbers; each retaining their identity, represented by their color of origin. Green became the green colored Three, Purple became a purple Four, and Orange became Five; orange in color.

Seeing the other colors transform themselves, Blue wanted to change as well. Red also noticed that Blue intended to stay with his newly transformed friends. To reassert himself, Red tried to "roll over" Blue, stating "Red is HOT. Blue is NOT." But Blue had become Six, including his new straight edge at the stem; symbolically making it more challenging for Red to roll over Six. Six now possessed inner strength and self-confidence to counter Red's assertion, by saying to Red, "Red can be really HOT...but

Blue can be super COOL.” (Otoshi, 2008, p.23) Simultaneously, One, Two, Three, Four, and Five joined Six in resisting Red’s aggressiveness by telling Red “No!” (Otoshi, 2008, p. 26) Defeated, Red deflates in size, and begins to roll away from the group.

Six retains his original color, his quiet personality. Six wants to be “cool,” i.e., easy-going, likeable. With new self-confidence, Six’s nature is to forgive of Red’s past mistreatment of him by suggesting to Red they can co-exist by asking “Can Red be hot...AND Blue be cool?” (Otoshi, 2008, p. 28) One invites Red to join the group by saying to Red “Red can count too.” (Otoshi, 2008, p. 29) Feeling accepted, Red becomes Seven, entering into a happier state of well-being, and joins the group in their fun. The group shouts “Everyone counts!” (Otoshi, 2008, p. 31)

Otoshi conveys a sense of unity through her subtle emphasis of “Counts!” by correlating a character’s color to the corresponding letter in the word “counts!” For instance, the first letter ‘c’ is grey, matching to One’s color. As the second letter ‘o’ is yellow, matching Two’s color. Three, Four, Five and Six correspond to the remaining letters in “counts.” Red’s joining the group is punctuated through the red exclamation point. The story concludes with the notion that “Sometimes, it just takes One.” (Otoshi, 2008, p. 32) A summary of each character is offered in Table 2.

Table 2
The Cast of Characters from “One”

Character (Oval)	Identified Gender	Personality	Conduct	Transformation During Story
Blue	Male	Quiet		Afraid of Red; Picked on by Red. Became “6”, then suggested Red co-existence with other numbers
Yellow	Female	Sunny	Comforted Blue	Afraid of Red. Following One’s lead, became brave, through becoming “2”
Green	None	Bright		Afraid of Red. Did not speak out. Became “3”
Purple	None	Regal		Afraid of Red. Did not speak out. Became “4”
Orange	None	Outgoing		Afraid of Red. Did not speak out. Became “5”
Red	Male	“Hot”	Bully	Transformed to become “7”
Grey	Male	Funny	Bold. Said “No”	Challenged Red. Instilled confidence in other numbers, which resulted in their transformation into numbers. Invited Red to join group

For an additional perspective, the book was read to a four year old boy to gauge his reaction to the story. Selecting this particular child was solely out of convenience. The boy is the grandson of the author. The story held his attention. He understood what was read to him as he simultaneously noted the corresponding illustrations. He said he liked the story. When asked what he thought the story was about, he talked about the circles becoming numbers. When asked if the story was about Red being mean, he indicated he did not know. He said “Red” became “7.” Perhaps the boy did not comprehend bullying because the boy may not have experienced bullying, from either a victim’s or perpetrator’s perspective.

In the YouTube video “Author Kathryn Otoshi Reads Her Award-Winning Book “One,” the children portraying the story’s oval characters appear to be 10 years old; old enough for these children to understand relate to notion of bullying, and its impacts. The children’s play-acting to Otoshi’s reading the story aloud gives visual emphasis to Otoshi’s words. (projectcornerstone, 2011)

Otoshi shares her own story about her own efforts to integrate with other children, by wearing popular clothes and hairstyles. Otoshi talks about another girl, named Ming Choi, who wore clothing and ate foods unique to her heritage. Otoshi witnessed Ming Choi's progressive punishment and ostracizing by others, followed by Ming Choi's repeated states of isolation and despair, and "...painful, heart-wrenching screams, almost as if we had burned her physically." (Otoshi, 2010) When asked which color she was in the story, Otoshi said:

I was like Green, Purple, and Orange, who didn't like what they saw but didn't know what to do. And I also realized didn't know what to do. I also realized that while I didn't know what to do, I was also terribly, terribly afraid to take a stand. (Otoshi, 2010, p.34)

Otoshi's experience is similar to others; similar to the story line in the YouTube music video "Too Late to Apologize." (rAdicaKevin123, 2011) In "Too Late to Apologize," the setting is a middle school environment, where a small group of girls, pick on another girl. One girl in the group shows occasional reservation about the group's bullying the victimized girl; but, does nothing to try and stop the behavior until it is too late. The victim ends up committing suicide. The video ends with the girl who failed to act in time visiting the victim's grave. (rAdicaKevin123, 2011)

Otoshi did not intervene when her peers were bullying Ming Choi. Like the taunted girl in the "Too Late to Apologize" video, Ming Choi was in despair. And like the guilt-ridden girl in "Too Late to Apologize," Otoshi's book is written long after Ming Choi's agonizing experience. Otoshi's reluctance to be brave for Ming Choi is reflected in the character Yellow. Otoshi's One is about standing up to bullying. From Otoshi's perspective, there's emphasis on the importance of mustering the courage to take such stands.

Otoshi's hero is One. One was never introduced as an oval. One's color, grey, is significant for two reasons. First, it is technically not a color; it is a tone, blended by combining opposite, or complementary colors.¹ Second, One's arrival in the story already a number, and his grey identity, reflects his being previously transformed from through prior bullying experiences. He alludes to this transformation by saying "If someone is mean and picks on me, I, for One, stand up and say, No." (Otoshi, 2008, p. 18) This is something Yellow did not do earlier in the story.

Implications

Considering Otoshi's "One," Otoshi's story about Ming Choi, and Cooper's thoughts about the strength in numbers facilitating either good or evil (as in the "Too Late to Apologize" video), the singling out of a person because they are different and treating them as inferior, resembles an implied notion of racial bias and discrimination. A single person, or a group, could easily mistreat someone who appears different, either by skin color, national origin, creed, sexual orientation, or is part of a disadvantaged or vulnerable population. Just as Otoshi's ovals and numbers had their colors of origin, people have their unique origins. Those among minority populations can be more vulnerable to mistreatment by those among majority populations.

Otoshi's "One" talks about strength in numbers to counter bullying. But perhaps it is more the strength of a diverse population; one comprised of many colorful individuals who complement others to a point of forming a series of diverse group that is unified through grey tones. Diversity can deter bullying. Red can be hot and Blue can be cool, someone else can identify with being sunny (yellow),

¹ Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's Color Theory states that each color has an opposite color. Figure 1, which is at the end of this paper, provides an illustration of the Goethe's color wheel, with primary and secondary colors, which correlate with the characters' colors in "One."

regal (purple), bright (green), or outgoing (orange). Fostering diversity in communities is an indirect approach countering bullying. Communities with diverse populations can preclude bullying; especially when a community's culture is enriched through the collective acceptance of everyone, regardless of differences. The wider the range of acceptance among diverse people, the fewer opportunities for a bully to isolate a prospective victim. With everyone being accepted, no person is made to feel isolated. Each member of the accepted community retains their individual identity, character, and value, and not be ashamed, or feel inferior to others.

As a bully, being feared doesn't mean they are revered. The bully is probably lonely. Such loneliness results stem from their past rejections by others. Loneliness can be averted through a culture of acceptance.

As an ending thought, by transforming of just one mind, many hearts may be transformed.

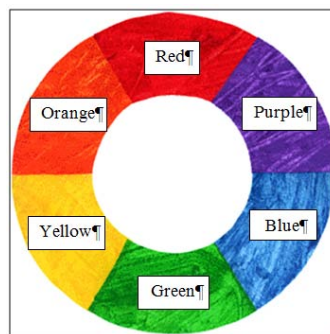


Figure 1. ² This is an illustration of Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's Color Theory, which states that each color has an opposite color. Combining opposite (or complementary) colors results in a grey tone. The six colors shown in this wheel are the same as the character colors in the story "One."³

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²The diagram was retrieved from <http://www.eric-carle.com/bb-HRFnotes.html>.

³From the Wikipedia entry "Theory of Colours" - <http://www.eric-carle.com/bb-HRFnotes.html2>