

Toys, T-Shirts, and Tumblers: These are Not the Paratexts You Are Looking For (Hint: The Films Are)

Once Upon a Paratext: Rewriting the Feminist Fairytale *Frozen* through *Frozen* Books?

Amanda D. Lotz and Kathryn Frank, University of Michigan

For many audiences, engagement with a film text may be only the first encounter with a story universe and may be much more limited than the time spent with paratexts that expand that world. This response paper explores the children's book adaptations of Disney's *Frozen* with a focus on exploring how the books retell the film narrative. Analysis particularly examines whether the books foreground the sisters' reunion over Anna and Kristoff's hetero-coupling, how the books' illustrations support or deviate from the narrative, whose perspective the books privilege, and what features of the film are made more explicit through the storytelling tools of book texts?

As a site of culture, *Frozen* provides a rich case for analysis, perhaps foremost because of its unexpected global blockbuster success. Beyond this, the film is also intriguing because it achieved this success while deviating from Disney's standard "Princess" formula in significant ways, particularly its use of dual female protagonists and de-emphasis of a "happily ever after" conclusion rooted in hetero-coupling. This uncommon narrative convention consequently required deviation from Disney's merchandising strategy, particularly that of its "Princesses."

To examine these questions, this project analyzed eleven *Frozen* books that were available in summer 2014 (One book included two stories). A Disney-owned imprint published all the books.¹ This sample was exhaustive of those available at the time with exception of toddler board books, three books featuring only Olaf on the cover, and activity/coloring/sticker books that lacked coherent narrative.

In brief, the analysis found: 1) many of the books emphasize the sisters' relationship and friendship in a manner assessed as consistent with the film; 2) on the whole, Anna is emphasized: More books are written from her perspective, make her the protagonist, or foreground her in illustrations; and 3) one book enforces the hetero-coupling theme much more extensively in its narrative, while a few others do so through illustrations.

Books emphasizing the sisters' relationship often used a strategy of dual voice, or dual first person address. This strategy allows insight into both characters' perceptions, particularly their feelings toward the other sister. Notably, *Frozen: The Essential Guide*, which is not structured through a narrative retelling of the story, provides the most sophisticated treatment of the emotional complexity of the sisters' relationship.

Most other books that provide an abridged version of the film use an omniscient voice. A key exception is *Anna's Icy Adventure*, which is told from Anna's perspective, and the feelings she expresses deviate from those most apparent film. For example, the book's narrative constructs Elsa's childhood distance as Elsa not liking Anna, and although

Anna comes to understand the true reason for Elsa's distance over the course of the story, the self-centeredness suggested in the characterization of Anna throughout the book remains in tact.

Other books, particularly those that draw from the *Frozen* narrative universe but are not primarily driven by retelling its plot, emphasize Anna in what they include. For example, *Anna's Best Friends* barely mentions Elsa (though doesn't include Hans or the Trolls at all) and its cover image corresponds to the focus on Anna suggested by its title. This book concludes with "Elsa, Kristoff, Olaf, and Sven. They will always be Anna's best friends.", which is illustrated with an image that couples Kristoff and Anna. Also, *Big Snowman*, *Little Snowman* (primarily about opposites rather than narrative) is mostly Anna's story, though concludes with "Sisters TOGETHER. Elsa, Anna and Olaf...friends forever.", and an illustration entirely excluding Kristoff.

Consistent with our reading of the film, most of the books emphasize the sisters' reunion as the conclusion of the primary narrative, though the illustrations in some books may undercut the narrative through images emphasizing the hetero-coupling of Anna and Kristoff.²

The context of children's films and books is arguably an especially important site for considering the variation among texts and paratexts because of the repetitive consumption of artifacts common in this audience and their use as the basis of pretend play. A child may watch a film once, or only occasionally, but regularly pour over a book that presents a slightly different story—but one different in meaningful ways. Similarly, two playmates may share in reconstructing the narrative in their play, but may draw from different source texts. The textual instability this suggests is certainly not a new insight to media analysis, but it reinforces scholars' calls to broaden our objects of analysis and limit the scope of claims made from analysis of an original text alone.

1 Disney Enterprises, Random House Disney; Disney Book Group, DK Essential Guides.

2 Three books conclude with this illustration, though two books use the same image.