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Advanced Darkness: The Deep Sea in Children's Media

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Abstract

In the cultural imaginary, the deep sea is persistently constructed in terms of its alterity. Young children are particularly fascinated with the ocean, and popular media such as books, tv programmes, and films constitute their introduction to the deep sea in the context of both education and entertainment; usually a mix of both. This paper considers the representation of the deep sea and its function as a narrative setting in children's films Finding Nemo and Luca, animated series SpongeBob Square Pants and Octonauts, and in the picture book Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea. Each of these texts have primarily marine settings and feature temporary excursions to deeper waters, indicating that the deep sea is imagined as a separate, more dangerous place in contrast to the safety of shallow waters. In doing so, these texts impose a juxtaposition of the Self (shallow) and other (deep) upon the vertical geography of the ocean. Some texts, however, go a step further in utilising the deep sea to question Otherness by showing that it is not as scary as initially believed. The setting of the deep ocean is used to encourage critical thinking and to emphasise the importance of experiential learning. Although the deep sea is a highly metaphorical, formative space in these fictional texts, the way in which it is represented has an impact on how audiences view and relate to the largest and least explored ecosystem in the world.

Keywords: Deep Sea, Oceanic Humanities, Horror, Children's Literature, Film & Television.

1. Introduction

Young children are fascinated by the ocean and its life, and this is reflected in the number of children's media with marine settings. In these texts, ocean ecosystems are analogues for wider society, and human issues are played out in the relations between different sea creatures and their environs. Animated films, television series, and picture books have a pedagogical function in addition being entertaining. They educate their young audiences on human values while also communicating scientific fact about the ocean. This paper considers the narrative function of the deep sea as a setting in Finding Nemo (2003), Octonauts (2010-2021, SpongeBob Squarepants (1999-present) and Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea (2009). Drawing on a pre-existing construction in the cultural imagination of the deep sea as a dangerous, monster-infested void, these texts feature temporary excursions to deeper waters where the protagonists are challenged physically and mentally. In doing so, these texts impose a juxtaposition of the Self (shallow) and Other (deep) upon the vertical geography of the ocean, continuing the ongoing cultural enigmatisation of the deep sea.

In a paper titled "Fear and loathing of the deep sea: why don't people care about the deep ocean?" Jamieson et al. discuss several factors which affect public sentiments of ambivalence and fear towards the deep sea, such as the lack of visibility, relatability, and a continued perception that it has little to do with everyday life (2020, p. 797). Surveys indicate that public perceptions of the deep sea are affected by age, gender, and education level (Ankamah-Yeboah et al. 2020).

In a later response to a reply to "Fear and loathing of the deep sea", Jamieson et al. highlight the difference in how photic and sub-photic depths are used as settings in children's animated films (2022, p. 2340). In Disney's The Little Mermaid (1989), Ariel leaves the safety of her underwater home to make a pact with Ursula, the Sea-Witch, in the sea depths. The physical surrounds of the environment change from vibrant corals and colourful creatures to dark waters and hydrothermal vents. In Disney Pixar's Finding Nemo, Marlin and Dory are forced to endure the terrifying depths of a deep-sea canyon where they encounter a fanged anglerfish. These excursions are always temporary and 'are often the first impression that children obtain of the deep sea: a scary, frightening place that their heroes have to survive (and escape from) to be happy' (Jamieson et al. 2022, p. 2343). As this

paper will demonstrate, the continued construction of the deep sea in terms of its alterity in popular media presents an obstacle towards effective ocean stewardship.

1.1. Eldritch Ocean Abyss

The pop culture wiki TV Tropes describes the enigmatic way in which the deep sea is represented in popular culture as the "Eldritch Ocean Abyss", here described in the tongue-in-cheek style of the wiki:

> The ocean is mysterious. We know more about the surface of Mars than we do about our own oceans. The really deep, dark parts of the ocean are even more mysterious. When depicted in fiction, the ocean floors and trenches may be populated by unrelenting horrors the likes of which no human can comprehend: Alluring Anglerfish, Giant Squids, gulper eels, horrific leviathans — any briny monster you can name, and plenty more that you can't. (TV Tropes).

The common statement that we know more about the surface of Mars than we do about our own oceans—repeated in the TV Tropes description and in Blue Planet II—is not quantifiably true (Jamieson et al. 2020, p. 803, Arasu et al. 2023). Significant advances in deep-sea marine science mean that the deep sea is far from enigmatic; however, depictions in popular culture—continue perpetuating the idea that the deep sea is the world's last unexplored frontier; drawing upon a literary and cultural tradition to do so. The "Eldritch Ocean Abyss" entry cites H. P. Lovecraft as a major influence in establishing the deep sea as a place resistant to human understanding and as the home of dormant monsters who lie in wait. Séan Harrington argues that the feeling of "oceanic horror" in Lovecraft is really a fear of the Other within the Self; a "terror that comes from the discord between the reflective surface and the depths beneath, that draws our gaze into dark places from which we may never return" (2018, p. 32). The deep sea is anathema to the human condition and threatens human exceptionalism; and the stories we build around it are reflections of these anxieties. Steven & McCallum's analysis of cultural metanarratives argues that the "existential concerns" of societies manifest symbolically in mythological stories, which form a cultural inheritance of tropes, stories, and images for subsequent storytellers to draw upon. We therefore face a phenomenological void between how the cultural imagination conceives of the deep sea and how deep-sea scientists regard their area of enquiry—it is simultaneously a psychological space of the other within the Self and a vibrant ecosystem that exists independent of human perception.

1.2. The Deep Sea in Finding Nemo

Pixar's Finding Nemo is about clownfish Marlin's journey from the Great Barrier Reef to Sydney Harbour to find his son, who has been captured by amateur aquarist and dentist P. Sherman. Marlin is accompanied by Dory, a blue tang. Early in the film, the dentist's scuba mask, on which is written his address, drops down a trench, and Marlin and Dory must descend into the trench if they have any hope of locating Nemo. In the trench, they are captivated by a light, which is then revealed to be the lure of a horrific, sharp-toothed anglerfish. Finding Nemo is one of several films which "draw upon the anglerfish to evoke deep-sea alterity and therefore the danger presented to the protagonists" (Arasu & Jamieson 2023, p. 20). The anglerfish has huge, vacant eyes and does not speak, unlike the talking, cartoon-eyed, expressive sea creatures that populate the rest of the film. It is not based on one but many species of deep-sea fish; effectively foregoing scientific accuracy for spectacle (Anderson & Leslie 2001).

TV Tropes lists Finding Nemo alongside The Little Mermaid, The Sponge Bob Square Pants Movie (2004), and Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999) as contemporary film examples of the "Eldritch Ocean Abyss". These texts are largely aimed at young audiences. While we don't typically associate horror with children's literature, a great deal of media for young audiences utilises elements of horror to instil and reinforce ideas about what is and isn't normal. Fairy tales, for example, often feature monsters whose status as other is signified by morphological markers such as their large size, unnatural colours, claws, hair, teeth, etc. in abject configurations. The monster offers a "bibliotherapeutic space" for children to experience 'the darkest fears within the deep corners of their mind and remain within control of the situation' (Lauren 2020, p. 2). Noel Carroll proposes a working definition of a monster as "any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" (1990, p. 24). According to this definition, the anglerfish in Finding Nemo is a monster because of its scientific inaccuracies which separate it from the friendlier, speaking creatures that

populate the rest of the film. However, in Finding Nemo and the other texts discussed in this paper, the inhabitants of the deep sea take on the narrative role of monsters by being antagonists, obstacles, or otherwise foils to the protagonists regardless of whether they are real animals, imagined composites, or entirely fictional spectacular creatures. Monsters are "the product of cultural, social, and historical anxieties" which "become 'embodied' (such as in literature and/or through scientific classification) so that such anxieties can be 'controlled', examined, understood, and subsequently, 'resolved'" (Ng 2004, p. 5). The monsterisation of deep-sea animals represents the need to project a fear of the deep, dark other onto the transgressive body of an entity which can be defeated, as we see in the escape from the anglerfish, the demise of Ursula the Sea Witch in The Little Mermaid, and the dismemberment of the Naboo Opee Sea Killer by the even bigger Sando aqua monster in The Phantom Menace. Marlin and Dory "defeat" the anglerfish by trapping it in the scuba mask. They celebrate, triumphant over the monster, and quickly ascend to the relative safety of photic depths. Their adventure in the deep sea is brief and soon forgotten.

1.3. The Deep Sea in Luca

Luca is a 2021 Disney-Pixar animated film about a young sea monster who, much like The Little Mermaid's Ariel, is curious about life on land. The use of the word "monster" to describe Luca's kind represents a neutralisation of the term: they are cute, colourful, and commodifiable monsters in the sense that Pokémon or muppets are monsters. Sea monsters in Luca automatically assume a human form when not wet, so Luca is able to spend time on land and visit a local village in the Italian Riviera. His parents, however, are extremely wary of "land monsters" (humans), and forbid Luca from going to the surface. The conscious reversal of categories subverts the otherness implied in the term and draws attention to the way in which denoting the other as a "monster" is a process of identity construction. The multiple denotations of monstrosity in Luca highlight the shifting nature of the monster, much like Luca's own shifting form.

Luca's parents attempt to send him to the deep sea where his Uncle Ugo lives. In contrast to the other sea monsters that are brightly coloured with expressive eyes, Ugo (voiced by Sacha Baron Cohen) has an anglerfish's lure, chameleon eyes, and a wide mouth full of sharp teeth. When he visits Luca's family his heart stops due to the increased oxygen levels of the water, and Luca must punch him in his transparent chest to save him. His transparent body may have been inspired by the barrel-eye fish or by the general gelatinous semi-transparency of deep-sea animals. Given the film's setting upon the Italian Riviera and Ugo's oxygen intolerance, he is likely to reside in either Canyon Polcavera or Canyon Bisagno, which both underly the "Santuario de Cetacei" or Cetacean Sanctuary in the Mediterranean Sea (Mavropoulou et al 2020, p. 103348). This would explain his diet of "the entire whale carcass you can eat. It just floats into your mouth. You can't stop it." A scavenger diet, however, is inconsistent with the fact that he has a bioluminescent lure, which are only useful for pelagic predators and only present on female anglerfish; indicating that Ugo may be read as trans or intersex (Arasu & Jamieson 2023, p. 25).

In a tweet reply to a fan question about Ugo's appearance, director Enrico Casarosa explains that he was once almost killed on the surface: "He reformed and moved as far from his 'addiction' as possible to an ascetic life of deprivation" (2021). The deep sea is a place of exile; in Foucauldian terms a leper colony where abnormality is excluded from society (Foucault 2003, p. 44). In the film, Luca never actually goes to the deep sea, as the threat alone is enough to make him leave the sea for good and pursue a life on land with his friend Alberto. His parents track him down, and eventually sea monsters and humans overcome their differences. The denouement hints at a more amphibious future for Luca and his family, who are now welcomed and celebrated in the town of Casarosa. Ugo, however, is noticeably absent in the family reunion at the end of the film, in which Luca's grandmother reveals that she visits the town in human form every weekend without feeling any need to punish herself. Ugo's only other appearance is in a post-credits scene in which he monologues "some people think I'm mad to live in the deep. I think that they are the ones who are mad, not me the one who is mad, not them." It appears as if nobody bothered to inform him that it is now fine to spend time on land with humans and that there is no need for him to continue his miserable self-inflicted exile. He is reduced to a comic figure whose fate undercuts the film's central message of overcoming differences.

1.4. The Deep Sea in Spongebob Squarepants

The children's television series SpongeBob Squarepants was created by marine biologist Stephen Hillenburg in 1999. Scholarly analyses on the series have highlighted its environmental messages about health and pollution (Piatti-Farnell 2015, p. 143), and in 2011 a full-length philosophical analysis titled SpongeBob Squarepants and Philosophy: Soaking up Secrets under the Sea was published. The show's primary setting is an undersea town called Bikini Bottom; implied by the name to be a part of the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. This has spawned fan theories that SpongeBob and his friends are the product of the nuclear testing by the US government from 1946 – 1958. Deviating from its origins as a science communication comic titled "The Intertidal Zone", SpongeBob Squarepants opts for comic absurdism over scientific accuracy, with the titular character depicted as a kitchen sponge instead of a sea sponge. The characters are highly anthropomorphised for the sake of storytelling; they are bipedal and wear clothing, have jobs, and live in rock/tin/pineapple houses. SpongeBoB may not exactly educate children on the ecological details of benthic ecosystems, but it does introduce its young audiences to the biodiversity of marine life.

Episode 17 of Season 1, "Rock Bottom", is one of the most iconic episodes of SpongeBob Squarepants. In this episode, SpongeBob and Patrick take the wrong bus on their return from Gloveland and end up in a small town at the bottom of a cliff called Rock Bottom, whose name is an ominous contrast to their colourful home of Bikini Bottom. Although it is daytime, the surrounds are dark and barren: SpongeBob remarks that "even the soil is different here". Patrick remarks that he "can't even tell the bathrooms apart", leading to a shot of a toilet block with two doors: one with a question mark, the other with an upside-down question mark. SpongeBob suggests that they wait and see who comes out, and the two watches as a procession of deep-sea creatures of indiscernible gender emerge from each bathroom. Rock Bottom defies sense and order: gender signifiers can no longer be read according to social conventions; signs and clocks display strange symbols, and the locals have strange "accents". The Kafkaesque otherness of Rock Bottom is emphasised in SpongeBob's struggle to catch the bus back home. Patrick abandons him and night falls as indicated by the shift from dark to even darker, as SpongeBob observes: "This isn't your average everyday darkness. This is advanced darkness". After multiple repeated failures to board the bus, SpongeBob is helped by a local lanternfish who illuminates their surroundings with his lure. Ignoring SpongeBob's cries of terror, the lanternfish inflates his balloon, allowing him to float up and out of Rock Bottom. This subversive conclusion challenges the inherent monstrosity of deep-sea animals and shows that their differences are only relative. The ultimate struggle SpongeBob faces is with the public transport system (which isn't restricted or managed solely by the inhabitants of Rock Bottom, as the bus also goes to Gloveland and Bikini Bottom). "Rock Bottom" therefore goes a step further than Finding Nemo and Luca in questioning the conventional representation of the deep sea as dangerous and its inhabitants as monsters, even if this questioning only happens in the last few seconds of the show. In the texts that follow, as my analysis shows, this subversion is made more explicit, and the message of overcoming fears and prejudices is more centralised.

1.5. The Deep Sea in Octonauts

Octonauts is a children's television series which ran from 2010 – 2021 on BCC's CBeebies. The Octonauts are a multidisciplinary marine science team composed of Captain Barnacles (a polar bear), Lieutenant Kwazii, (a cat), medic Peso (a penguin), Professor Inkling (a dumbo octopus), biologist Dr Shellington, (a sea otter), engineer Tweak (a rabbit), technician Dashi (a dachshund), and chef Tunip (tuna/turnip hybrid). The show takes an edutainment approach, with each episode featuring a particular ecosystem or animal in need, who are then helped by the members of the team. Series creator and executive producer Kurt Mueller collaborated on the show with marine biologists, including some from NOAA (Abrams 2013). Children's media is a powerful educational tool in helping children to understand their role in caring for the natural world. A study on secondary students showed that the use of (print) cartoons led to a better conceptual understanding of issues in environmental science (Espinosa 2013, p. 13). Similar outcomes with animated cartoons have been demonstrated in primary level science classes (Delacosta 2009, p. 741). Octonauts communicates scientific facts about marine animals by having Captain Barnacles and Dr Shellington explain relevant scientific information about the creatures they help, and a "creature report" song at the end of each

episode consolidates this information. Where the science communication function of Octonauts is clear, the show also plays a role in cultivating interest in the ocean in young audiences.

Because young children have limited physical access to the ocean outside of aquariums and trips to the beach, media plays a significant role in shaping their understanding of the ocean, its inhabitants, its different ecosystems, and how people work in/with the ocean. In addition to communicating marine biology, Octonauts suggests the ways in which scientists interact with the ocean by having a team of mostly air-breathing mammals, who use undersea stations, submersibles, and diving suits to complete their missions. "Octonauts and The Midnight Zone" begins with the construction of the Octonauts' deep-sea lab in "the deepest darkest place on earth", the Mariana Trench, where they observe seamounts and hydrothermal vents. Although Peso is initially scared about setting up a deep-sea lab, he is reassured by the others who are excited about trying out their new equipment. To its credit, this episode does not depict the trench animals as weird or particularly scary; the plot revolves around a small group of yeti crabs, giant isopods, and tube worms who are lost due to their poor eyesight. The only other obstacle to the establishment of the lab comes from VeggieBot, who causes mayhem by making too many cakes. Other episodes also feature deep-sea creatures in need of help. In "Octonauts and the Vampire Squid" Kwazii scares Peso with a story about "a creature of the midnight zone… [who] wears a big cape covered in sharp spikes! His eyes glow in the dark! He squirts a horrible slime and he lives in a haunted castle in the deepest darkest part of the midnight zone!"

As Peso descends into the midnight zone alone he hears horrible moans. These turn out to be coming from a vampire squid who cries that he's "hurt, and nobody cares". Peso is terrified but reminds himself that "a medic helps any creature who is hurt or sick no matter what." Peso pursues the skittish vampire squid, demonstrating bravery and compassion. He learns that the squid's "scary" traits such as his mantle and bioluminescent ink are simply adaptations to living in low light. Peso helps the squid with his injured spike and they become friends. The vampire squid returns in "Octonauts and the Long-armed Squid". The episode begins similarly; with Kwazii telling Peso and the scared Vegimals a story about a ghost with long tentacles when the squid interrupts to warn them about the cries of a hurt creature coming from a shipwreck in the midnight zone. As the medic, it is Peso's responsibility to help the creature, but Kwazii's stories have again made him afraid of "sea ghosts". As the Octonauts explore the deep-sea shipwreck, the long arm of the "sea ghost" chases them through darkened rooms. Finally, the 'sea ghost' is revealed to be a long-armed or bigfin squid (Magnapinna spp., Jamieson & Vecchione 2022) whose long arms have been tangled. The squid accepts help from the Octonauts and apologises for scaring them.

Other deep-sea animals in Octonauts are depicted with less attention to scientific accuracy than is typically given to other creatures, and they are often depicted in a negative light. "Octonauts and the Kraken" is about a colossal squid who is unintentionally causing damage to the Octopod. He is heavily implied to be far less intelligent than his dumbo octopus cousin Professor Inkling. "Octonauts and the Blobfish Brothers" is about Blobfish Bob and his brothers, who are also all called Bob. The visual depiction of the blobfish is based on the internet-famous picture of a trawled, skinless specimen, which vastly differs from what blobfish look like in situ (Prokofiev & Kukuev 2009). These examples aside, Octonauts provides an interesting example of the "Eldritch Ocean Abyss" trope from within children's edutainment. It acknowledges the pre-existing construction of the deep sea as scary and dangerous and challenges this idea by using scientific fact to explain the deep-sea animal's morphological features, and more broadly, delivers a strong message about overcoming our fears.

1.6. The Deep Sea in Rainbow Fish

Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea (2009) by Marcus Pfister is one of five sequels to the immensely popular children's book The Rainbow Fish (1992). The first book is the tale of Rainbow Fish, a beautiful and vain fish with unique shiny scales who is friendless due to his arrogance. The wise octopus tells Rainbow Fish to share his scales with the other fish, which he does, gaining their friendship in the process. The Rainbow Fish has been criticised by right-wing journalists for promoting socialist values (Campos-Duffy 2021). In Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea, Rainbow Fish loses his one remaining shiny scale and must dive down to the deep sea to retrieve it. His friends

are apprehensive and warn him about the strange creatures that live there. His friend the octopus says, "I've heard that it's cold down there, and dark—and full of strange creatures nothing like us" (Pfister 2009, p. 4). The juxtaposition of Self/Other as shallow/deep is introduced, and Rainbow Fish is presented with the challenge of descent. Rainbow Fish journeys down into the canyon and meets a firefly squid, who introduces him to a dumbo octopus, jellyfish, a sea slug, and a lantern fish, who use their bioluminescence to light up the seabed and help him find his scale. Rainbow Fish returns to the shallows where his friends ask, "Was it scary?" and "were the creatures awful?" to which Rainbow Fish replies "No! […] They were beautiful! They looked different, but they turned out to be wonderful friends. Just like you" (Pfister 2009, p. 25).

Departing from a straightforward reproduction of the Eldritch Ocean Abyss trope; the story highlights the friendliness and beauty of the creatures through the use of holographic foils to represent bioluminescence. These are the same foils used to illustrate Rainbow Fish's envied shiny scales in the first book and which captivated its young audience. The use of beautiful foils across the shallow and deep fish hints at a kinship that extends past the habitats that divide them. Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea is a moralistic story about bravery, community, and facing fears. The thematic contrast between Rainbow Fish's friends' prejudices about the deep-sea creatures and the reality of them being kind of helpful work on both literal and allegorical levels. The shallow/deep binary serves as an appropriate setting for a child-friendly story about questioning what we are told, while also communicating scientific fact about deep sea animals.

A study of 100 fiction and non-fiction marine-themed children's picture books including The Rainbow Fish suggested that "ocean-themed picture books regularly align with mainstream science concepts and identify in which specific examples might be used to help teachers overcome current barriers and inhibitors for marine education inclusion" (Francis 2021, p. 182). Children's picture books "combine access to knowledge about a local marine environment while introducing children to scientific and geographical vocabulary and to marine science concept and processes" (Freitas et al. 2023, n.p.). Other studies demonstrate the effectiveness of edutainment animation and marine science communication (Soucy-Humphreys et al. 2023, p. 3, Pathmanathan 2014, p. 94). A similar children's picture book, Twinkle, Twinkle, Squiglet Pig by Joyce Dunbar and Tim Hopgood features a piglet squid (Helicocranchia pfefferi) who lives at the bottom of the ocean which is "deeper, darker, further, wetter, colder, lonelier than anything you can imagine" (2013, p. 1). He lives in the deep sea with a "woebegone" hairy frogfish, blobfish, lumpfish, spookfish, mola mola, and loosejaw, who do not understand why Piglet Squid is constantly smiling. Through a torturous series of events, Piglet Squid ascends to the surface, sees the stars, and returns to the deep sea to tell the woebegone fish about the "twinkle twinkle squiglet pigs" (stars) which make the fish smile. Where TTSP and RFDDS are similar in plot and both draw upon the negative representation of the deep sea, the latter subverts this representation while the former does not.

2. Discussion

We can observe a recurring representation of the deep sea as an unknown abyss across a wide range of media with marine settings designed for young audiences. These texts engage with the pre-existing cultural construction of the deep sea as the binary opposite of the safe and beautiful shallow waters: it is dark, depressing, dangerous, and unknown. In Finding Nemo, The Little Mermaid, SpongeBob Squarepants and Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea, temporary descents into the deep are brief physical and psychological challenges. The Hero's Journey's descent into the abyss is taken literally, with the "Known" represented by the protagonists' shallow water home, and the "Abyss'/'Unknown" represented by the deep sea, in which the "hero" "moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell 2004, p. 89). The ascent that follows signifies the "hero's" psychological development as they return with new knowledge, power, or resolve.

For stories set underwater, the deep sea is a natural choice for a temporary adventure used to facilitate character development. The consistent othering of the deep sea across myth and popular culture may be related to an ingrained aversion to danger. Thalassophobia (fear of the ocean) is a common phobia, and fear of the deep sea compounds it with nyctophobia (fear of the dark) and agoraphobia (fear of open spaces). Such phobias are common and may have evolved as advantageous

traits. Neuroscientific modelling proposes that the fear elicitation module is activated by stimuli "that are fear relevant in an evolutionary perspective" (Öhman & Mineka 2001, p. 483). This would provide a partial explanation for the cultural ubiquity of deep-sea monster myths among seafaring societies; a "deep human thread" that manifests as an instinctual aversion to what we consider to be unknown (Gilmore 2003, p. 2). Contemporary monster theory regards monsters as the cultural manifestations of the anxieties of the cultures from which they arise (Cohen 1996, p. 4). Stories about deep-sea "monsters" are reflections about what might lurk in the unknown abysses of our minds and/or the deep. As the modern form of mythological transmission (Attebery 2013, p. 9), contemporary texts inherit this cultural legacy and have the ability to reproduce, adapt, and subvert the "images and forms" that are "subject to social conditioning and modification through the interaction of various retellings" (Stephens & McCallum 1998, p. 3). The metanarrative of the deep is subject to re-negotiation in a number of the texts examined, which demonstrate a level of subversion towards the idea that the deep sea is inherently bad and scary. SpongeBob Squarepants, Octonauts and Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea draw on the pre-existing metanarrative of the other deep sea and challenge this assumption by drawing attention to the ways in which difference is constructed in terms of artificial binaries. The deep-sea episodes of Octonauts and the narrative of RFFDS show that deep-sea animals aren't as scary we are made to believe. These texts expose the processes by which metanarratives are transmitted and reproduced throughout communities until they become accepted as fact, and instead highlight the value of experiential knowledge.

The dissolution of the Self/Other distinction in SpongeBob Squarepants, Octonauts and Rainbow Fish Discovers the Deep Sea, as exemplified in the formation of deep-sea kinships, situate these texts within a broader postmodern tradition of questioning pre-existing cultural metanarratives and knowledge structures. Fictional monsters in children's literature "can lead the readers to question the deep-ingrained human/other distinction and encourage them to face their own inner monstrosity" (Mustola & Karkulehto 2020, p. 137). To varying degrees, the texts discussed are also informed by recent advances in deep-sea marine science. This is most evident in Octonauts, which is primarily a science edutainment program. Fictional texts about the deep sea determine how audiences—particularly young audiences—learn about and relate to it. For children, much of their knowledge of marine life comes from the media they consume, TV programs and picture books are effective educational tools when it comes to fostering interest in science, but also influence the ways and extent to which children relate to a less physically accessible world.

Although the deep sea in children's media is a highly allegorical, aestheticised place, the way in which it is constructed in fictional has a significant impact on shaping how children understand and relate to it. Children's popular media functions as a pedagogical space where "identities are transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic" (Giroux 2004, p. 60). When the deep sea is universally exploited as a generic abyssal setting in which the protagonist will face a character defining struggle, a young viewer's concept of the deep sea will be shaped by sentiments of fear and aversion. Stories which subvert the mythologised otherness of the deep sea are palimpsestic works which negotiate the tensions between a deep-seated fear of the Other and a growing environmental shift towards an ethics of care which encompasses all aspects of the natural world, not just those which are charismatic or profitable. When it is represented in a more positive light that encourages curiosity and aesthetic appreciation, young audiences have a better chance at developing the "multispecies alliances" necessary for "navigating through present crisis" (Deloughrey 2017. p. 42). Because the general public encounters sea life in "highly mediated forms—such as films, photography, websites, and aquariums", issues pertaining to ocean conservation tend to elude environmentalist and environmental justice models of knowledge (Alaimo 2013, p. 191). This is even more so the case when it comes to the deep sea. We can only hope that this subversive approach continues in the new waves oceanic entertainment that seem to be dominating popular culture at this cultural moment.

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