**“Bluebeard” versus black British women’s writing: Criminal-authors, reader-detectives, and deadly plots in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox***

Helen Oyeyemi’s 2011 novel *Mr. Fox* artfully remasters the “Bluebeard” fairytale and its many variants and rewritings, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. It is also the first novel in which Oyeyemi does not overtly address blackness or racial identity. However, the present article argues that *Mr. Fox* is concerned with the status of all women writers, including women writers of colour. With *Mr. Fox*, Oyeyemi echoes the assertiveness and inquisitiveness of Bluebeard’s last wife, whose disobedient questioning of Bluebeard’s canonical authority leads her to discover, denounce, and warn other women about his murderous nature. A tale of the deception and manipulation inherent in storytelling, *Mr. Fox* allows for its narrative foul play to be exposed on the condition that its literary victims turn into detective-readers and decipher the hidden clues left behind by the novel’s criminal-authors. This article puts the love triangle between author St. John Fox, muse Mary, and wife Daphne under investigation by associating reading and writing motifs with detective fiction. Oyeyemi’s *ménage à trois* can thus be exposed as an anthropomorphic metaphor for the power struggle between the patriarchal literary canon, established feminist literature, and up-and-coming (black British) women writers, incarnated respectively by Mr. Fox, Mary Foxe, and Daphne Fox.

**Keywords:** Helen Oyeyemi; Black British Women’s Writing; Detective Fiction; Bluebeard; Fairytale Rewriting

Helen Oyeyemi’s 2011 novel *Mr. Fox* artfully remasters the age-old “Bluebeard” fairytale by blurring all kinds of boundaries: gender roles, definitions of good and evil, storytelling conventions.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this intricate love game between a burned-out author, his hysterical wife, and his made-up muse, Oyeyemi inverts the trope of the passive damsel in distress and complicates “narrative lines” in order to unsettle the reader’s grasp of victims and villains (Ormond 2017, 154-157). *Mr. Fox* exposes how “patriarchal and colonial lines” enclose women’s behavior, force them into disobedience, and legitimize their punishment (Radford 2018, 194). Female insubordination, it would seem, is what sets *Mr. Fox* in motion – one of many narrative traits the novel shares with the “Bluebeard” tale cycle. Building on these previous analyses, the present article contends that Oyeyemi’s metafictional novel reads like a murder mystery. Reading *Mr. Fox* as an engagement with the form of detective fiction, it draws on Heta Pyrhönen’s Bluebeard Gothic and Peter Hühn’s interactional reading model.[[2]](#footnote-2) Pyrhönen sees in Bluebeard a criminal-author and in his wife a reader-detective “whose reading enables her to write her way out of Bluebeard’s deadly plot” (2010, 17). In the same vein, Peter Hühn proposes an analogy between the detective’s activities to sign-interpretation, meaning-formation, and storytelling (1987, 453). Hühn argues against the “instrumentalist reading model” that is typical of classic detective fiction, where “a basic congruence between language, thinking, and reality […] is only temporarily obscured by the criminal” (461) and views hardboiled stories as essentially about “writing and reading insofar as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering ‘plots’” (451). Harking back to Todorov’s typology of detective fiction, he sees in the hardboiled private eye an interpreter of the “*interaction* between the reading subject and the object (the text) in which neither side remains a stable entity” (461; emphasis in the original). Combined together, Heta Pyrhönen’s Bluebeard Gothic take on reader-detectives and criminal-authors and Peter Hühn’s interactional reading model of hardboiled fiction are used in this article to interpret *Mr. Fox* as a cautionary tale of the deceptive and manipulative nature of storytelling.

Set in the U.S.A. of the 1930s, the Golden Age of hardboiled detective fiction, the novel abounds with narrative foul play: it is seemingly impossible to figure out which character writes what, when, to what end. The novel’s storytelling trickery can only be revealed on the condition that its literary victims – both inside and outside the novel – turn into detective-readers and decipher the hidden clues left behind by the novel’s multiple criminal-authors. In other words, metafictional sleuthing on the part of the reader is necessary to uncover *Mr. Fox*’s extensive intertext (Smith 2007; cf. Hermansson 2009; Wilson 2010). Taking his cue from Gérard Genette’s concept of transtextuality, Kevin Smith defines the concept of “metafictional fairytale intertext” as one of eight identifiable ways in which the fairytale can operate as an intertext (Smith 2007, 20). According to Smith, metafictional intertextuality occurs when a fairytale is commented upon or analyzed in a critical way, either in a short sentence or as a running concern throughout the text (Smith 2007, 60–62). The title of the novel echoes the English variant of the gruesome fairytale (ATU 312; *MF* 74, 141, 255, 267), but *Mr. Fox* also alludes to “Reynardine” (*MF* 103-109, 127-136, 267), “Fitcher’s Bird” (ATU 311; *MF* 74-80, 172, 267), and “The Robber Bridegroom” (ATU 955; 11-57, 74, 77, 127-131, 153, 270, 289). [[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, the names of the protagonists of the novel (St. John Fox, Mary Jane Foxe, Daphne Fox) evoke *Jane Eyre* by Victorian writer Charlotte Brontë as well as the interbellum novel *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier – both famous adaptations of “Bluebeard” themselves (cf. Bertrandias 2006; Carter 1992; Miquel-Baldellou 2009; Stoneman 1996; Tatar 2004). Without this intertext, *Mr. Fox* would have been no more than an unfortunate love story between a seemingly insane threesome. However, this article suggests that *Mr. Fox* remains true to its fairytale nature by magically transforming the texts “Bluebeard”, *Jane Eyre*, and *Rebecca* into (fictional) humans and casting them in the roles of writer St. John Fox, muse Mary Jane Foxe and wife Daphne Fox. Reading *Mr. Fox* as a metafictional intertext allows for the explosively awkward *ménage à trois* between author St. John, muse Mary, and wife Daphne to be interpreted as an anthropomorphic metaphor for the on-going power struggle between, respectively, the patriarchal literary canon (i.e. “Bluebeard”), established feminist literature (i.e. *Jane Eyre*), and up-and-coming woman writers (i.e. *Rebecca*), such as Helen Oyeyemi herself. When Daphne puts pen to paper, she mirrors the assertiveness and inquisitiveness of Bluebeard’s last wife, whose disobedient questioning of Bluebeard’s canonical authority leads her to discover, denounce, and warn other women about his murderous nature. Outside the novel, the same could be said of Oyeyemi. With *Mr. Fox*, she rereads and rewrites the Bluebeard-like British canon, like her fictional alter-ego in the novel. Oyeyemi uses *Mr. Fox* to write her way out of the canon’s deadly, creatively stifling authorship and establish herself as a full-fledged British writer, who also happens to be female and black.

1. **St. John, Mary, Daphne: *Ménage à trois***

Since the publication of her acclaimed debut novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005), written when she was studying for her A-levels, Helen Oyeyemi has been steadily carving out a successful writing career. The Nigerian-British child prodigy has become a renowned author of six full-length novels,[[4]](#footnote-4) two plays,[[5]](#footnote-5) and a collection of short stories.[[6]](#footnote-6) In all of her writings, Oyeyemi seems to have a predilection for gothic tropes of fear, haunting, entrapment, and madness. Interestingly, her gothic is self-reflexive as her Uncanny is haunted itself by unstable notions of precolonial and postcolonial pasts. Mafe classifies Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* as “postcolonial Female gothic”, a term designating feminist fiction that engages with colonial histories through the horrific, the supernatural, the sublime, and other gothic tropes (Mafe 2012). Buckley follows suit and reads not only *The Icarus Girl* but also *The Opposite House* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* as postcolonial gothic fiction (Buckley 2017; cf. Lau 2016). In the same vein, Cousins argues that by weaving Yoruba tropes (e.g. *aje, abiku*) into an otherwise markedly English gothic tradition, Oyeyemi develops a new subgenre in *White is for Witching*, namely “the Yoruba gothic” (Cousins 2012; cf. Satkunananthan 2011). Buckley and Ilott even herald her place within the gothic canon of postcolonial writers “such as Salman Rushdie (*Shame*, 1983), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987), Shani Mootoo (*Cereus Blooms at Night*, 1996) and Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997), all of whom have turned the Western-dominated gothic genre to their own purposes in engaging with the legacies of colonial violence and slavery” (Buckley and Ilott 2017, 10). *Mr. Fox*’s gothic undertone is the only aspect that seems to tie it in with Oyeyemi’s other work. Contrary to the novels succeeding and preceding *Mr. Fox*, all narrated from the perspective of a female protagonist who struggles with her identity, the maverick novel’s main concern is seemingly not one of race but of gender. *Mr. Fox* gives voice to St. John Fox, a 1930s New England author who keeps offending his muse Mary Foxe with his misogynistic and violent writerly tendencies. Set in a non-British past, the plot centers on a male protagonist, who is racially unmarked – as are nearly all of the other characters in *Mr. Fox*. [[7]](#footnote-7)

To St. John Fox, the violent ways in which he has his female protagonists die are “all just a lot of games” (*MF* 5), but to Mary Foxe his writing makes him “a villain” and “a serial killer” (*MF* 4) who needs to be given a taste of his own medicine. From the very first lines, Oyeyemi foreshadows that *Mr. Fox* will read like detective fiction andwill, therefore, consist of two kinds of stories: “the story of the *crime* (which consists of action) and the story of the *investigation* (which is concerned with knowledge)” (Hühn 1987, 452; emphasis in the original). In this case, both the readers and the characters of *Mr. Fox* will be faced with murderers whose identity they are expected to decipher as the novel unfolds. As Hühn explains, if the detective is to be compared to a reader, then:

[the] main difficulty of the reading process is occasioned by the criminal’s attempt to prevent the detective from deciphering the true meaning of his text. This is, basically, a contest between an author and a reader about the possession of meaning, each of them wishing to secure it for himself. (The contest *within* the novel is repeated on a higher level between the novelist and the actual reader.) The reading process is further complicated by the fact that there are always other characters involved who are also guilty of something that they attempt to hide – the *suspects*. Typically, these characters also tamper with the text of everyday reality, changing or rearranging signs so as to conceal or transform the appearance of their guilty little secrets. Thus the text is revealed as having more *authors* than one and, consequently, as containing more meaning than one – all of which can be classified as *stories* and are, in fact, recounted as separate stories in the end. (Hühn 1987, 456)

True to form, Oyeyemi’s main plotline is interlaced with whimsical but gruesome short stories, which serve to cover the tracks of the villains and victims of the novel (cf. Ormond 2017) and throw everybody off their scent – both the detective-readers within the novel and the real-life detective-readers of the novel.

 As a criminal-author herself, Oyeyemi uses Mary and St. John Fox’s banter as a red herring and distracts her reader-detectives from the narrative hocus-pocus she is about to inflict on them. Tired of solely inspiring femicides in him, Mary tricks St. John Fox into playing a storytelling game with her. To have him change his ways, she tries to turn the tables on St. John and writes *him* into the kind of violent short stories for which he is known. Right before they set off on their narrative adventure, Mary warns Mr. Fox that he will have to be “flexible” (*MF* 6) and cryptically predicts that she will be casting him in the role of the underdogs he usually kills off without a pardon:

‘[…] Let’s go further in, Mr. Fox. Would you love me if I were your husband and you were my wife?’

‘This is dumb.’

‘Would you, though?’

‘Well, yes, I could see that working out.’

‘Would you love me if… we were both men?’

‘Uh… I guess so.’

‘If we were both women?’

‘Sure.’

‘If I were a witch.’

‘You’re enchanting enough as it is.’

‘If you were my mother?’ (*MF* 3)

Their first literary collaboration is “Dr. Lustucru”, the story of an insane doctor who ends up beheading his wife, for no particular reason (*MF* 9-10). The bloody and unjust ending, typical of St. John, comes as a surprise to Mary Foxe; she never expected St. John to take over – what was supposed to be – their joint plot so shamelessly, only to revert to “exactly the kind of behavior she had set out to discourage” (*MF* 57). Mary Foxe’s seemingly straightforward plan to evoke empathy in Mr. Fox for his literary victims through storytelling quickly turns into a hazy showdown of (meta)narrative prowess, marred even further by Daphne Fox, St. John’s long-suffering wife. Initially only making brief appearances in the main plotline as well as in some of the short stories, Mrs. Fox ends up taking the reins of the narrative when she realizes that instead of seeing Mary as a rival with whom she needs to compete for Mr. Fox’s undivided attention, she too can use Mary as a muse and become a writer herself (*MF* 299-305). The story reaches a climax when Mary, previously “just a thought” and “someone imaginary” (*MF* 233), transforms into a woman of flesh and blood and, with the help of Daphne, escapes Mr. Fox’s writerly grip (*MF* 304).

Looking solely at the above-mentioned narrative, *Mr. Fox* makes for a confusing read. Unsurprisingly, the novel received mixed reviews in the broadsheet and literary press, “where its deliberately fragmented narrative structure [was] met with some dissatisfaction” (Buckley and Ilott 17). However, *Mr. Fox* begins to make more sense when it is read as detective fiction and its “deliberately fragmented narrative structure” as a narrative maze, consisting of carefully planted clues that lead to nowhere and ensure the novel’s *dénouement* – if there is one – is forever delayed. *Mr. Fox*’s seemingly uncharacteristic 1930s setting could be one of those leads, elucidating part of the novel’s mystery, while simultaneously thickening its plot. The interbellum was the Golden Age of hardboiled detective fiction, which speaks for *Mr. Fox*’s possible categorizationas a detective novel. The 1930s was also the decade in which Daphne du Maurier published *Rebecca*, which strengthens the argument that Daphne Fox can be interpreted as a metafictional reimaging of Daphne du Maurier. What happens if not only Daphne Fox, but the entire novel is seen through the lens of metafiction? St. John Fox cannot be seen as just another author anymore. He becomes *the* Author – the (predominantly male) canon incarnate, “a deadly foe” as per Daphne (*MF* 288), an unyielding and indestructible literary force. Mr. Fox is always one step ahead of his female coprotagonists, who desperately “wish that there was some level ground [they] could meet him on” (*MF* 228). Mary Foxe, in her turn, transforms into Charlotte Brontë, Margaret Atwood, Marina Warner, Anne Sexton[[8]](#footnote-8) and all the other Grandes Dames of Women’s Writing: literary commentators whose primordial critiques of canonical Authors have become classics in their own right. By that logic, if St. John Fox and Mary Foxe symbolize the male versus the female literary canon, Daphne turns into the woman writer of today, vying for a place among the Greats. Initially perplexed by the intimidating writing that surrounds her, she slowly emancipates herself from her predecessors and blazes her own trail. Daphne transforms from a colourless, somewhat childish foil for Mary and St. John into the wise, poised heroine of the story. As *Mr. Fox* unfolds, Mrs. Fox evolves from a meek and self-deprecating figure, chronically outshone by St. John and Mary’s ongoing bickering, to a confidant leading lady. She decides she will no longer be consumed by the destructive relationship she shares with her husband and even makes peace with Mary Foxe. Even more, with some encouragement from the latter, Daphne decides to put the toxic love triangle in which she finds herself entangled to good use by writing a novel about it. The enigma of the bond that Daphne and Mary, who started off as love rivals, inexplicably develop throughout the story is solved when the texts the women metafictionally represent, i.e. *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, are seen as Barthian “writerly” texts, open to interpretation and engaging in an on-going dialogue with their readership (Barthes 1974, 4–5). By the same token, the uncompromising Mr. Fox and the “Bluebeard” folk tales for which he stands signify “readerly” texts, inflexible archetypes that have become “‘mythicized’ as natural stories, as second nature” (Zipes 2006, 1). *Mr. Fox* thus rewrites the rewriting (i.e. *Rebecca*) of a rewriting (i.e. *Jane Eyre*)of a rhizomatic original (i.e. “Bluebeard”) by reimagining the way stories of the likes of *Rebecca*, *Jane Eyre* and “Bluebeard” come to be.

1. **St. John, Mary, Daphne: *Folie à Deux***

Why did Oyeyemi chose du Maurier’s *Rebecca* as the third literary element of her metafictional *ménage à trois*, when a much more obvious choice for a writer so well-versed in the postcolonial gothic would have been Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), another famous retelling of *Jane Eyre*? A textbook postcolonial as well as gothic novel (cf. Spivak 1985; Senel 2014), *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes up the challenge of allowing Creole Antoinette/Bertha, Rochester’s first wife, to metaphorically “write back to the center” by sharing her side of *Jane Eyre* – a story that was supposedly silenced by Jane’s uncouth depictions of Bertha as nothing but an abject madwoman (cf. Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Oyeyemi’s reluctance to include *Wide Sargasso Sea* lies, perhaps, in her trademark suspicion of the postcolonial agenda. As Buckley and Ilott explain: “Oyeyemi’s brand of postmodern, postcolonial writing […] does not celebrate the fragment or the incomplete. It is not an affirmation of a postmodern identity negotiated at the margins, but a troubling whisper that highlights the trauma that seeps into histories, nations and bodies that have become broken” (1). Incorporating *Wide Sargasso Sea* into *Mr. Fox*, as opposed to *Rebecca*, might have been a somewhat – for Oyeyemi’s standards – gratuitous validation of the postcolonial concern with subaltern voices. In *Mr. Fox*, Oyeyemi does not write back to the center. Instead, she relies on metafiction to imply that she has read the center. She has also read what was written back to the center. However, in *Mr. Fox*, Oyeyemi positions herself above and beyond the postcolonial dialectic by writing not *to* but *about* all the texts who position themselves somewhere between the center and the periphery. Oyeyemi writes for the sake of writing, thus converting her signature dodging of definitions and tags into a central concern of the novel itself. This might explain why Oyeyemi plays around with the detective genre in *Mr. Fox*. As Hühn (1987) and Pyrhönen (2010) argue, detective fiction naturally lends itself to riffs on the concepts of reading and writing. These reading and writing motifs are crucial to the significance of *Mr. Fox* both inside and outside the novel: they allow the narrative to float above rigid labels and binary oppositions, both within the story and beyond it. Unlike *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Mr. Fox* does not answer back to its canonical predecessors. Rather, *Mr. Fox*’s metafictional fairytale intertext seems to emphasize the novel’s narrative porousness by acknowledging its canonical lineage, however scary and immoral a Bluebeard-like heritage of the kind may be.

A matrix of metafictional references intent on escaping dialectical dichotomies, *Mr. Fox* contains texts thatexist *because* of each other and not *despite* each other – the latter being an implication on which many postcolonial classics, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, are built. The novel is not only a rewriting of writerly texts, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, and readerly texts, such as the “Bluebeard” folk tales, but of literary criticism[[9]](#footnote-9) as well – a claim further substantiated by the fact that Oyeyemi cites critic Marina Warner in one breath with writer Margaret Atwood and poet Anne Sexton as her sources of inspiration for *Mr. Fox* in her “Acknowledgments” (*MF* 325).

In contrast, previous readings of “Bluebeard”, *Jane Eyre*,and *Rebecca* tended to present the main characters as incarnations of antagonistic doubles. As Patsy Stoneman explains:

The young heroine [i.e. the nameless Mrs. De Winter in *Rebecca*] is like Jane Eyre in being an orphan, humble, shy and diffident, and her occupation, as companion to a rich lady, is similar in status to that of a Victorian governess. Maxim De Winter is like Rochester in being rich and independent, the owner of a country house, and in having an unhappy secret which makes him moody and inward looking. The two secrets are similar (first wives [i.e. Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and Rebecca in *Rebecca*] who were brilliant but immoral), and both have attempted to rid themselves of their wives by illegal means. In both cases, the country house becomes oppressive to its owner because of its association with the mad, bad wife. In spite of being haunted and oppressed, however, by the houses which contain evidence of disastrous first marriages, both Rochester and Maxim De Winter try to establish new, young wives in the same houses and under the same domestic rules. (Stoneman 1996, 99)

Bertha versus Jane, Rebecca versus Mrs. De Winter, Mary Foxe versus Daphne Fox: all three pairs of opposites appear similar in that they walk a fine line between obedience and disobedience of the patriarchy symbolized by their male Others. While wandering through Thornfield Hall, for instance, Jane ponders the gender roles of Victorian society and finds that she disagrees with them:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 1847, 95)

This fiery internal monologue is interrupted by a demonic laugh, which at this point of the plot Jane still ascribes to Edward Rochester’s servant Grace Poole, who is in fact Bertha Rochester’s nurse. Jane’s tone changes completely: despite her previous thoughts on the unjustness of condemning women for behaving in ways that do not strike with the custom, Jane is suddenly submersed by feelings of disgust and disdain for the un-womanlike and unconventional Grace (Brontë 1847, 95). The hypocrisy of the scene somewhat undermines Jane’s otherwise fiercely – for Victorian standards – feminist demeanor. Similarly, the soft-spoken ingénue Mrs. De Winter accepts her husband’s depiction of Rebecca as a fiendish woman and even agrees with his logic that killing Rebecca was a necessary evil. She reassures him that “Rebecca is dead […]. That’s what we’ve got to remember. Rebecca is dead. She can’t speak, she can’t bear witness. She can’t harm you anymore” (du Maurier 1971, 282).

Daphne’s initial rejection of rebellious, disobeying women such as Mary Foxe is just as striking. When Daphne learns that Mary Foxe – who is only supposed to be St. John’s muse, a harmless figment of his imagination – is bullying her husband and therefore alienating him from her, Daphne’s first thought is that St. John should kill her, as he has done with every other female literary character he ever made up: “[…] I could ask him, tell him, to stop, just stop, do whatever was necessary; he could kill her or something – what did that even mean, to kill someone imaginary – why, it was nothing at all. He could do it. He should do it, for me” (*MF* 233). It is not until Jane, Mrs. De Winter, and Daphne meet their counterparts Bertha, Rebecca,[[10]](#footnote-10) and Mary that they realize that the Other woman they so despise and vilify is, in fact, more like them than not. Consequently, Bertha, Rebecca, and Mary are usually read as Jane’s, Mrs. De Winter’s and Daphne’s dark Other self; the most famous example of this kind of reading would be Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). Building on this interpretation, Karen Stein argues that:

[…] rather than responding to each woman as a unique, complex, and therefore potentially fearsome being, men have split the concept of Woman into pairs of stereotyped antitheses: saint/sinner, virgin/whore, nurturing mother/devouring stepmother, and angel/witch. […] Through centuries of conditioning, women have internalized this male-created division, and, consequently, much of their behaviour can be understood as a reaction to this reductionism. […] At some point the mask is no longer a convenient defense but a trap; the woman is then confronted with her own terrifying split between “monstrous” inner drives and “nice” outward appearances. (Stein 1983, 124–25)

In other words, Bertha, Rebecca and Mary proudly exhibit on the outside what Jane, Mrs. De Winter and Daphne hide on the inside, or what they are made to hide by their Bluebeard-like suitors.

The Other woman is not only supposed to symbolize the monstrous inner drives that Jane, Mrs. De Winter and Daphne suppress. According to Eugenia DeLamotte, the Other woman is also an inherent part of Bluebeard’s – and therefore Rochester’s, Maxim De Winter’s and St. John Fox’s – own psyche (1990, 212–13). As the symbolic universal wicked Woman, she is to be the recipient of every negative quality of her supposedly superior male other half. As Heta Pyrhönen observes in *Bluebeard Gothic and Its Progeny*:

Rochester acts like Bluebeard in incarcerating Bertha. He sees in her the origin and cause of all that has gone awry in his life. Acting Bluebeard’s role, Rochester’s mode of thinking adheres to […] the persecutor’s mentality. Persecutors blame their victims for the loss of the supposedly crucial distinctions and the lack of founding differences. The chamber is Bluebeard’s site of ritual sacrifice, sustaining the order of his world. Bluebeard holds woman responsible for both sickness and cure, [because] her death redeems her transgression by asserting her fundamental difference from him. Woman is thus transformed into a sacred scapegoat. (Pyrhönen 2010, 18; cf. Hartsock 1989)

Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that initially Jane, Mrs. De Winter, and Daphne acknowledge the alleged superiority of their male counterparts. As Daphne explains:

I vowed that I wouldn’t have a man unless he was someone I could really be with, someone capable of being my better self, superior and yet familiar, a man whose thoughts, impressions, and feelings I could inhabit without a glimmer of effort, returning to myself without any kind of wrench. […] I wanted St. John Fox. (*MF* 228)

Just as Bluebeard’s wife “hankers not so much after his wealth as after his superior status, the sign of which is the chamber with its secret knowledge” (Pyrhönen 2010, 28), the women of *Mr. Fox*’s intertext seem to truly believe that by attaching themselves to powerful men they, the underdogs, will also be regarded with the same prestige. Only when Bluebeard’s love interests meet and merge with their Other half, do they realize that their Man is not inherently superior. Bluebeard’s true secret is, in fact, “the arbitrary nature of phallocentric power, the arbitrariness of which Bluebeard refuses to acknowledge” (Pyrhönen 2010, 23).

The Victorian notion that double natures should remain separate in order for the individual to thrive has been challenged by quite a number of postmodern works, some of which Oyeyemi mentions in her “Acknowledgements”, i.e. Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Anne Sexton’s *Transformations,* and Margaret Atwood’s *Bluebeard’s Egg*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Arguably, the literary criticism Oyeyemi includes in her rewriting testifies to an interpretative evolution according to which characters of the likes of Jane/Bertha and Mrs. de Winter/Rebecca are doublets (Miquel-Baldellou 2009). Unlike the antithesis, which signifies the flipside of the same coin, the doublet is the result of a word game “in which one word is transformed into another by changing one letter at each step” (Miquel-Baldellou 2009, 32). The doublets in *Mr. Fox* are not limited to obvious word games, such as the closeness of the last names of St. John Fox and Mary Foxe[[12]](#footnote-12) or the shared first names of St. John Rivers (*Jane Eyre*) and St. John Fox (*Mr. Fox*) as well as Daphne Fox (*Mr. Fox*) and Daphne du Maurier (*Rebecca*). *Mr. Fox*’s characters are doubletsas well: St. John Fox is no mere alter ego of Rochester or Maxim De Winter, Mary Foxe is not just another Bertha or Rebecca, and neither is Daphne another Jane Eyre or Mrs. De Winter. St. John Fox is both Rochester *and* St. John Rivers, as well as Maxim De Winter *and* Favell.[[13]](#footnote-13) Mary Foxe and Daphne Fox are both Jane *and* Bertha and Mrs. De Winter *and* Rebecca.

In a similar vein, Oyeyemi upsets readerly expectations about the union of her characters. Tatar points out that, far from reverting to the sacred killing of Bluebeard, Brontë and du Maurier bless their heroines with a surprisingly happy marriage, which could be ascribed to a tacit connivance between husband and wife: “Inspired by a radical critique of marriage for the sake of wealth and glamour, Charlotte Brontë and Daphne du Maurier reconfigure the folklore plot to create wives whose curiosity leads to collusion rather than detection” (Tatar 2004, 85). The Bluebeard-like husbands initially try to keep a dangerous secret from their second wives-to-be, namely a lunatic first wife with whom they did away, but once the women are initiated into their husband’s conspiracy, they do not publicly denounce their husband’s wrongdoings – which, in the end, is their moral and legal duty. In contrast, Oyeyemi adds a plot twist to these earlier rewritings of “Bluebeard” and turns her unlucky *ménage à trois* into what Daphne Fox calls a *folie à deux*:

[…] St. John’s in a bad way. He says he’s fine and he acts as if he’s fine, but he’s in a bad way. I don’t blame him for not being able to tell; he doesn’t do sane work for a living. And I have been sleeping with him, eating with him; we took a bath together last Tuesday – so I’m in a bad way too. I’ve seen and heard a woman he made up. I know what this is called – a folie a deux [sic], a delusion shared by two or more people who live together. (*MF* 235-6)

Madness in *Jane Eyre* is exclusive to women: the first wife is declared insane by her husband and the wife-to-be becomes paranoid and starts questioning her sanity because of her beloved’s secret. In du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, madness starts seeping into the male psyche as Maxim De Winter ponders whether living with a wife like Rebecca might have made him mad by proxy: “Perhaps I was [mad]. Perhaps I am. It doesn’t make for sanity, does it, living with the devil? (Maurier 1938, 273). In *Mr. Fox*, however, Oyeyemi’s Bluebeard does not blame his madness on the women around him. Contrary to Maxim De Winter, St. John Fox is not portrayed as the otherwise clear-headed counterpart of unstable Mary or hysterical Daphne, whose infectious insanity he supposedly cannot escape. It is revealed that St. John Fox came back shell-shocked from the Great War, which is why he went so far as contemplating suicide at one point:

It got so I had a pistol to my head, there in my cosy study, and I wasn’t at all sure that I’d taken it out of my desk drawer myself. I must have been holding it, but there was no feeling in my fingers; the gun seemed to be floating […]. The gun’s nozzle pushed at my skin, as if trying to find the correct part of my skull to nestle against. Death like the insect, menacing the tree…

‘Shhh’, said Mary Foxe. She reached over my shoulder, prised my fingers loose one by one, and took the gun. (*MF* 112)

Paradoxically, although Mr. Fox has been questioning Mary’s mental state from the beginning, stating “[if] it wasn’t for the serenity in her eyes I would’ve thought she’d lost her mind” (*MF* 4), it is she who prevents his suicide and reassures him that he is not “going mad” (*MF* 112). St. John’s revelation that Mary saved his life once somehow brings all three central characters together, as if they were suddenly aware that their lives are inseparably linked. Had Oyeyemi’s protagonists been each other’s doubles, only the demise of their dark Other(s) would have allowed them to lead sane, virtuous lives. In *Jane Eyre*, not only does Bertha perish in a fire, but Rochester must also pay his dues: he is left crippled and partially blind by the same fire that killed Bertha. In *Rebecca*, the death of the first wife is not enough; throughout the novel, Rebecca’s memory is only further tarnished and shamed for the benefit of the new Mrs. De Winter. In *Mr. Fox*, on the other hand, Oyeyemi’s characters are doublets who need to find a way to co-exist. And they do, once they start focusing on what binds them together rather than what separates them.

Daphne discovers that Mary’s handwriting is so similar to her husband’s that she cannot tell them apart anymore (*MF* 232, 305); even St. John Fox thinks “for a second” that Mary’s handwriting is his own (*MF* 274). The similarities do not end there, as Mary’s and Daphne’s characters become so friendly that they start to merge, blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary even further – so much so that, towards the end of the novel, Mr. Fox does not even know anymore whether Daphne sounds like Mary or whether Mary sounds like Daphne (*MF* 301). All three protagonists permeate each other to such an extent that they start shape-shifting into each other. As it turns out, no party is intrinsically evil or insane in *Mr. Fox* and neither is anybody essentially good or sane, contrary to what St. John and Mary have been trying to prove each other over the course of their ten short stories.[[14]](#footnote-14) Daphne is the only one who becomes gradually aware of how close they *all* are to madness and even begins toying with the idea of having her husband “certified insane” (*MF* 233) before she suffers the same fate as Fitcher’s third wife (ATU 311) who “went insane because of him” (*MF* 269). It is not domineering St. John or brazen Mary who has the last word in Oyeyemi’s novel: it is mousy Daphne. “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold”, the instruction that the wives of Mr. Fox (ATU 955), i.e. the English variant of Bluebeard, are supposed to follow perfectly applies to Daphne’s and, by extent, Oyeyemi’s worldview. *Mr. Fox* suggests that when it comes to the male and female canon for which St. John Fox and Mary Foxe stand, there should be no life-or-death struggle between literary doubles. The only sustainable alternative is the co-existence of doublets – an existence not unlike Daphne’s. There is no black or white in *Mr. Fox*, quite literally. The novel is more of an ode to Daphne’s mousy grey.

1. ***Mr. Fox* as Bluebeard Gothic**

With the publication of *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë became the first female Anglophone author to rewrite “Bluebeard”in a way that expressed both the female protagonist’s gothic fear of being buried alive by her husband in a too-limited domestic world as well as the female writer’s sense of gothic imprisonment within male legacies of writing (Pyrhönen 2010; cf. DeLamotte 1990; Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Hermansson 2009). Because Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* was, arguably, the first novel to break away from Bluebeard’s narrative hold, Heta Pyrhönen considers *Jane Eyre* to have spearheaded the Bluebeard Gothic genre. In *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and its Progeny* (2010), Pyrhönen also categorizes *Rebecca* as a Bluebeard Gothic novel, because the emancipation of both Jane Eyre and the second Mrs. De Winter comes full circle when they give a first-person account of their life story to a third party (Pyrhönen 2010, 79–84). Daphne Fox, also an aspiring writer, could easily be added to the equation, considering her fascination with “Mr. Fox” (ATU 955). Daphne is intrigued by how, in that fairytale,

[…] Lady Mary [conquers] Mr. Fox just by telling him what she’d seen in his house… telling him right to his face in front of all the guests at that ghastly betrothal breakfast. And all Mr. Fox could do was stand there denying it, his denials getting weaker and weaker as her story got more detailed. I know what you’re doing – I know what you are. She had power after that, the knowing and the telling – power to walk away, or stay, save his life, order his death*.*(*MF* 289)

It is Lady Mary’s fearlessness to expose Bluebeard’s true nature – his bloodlust and misogyny – that Daphne admires. Like St. John’s muse Mary, Lady Jane, and Oyeyemi herself, Daphne strives to set her creative mind free from this mental imprisonment by writing about and denouncing all the literary Bluebeards who have held her captive in their imagination.

Oyeyemi carries this notion through in “Like This” (*MF* 89-109), one of the many short stories Mary Foxe and St. John Fox come up with together as part of their story-telling game. “Like This” seems to be an oblique questioning of where Oyeyemi belongs in English Literature as a black British woman writer. The short story in question centers on an Englishman married to Brown, a Yoruba woman (*MF* 89). Their moody and explosive relationship comes to a head when the husband “[ditches] his woman out in some foreign country because he [can’t] handle her” (*MF* 257). Brown’s Yoruba ancestors take advantage of the situation. Now that they have her all to themselves, they force her to write about them:

‘We’re here,’ they said […].

‘What do you want?’

‘You are Yoruba.’

‘Am I?’

‘So you think your accent fools us…’

‘But I can’t even speak Yoruba!’

‘That doesn’t fool us, either.’

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I know. But look – I’m in Paris at the moment.’

‘Don’t interrupt,’ they said. ‘You might want to get away from us. You might feel that we crowd too close, that we want too much. But we like you. We think you’re spirited. And we’re trying to listen.’

‘To what?’

‘To what you won’t tell us. We want your stories. […] Those stories belong to us. It doesn’t matter what language they’re in, or what they’re about; they belong to us.’ (*MF* 106)

In the meantime, a woman called Blue, whose “skin was more or less the same shade of Brown, but after that there were only differences”, appears in the Englishman’s life (*MF* 94). An insipid replacement of his Yoruba wife, Blue cannot satisfy the Englishman or appease his yearning for the tumultuous relationship he shared with Brown. Oddly, Blue seems to conspire with Brown’s ancestors: right before Blue drives off with the Englishman, she hands Brown a collection of fountain pens, implying that Brown must write. Eventually, Brown gives in to the pressure in the hope that it will bring her husband back.

 With “Like This”, Oyeyemi appears to anticipate the deviant nature of *Mr. Fox* in the context of her other work. She addresses a very salient issue in black British literature: what defines the blackness and/or Britishness of a black British writer? What comes first: Brown’s Yoruba past/ancestors or her English present/husband? Can they co-exist? Brown frantically tries to exorcize herself from the Yoruba stories she knows. When she is done writing, she announces to her ancestors: “Here are your stories, then. Have them back” (*MF* 107). Suddenly the trickster Reynardine appears, who rewards Brown for her diligent storytelling by bringing back her Englishman. However, she realizes too late that Reynardine, true to his nature, tricked her into eternal death with her beloved:

The first moment in the tomb was the most forbidding. The silence, the stillness, the dark.

Then they realised: They were together, and there was no one else. She felt his lips tremble against her forehead. After that he became courageous and brought his arms down around her. He kissed her closed eyelids and he kissed her mouth and he kissed handfuls of her hair and he kissed her elbows. […] Reynardine had thrown a candle and a box of matches in with them. They didn’t need a candle… In the dark they learnt to waltz. Then they lit the candle anyway – why not? And they let its flame warm their stone house for a little while as they danced on behind their locked door. (*MF* 109)

In the above-mentioned passage, Oyeyemi seems to anticipate the mixed reception of *Mr. Fox* – a novel essentially devoid of Yoruba stories and one that condemns Oyeyemi to a metaphorical death-by-mixed-reviews, possibly because of her choice to rewrite an English folk tale. “Like This” seems to question preconceived notions of belonging, thus indirectly linking *Mr. Fox* to Oyeyemi’s other work. As female writers who feel trapped by all those who precede them, Mary Foxe, Daphne Fox and the Yoruba woman do not seem to wish to turn their backs on centuries of canonical storytelling. They simply want to be allowed to exist *next* to their legacies, and not *because* of them – not as their double, their photo negative, their evil, abject, female Other. As Mary explains to St. John:

I would like to have breakfast with you […]. And I would like to have you defer a little to my tastes and habits – at present I have none, because you haven’t given me any. I’d like to have friends to lend me books and tell me secrets. I would like to have nothing to do with you for hours on end and then come back and find you, come back with things I’ve thought and found out all on my own – on my own, not through you. I’d like not to disappear when you’re not thinking about me. (*MF* 208)

By echoing Mary’s discourse in “Like This”, Oyeyemi validates Pyrhönen’s suggestion that Bluebeard does not necessarily have to be seen as a serial killer of women in the literal sense. Bluebeard can be interpreted, metafictionally speaking, as a “criminal-author” who writes about killing women in his secret chamber (Pyrhönen 18). Bluebeard’s wife is, therefore, a “detective-reader” who tries to read into and solve Bluebeard’s enigmatic stories in order to escape from his “deadly plot” with the help of her pen (Pyrhönen 17). However, “Like This” betrays a sense of latent pessimism when it comes to authorship. It seems to suggest that *Mr. Fox* will not be able to escape the label of “minor literature” (cf. Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley 1983) because of Oyeyemi’s affiliation with black British women’s writing, nor will it be accepted into the literary hall of fame to which Charlotte Brontë and Daphne du Maurierbelong because, like Brown, Oyeyemi did indeedwrite Yoruba stories at one point. Her Yoruba storytelling days – and the labels associated with that kind of writing – still haunt her. Consequently, it is implied that Brown, as a possible alter ego of Oyeyemi, cannot live in broad daylight and remain married to her English husband. Her choice is between one of two evils: she either leads a lonely life and writes Yoruba stories or she enjoys eternal death by the side of her Englishman. Oyeyemi’s meta-answer to this dilemma is as simple as it is brilliant: if the English canon will not acknowledge her in the world of the living, she will use Reynardine – one of the many faces of Bluebeard – to trick it into joining her in her afterlife. If the canon will not include her, she will include it, by any means necessary.

1. **Conclusion: From Detective-as-Reader to Detective-as-Writer**

This analysis of Oyeyemi’s fairytale about fairytales started off as an exploration of St. John, Mary, and Daphne as anthropomorphic incarnations of, respectively, the canon, the anti-canon, and emergent literatures. In the end, Oyeyemi’s characters are secondary to the stories they represent. What prevails in *Mr. Fox* is the (meta)fictional matrix that St. John, Mary, and Daphne produce throughout the course of the novel. A narrative matrix to which they contribute, by not only reading each other’s stories but by writing about each other as well. *Mr. Fox* is not as much an invitation to read, as it is to write. Indeed, *Mr. Fox* testifies of Oyeyemi’s remarkable self-awareness as a writer of colour. In this maverick novel, she reiterates her aversion to be pinned down as a particular kind of writer associated with a specific agenda (cf. Nazaryan 2014; Morales 2017; Buckley and Ilott 2017). She is an author who, allegedly, hates tags and insists on not having a style: “I just try to write what the story demands”, she once said in an interview (Oyeyemi 2014b). Oyeyemi’s *modus operandi* is to transcend engrained ideas, tropes, formulas. Therefore, as it becomes clear towards the end of the novel, *Mr. Fox* does not merely celebrate or emulate Pyrhönen’s reader-detective or Hühn’s interactional private eye. Their interpretation of detective fiction focuses solely on what Jeffrey Nealon calls “the detective-as-reader” (Nealon 1995, 95). Oyeyemi’s mongrel novel, on the other hand, is more of a denouncement of the passivity of reading as a tool to make sense of the Bluebeard-like canonical maze she and her fictional alter-egos inhabit.

 Like Oyeyemi herself, Mary Foxe, Brown, and Daphne Fox all turn to writing, their zeal highlighting the assertiveness that comes with the figure of the “detective-as-writer” (Nealon 1995, 95). In her first book, titled *Hedda Gabler and Other Monsters*,Daphne exposes how all the classical “villainesses”, such as Henrik Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, Wilkie Collins’ Lydia Gwilt, or Alexandre Dumas’ Milady, are depicted to be so “wicked” by their authors that “killing them off becomes a moral imperative” (*MF* 294). Tired of waiting for moral retribution for women who, like herself, were wronged by History for lack of an accurate Herstory, Mrs. Fox takes up her pen to set the record straight in her own name and in her own right. Brown also takes matters into her own hands by double-crossing Reynardine and making his trick work in her favor, turning her from the passive, living wife of her Englishman to the active, undead author who domesticates her husband and incorporates him in her afterlife. Seen from this perspective, the eternal death bestowed upon Brown and her Englishman by Reynardine becomes more of a blessing than a curse. Their companionship may be lonely; nevertheless, it is everlasting. Had Brown and Daphne remained passive readers, their existence would have come to an eventual end because, as Nealon explains, “[for] the reader, the mystery always ends, regardless of whether it is solved” (1995, 93). However, “as the writer and the detective embark on a journey that has no guaranteed destination”, the detective-as-writer’s job is never done (Nealon 1995, 93). Contrary to the detective-as-reader, the writer does not have access to a possible “return to the self and its myriad possibilities” because, in the writer’s world, “[there] is no end, as there is to a reading; rather, there is the hesitating, interminable response of writing” (Nealon 1995, 107). It is no surprise, therefore, that the last short story, “Some Foxes”, ends the novel quite abruptly with the sentence: “But you are tired of hearing about foxes now, so I won’t go on” (*MF* 324). *Mr. Fox* could go on, because it appears there is always another fox-related story to be told. However, the writer of this last story consciously chooses not to disclose any more information, which indirectly points out the power the writer invariably holds over the reader. As the short story “Some Foxes” demonstrates, a writer can create knowledge and withhold it, thus completely disarming the reader, who remains forever at the mercy of the writer.

It is in the writing, not in the reading, that the power to change the status quo lays. *Mr. Fox* fits in with Oyeyemi’s other work insofar as it locates, undoes, and reworks the ties with which certain tales – hers as much as those of others – are systematically woven into pre-established patterns, such as those of black British women’s writing, postcolonial theory, Yoruba Gothic, and so on. Her writing is not aimed at those patterns per se, but rather at the urgency and dexterity with which they can and should be renegotiated, time and time again. And that, it would seem, is the elusive morale of Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox*. It does not really matter whether a story is presented under the guise of folklore (e.g. “Bluebeard”), rewritings (e.g. *Jane Eyre*), children’s literature (e.g. Roald Dahl’s *Fantastic* *Mr. Fox*), critique (e.g. *From the Beast to the Blonde*), and so on. What matters is that all stories be told and retold in ways that inspire whoever stumbles upon them to not only read them but to also incorporate and, eventually, rewrite them.

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**Address for correspondence**

Alexandra J. Sanchez

KU Leuven

Sint-Andriesstraat 2

2000 Antwerpen

Belgium

alexandra.sanchez@kuleuven.be

1. Like Pyrhönen in *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and its Progeny*, I use quotation marks when referring to the “Bluebeard” tale cycle. When used without quotation marks, Bluebeard refers to the protagonist of the “Bluebeard” tale cycle. Additionally, all references to *Mr. Fox* will consist of brackets containing the abbreviation MF followed by the page number in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Heta Pyrhönen stylizes her coinage as Bluebeard Gothic, which I do too. In all other instances, when referring to the genre of the gothic, no capitalization is used. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Reynardine”is a Victorian ballad and has no Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU Index). In the indexed “Bluebeard” variants, a young bride escapes from a certain death at the hands of her wicked husband, but her deliverers differ every time. In ATU 311 folk tales, the bride saves herself as well as her sisters. In ATU 312 folk tales, it is her brothers who come to her rescue. Finally, in ATU 955 folk tales, the wedding guests execute the murderous bridegroom. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Icarus Girl* (Oyeyemi 2005b); *The Opposite House* (Oyeyemi 2007); *White is for Witching* (Oyeyemi 2009); *Mr. Fox* (Oyeyemi 2011); *Boy, Snow, Bird* (Oyeyemi 2014a); *Gingerbread* (Oyeyemi 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Juniper’s Whitening* *and* *Victimese* (Oyeyemi 2005a). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *What is Not Yours is not Yours* (Oyeyemi 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Boy, Snow, Bird* is also set in a non-British past. Like *Mr. Fox*, *Gingerbread* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* can be read as fairytale rewritings. Contrary to *Mr. Fox*, race is an overt trope in *Boy, Snow, Bird*. *Gingerbread*, on the other hand, focuses more on foreignness. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Oyeyemi mentions Marina Warner’s *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), Margaret Atwood’s essay “Fitcher’s Bird” (1983), and Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* (1971) in her “Acknowledgments” (MF 325), adding another layer of complexity to *Mr. Fox*’s intertextual character. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lefevere considers literary criticism to be similar to rewriting since critics “adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time” (Lefevere 1992, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Contrary to Jane and Bertha or Mary and Daphne, Mrs. De Winter and Rebecca never physically meet or merge. They do, however, know several moments of mimesis, such as when Mrs. De Winter unwittingly chooses one of Rebecca’s gowns to wear to a fancy dress ball, much to the horror of Maxim De Winter and his guests (Maurier 1971, 205-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In her “Acknowledgements”, Oyeyemi does not refer to Atwood’s *Bluebeard’s Egg and Other Stories* (1983), which is a collection of short stories. She only mentions the essay “Fitcher’s Bird” contained in the short story “Bluebeard’s Egg”, which is one of the short stories featured in *Bluebeard’s Egg and Other Stories*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the short story “What happens next?” it is implied that Mary Foxe is a descendant of the author of *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (MF 25), but this factoid is not expanded upon. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, the male protagonists Rochester and Maxim De Winter have love rivals who are their complete opposites in terms of background and disposition. St. John Rivers proposes to Jane Eyre, Rochester’s second wife-to-be. In Maxim De Winter’s case, Favell courts his first wife, the eponymous Rebecca. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. These ten short stories are, in order of appearance: “Dr Lustucru”; “Be bold, be bold but not too bold”; “Fitcher’s bird”; “Like this”; “The training at Mme De Silentio’s”; “What happens next?”; “Hide, seek”; “My daughter the racist”; “31 rules”; “Some foxes”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)