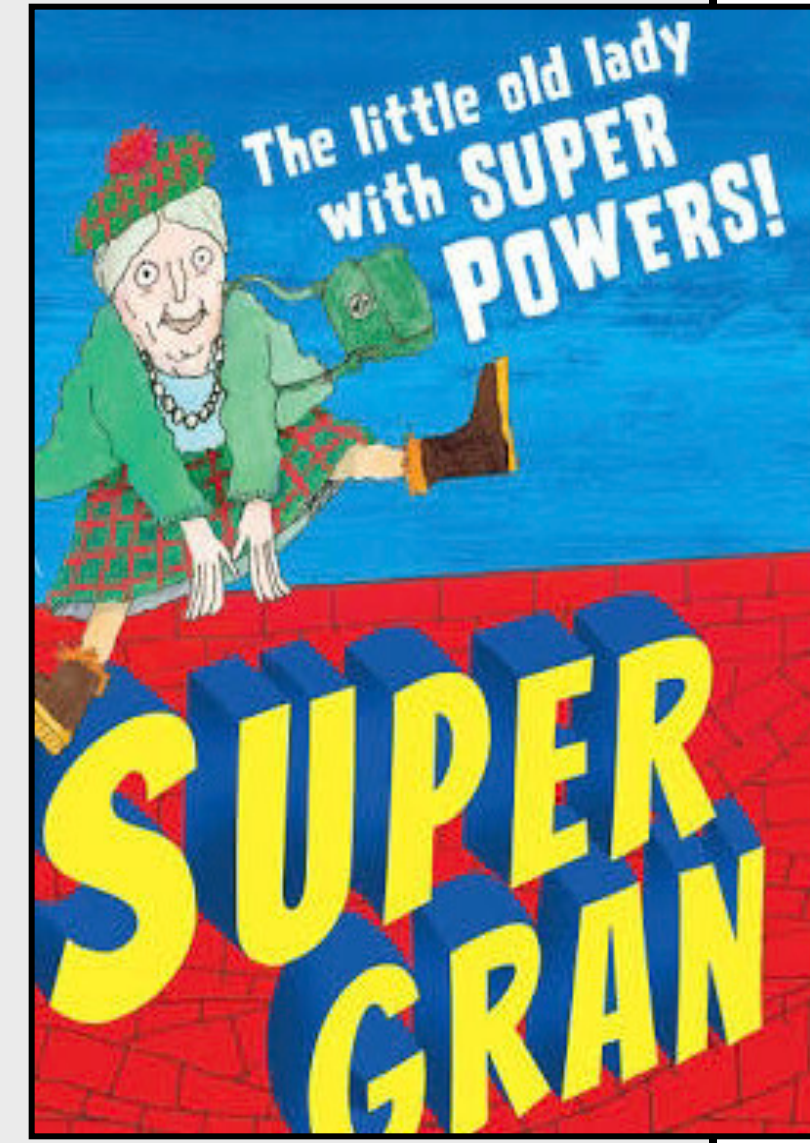


Bad Grandma: Deconstructing the Cultural Stereotype of the Storybook Grandmother, and Constructing a Counternarrative

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1) Introduction: The Scottish 'Super Gran' began a trend in children's stories, where the grandmother narrative is stereotypically romanticised (Bendix).

She appears as single, old, resource-fully living alone, somewhere 'other' with a moralistic, pivotal role in the grandchild's young life experience, and often has superpowers.



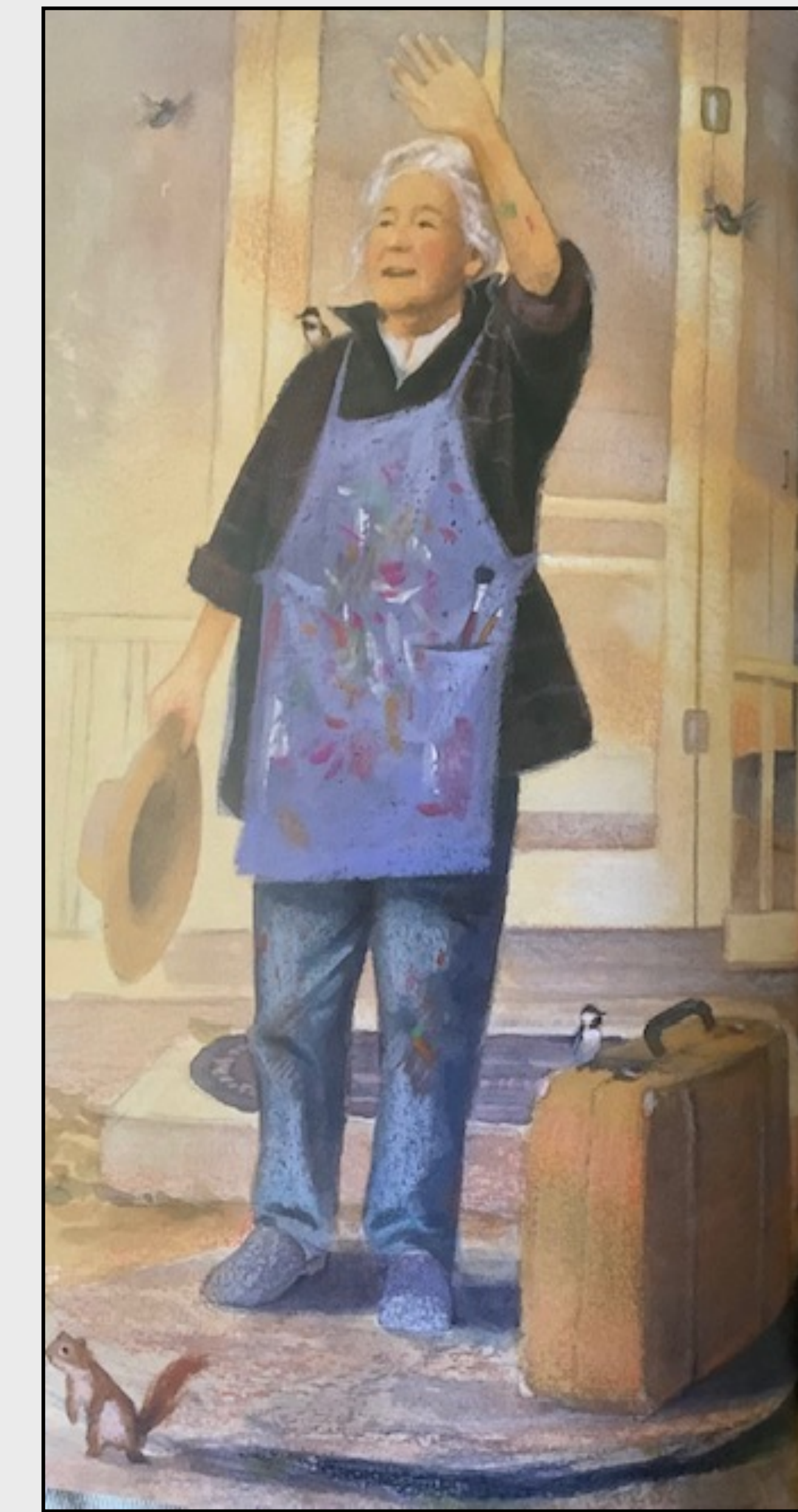
2) Methodology: Through reading current picture books, interviews with grandmothers, and reflexively drawing from my own experience my approach is to look at these grandmother conventions (Kivett). By releasing it from storybook tropes (Janelli & Sorge) and offering my transgressive alternative I then ask if this would trigger satisfaction or disconcert.



3) Narrative: In presenting my counternarrative, I ask if there is a need to explore and protect idealised notions in communal lore or to redefine them for new contexts.

A Bad Grandma Story or 'Grandma Comes to Tea' Synopsis:

- Grandma (G ma), arrives late for baby-sitting duty and is sick on the puppy. She asks Emmeline, her young grandchild to get her a snack from the kitchen along with a bottle of beer.
- She then pays little attention to Em, who occupies herself crayoning pictures on the floor.
- After nodding off she wakes up feeling cold. She instructs four-year-old granddaughter, Em, to light a fire, encouraging her to use matches and use her drawings as kindling.
- They both retire to the sofa and wait for the parents to return. The puppy barks at the sound of the door/ Em wakes but can't move the dead arm of her G ma pinning her to the sofa.



in my presentation I shall mention this grandma, who has a wild bird on her shoulder and a chipmunk at her feet.

4) Discussion: This narrative has disobeyed the storybook grandmother rules, with regards to morality, protection, reverence, responsibility, danger, and death.

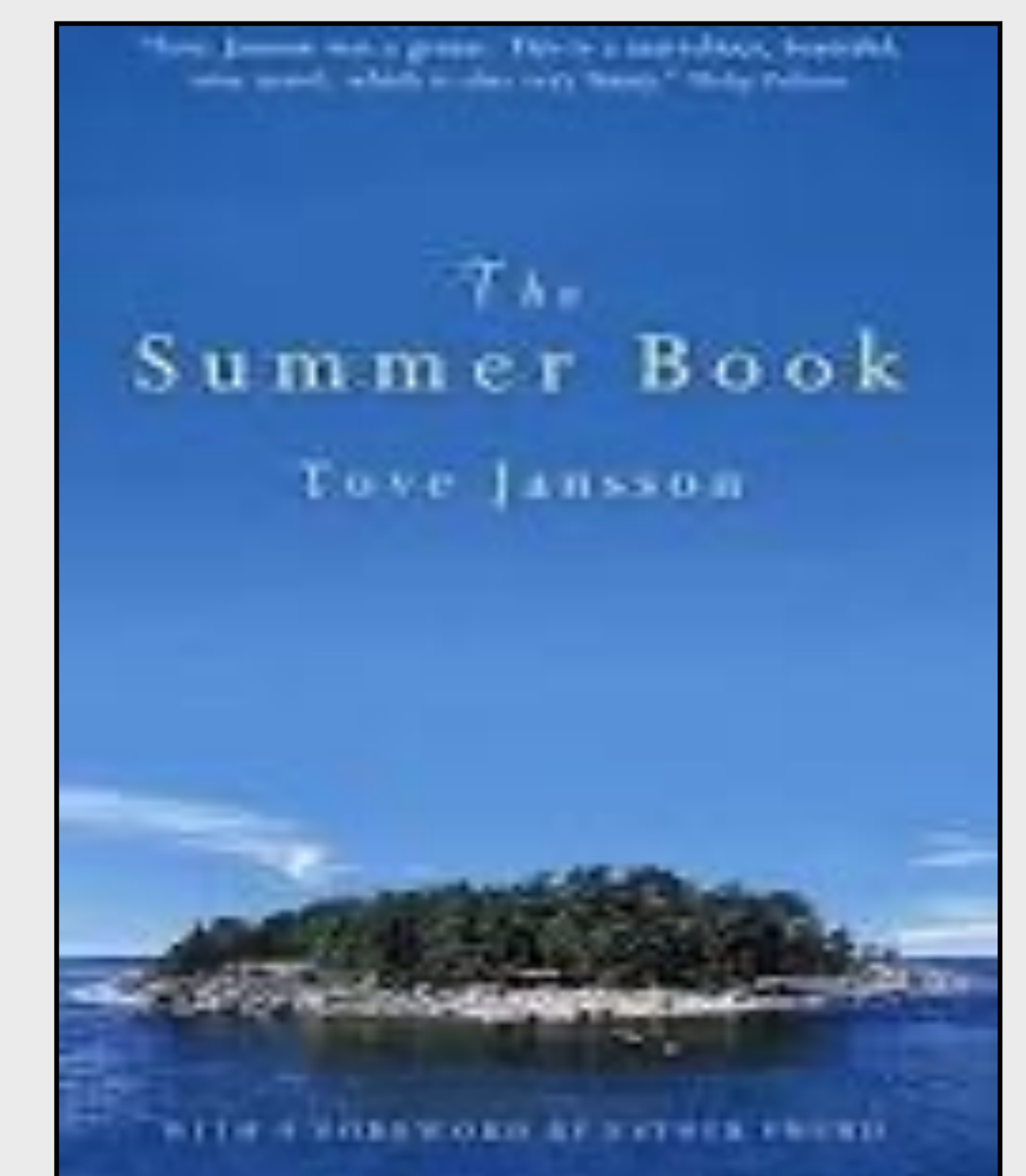
If you are feeling uncomfortable about this story, even though some of these things happen in real life we could ask:

Are there personal narratives (Dolby-Stahl) that are unacceptable to our notion of a grandma? Are there mutually agreed, ethical principles that protect the character of a grandmother? Are these stories replacing actual grandmothers who may now be geographically or culturally distant?

5) Outcomes: It may be that there is collusion between writers, illustrators, publishers, and grandmothers to keep to rules that protect a symbolic construction of the grandmother?

- Is that to make us all feel more secure?
- To offer an example that grandmothers feel obliged to follow?

When we are considering how to address this dichotomy, we could pay attention to Tove Jansson's unusually convincing literary grandmother. In *The Summer Book*, when six-year-old Sophie asks when her grandmother is going to die, she asks plainly, 'Will they dig a hole?'.



Bibliography:

Bendix, Regina *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Uni Wisconsin 1997)
Dolby-Stahl, Sandra, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Indiana University 1989)
Janelli Linda M. and Sorge, Laurie, *Portrayal of Grandparents in Children's Storybooks* (2008)

Kivett, Vira, *Grandparent-Grandchild Connection,' Marriage & Family Review*, 16:3-4, 267-290

Further information

www.marycane.uk • Elphinstone Institute

To listen to the full audio story, click [here](#).

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Patsy Richardson from Michigan Schools Library for finding so many grandmother picture books, and telling me that, whilst she wasn't keen to buy my story, her grandmother more resembled my narrative than the books she selected.