Royal Sisters:

Sisterhood and Fear in *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* and *Frozen*

Sisterhood is a bond of chance rather than choice, and not all sisters are close. For Princesses Addie and Meryl of Gail Carson Levine’s 2001 novel *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* and Queen Elsa and Princess Anna of Disney’s 2013 animated film *Frozen*, the bond is strong. Addie and Meryl are inseparable as children, and remain so throughout their adolescence. It is not until Meryl falls ill that Addie must gather the courage to go out alone and learn to fend for herself in order to save her sister’s life. Elsa and Anna also experience a deep closeness as children, but after an accident, they are forced to live separate lives. The film details their journey of coming back together. While Addie relies too much on her sister, Elsa doesn’t rely on Anna enough, and they each must learn to find a balance in their relationships. Both Addie and Elsa struggle with fear throughout their stories, and in both cases, the key to overcoming it is their love for their sisters. Addie does so by acting selflessly for the sister she cares about. Elsa learns to control her powers by replacing her fear with love. Through these relationships, children can better understand their own sibling relationships, as well as how to control their fears regarding those relationships.

In a 1999 article for *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman write that “children’s conceptions of what sibling relationships can be like may be influenced, in part, by the literature they read” (Kramer 555). The ways in which Addie, Meryl, Elsa, and Anna develop teach children reading the novel and watching the film a lot about relationships. Both pairs of sisters begin their stories closely bonded, and the scenes we see of them as young children foreshadow their future adventures. Addie and Meryl are shown acting out the Gray Death, with Addie portraying the victim and Meryl searching for the cure. Their
favorite game becomes reality many years later when Meryl, not Addie, falls ill. It is a scenario neither of them have ever considered, with Meryl being so brave and Addie so fearful, they always assumed Addie would be the damsel in distress. Addie relies on Meryl, she “was my protector, as necessary to me as air and food… Meryl understood me, although we were as different as could be… Meryl was brave, and I was afraid of almost everything—from monsters to strangers to spiders” (Levine 2). Meryl takes it upon herself to make sure Addie feels safe at all times, defending her against the monsters, speaking for her to strangers, and making the ultimate sacrifice of promising not to leave for her own adventures until Addie is married (Levine 5). Meryl is Addie’s security and stability, so much so that several years later Addie swears to herself: “I’d never marry. Bamarre would be too perilous without Meryl” (Levine 32). Although Addie’s constant reliance on her occasionally frustrates Meryl, the two continue to have a strong bond as they grow older, and are unable to imagine a life without the other. Elsa and Anna also start out close. In the opening sequence of the film, Elsa is shown using her ice powers to create a winter wonderland for both girls to play in. Anna is entranced by Elsa’s powers, shouting “This is amazing!” as her sister makes snow cover the ballroom floor (Frozen). Elsa enjoys experimenting with her powers to see just how much she can do, but the fun ends when she accidentally strikes Anna in the eyes. Horrified, Elsa cradles Anna in her arms, sobbing and losing control of her powers (Frozen). The girls’ parents decide it is best to separate them, and to keep Elsa’s powers (the memories of which were removed by the trolls) a secret from Anna. This leaves Anna feeling hurt and confused as she sings in “Do You Wanna Build a Snowman?” that “we used to be best buddies, and now we’re not. I wish you would tell me why!” (Frozen). Anna does not stop trying to talk to her sister for over ten years, but it is not until the death of their parents that we see Elsa has wanted the same as well. They sit on opposite
sides of the door as Anna sings “I’m right out here for you, just let me in. We only have each other” (*Frozen*). Both desperately want the door to open, but Elsa has only grown more afraid of her powers and as a result she has lost more control. She is afraid of again harming Anna, the only family she has left. This fear and loss of control will only grow over the next two years, leading to Elsa not just freezing a ballroom, but the entire nation of Arendelle. These relationships both have flaws, made clear to readers and viewers, and it is from these flaws that the sisters are able to further develop their relationships.

Both Addie’s and Elsa’s fear drives the plots of both tales. Addie is afraid of having to face the world without Meryl, which keeps her from becoming independent. She fears Meryl’s often reckless bravery will get her killed, which is why she makes Meryl promise to stay home in the first place. However, Meryl is not safe at home either, falling ill with the Gray Death at the age of seventeen. Addie is left in shock: “I laughed bitterly. I’d spent years worrying that Meryl would leave Bamarre castle and be killed. I’d never thought she could stay home and be killed” (Levine 48). They had always thought that if anyone were to fall ill, it would be Addie. Meryl had been preparing for that day for years, in lieu of having the freedom to go on adventures. Confronted with the reality that her sister is likely to leave her life forever, Addie is overwhelmed with fear and guilt: “She was going to die without having the adventures she’d longed for, all because of her promise to me. She’d postponed her dreams just to set me at ease” (Levine 77). She is ashamed that her fear has cost Meryl so much, and this shows readers what needs to be improved in her relationship with Meryl.

Where Addie fears isolation, Elsa needs it. She is afraid of herself and afraid of hurting others, which keeps her from having the close relationship with her sister they both desire. Elsa does not have anyone to help control her fears after the death of her parents. She continues to
shut Anna out, afraid of hurting her, and she attempts to keep control by not feeling anything at all. The looming coronation ceremony terrifies her because for the first time since she was five years old there will be people filling the castle halls. Anna on the other hand, is sad that it will only be for one day. Elsa is able to relax during the ball and actually acknowledge that she, like Anna, wishes “it could be like this all the time,” but she quickly remembers why it can’t, turning away from Anna (*Frozen*). Elsa’s body language in this scene suggests she is trying to push Anna away as much as she can so that it will hurt less when she shuts herself away again. She turns away and shies from Anna’s attempt to reach out and touch her, pulling her hands—the source of her power—close to her body. From her early childhood, Elsa is shown keeping her arms close to her chest when she is feeling anxious and therefore more likely to accidentally use her powers. During “Do You Wanna Build a Snowman,” she pulls back when her parents try to comfort her in her fear that her powers are too strong for her to handle. She allows her fear to control her because she feels that if she shares the burden with her family she will only end up hurting those she cares about. Wrapping all of her power in fear, however, has consequences as she grows increasingly flustered during the ball. Anna, knowing nothing of her sister’s powers, pushes Elsa to the edge and the newly crowned queen lashes out, inadvertently surrounding herself with spikes of ice as a barrier. All of a sudden, the power Elsa has been trying to hide for twenty-one years is released at once, freezing over the entire kingdom.

Seeing someone overcome a deep-seated fear in a story can be a powerful thing for a child. In an article for *Professional School Counseling*, authors Nicholson and Pearson write that “rather than frightening children, scary books capture their attention and seem to provide vicarious opportunities for exploring and mastering their fears” (Nicholson). Addie and Elsa must both overcome their fears in order to save the ones they love. Addie, who has feared facing
anything without Meryl her entire life, makes the decision to leave the safety of Bamarre castle to go on a quest for the cure for the Gray Death. She reminds herself:

If I had caught the Gray Death instead of Meryl, she would have begun her quest the moment Milton pronounced my doom. She wouldn’t be weeping in Bamarre castle… I should have acted as she would have. I should do so now. I had already wasted six days, perhaps a third of the life Meryl had remaining. (Levine 76)

Her bond with her sister allows her to consider what Meryl would have done in her place, and then act on it. Addie finds strength through Meryl throughout the quest even without her there. The day she leaves is her “first day ever without her” sister (Levine 93), but it is her love that drives the quest and allows her to overcome her terror of the world. Addie does find the cure, overcoming many of her fears, but she is too late to save Meryl. Her sister accepts an offer to become a fairy instead of dying, and still be able to have her own adventures in the fairy realm. Meryl tells Addie:

“I would have thought it would be easy to decide, but it wasn’t. The choice would last forever. Forever. Eternity—no going back, no changing my mind. But in one way there was no choice. Either way I’d lose you. Either way I’d stop being a human sister and stop having a human sister.” (Levine 217)

Fairies do not technically have sisters, and this is the price of the Gray Death: Addie and Meryl will have to live without each other. Meryl will fight her battles, and Addie will fight her own. Addie will grow old while Meryl lives forever. As they prepare to part, Addie asks Meryl to come with her, back to Bamarre, but Meryl “shook her head smiling. ‘Addie, Addie… I have work to do. These adventures, they’re not play. The fairies need me, and you don’t. Not anymore’” (Levine 238). Addie has learned to live without her sister, and now they must part.
They can only hope that they will meet someday again, but are both now confident in their ability to be separated.

Elsa is so focused on not feeling anything at all in order to curb her fear, she forgets to love and let herself be loved. She seems unaware of just how much Anna cares for her, in spite of all she has done to push her away. She is astonished that Anna threw herself between Hans and Elsa, believing she was sacrificing her own life. Any doubts about Anna’s love for Elsa are vanquished when Anna’s frozen heart thaws. Only an act of true love could have done that, yet Elsa still questions her sister’s actions: “You sacrificed yourself for me?” Anna shrugs, telling Elsa “I love you,” as though it should be obvious she had no other option than to save Elsa (Frozen). The sister embrace for the first time in years, and Elsa is finally able to let herself feel the love they have for each other. She can then use this love to bring back summer. At the end of the film, Elsa and Anna are playing once again as they did as kids, and Elsa tells her sister that they are never closing the gates again. Their story ends, but leaves viewers with the impression that the sisters are now closer than ever, and finally have the relationship they have been longing for since that first accident so many years ago.

The relationships of Addie and Meryl and that of Elsa and Anna sit on opposite ends of a spectrum. Addie and Meryl are almost too close, with Addie completely unable to fend for herself at the start of the novel, while living apart is all Elsa and Anna have known for years. Throughout their stories, the sisters find the balance between independence and closeness they need. Addie overcomes her reliance on Meryl as a protector, and Elsa conquers her fear of hurting Anna with her powers. The study conducted by Kramer, Noorman, and Brockman on just how much literature about sibling relationships affects readers shows that “although children and their parents may not purposely read books to promote the potential still exists for them to learn
from the experience” (Kramer 567). Children who read *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* and watch *Frozen* will certainly be exposed to different ways in which a sibling relationship can develop. What they will ultimately learn is that balance between the individual and the pair is needed in any healthy relationship.
Works Cited


