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And Tango Makes Three

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795581949570581

A Beloved Story of Unconventional Family: The Enduring Legacy of And Tango Makes Three

In the landscape of children's literature, certain stories transcend their pages to become cultural touchstones. Few picture books have sparked as much conversation, adoration, and, at times, controversy as **And Tango Makes Three**. First published in 2005 by Simon & Schuster, this heartwarming tale based on true events at the Central Park Zoo has sold millions of copies worldwide. It has been translated into numerous languages and remains one of the most frequently challenged books in American libraries. Yet, through every debate, the story of two male penguins raising a chick together continues to find new generations of readers eager for its simple, powerful message: families come in all forms, and love is what truly makes a home.

The True Story That Captured the World

To understand why **And Tango Makes Three** resonates so deeply, one must first know the remarkable true story that inspired it. In 1998, zookeepers at New York City's Central Park Zoo noticed something unusual about two male chinstrap penguins named Roy and Silo. The pair had formed a strong bond, engaging in behaviors typically seen in male-female penguin couples. They built a nest together, and when spring arrived, they attempted to incubate a rock, treating it with the same care and devotion that other penguin pairs showed their eggs.

Rob Gramzay, a perceptive zookeeper, recognized the pair's desire to become parents. He provided them with a fertile egg that needed care, and Roy and Silo proved to be exceptional fathers. They took turns incubating the egg, keeping it warm and protected. When the egg hatched on August 23, 1999, the chick was named Tango, a nod to the idea that "it takes two to tango." Tango became the first same-sex penguin pair to successfully raise a chick in a zoo setting. The story of Roy, Silo, and Tango quickly spread beyond New York, capturing hearts around the globe. It was a living testament to the diversity of animal behavior and the universal drive to nurture and love.

Bringing the Story to the Page: The Authors and Their Vision

The book **And Tango Makes Three** was brought to life by the collaborative efforts of author Justin Richardson, a psychiatrist and writer, and author Peter Parnell, a playwright and screenwriter. The two had been a couple for many years and understood personally the importance of representation in family narratives. They were drawn to the penguin story not as a political statement, but as a genuine, tender example of family formation in the natural world.

Richardson and Parnell approached the story with careful consideration for their young audience. They aimed to present the facts of the penguin family in a straightforward, age-appropriate way, without overtly promoting any agenda beyond the simple celebration of love and care. The narrative focuses on the universal experiences of building a home, longing for a child, and the joy of becoming a parent. By grounding the story in observable

animal behavior, the authors created a gentle entry point for conversations about family diversity.

The book's success is also deeply indebted to illustrator Henry Cole. His warm, expressive watercolor illustrations bring Roy, Silo, and Tango to life with remarkable charm and realism. Cole's artwork captures the penguins' distinct personalities—Roy's gentle patience, Silo's devoted attentiveness, and Tango's curious, fluffy innocence. The illustrations also beautifully depict the Central Park Zoo setting, from the rocky habitat to the lush greenery of Central Park in the background. Cole's ability to convey emotion through penguin postures and expressions allows readers to connect with the characters on a deeply human level, reinforcing the story's core themes of love and belonging.

The Plot: A Simple Tale of Love and Belonging

The plot of **And Tango Makes Three** unfolds with the gentle rhythm of a classic picture book. The story begins by introducing young readers to the Central Park Zoo and its many animal families. Among these families are Roy and Silo, two male penguins who are always together. They do everything side by side—swimming, eating, and sleeping. When spring arrives and the other penguin pairs begin to build nests for eggs, Roy and Silo build a nest of their own.

The narrative takes a poignant turn when the zookeeper observes that while the other pairs have eggs to care for, Roy and Silo have only a rock. They lovingly tend to their rock, but it never hatches. The zookeeper, recognizing their longing, decides to give them a real egg that needs a home. Roy and Silo become devoted fathers, taking turns sitting on the egg and keeping it warm. When Tango hatches, the joy is palpable. Roy and Silo raise their chick together, teaching her to swim and eat, and the story concludes with the happy threesome napping together as a family.

This straightforward plot—a longing for a child, the kindness of a caregiver, and the joy of parenthood—is universally relatable. The narrative avoids complex language or explicit labels, allowing the story to speak for itself. Children understand the emotional arc without needing any explanation about why the family is unusual. They simply see a story about wanting a baby, getting one, and living happily together. This simplicity is the book's greatest strength and a key reason for its enduring appeal across cultural and political divides.

Themes That Resonate: Family, Love, and Diversity

At its heart, **And Tango Makes Three** is a celebration of family in its many forms. The book explores the theme of family formation not through abstract concepts but through observable, relatable actions. Roy and Silo build a nest, protect their egg, and feed their chick—exactly the same behaviors performed by the other penguin parents in the zoo. The message is subtle but powerful: the essential elements of family are care, commitment, and love, not the gender of the parents.

The theme of diversity is handled with remarkable sensitivity. The book does not single out Roy and Silo's family as strange or exceptional. Instead, it presents their story as one among many in the zoo's community of animal families. The other penguin families, as well as the other animals in the zoo, are shown going about their lives without any judgment or commentary. This normalization of diversity is a significant aspect of the book's educational value. It teaches young readers that differences in family structure are natural, common, and worthy of celebration.

Love, in all its forms, is the thread that ties the narrative together. The love between Roy and Silo is evident in their constant companionship and their shared desire to nurture. The love they give to Tango is depicted in gentle, concrete actions: keeping the egg warm, guiding the chick to the water, and offering comfort. The book never uses the word "love" in an abstract or sentimental way, but the illustrations and narrative make it unmistakable. This focus on love as action—rather than as a concept—makes the story deeply accessible to young children, who understand love through the care they receive from their own families.

Cultural Impact, Awards, and Controversy

Since its publication, **And Tango Makes Three** has achieved remarkable recognition. It has received numerous awards, including the American Library Association's Notable Children's Book designation, the ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award, and the Bank Street College of Education's Best Children's Book of the Year. It has been praised by educators, librarians, and child development experts for its gentle handling of family diversity and its beautiful illustrations.

However, the book's journey has not been without challenges. It has consistently appeared on the American Library Association's list of most frequently challenged books, often cited for its portrayal of same-sex parenting. Parents and community groups in various school districts have requested its removal from library shelves and classroom curricula. These challenges have sparked heated debates about age-appropriate content, parental rights, and the role of schools in discussing family diversity. In nearly every case, librarians and educators have defended the book, citing its factual basis, its gentle tone, and its alignment with anti-bullying and inclusion curricula.

The controversy surrounding **And Tango Makes Three** has, paradoxically, contributed to its enduring relevance. Each challenge brings renewed attention to the book and the true story behind it. The debates also provide opportunities for meaningful conversations about the purpose of children's literature, the diverse needs of families, and the importance of representation. For many families with same-sex parents, the book has been a lifeline—a rare mirror reflecting their own lived experience in a format designed for their youngest children. For children in more traditional families, it offers a window into the lives of others, fostering empathy and understanding from an early age.

Educational Value and Classroom Use

In classrooms and libraries, **And Tango Makes Three** serves multiple educational purposes. It is an excellent resource for teaching about animal behavior, specifically the social structures of penguins and the diversity of parenting strategies in the animal kingdom. The book can be paired with nonfiction texts about penguins, allowing students to explore the scientific basis of the story. The factual accuracy of the central event—the observation of same-sex pair bonding in penguins—provides a springboard for discussions about the natural world and the surprising behaviors that scientists continue to discover.

The book also functions as a valuable tool for social-emotional learning. Its themes of empathy, belonging, and family can be explored through discussion questions and creative activities. Teachers can ask students to reflect on what makes a family, how families care for one another, and how it feels to be included or excluded. These conversations help build a classroom culture of respect and kindness. The book's positive portrayal of a nontraditional family also supports children who may themselves come from diverse family structures, providing them with validation and a sense of being seen.

For older students, the book can be used to explore issues of censorship, intellectual freedom, and the role of literature in society. The controversies surrounding **And Tango Makes Three** provide a concrete case study for discussions about First Amendment rights, community standards, and the responsibilities of schools and libraries. These discussions encourage critical thinking and civic engagement, helping students understand the complexities of living in a diverse society.

Why And Tango Makes Three Matters Today

Nearly two decades after its original publication, **And Tango Makes Three** remains as relevant as ever. Conversations about family diversity, inclusion, and representation continue to evolve, and children's literature plays an important role in shaping young minds. The book's message that love makes a family is timeless and transcends any single political or social moment.

The true story of Roy, Silo, and Tango also continues to resonate. After Silo's death in 2018, tributes poured in from around the world, a testament to the impact of their story. Tango herself lived a long life, passing away in 2021. The legacy of this remarkable penguin family lives on in the book, in the continued interest in their lives, and in the countless children and adults who have found comfort and joy in their story. The Central Park Zoo still honors their memory, and visitors continue to ask about the penguins who became symbols of love and family.

Conclusion: A Story for Every Family

And Tango Makes Three is far more than a children's book about penguins. It is a gentle, beautifully crafted story about the universal desire to love and be loved, to build a home, and to raise a family. Its roots in a true story ground it in reality, while its tender illustrations and straightforward narrative make it accessible to the youngest readers. Whether in a classroom, a library, or a bedtime reading session at home, this book opens doors for essential conversations about family, diversity, and the many forms that love can take. For those who have felt unseen in children's literature, Roy, Silo, and Tango offer a powerful message: your family is real, your love is valid, and you belong. That message, simple and profound, ensures that **And Tango Makes Three** will continue to be read, cherished, and discussed for generations to come.

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