

Sally the Soft Toy Seal: Connection and Communication in a North-East 'Oil Family'

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This article takes as its focus an important component of the material culture of family life: the toy or plaything. It examines one family's interaction with a mass-produced soft toy seal, exploring the contexts within which it exists, the way it is used, and the potential meanings that have accrued to it over time. Since, as Henry Glassie notes, 'there is no such thing as an object out of context', (Glassie 1997: 59) I aim, in the first half of the article, to provide a detailed description of several contexts within which the toy is engaged. I begin with a discussion of the situation in which the family finds itself in terms of parental work patterns, and how these are experienced by its members. Without grasping this wider context, a nuanced understanding of the toy is not possible, since one of its meanings and central functions emerges from the challenges and opportunities brought about by it.

Another important context discussed is the family's frequent interaction with both living seals and symbolic representations thereof. The ubiquity of seal experiences and the stories that accompany them come to shape engagement with the toy in important ways. Finally, I explore

media context focusing on an element of the family's repertoire of mass-mediated images and narratives, or mediascape (Appadurai 1990), as Arjun Appadurai has called it, looking at how a children's picturebook has come to influence how the toy is understood and how it is played with in daily life.

In the second half of the article, I offer an interpretation of the toy as a signifier or symbol, embedded in a complex web of other signifiers, practices, experiences and so on, for what Timo Heimerdinger has called, a 'helper' figure (Heimerdinger 2011: 198). These figures such as the Tooth Fairy or, as in his study, the Dummy Fairy, are deployed by parents to teach their children lessons or to achieve some other outcome. In closing the article, I posit that families can also invent these figures and suggest that Sally the Seal, their particular helper figure, which is represented in family stories, toys, picture cards, WhatsApp videos, and magnet tiles, constitutes a meaningful common resource which the family deploys to create traditions and practices that foster a sense of continuity and togetherness when the father is away. Returning to the toy at the end of the

article, I briefly discuss some of layers of meaning that have accrued to the toy itself over time as a crucial part of the iconography of the helper figure. I am extremely grateful to Claire and her family for allowing me into their home and sharing so generously their experiences of family life. It is a privilege to have been given a glimpse into their domestic world and the creative ways in which they respond to it.

A brief discussion of my fieldwork process seems pertinent at this point. This study is based on three ethnographic 'sessions' with a family in the North-East of Scotland. My visits largely took place during the 2022 school summer holidays when the children were at home, making them, on occasion, very lively affairs. I have tried to capture something of the nature of these sometimes-chaotic sessions, and by extension, family life, in the transcription excerpts by leaving in the 'stage directions' illustrating the many disruptions, child-led tangents, and so on. I use the term 'sessions' because my visits often entailed the use of several ethnographic methods almost simultaneously. It was common, for example, for interviews with parents to feature lengthy interjections by children, converting the session into a group interview. At other times children wanted their parents to play with them, and if the parent obliged, I became, temporarily, an observer of family play. Frequently, I was requested to join as a player, enabling me to observe my own participation in another family's play. I was also taken on tours of the house, photographed various objects and spaces, and had some time to reflect and take notes, while, for example, parents were

preparing food or drinks for children.

This fieldwork partially underpinned my MLitt dissertation, 'The Telly that We Watch Seems to be All-Pervasive: A Study of Media-Referenced Family Folklore in the North-East of Scotland', and the article is based on the study's third chapter.

A Father's Work Pattern and its Impact on the Family

Parents Claire and Tony, and their children Robyn, aged three, and Leon, aged six, are what could be described as an oil family; their daily lives and its rhythms are directly impacted by the oil industry and its machinations in some form or another. Tony is a Safety Advisor offshore on an on-going three-week-on-three-week-off rotation. Claire, who is a Community Development professional, yoga teacher, and musician, works part-time for a local arts organisation and is the primary caregiver to their children during the three weeks Tony is away. When he returns, domestic duties are shared more equitably between parents. This three-on-three-off rotation is a major force in their family life, structuring and shaping it in myriad ways. While it likely provides a significant source of income for the family, it provokes strong affective responses from its members and carries implications for family cohesion by placing pressures on different members at different points during the rotation.

In our first interview, Claire offered her thoughts on the way that the rotation structures their lives:

It's a really weird routine to be in. It doesn't map onto any other rhythms of life. It's just this big clunking three-and-three rotation that is just this big clumsy thing that's our life... Even if it was like a two and two, at least it would be like a calendar month.¹

When Tony is away, Claire is the primary caregiver. During these periods she finds herself, in her words, having to 'mesh' or 'blend' various domains of life such as her jobs, childcare, housework, and self-care.

For me, the house and my jobs and the family all have to blend into each other. So, when Tony's at work, he's at work. And he has that clear time where he's just working and then when he is at home, he just has the clear time when he is at home. He doesn't really have to do that much else, but I have to mesh it all together... laundry, the meals, and cleaning...the mental load.²

The 'mental load' to which she refers is a concept developed by feminist scholars to describe the internal, and thus, invisible (to some) work carried out largely by women and mothers. According to Liz Dean et al., it is 'the combination

of the *cognitive* labor of family life – *the thinking, planning, scheduling* and *organizing* of family members – and the *emotional* labor associated with this work, including the feelings of caring and being responsible for family members but also the emotional impact of this work' (emphasis in original) (Liz Dean, Brendan Churchill & Leah Ruppanner 2022: 13).

Claire talked about what that mental load looks like for her and how it becomes heavier due to the constant life rhythm changes.

I know that the offshore life is super super hard and it's risky and it's intense and it's demanding, but sometimes I think, 'God! It would be great to just have a whole stretch of time where I could just...draw a ring around the work and do the work' because the longest stretches of time that I get are maybe like four hours at a time... So yeah, it feels very...for Tony, maybe it doesn't feel like this for him, but for me looking in, it feels like his time is very...when he's at home, that's his focus and when he's at work, he's allowed to just be at work, whereas when I'm at work my phone is nearby so that if the nursery calls, I'm there. I might be writing something up and then I'm like 'I need to respond to...' [*laughs*], [*to Robyn*] Robyn, what are you doing? [*Robyn secretly passing SG individual bracelets without looking at him*] ([SG] Thanks!) [*to Robyn*] Are you doing magic tricks? [*to SG*] I need to respond to this email, or I need to fill out that form or think about what I'm doing for dinner and, yeah, it's a lot, and it's very messy and it feels really disorganised and sometimes it just feels really overwhelming. So, like Tony goes away for three weeks at a time; week one, I'm like, 'I've got my big-girl pants on, I can do this'. I'm keeping things tidy, and I've got meal

1 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Primary Contributor about her Life and Work and her own, and the Family's, Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 28 July 2022, EI 2022.017, 00:15:18, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

2 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'First Interview on the Family's Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 27 July 2022, EI 2022.016, 01:07:26, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

plans. Week two, things are starting to unravel a little bit, and then by the end of week three I'm dragging myself through mountains of laundry.³

For Claire, the mental and physical load caused by the blending of the various domains of life can become so intense that when Tony returns, she feels, in her words, 'physical relief'⁴ and enters, what she calls, a 'recovery phase'.⁵ Addressing Tony, she offered:

I've actually cried with relief that you're back because my whole body is just like [*makes a sighing sound*], you know, I've got back-up. I don't have to parent on my own anymore. I don't know how single parents do it. I do not know how they do it, and I've got loads of support around me from family and friends, it's just... and then in those first few days afterwards... the first day, I absolutely need to have a coffee in bed.⁶

Despite these challenges, the three-week period when Tony is away allows Claire to spend valuable alone-time with her children:

when he goes away, sometimes I feel like [*makes a sigh of relief sound*] I've got my kids to myself again because when he's here...it's weird because sometimes I'm like, you know, I'm like, 'ok what do I do now that he's here'?...Because

he's so good at picking everything up and there's no roles in the house, like it's not just me that does the laundry or it's not just him that cuts the grass but yeah, sometimes I can feel a bit like...where do I fit when they're playing and he's taking care of everything?⁷

When Tony returns, he begins to share both the mental and physical load of domestic life. This home-time affords other benefits for Claire.

So, in the past seven years I've had three jobs, I've got two Master's, I've qualified as a yoga teacher, I've restarted the band...and it's a lot. I probably wouldn't be able to do it unless Tony had that time at home as well.⁸

For Claire, then, the three-on-three-off rotation presents both challenges and opportunities. It places cognitive, emotional, and physical strain on her when Tony is offshore but, when he is on-shore, she can dedicate more time to herself and her work.

While I was able to speak less with Tony during my fieldwork, I understand that his view of the situation is slightly different. In a group interview with the parents only, Tony, addressing Claire directly noted:

'I don't know your reality when I'm away and so you don't know my reality just because we haven't lived that each. So, I think we've got, not different views, but our experience is different'.⁹

For Tony, this work/home pattern is also

3 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Primary Contributor about her Life and Work and her own, and the Family's, Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 28 July 2022, EI 2022.017, 00:11:03, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

4 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:35:30, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

5 Ibid., 00:07:28.

6 Ibid., 00:35:34.

7 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Primary Contributor about her Life and Work and her own, and the Family's, Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 28 July 2022, EI 2022.017, 00:25:35, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

8 Ibid., 00:13:40.

9 Ibid., 00:04:58.

intense. Both parents acknowledge that Tony has no respite. He is either working intensively on an oil platform or parenting intensively at home. In our group interview, we discussed Tony's transition from offshore to onshore.

- [C] You don't get a recovery phase at all.
[T] No, it's work head or home head. There's no period for me.
[C] There's no rest.
[T] Yeah. There's no handbrake for me, but I don't mind. It's how it is.¹⁰

While working away presents him with challenges such as the anxiety it causes him to know that it deeply upsets his children, he tended, in the short conversations we had, to emphasise the value of the three-week period at home as important family time. Contrasting his current pattern with his previous work rota at a different job in Saudi Arabia, he noted,

so, for me, going away, this three-and-three, it enables me to spend a lot of time with the kids, especially while they're tiny. [In] Saudi, it was a hundred days away, four weeks at home...[it] was not acceptable. That was the main driving force, the kids...the little guy [Leon, their son] said, 'please, please don't go back'.¹¹

The final sentence of the above quote hints at a common theme that emerged in our discussion: that of the effect of the work pattern on Robyn and Leon. Both parents talked of how the rotation affects them emotionally. Robyn, the

youngest, regularly pleads 'keep home, don't go away, dad, I don't like it, I miss you' and Leon demands 'Don't go, get a home job'.¹²

Claire, addressing Tony, gave a touching description of the moment of parting:

when you say goodbye and give them a hug and then I drive off, they're just like breaking their hearts in the back seat crying their eyes out and it's horrible, it's really sad.¹³

Leon, perhaps because he is older, has a particularly hard time adjusting. Claire told me that,

it breaks his heart every time Tony has to leave to offshore and then...it takes a couple of days to get back into a routine of it just being the three of us in the house again and the dog, and then he'll have like a spell of being really sweet and really good and then he'll have a spell of struggling with stuff.¹⁴

Tony told a story which further emphasises the affective dimension of the work pattern on Leon.

He was at the university nursery at the time, I think, [*To Claire*] do you remember? There was like a three- or four-day period where there was quite...it wasn't bad weather, but it was like lightening or something and he said... remember...I got delayed for like four or five days – it's the longest I've ever been delayed. Every day he said that he'd asked for more lightening or bad weather and ([*Claire*]) So that

¹² Ibid., 00:28:28.

¹³ Ibid., 00:30:21

¹⁴ Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'First Interview on The Family's Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 27 July 2022, EI 2022.016, 01:04:26, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

¹⁰ Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:07:39, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

¹¹ Ibid., 00:04:58.

you could be stuck at home) more storms. He started going on and on and it was like three or four days and eventually I had to leave when the weather improved. But that was good that he believed that he was asking and creating the bad weather so the choppers couldn't fly to keep his dad at home. That was nice, wasn't it?¹⁵

Alongside the anxiety about Tony leaving, there is also joy when he returns. Claire talked of the physical and emotional relief she feels when he returns, but both parents described how the children are like 'little limpets' and 'little magnets'¹⁶ stuck to their father when he arrives, expressing their happiness and excitement to have him there.

The three-on-three-off pattern pervades many aspects of the family's life. This constant cycle of transitions – separations and reunions – places strain on the family in the ways that are outlined above that must be negotiated and ameliorated. In the remainder of the article, I discuss how the family foster a sense of continuity and connection while Tony is offshore. Family culture is complex, and I could have perhaps chosen any entry point into this study, but I have chosen to focus on an object: a soft toy seal. By focusing on this single object and the webs of significance within which it is situated, I necessarily omit many other equally interesting practices and objects brought to my attention by the family. This is unfortunate as there is much to say about their traditions and creativity, but space permits only a partial exploration of the fieldwork material.

15 Tony, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings, Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:33:23, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

16 Ibid., 00:06:28.



Soft Toy Seal known as Sally/Sealy.
Photograph by Claire.

Sealy/Sally and the Prevalence of Seals in Family Life

Very early in my first visit to the family's home I was alerted by Claire to the existence of a soft toy seal which had been her favourite toy when she was a child. After keeping it for many years, Claire's mother gave it back to her, and she subsequently passed it on to Leon and Robyn. Claire told me how she came to own the seal.

I remember going to an aquarium of some sort on a family holiday and getting Sealy from a gift shop when I was about five...Sealy was my favourite soft toy for a really really long time and I refused to let my sister touch him...my

mum kept him for ages and then last year or the year before she was like, 'here's some of your toys from when you were a kid'.¹⁷

The toy clearly holds some meaning for Claire having been her companion for a long time, but, since giving Sealy to her children it has acquired other layers of meaning. The children have come to call the toy Sally because it has become inextricably associated with a child's picture book: 'Sally the Oil Rig Seal'. In searching for ways to overcome the children's separation anxiety provoked by Tony's leaving, the parents found a partial solution in books. The short picture book, written by Peter Brunton and illustrated by Trevor Kirton, is dedicated to 'all the children of offshore workers' (Brunton 2011), and tells the story of a seal who visits an oil rig. The parents read it to their children to ease their suffering and familiarise them with offshore life in a way that is playful and accessible. The book focuses on Sally's annual visit to the rig where she entertains the workers with tricks. The story of Sally the Oil Rig Seal has become a family favourite, making it a common point of reference among all members.

In addition to the toy and the book, the family encounter seals in other areas of life. Seals regularly visit the platforms on which Tony is stationed and the family, who live a few hundred meters from a river, frequently see seals on the river islands. These experiences are often narrated to other family members, adding to the repertoire of seal/Sally-

related stories. Similarly, some of their purchased toys such as whiteboard magnets and picture cards feature seal images. Not long after our first session, Claire, in personal communication, sent me a photograph of a picture card with a seal image on it and the following message.

Robyn found a 'sally the seal' card in her game and said 'dad will be so happy!' I think sally is more significant than I even realised!¹⁸

When I asked, in our final interview, if the parents thought that the image of the seal brought the family to mind, Claire, addressing Tony, concurred saying, 'she [*Robyn*] must feel like it keeps her connected to you...both of them'.¹⁹ The finding of this card inspired Robyn to send, with her grandma's help, a video to her father telling him that she had found Sally. The idea of the seal as a recurring image clearly holds significance for the family.

Having explored the wider contexts around Tony's work patterns, the family's feelings about it, and the prevalence of the seal in their lives, I now want to offer a way of conceptualising Sally the Seal, looking at a brief example of how she is used to foster connection and togetherness.

Family Helper Figures

The ubiquity of, and the family's familiarity with, the various tangible and intangible representations (soft toy, picture cards, stories, videos, book character, living seals, magnets, images) of Sally

17 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Primary Contributor about her Life and Work and her own, and the Family's, Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 28 July 2022, EI 2022.017, 00:46:21, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

18 Personal communication

19 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, 'Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings', Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:16:02, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

the Seal in/near both the home, Tony's work environment, and the children's minds, makes her a safe and positive cultural resource upon which the family can draw. She is, as Zeitlin et al. have said, a 'creative expression of a common past' (Zeitlin, Kotkin, Cutting Baker 1982: 2), and can be understood as something akin to what Timo Heimerdinger has called 'lower mythological figures' – fantastical 'pedagogical helpers' that are developed and deployed by parents to accomplish tasks with children (Heimerdinger 2011: 202).

Writing specifically about the German *Schnullerfee*, or Dummy Fairy, he explores how it is used to help wean a child off its dummy. The Schnullerfee is a key figure in a widespread 'farewell ritual' in which an elaborate exchange between the child and fairy takes place (Heimerdinger 2011: 199). Typically, the child agrees a date and time to leave their dummy in a predetermined location (often outdoors) and, during the night the fairy comes to take it away, leaving a present in its place. The figure, Heimerdinger suggests, enables parents to negotiate, at least partly, the competing demands of major parenting discourses around the dummy: the medicalised discourse and the de-medicalised discourse. Understood as 'the incursion of medical advice into more and more areas of life' (Heimerdinger 2011: 204), the medicalisation discourse holds that dummies should be removed from children at an early age to avoid the dangers of 'bacteria, the potential deformation of jaw and teeth, and interference with the child's speech development' (Heimerdinger 2011: 204). The de-medicalising discourse on the other hand holds that 'health no

longer means the absence of illness, but rather is perceived as a continuing constructive process of becoming and being healthy' (Heimerdinger 2011: 204). It pushes to the fore the idea of cooperation with the child in its development, and the importance of understanding the child's perspective. In this discourse 'the infant is perceived as an interactive, competent, and social being' (Heimerdinger 2011: 205) whose feelings towards the dummy, perhaps as something soothing and comforting, should be respected. The fairy figure and its 'actions' help parents out of a discursive double-bind that Heimerdinger describes as follows:

On the one hand, the child should have its dummy and the emotional support that comes with it. On the other hand, the dummy should be taken away before the third birthday in a gentle and cooperative manner (Heimerdinger 2011: 207).

In short, if parents fail in removing the dummy, their child faces certain medical risks. On the other hand, if they remove it too soon or in a way that does not respect the child, they risk causing trauma or straining the parent-child relationship. By deploying the Schnullerfee, parents can succeed in removing a potentially dangerous object in a way that is gentle and respects the child, while outsourcing the unpleasant task of its removal to the fairy, leaving the family relationship intact. He continues, 'both believe in the fairy: the children in her existence, the parents in her functionality' (Heimerdinger 2011: 208).

In a similar vein, in 1977 John Widdowson identified the widespread use of such helper

figures in his study of the social control of children in Newfoundland. Most relevant to this study are those he classified as ‘Supernatural, Mythological, Fictitious or Invented Figures’ (Widdowson 1977: 103), and two sub-categories: ‘Figures Adapted from Literary Fiction and Advertising’ – ‘figures...apparently drawn from literature, including children’s fiction and nursery rhymes, and also from advertising’ (Widdowson 1977: 153) – and ‘Invented Figures’ which ‘are constructs which have certain sociological functions but they are not believed in by those who employ them for this purpose’ (Widdowson 1977: 156).

In our example, Sally the Seal, as an invented figure, both serves ‘sociological functions’ and draws heavily from children’s fiction for her name and part of her backstory. Referencing Widdowson’s and Heimerdinger’s ideas, Sally the Seal could be understood as a media-referenced fantastical helper who has emerged from the family culture, and whose presence is reified in images, toys, biological forms, and so on. As a media-referenced figure she is the nexus of several objects, stories, and practices, helping the family contain, organise, and access them when required. While not necessarily a pedagogical helper in the strictest definition of term, she could be understood as an executive helper, one who helps the family get the important job of connecting done. Moving to look at what the family do with Sally the Seal, I now briefly explore a playful tradition described to me by the parents.

Sally and the Linking of Onshore and Offshore

When Tony is away, family communications largely take place through WhatsApp videocalls so that Tony can see his children and address them directly. Through these calls he tries to familiarise his children with his workplace, showing them objects and processes in his environment, noting that ‘they hone-in on things that are there, and they get quite fixed about it’.²⁰ Occasionally he brings objects home for the children to explore, providing them a more visceral engagement with aspects of his offshore experience. This practice affords a sense of continuity as objects meaningful to Tony are moved between settings and acquire meaning for others as they learn about and play with them. In one example, Tony took this practice of familiarising his children with the materiality of offshore life a step further by providing an opportunity for them to experience, in a virtual way, wider sensory dimensions of offshore life. In a previous job, he took Leon and Robyn to an offshore training facility where they were able to drive the offshore crane simulator and learn about the kinds of people and objects on an oil rig. Since that experience, Tony noted that, when driving past the harbour in Aberdeen, the children spot the cranes and boats that look similar and enquire about them.

we’d drive past a boat and from the back seat Robyn’s like, ‘dad, dad, I can see the crane and boats, are they the ones that come to the oil rigs?’ So, pretty much when we do go past there,

²⁰ Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, ‘Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings’, Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:10:09, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

‘oh, look, there’s a yellow one, a yellow boat, that’s my favourite colour, is that the one that comes?’²¹

This practice of purposefully linking together home and offshore environments through objects and experiences serves to reduce the strangeness of Tony’s offshore life by increasing familiarity with where he goes and what he does. Tony notes, ‘Now when they see things like the boats and the cranes and that, there’s an association as well, like...it’s where I go.’²²

The figure of Sally the Seal and her various depictions provide another such set of resources which come to link the environments and foster connection and continuity. Through their WhatsApp calls, the family have invented a tradition whereby the two parties play at sending messages back and forth via the living seals in their surroundings. Tony described what might happen in a typical WhatsApp call.

I’ll say things like, ‘so you’ve seen Sally the Seal’ – because we get seals on the river –and I’ll say ‘Sally came to the rig today’ and I’ll say ‘she was on the [oil rig] hose. Did you see her? Did you send any messages?’ ‘Oh yeah, we saw Sally’. ‘Okay. Yeah. Next time I see her. I’ll tell her that you said hi’. So, we try and have something familiar.²³

He continues,

What I normally find, his [Leon’s] imagination, if it’s flowing, he’ll be like ‘yeah, da da da’, he’ll

say whatever he said, and then I’ll say, ‘I’ve sent messages back so if you see Sally outside or something, let me know’. It’s a way of communicating stuff.²⁴

This recurring family practice seems simple of the surface, but the context within which it is was created and is played is complex. The game is underpinned by the family’s shared, co-constructed knowledge of the figure of Sally the Seal and all the stories, practices, and material representations of her. This knowledge is then applied to their reality as elements of the book plot are acted out in something akin to what Carl Lindahl calls ‘ostensive play’ (Lindahl 2005: 165), the playful acting out of a story in real life. While ostension is usually associated with the study of legends, it seems to me that something similar could apply to the way in which families act out, or at least draw from, their own story-worlds in their play. In the application of this knowledge a play frame is established and the seals that visit the rig and the local river, are recast as playthings, as conduits for intimate messages passed back and forth between players. The seals-as-playthings are played with using components from the family’s mediascape as they borrow elements from the Sally the Oil Rig Seal picture book such as the name Sally and motif of the seal’s rig visit. Additionally, the game was invented and is played within a particular family and work context that can be emotionally challenging for all involved, and it is used quite consciously (or instrumentalized) by the parents to maintain connection with a father who is away. Finally, the family all use their knowledge of one another and their creativity to formulate

21 Claire, interviewed by Simon Gall, ‘Interview with Parents about their Engagement with Toys and Playthings’, Aberdeen, 2 September 2022, EI 2022.022, 00:20:17, Elphinstone Institute Archives.

22 Ibid., 00:21:00.

23 Ibid., 01:10:38.

24 Ibid., 00:14:34.

messages to send back and forth, creating playful and engaging ways to stay connected.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to describe several important contexts within which the toy exists: that of Tony's work pattern and its effect on the family; the family's wider engagement with seals both in symbolic and material forms; and the parental tendency to create links between home and offshore objects and experiences. This was followed by an interpretation of Sally the Seal as a 'helper' figure who is deployed in ludic interaction by the family to ameliorate challenging issues. To close, I will return to my entry point into this study: the soft toy seal itself. Sealy/Sally, as we have seen, has had an eventful life. In our story, the toy was first an item of merchandise in a gift shop in the early nineties when Claire was a child. It then became a child's favourite toy, was given the name Sealy, and accompanied Claire through many years of childhood experience with all the joys and challenges that entails. Later, Sealy was kept for many years by Claire's mother, perhaps as an object holding cherished memories or tinged with nostalgia recalling her own daughter's early years. It then made its way to Robyn and Leon who, together with their parents, and drawing on their mediascapes, have added new layers of meaning. In its current setting it is a key part of the iconography and ecosystem that has come to sustain the family's fantastical executive helper who helps foster continuity and connection in a way that is creative, positive, and playful when the family cannot be together.

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Ethical Statement

The fieldwork informing this article was carried out in summer 2022. It underpinned my MLitt dissertation entitled 'The Telly that We Watch Seems to Be All-Pervasive': A Study of Media-Referenced Family Folklore in the North-East

of Scotland, as part of the Elphinstone Institute's (University of Aberdeen) MLitt in Ethnology and Folklore. As part of the process of writing the dissertation, students were required submit to department staff a 'Student Fieldwork Ethics Form' which articulated all of the potential ethical issues associated with the study. This was approved by department staff before fieldwork began. All contributors filled out and signed a consent form, stipulating, via permissions, how the fieldworker could use the material. Additionally, contributors were sent draft chapters and were encouraged to raise any issues. No amendments were required. When the opportunity arose to submit to the RoSC, the author contacted the contributors quoted in this article to ask permission to submit it. Permission was given in writing and the article was submitted.