

The characters in *Not Quite Narwhal*—clockwise from far left: Pixie, Kelp, Ollie, TKTK and Juniper—represent and celebrate different expressions of gender



Looking past gender tropes

How the creative team behind DreamWorks Animation's *Not Quite Narwhal* kept gender expression front of mind in developing its cast.

BY: KATIE BAILEY

It would have been easy for the writers and artists behind DreamWorks Animation's *Not Quite Narwhal* to simply lean into the cute. Premiering June 19 on Netflix, the series is based on a very cute book by American author Jessica Sima. It stars an adorable unicorn named Kelp, who was raised underwater as a narwhal. And the story has a sweet, soul-satisfying narrative about being happy with who you are. Add in some

trademark DreamWorks animation, a great script and...magic. Right?

But DreamWorks, Netflix and executive producers Brian Roberts, Nakia Trower and Sarah Katin didn't just want to work on a cute series. They knew they had a special story and wanted to use that opportunity to move the needle on what exactly "being true to who you are" means in a modern preschool series.

"We wanted to approach the entire show from a lens specific to that character [Kelp], and not fall into gender tropes," says Trower. "We didn't want to say this is a boys show or this is a girls show."

The idea soon permeated all aspects of the show's writing and design. For example, the kid-unicorn character Ollie is drawn, voiced and written in a "gender-expressive" way—a term that GLAAD introduced to the team and helped them build into the character development. Traditionally, many of Ollie's physical characteristics would likely be assigned to a girl: a soft-pink/pale-yellow ombre ponytail, purple eyebrows and stars on his face. While the character was written as a boy and goes by he/him pronouns, "I hear kids sometimes referring to Ollie as a he and sometimes as a she because they are not quite sure, because he's not the traditional boy character," says Katin. "He's Ollie, and that's just who he is."

Acceptance of unique characteristics is at the heart of the show. In the first episode,

Kelp guiltily explains to his adoptive narwhal parents that he has discovered he's really a unicorn and that he's worried this will disappoint them. In another, precocious sister Juniper is admonished for grilling Kelp on unicorn things he doesn't know. She defends herself by saying, "I can't help it! He's SO different, and that's why he's SO interesting!"

Juniper herself is another case in point. She was originally written as a little brother for Kelp, but when the writers realized the boy-girl weight of characters was skewed, the character was converted to a girl. The team used the opportunity to do an exercise Brian Roberts picked up at a Geena Davis Institute presentation. In it, Davis asked the audience to test their biases by looking at a male character and imagining it as a girl character without altering it at all. The Narwhal team tried it with Juniper and were delighted to find that they didn't have to change anything to make the character "work" as a little sister.

The elegance of the experiment was a revelation for Katin. "It's kind of annoying when people [say], 'Just take the girl and give her masculine things, and now she's strong!'" We went into this thoughtfully and mindfully, and really looked at the characteristics we created for this little boy character and asked ourselves, could a little girl character have these characteristics? And we realized that at this age [four], as a little sibling, yes." **K**