

New Approaches to Ideology in Children's Literature

Marian Thérèse Keyes & Áine McGillicuddy, eds. 2014. *Politics and Ideology in Children's Literature*. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 191 pp. ISBN 978-1-84682-526-2

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The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature (ISSCL) was founded in 2002, eight years before the Croatian Association of Researchers in Children's Literature. Having similar objectives, both societies aim to promote multi-disciplinary research in the field of children's and young adult literature and help disseminate research findings.

ISSCL publishes a series of edited collections of essays, and the seventh book in this series focuses on politics and ideology in children's literature. The book contains an introduction, written by editors Marian Thérèse Keyes and Áine McGillicuddy, thirteen articles by various authors divided into four thematic units, notes on the authors (179–181) and an index (183–191).

Starting from the well-known fact that children's literature cannot address its readership without affirming certain values and beliefs, the editors aim to shed light on various modes in which politics and ideology are present in children's literature, and also on their role. With this aim in mind, they have gathered contributions by a range of researchers focusing on the central theme of the volume. Thus, the collection assembles research papers in which particular children's books are studied from an innovative perspective not yet applied to them, as well as papers which discuss the presence of ideology in children's literature by using new approaches and perspectives (ecocritical, biopolitical, paratextual, cinematic).

The first topic, "Ideology and Subversion" is addressed in Clémentine Beauvais's opening essay "Little Tweaks and Fundamental Changes: Two Aspects of Sociopolitical Transformation in Children's Literature". Beauvais explores so-called "radical books for young readers" (or "transformative children's literature") (20). In her opinion, the main problem with studying committed children's literature lies in the easy labelling of such books as "Green", "Marxist", "antiracist", "queer". The effect of this approach is the fragmentation of the corpus of committed literature and the eventual weakening of its social perception. Therefore, Beauvais suggests that the "fluid, controversial, commonly disagreed-upon, ever changing corpus of texts that we might name politically 'radical' or 'transformative' children's literature [is] to be analysed transversally" (20). Thus, at one end of the scale are the books that promote "local and gradual changes" and rely on the "existentialist form of reflection" (25). Children's books that call for the "complete restructuring of whole worlds" occupy the other end of the scale. However, the crucial sentence in the paper seems to be in the introductory part, where Beauvais considers difficulties related to the categorisation of what constitutes a radical book for young readers. In her opinion, radicalism, apart from being "easily outdated" (20), is difficult to categorise because one country's radicalism may be the neighbouring country's mainstream. This leads us to suggest that the Eastern European view of children's books, in particular those placed at the latter end of the proposed scale, might be considerably different from what Beauvais suggests.

Eithne O'Connell applies ecocriticism to the study of the work of Beatrix Potter. A relatively new area within literary studies, ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s. Concerned with the relationships of literature and the environment, in the course of its development ecocriticism moved away from the exclusively ecocentric position and came closer to the sociocentric standpoint. This tendency paved the way for talk on behalf of the silent environment and silent animals, but also on behalf of silent social groups (from feminism to ageism and ableism). Children's literature certainly has its own role here. Viewed in this perspective, Beatrix Potter, passionately engaged with problems that are today recognised as ecocentric and sociocentric, is seen as a writer and person far ahead of her time.

In the chapter "Creaturely life: Biopolitical Intensity in Selected Children's Fables", Victoria de Rijke applies biopolitics, as developed by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, to animal characters in Aesop's fables. Biopolitics is concerned with the political impact of capitalism on corporal, biological aspects of human existence. De Rijke explores how "particular fables, suggestive of class struggle and revolution, may be smoothed over or radicalized in children's literature" (46). Thus, the very story about Aesop, who, if he ever existed, was a Phrygian slave and never grew to old age, is cited as an example of "whitewashing". In various illustrations and interpretations, Aesop is depicted as an old white man, and not as a black young man. With regard to this, it is interesting to examine the solution employed in Relković's *Esopove fabule za slavonsku u skullu hodechju dicu* (Aesop's Fables for Slavonic Schoolchildren) from 1804, where the reader has, on his own, to read into the illustration portraying Aesop as a bearded man under heavy clothes the "ugliness of the body" and "bad temper", attributed to him in the verses under the illustration.

Applying the concepts of the individual and the masses, as conceived by John Stuart Mill, and Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Olga Springer explores the characteristic structure of Edward Lear's limericks, founded on the confrontation of an individual and society. Looking for the full meaning of Lear's limericks, Springer not only examines the text but also takes into account Lear's drawings. The interplay of the drawing and text opens space for the resonating multiple meanings that actually constitute the full sense of the limerick.

The second topic of the book is "Utopias and Dystopias". In this part, two texts address a kind of utopia, if that might be the appropriate term to refer to the creation of an idealised picture of Ireland in the past in adolescent novels by Eilís Dillon, or the relations of the mythological and real Ireland in the novels by Irish-Canadian author O.R. Melling (whose real name is Geraldine Whelan).

Anne Marie Herron analyses the work of Eilís Dillon (1920–1994), an Irish author for children and adults, whose works have been translated into sixteen languages (regrettably, not into Croatian). Herron focuses on fifteen books for teenagers, in which Dillon seeks to inspire the Irish "boy's capacity to embrace the literal and symbolic values of hearth and home".

Ciarrae Ni Bhroin addresses the problems of the return of Irish emigrants to their country of origin, of national identity and tradition in three fantasy novels by O.R. Melling, an author who was born in Ireland and grew up in Canada (her works have not been translated into Croatian). The protagonists of *The Druid's Tune* are Canadian teenagers, whose father,

a judge, sends them to visit relatives in rural Ireland in order to move them away from their wild friends in Canada and to keep them out of mischief for a while. Of course, Ireland as their father remembers it does not exist any longer; his is only an emigrant's picture of the homeland. According to Ni Bhroin, this vision of the homeland, in Melling's novels amalgamated with ancient mythological themes, has no foundation in modern Irish reality. Still, it is a significant reminder of the power of Irish tradition and heritage, both for the Irish people living in Ireland and those living abroad.

The starting point in Susan Shau Ming Tan's study of *The Hunger Games* is the thesis that this trilogy is not only a teenage dystopia, or a cautionary tale, but also a cultural and political critique of the United States. Her aim is to explore the interaction of space, history and national identity in *The Hunger Games*. There is an impressive analysis of the politicised landscape, of places permeated with history that in the dystopic future will become places of destruction, or, in other words, the geography of Panem. The memories of the history of these places are preserved, though in fragments, in the very structure of Panem (for example, District 11 – slave plantations, District 12 – coal mines in the Appalachians). In a similar vein, parallels are drawn between contemporary American tradition, reflected, for example, in Thanksgiving, and its twisted reflections in the games held in Panem. Ming Tan perceives *The Hunger Games* as a warning projection that is a result both of the traumas from the past and the ideological perversions of today.

The third topic in this collection addresses "Experiences of War and The Exile". Elizabeth A. Galway explores the ideological foundations of the three main child figures emerging during the First World War – the child victim, the child soldier and the child peacemaker, as they are presented in English-language periodicals and annuals aimed at school children. The child victim is analysed not only as a victim but also, within war propaganda, as an excuse for war actions. In the children's literature of the period, boys are often presented as those who will find freedom, a sense of belonging, and their natural environment in a military unit. The child peacemaker is a "revived Romantic notion of the child as an incarnation of mankind's potential" (110). Galway pays particular attention to Hermann Hagerdon, an American author who in 1917 wrote *You Are the Hope of the World! An Appeal to the Girls and Boys of America*. In his book, Hagerdon does not see the American child as a victim or a soldier, but as a thinker, leader and ambassador of democracy, who struggles against the dark layers of the past (which are destroying and devouring Europe): "coercive government, irrationality, barbarism, feudalism..." (113).

The topic of Jessica d'Eath's paper is Italian children's literature in the 1930s, when *squadristo* became an established theme in Italian children's literature. *Squadristi* were depicted as "heroic" protectors of the Italian people in the 1920s, "who used public beatings and castor oil 'purges' amongst other methods to silence and punish their declared enemies" (116). Actually, as in the 1920s Italian Fascists were not happy to be perceived as associated with the brutal actions of the *squadristi*, the image of the *scuadrista* was only later ameliorated and the *squadristi* were incorporated into the history of the Fascist movement. As children's literature was under the strong control of Fascist propaganda, it played a significant role in the dissemination of the "truth".

Áine McGillicuddy analyses *Out of the Hitler Time*, a trilogy written by Judith Kerr in 1994. Judith Kerr, a British children's author and illustrator, was born in 1923 in Berlin, in

a family of Jewish origin, who fled from Germany in the face of Hitler's accession to power in 1933. McGillicuddy's attention is placed on the emotional traumas suffered by the nine-year-old Anne and her family, caused by the crossing of linguistic, national and cultural boundaries during her childhood and youth.

The fourth topic is "Gender politics". Marian Thérèse Keyes explores the role played by the paratext (as created by the publisher or the author) in ideologically preparing the reader for the encounter with the text. For this purpose, she analyses the works of Anne Marie Fielding Hall (1800–1881), more precisely her three frontispiece portraits and paratextual elements of *The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not* (1829–1837).

Brigitte Le Juez examines the film adaptation of the story about Bluebeard produced by French director Catherine Breillat in 2009 under the title *Barbe Bleue*. Le Juez finds reasons for the appearance of a host of interpretations, adaptations, rewritings of this story in diverse cultural and historical contexts in the fascination with its realistic basic motif: "the husband as a serial abuser and killer of his young bride(s)" (158), that is, in the central theme of psychological and sexual abuse.

Marion Rana describes the presentation of rape and sexual violence in contemporary young adult novels, as well as numerous myths that make up the commonplaces of contemporary culture, employed to justify rape or diminish its criminal nature.

The edited collection of essays *Politics and Ideology in Children's Literature* opens up a whole range of thought-provoking perspectives on Irish children's literature, which is insufficiently researched. At the same time, it offers insight into Irish research of children's literature (where we can look for parallels with the situation in Croatian research). In doing so, this collection of essays also brings Ireland closer to us. There are many similarities between Ireland and Croatia. Undoubtedly, when such a large number of Croats are choosing Ireland as a country where they hope to achieve their ambitions, there must be a certain sense of affinity, surpassing pure economic interests. Perhaps this fact also makes it difficult for us to resist the temptation to look for parallel experiences and parallel practices, in particular with regard to the themes of politics and ideology, evidently a delicate topic in both countries. Still, however difficult it might be for us in Croatia to resist such interpretations, we should note that we are also facing a very different culture, whose experiences can be really precious.

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History Revaluated

Helen A. Fairlie. 2014. *Revaluating British Boys' Story Papers, 1918-1939*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 210 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-29305-3

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The book *Revaluating British Boys' Story Papers, 1918–1939* presents a bright example of the successful application of various theoretical approaches in a case study of children's literature. Helen A. Fairlie focuses on revaluation, as the title says, of boys' story papers published in Britain in the period from 1918 to 1939. As Fairlie emphasises, this period of British children's literature was often interpreted as a decline in the quality of children's