Filoteknos, vol. 13 • 2023 • DOI: 10.23817/filotek.13-12

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History, Modernism, and Children's Literature in North American Slavic Studies

Marina Balina (Illinois Wesleyan University) in an Interview with Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg (University of Wrocław) and Mateusz Świetlicki (University of Wrocław)

Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg and Mateusz Świetlicki: We are thrilled that you have agreed to answer a few questions for the readers of *Filoteknos*. Your contribution to the fields of children's literature studies and Slavic Studies has been enormous. Why did you decide to study children's literature? Has it been difficult to publish about Eastern Europe in North America?

Marina Balina: I began taking an interest in children's literature when I was already here in the US. I had always read a lot, but as a child, I was more interested in literature for grownups – in getting at those books that, at my parents' house, were always kept on the very top shelf, where they were hard for me to reach. When I emigrated to the US in 1988, I was active in auto/biographical literature and all kinds of life writing, including childhood memoirs. Working at an American university, and creating new courses in culture and literature, led me to think about a course on fairy tales, a genre key not only to folklore, but also to Soviet-era culture. My colleagues Helena Goscilo (The Ohio State University) and Mark Lipovetsky (at that time at the University of Colorado, Boulder) and I collaborated on an anthology of Russian fairy tales for university courses, *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005). My section in this anthology and my critical introduction were dedicated to the Soviet fairy tale. It was at this point that I had occasion to review a lot of Soviet-era children's fairytale

texts, and to read a great deal about the history of children's literature. Notably, there were practically no Western sources, so I had to go back to the literature of my childhood, which, for all its ideological contradictions, turned out to be quite interesting and to provide a lot of material for analysis. Thus began my love of children's literature, and of researching it, which has been my focus since 2005. And I have never been disappointed, as children's literature is the kind of research topic that is always finding some way to surprise you, whether it's the history of this literature, its theory, or the analysis of its texts.

As for publishing on Eastern European literature in the US, I can't really complain. During the years I've worked in the US, I've managed to publish quite a lot, and I can't say I've experienced much difficulty. Scholarly work in the cultural space of Russia and Eastern Europe calls for more attention to how you present the material, since often the reader (whether academic or general) is unfamiliar with the original texts. When I first started this work, I had to internalize a new writing style and accustom myself to this new reader, but I think I learned these new rules pretty quickly. The last ten to fifteen years have seen major changes in how children's literature is researched in the US. The Children's Literature Association organized a special International Committee, which I chaired for four years. Eastern and Central Europe are well represented by special sections, whose meetings have been actively attended by our colleagues. There has been, and continues to be, a very interesting exchange of research methodologies, which I think brings all of us – researchers of childhood and children's literature – closer together.

A few articles in this issue of *Filoteknos* discuss modernism and postmodernism in children's and young adult literature. Can you explain what makes Slavic modernism(s) different from others? What was the role of children's literature in Russian modernism?

All the movements within Russian modernism paid great attention to the image of the child in children's literature, and to all children's literature as such. Osip Mandelshtam, one of the major poets of Russian modernism, believed that the modern person should model their consciousness after that of children: "To read only children's books / To cherish only children's thoughts." The futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky perceived the revolution as "childlike," and moreover referred to the new, postrevolutionary Russia as "an adolescent country." The language of children influenced the search for a new language by such futurist poets as Aleksei Kruchenykh. In fact, the very idea that children's books are of value took shape precisely in the period of modernism (1890–1917). The work of book illustrators at this time (e.g., Aleksandr Benois's *An ABC in Pictures*, 1904) was particularly interesting.

Crucially for children's literature of the 1920s, children's poets continued to experiment in both form and language. This is seen in works by such members

of the OBERIU (the Union of Real Art) as Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky, who albeit briefly, were still being printed in the Soviet children's press. The nonsense poetry of Kornei Chukovsky of course came in for harsh criticism, but it was also very popular with children. And it was in the Soviet period that experimental poets like Oleg Grigoriev, Genrikh Sapgir, Grigory Oster, and Mikhail Iasnov got into children's literature. In the Soviet period, children's literature was something of a refuge for nonconformist poets and writers, who would be published in children's magazines because their playful experimentation was considered more appropriate to the field of children's literature, hence less strictly censored. Children's literature was also imitated and broadly cited by such postmodern poets as Dmitrii Prigov and Timur Kibirov.

Russian modernism, and for that matter postmodernism, experienced something of a temporal displacement; they appeared later than their European counterparts, and then were forced to quit the main stage and hide, either in underground literature, or in the permissible space of children's literature. But this retreat into the underground should in no way be associated with some secondariness or imitativeness on these authors' part. Both these movements have provided wonderful examples of new literature, and have shown that, despite censorship, and the complexity of existence within the Soviet space, modernist and postmodernist traditions have survived. It is the tradition of such survival that now gives me hope for the revival of Russian literature, which is struggling to survive in conditions that are terrible not only for Ukraine, but also for Russia itself, which is waging this war.

You have collaborated with various scholars and helped to popularize Slavic children's literature(s) in North America. Would you say that the popularity of children's literature among Slavic Studies scholars has increased in the last decades?

In Slavic studies, the situation in children's literature research has changed dramatically in recent years. It would be impossible for me to list all the recent publications here, but I can say that between 2020 and 2022 alone, seven books have come out on children's literature, culture, and illustrative art. There are several Slavic studies workgroups on this topic, in both the US and Germany. Children's literature and culture, and the history thereof, have become dissertation topics. Compared to previous decades, when publications were sporadic and isolated, it seems to me that nowadays in Slavic studies, research in children's literature is considered legitimate and necessary.

The history of Eastern Europe – especially the Second World War – has become a significant topic in North American children's literature in the last few decades. Is the Holocaust a major topic in Russian children's literature?

This is a very complicated question. I'm a member of a very interesting research group, the Consortium for Comparative Holocaust Literature Studies, 21st Century. This group consists of scholars from Poland, Israel, the United States, the Netherlands, and Belgium. When I was first invited to study children's literature as part of this research group, I was hesitant. The cult of the Second World War is very strong in Russia, where, indeed, it even has its own particular name: the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45. This war has its own heroes and its own victory day: the famous May 9th. There was never anything about the Holocaust in Soviet children's literature about this war. But since the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the appearance of private publishing houses for children, such as Samokat ("Scooter"), Rozovyi zhiraff ("Pink Giraffe"), and the children's sections of Compass-Gid ("Compass Guide") and Knizhnik ("Booker"), Russia has seen a small but significant influx of translated European children's literature on the Holocaust. I don't think this could be called a "major" topic in contemporary Russian children's literature, but it is a definite presence; these translated books are in libraries, and school librarians work with them within various reading groups. From my point of view, what is particularly important is how these translated Holocaust works have influenced the emergence of homegrown children's literature on the darker pages of Russian history: the tragedies of Stalin's repressions, stories about the fate of children interned in the Gulag, the terrible history of the Volga Germans, and the deportations of Tatars, Germans, and Ingush during the war.

You have taught at various universities in the USA. Which topics have been especially challenging during your teaching career?

First and foremost, this would probably be the rather limited knowledge of world history and… geography. At first, this surprised me, because Americans know their own history quite well. But when it comes to world history, and especially the history of Eastern Europe, not so much. This means that the history of the Second World War, and the prewar and for that matter postwar period, is typically a *terra incognita*. So, over many years of teaching the culture and literature of this region, I have gotten used to starting out by establishing a historical and geographic paradigm in which to situate my characters. And that's when my students and I begin to speak the same language – when they are not intimidated, and we can all jointly take an interest in the topic.

Thank you for your though-provoking answers! We are looking forward to seeing you in Poland.