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Therapeutic Writing Strategies in Contemporary Ukrainian Children's Books about War and Refugee Experience[1]

Abstract: In contemporary Ukraine, many children's authors see it as a conscious goal of their books to help distressed and traumatized readers cope with war and refugee experience. Their intentions are documented in various paratexts. This article refers to creative strategies aimed at potential therapeutic effects on young readers as *therapeutic writing strategies*. It analyzes nine war-themed Ukrainian picturebooks for preschool- and elementary-school-age children, published after the outbreak of the Donbas war (2014) and especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The focus is on the visual representation of emotions, activity elements, and fairy tale structures. Drawing on cognitive literary criticism and studies of emotions in children's literature, the analysis identifies verbal and visual strategies for encouraging and pre-structuring personal storytelling. Therapeutic writing strategies in contemporary Ukraine represent a new paradigm of engaged children's literature, which responds to an acute social need to protect the mental health of the young generation in wartime.

Keywords: picturebooks, emotions, activity, fairy tale, Ukraine, war

At the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2023, a podium discussion took place on the situation of children's literature in Ukraine during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. In her keynote statement, the writer Tetiana (Tania) Stus emphasized that children's authors must strive "not to retraumatize children" via their literary texts, but should instead foreground "the function of literature as therapy" (Z'obro, 2023). This argument refers to the idea of bibliotherapy, which is widespread among the creators of contemporary Ukrainian children's books.

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The term bibliotherapy, literally "healing with books," describes "a dynamic interaction between the reader and story," which "may assist the individual in coping with life changes, emotional issues, and behavioral challenges" (De Vries et al. 2017: 49). The psychological mechanism behind this potential effect consists of three main stages: "identification" (the reader's "empathetic response" to a literary character or situation), "catharsis" (realizing similarities between the story and one's own experience), and "insight" for the reader's own life.[2] In the volume *Understanding Children's Literature*, Hugh Crago argued that bibliotherapy should be considered in relation not only to psychotherapy, but also to reception theory in literary studies (Crago, 2005: 180). Like bibliotherapy, cognitively informed studies of emotions in children's literature also refer to the interaction between a reader and a literary text, which "can move a reader in a different way depending on the match between the affective space it instantiates […] and the emotion scripts and memories a reader brings to the text" (Coats, Papazian, 2023: 7). As literature continues to offer its readers new ways of structuring personal experience, scholars of children's books have identified their potential "therapeutic uses" (Coats, 2006) and their ability to constitute a "force for positive transformations" in the lives of young people experiencing despair and trauma (Reynolds, 2007: 113). These capacities are, at the moment, of the highest relevance to Ukrainian children, so many of whom have had traumatic experiences and/or become refugees during the ongoing war. According to UNICEF data, children in Ukraine "are experiencing excessive fear, anxiety, phobias and sadness, disinterest in school and sleep troubles" (UNICEF, 2024). In this article, I will analyze contemporary Ukrainian picturebooks about children who are coping with fear, sadness, and sleep troubles in wartime. The focus will be on textual and visual poetics, as well as on the particular writing strategies that guided the production of these books.

The growing field of cognitive literary criticism not only investigates "readers' cognitive and affective engagement with fiction," but also asks "how fiction, through various narrative strategies, can alert readers to get engaged" (Nikolajeva, 2014a: 712).[3] Accordingly, authors can develop writing strategies aimed at readers' potential cognitive and affective reaction. In contemporary Ukraine, many children's authors see it as a conscious goal of their books to help distressed and traumatized young readers cope with war experience. In 2023, a team of writers, psychologists, and historians led by the abovementioned Tetiana Stus prepared the volume *Living Writers: How to Talk to Children about War and Peace*, published by the Ukrainian Book Institute (Stus,

[2] The word "catharsis" was used by Aristotle in *Poetics* to describe the emotional effect of Greek tragedy on spectators; it began to be employed in psychoanalysis in the late 19th century.

[3] Cognitive literary criticism includes influential studies by Michael Burke, Patrick Colm Hogan, Keith Oatley, Blakey Vermeule, and Lisa Zunshine.

Tretiak, Artemenko, 2023). The "how to" part of this title reflects the book's status as a manual for parents and educators on using contemporary literature for conversations with children, but in particular, the title's first two words correspond to the section "Living Writers: Direct Speech," which includes statements by nine contemporary authors on their understanding of the role children's literature plays during wartime. Additional links and QR-codes lead to recorded longer interviews with them. In this section of the volume, the various writers emphasize the idea of providing emotional support through literature: "Reading books about current events can become a support, if not a therapeutic experience, for children" (Maksymenko, 2023: 37).[4] And bibliotherapy is explicitly mentioned by Oksana Lushchevska: "We have to […] make use of developmental psychology, therapeutic practices, storytelling, and bibliotherapy, doing so both in practical work with children and in writing texts for children" (Lushchevska, 2023: 39).

The original meaning of "bibliotherapy" has to do with strategies of reading and discussing books, including methods of the sort employed by Ukrainian educators and children's librarians during the current war (cf. Aksʹonova, 2022; Ter-Vartanova, 2024). However, the emphasis Lushchevska puts on the double use of bibliotherapy attests to a crucial transformation of this concept taking place in contemporary Ukrainian culture: bibliotherapy, that is, now also includes the *writing strategies* of children's authors. I will call this phenomenon *therapeutic writing strategies*, which also subsume visual artistic strategies in the case of picturebooks. The existence of such conscious strategies is documented in two ways: a) in various paratexts surrounding contemporary literary texts (subtitles, fore- and afterwords, interviews); and b) through creative cooperation between writers and psychologists.[5]

I will analyze nine war-themed Ukrainian picturebooks for preschool- and elementary-school-age children, published after the outbreak of the Donbas war (2014) and especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[6] Picturebooks, combining text and image, are a productive format for writing about fears and hopes, since visual design has its own tools, such as color schemes, for mediating non-verbal emotions. Drawing on studies of emotions in children's literature, I will focus on forms of "emotion ekphrasis," i.e., "the verbal or visual representation of emotions" (Nikolajeva, 2014a: 712).[7] Therapeutic writing strategies, which aim to shape readers' emotions, correspond to the "cultural politics of emotion [as] shaped and shared by texts

[4] All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[5] The term "paratext" was introduced by Gérard Genette (1997 [1987]).

[6] The Ukrainian writers under discussion include two who live in the US (Julia Kosivchuk, Oksana Lushchevska).

[7] Nikolajeva's usage of "ekphrasis" differs from its traditional conception as the verbal description of an artwork.

for children" to which contemporary scholars pay particular attention (Coats, Papazian, 2023: 9; see also Ahmed, 2014). My investigation thus takes into account both cognitive and sociocultural aspects of emotions in their interrelation. Insofar as writing strategies include choices of textual and visual poetics, I will analyze the narrative, compositional, and semantic tools used to represent changing emotions in picturebooks. Additionally, I will examine paratexts that comment on the production of these books and their intended therapeutic effects.

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF EMOTIONS

One of the war-themed Ukrainian picturebooks that appeared in 2022 is a wordless one: *Zhovtyi metelyk* (*Yellow Butterfly*, Engl. 2023) by Oleksandr Shatokhin conveys an emotional story solely through images. As Maria Nikolajeva has observed, "[m]any picturebooks utilise wordless doublespreads to convey strong emotions for which words would be insufficient and inadequate" (Nikolajeva, 2014a: 713). The composition of *Yellow Butterfly* is based on a dynamic exchange between images of the reality of war (barbed wire, missiles, destroyed cars, empty houses) and images of the emotions experienced by the protagonist, who is a little girl. Barbed wire turns into an enormous black spider, haunting her like a nightmare and incarnating her fears (cf. Shatokhin, 2022a: [12–17]).[8] The spider is reflected in the girl's wide-open eyes, thus representing both a threat and her emotional response to it (Shatokhin, 2022a: [17]). The girl sees a bomb crater and an unexploded missile, which she hits with her fists in a burst of anger. Strong emotion is visually represented through her gestures and a closeup of her face: the reader sees frown lines between her eyebrows, tears in her eyes, and a screaming mouth (Shatokhin, 2022a: [34–35]). The titular character first appears in the book as a big butterfly that is, at the same time, a patch of color and light in an otherwise black and white visual world (Shatokhin, 2022a: [21]). Then it becomes part of the girl, endowing her with great shining wings, themselves made of numerous tiny butterflies, that allow her to navigate the darkness (Shatokhin, 2022a: [42–43]). One yellow butterfly is connected, by a shining string, with a yellow spot on the girl's breast, and shows her the way (Shatokhin, 2022a: [42–43]). This yellow spot refers to the girl's heart, now full of light, which is a visual metaphor of hope. The visual narrative thus proceeds from fear and anger to hope, which transforms both the girl and the image of the world, as myriads of yellow butterflies turn into shining sun and golden wheat (Shatokhin, 2022a: [45, 61–63]). The overall emotional dynamic is conveyed through the change of prevailing colors. The

[8] Here and below, square brackets are used for picturebooks without printed page numbers.

visual narrative begins with black and white pages before yellow butterflies in the blue sky bring two other colors into the book, which represent both hope for future peace and the Ukrainian flag.

The cover of *Yellow Butterfly* shows a girl in the darkness with a yellow butterfly on her finger. The visual contrast of darkness and light is at the core of the color dynamics in two other picturebooks: *Viina, shcho zminyla Rondo* (2015, *How War Changed Rondo*, Engl. 2021) by Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv and *Dity povitrianykh tryvoh* (2022, *Children of Air Raid Warnings*) by Larysa Denysenko and Olena London. These works have in common a three-stage color progression to represent the narrative's emotional shifts: bright colors first prevail, then give way to a dark palette, and finally return at the end of the book.

Cognitive studies of emotions in literature argue that readers "draw on memories […] from real life and prior reading experiences" to interpret emotions represented in books (Coats, Papazian, 2023: 6). Accordingly, the visual ekphrasis of anger and fear in *Yellow Butterfly* can be expected to activate the reader's memory of anger and fears of their own. As per Maria Nikolajeva, the reader's reaction to emotion ekphrasis constitutes an "empathic identification" or "engage[ment] with literary characters' emotions" (Nikolajeva, 2014b: 122).[9] The reader of *Yellow Butterfly* who empathically identifies with its protagonist would proceed, as guided by the picturebook's imagery, from memories of their own anger and fears to a feeling of hope.

At a book presentation in Lviv in October 2022, *Yellow Butterfly*'s creator Oleksandr Shatokhin commented on the creative strategy behind his decision to produce a wordless picturebook: "[E]veryone who picks up such a wordless book […] immediately becomes a storyteller" (Shatokhin, 2022b: 11:16–11:25). This accords with the findings of researchers of "readers' responses to wordless picturebooks": Evelyn Arizpe concludes that wordlessness "heightens the active, co-authoring skills" of the audience (Arizpe, 2014: 101), while Perry Nodelman observes that stories from wordless picturebooks "can be told by many different children in many different ways" (Nodelmann, 1988: 186). To the extent that *Yellow Butterfly*'s ekphrasis of fear and anger largely omits specific details, the emotions it represents can match a considerable range of children's real-world experiences. The wordless book creates a visual structure that readers can fill with their own experience, becoming co-authors of the story. This is what makes *Yellow Butterfly*'s creative strategy a therapeutic one: the wordless composition encourages the reader to engage with their own emotions, while the book's emotion ekphrasis leads them from fear and anger to hope.

[9] Nikolajeva differentiates between "empathic identification" and "immersive identification," with the latter potentially leading to immature and uncritical reading (Nikolajeva, 2014b: 122).

ACTIVITY ELEMENTS IN THE PICTUREBOOK COMPOSITION

War-themed picturebooks represent emotions and traumatic experiences of young protagonists that are shared by many Ukrainian readers. For example, the title *Children of Air Raid Warnings* (2022) refers to the now common need to hide in bomb shelters. Short chapters introduce fictional children from different parts of Ukraine and provide insights into their life during the war, so that Ukrainian readers can compare these stories with their own situation. The title creates a community by naming it: the "children of air raid warnings" include, alike, the book's protagonists and the real-world child readers who share these war experiences. Ukrainian readers can identify with this community, gaining a sense of belonging and not being alone with their personal suffering in wartime.

Notably, one of the picturebooks under discussion includes activity elements, inviting young readers to share their personal stories both visually and verbally. *Zaliznytseiu dodomu* (2022, *Traveling Home by Train*) by Mariana Savka and Marta Koshulins'ka addresses the experience of leaving home and displacement. This is a fictional story of a girl named Yeva, telling in the first person of how she and her mother return to Kyiv after being refugees in Poland. It is significant that her displacement is described as being (almost) over: unlike the traumatic escape at the book's outset aboard an evacuation train, this (regular, ticketed) trip home has an entirely different emotional connotation, despite the fact that the war is not over. For Ukrainian readers with refugee experience, the empathic identification with Yeva, sustained through her first-person narration, would first activate their own memory of hurriedly packing, fleeing, and arriving in a new city. For those who are still far from their home(land), engaging with Yeva's story would offer hope and the "vicarious" experience (as Maria Nikolajeva calls such moments in emotion ekphrasis) of a future return (Nikolajeva, 2014a: 718).

Traveling Home by Train not only tells a fictional story, but also includes several tasks for readers as activity elements within the picturebook composition. Besides typical activity books for children, from coloring to brain games, there is the genre of informational activity picturebooks, which invite their readers "to interact and co-create the factual content by asking them questions and setting tasks to complete" (Rybak, 2022: 324). Like this kind of activity book, Savka and Koshulins'ka's includes blank spaces for completing tasks. However, what makes this a new entry in the category is that *Traveling Home by Train* is a fictional activity picturebook, with the reader invited to co-create both visual images and text through the setting of explicit tasks.

At the beginning of the book, the reader learns that Yeva is returning home and feeling a (verbally expressed) "joy," then she begins to recall her forced

travels (Savka, 2022: [5]). The third page of the story is left blank, under a heading addressed to the particular child reader: "Draw your own journey" (Savka, 2022: [7]). The book's last spread is likewise blank, setting another task to complete: "Write down your own story" (Savka, 2022: [30–31]). These pages form a frame composition to encourage the reader's cognitive and creative engagement with the picturebook. In the first step, the reader is invited to express their own refugee experience in visual form, which is open to non-verbal, possibly unstructured emotions. Then, Yeva's first-person narration offers a verbal structure for telling a personal story of displacement. Having followed Yeva's complete narration with its optimistic ending, the reader is asked to verbalize and structure their own experience. By offering this narrative model to the reader, the book facilitates and prefigures individual storytelling, structuring traumatic experience toward a hopeful ending. *Traveling Home by Train* and *Yellow Butterfly* thus share a therapeutic strategy to encourage personal storytelling, and in particular, to pre-structure it as a transition from suffering to hope, although the two picturebooks implement this goal through different aesthetic means.

FAIRY TALE IN PICTUREBOOKS ABOUT WAR

Several war-themed picturebooks employ the fairy tale genre familiar to children, or structural elements thereof, to model narratives about coping with traumatic experience. According to Kenneth B. Kidd, the fairy tale is a major genre tradition for dealing with trauma in children's literature: "Through the fairy tale, people tell stories about challenge and survival, hardship and hope" (Kidd, 2011: 187). The fairy tale "at once acknowledges and denies trauma," since its hero usually faces and overcomes difficulties (Kidd, 2011: 187).

In a 2024 interview, the Ukrainian children's author Kateryna Yehorushkina summarized her concept of a potentially therapeutic narrative structure in terms that, notably, would likewise be applicable to a fairy tale plot: "In fiction, the path of a character as a hero who overcomes difficulties gives [the reader] faith [*dodaie viry*] and shows possible ways to get out of a crisis and integrate fragments of experience into something coherent and meaningful" (Medvid', 2024). Yehorushkina's interview is titled "How to write the truth without being traumatic?" This question implies therapeutic writing strategies, and recalls the "reader-protective strategies" identified by Hamida Bosmajian in children's literature about the Holocaust (Bosmajian, 2002: XV). In Yehorushkina's case, the goal is both to avoid additional trauma for young readers and to help them overcome previous traumatic experiences.

The beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine directly affected numerous children, with millions forced to leave their homes; others were traumatized in an indirect way. Some creators of children's literature reacted immediately with an unusual digital picturebook format. *Kazky na lystivkakh* (*Fairy*

Tales on Leaflets), written by Halyna Vdovychenko in March-April 2022 and illustrated by Anastasiia Ponomar'ova, were published online in open access to reach all Ukrainian children in need of psychological support. Each of these "leaflets" consists of two A5 pages in pdf format, combining text and image. The intended therapeutic effect of the project is explicitly stated: "On this site you can download and print out leaflets with therapeutic fairy tales for children affected by military actions" (Vdovychenko, Ponomar'ova, 2022).

Another paratext that associates fairy tales and bibliotherapy is the subtitle "Stories and fairy tales with a therapeutic effect" that accompanies the collection *Taiemni istorii malen'kykh i velykykh peremoh* (2023, *Secret Stories of Small and Big Victories*), written by Tetiana Stus and illustrated by Marta Koshulins'ka. The book was created explicitly "for reading by adults together with children of preschool and primary school age."[10] The shared reading of fairy tales is a typical parenting practice. What is significant in this case is the invitation for a conversation between children and adults that is strategically prefigured through the book's composition: the various fairy tales are incorporated into a realistic frame narrative about three displaced children and their mother, who talk with each other about their troubles. Tetiana Kachak and Tetyana Blyznyuk summarize the traumatic wartime themes addressed in *Secret Stories of Small and Big Victories* "through the prism of fairy tale perception": "losing one's home, moving, adaptation, emotional experience, aggression, missing family belongings, landmine safety, the perception of the disability or death of soldiers, awaiting victory" (Kachak, Blyznyuk, 2024: 156).

This book is also an example of creative cooperation between writers and psychologists. Svitlana Roiz, a well-known Ukrainian family and children's psychologist, was involved as an adviser, and wrote the foreword, titled "A book for healing." Here she addresses the adult reader to describe the book as a product of conscious writing strategies: "These stories are created specifically for healing" (Stus, 2023: 5). The charitable Kateryna Biloruska Foundation has organized a free-of-charge audiobook version of *Secret Stories*, read by the Ukrainian singer Alyosha. Like the digital open-access *Fairy Tales on Leaflets*, this free audiobook is framed as "fairy tale therapy for children" affected by war.[11]

MAGICAL HELP IN FAIRY TALES ABOUT WAR

According to Vladimir Propp's landmark *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), the fairy tale structure involves seven "dramatis personae," including the "hero"

[10] This is part of the bibliographic information at the beginning and end of the book. Cf. Stus, 2023.

[11] As stated on the foundation's homepage: https://biloruska.foundation/en/fairytale-therapy-for-children/.

and the "helper," with the latter rescuing the former and solving their difficulties (Propp, 1968: 79–80).[12] The "helper" can come in the form of either a living being (a "magical helper") or an object (a "magical agent") (Propp, 1968: 82). The help most needed by wartime children beset by fear is protection and a sense of safety. One of the *Fairy Tales on Leaflets*, "Sekret paperovoho litachka" ("The Secret of the Paper Airplane"), centers on a paper airplane that functions as a magical agent and protector. This story addresses the nighttime fears that prevent children from sleeping: the protagonist, a little boy, is afraid of falling asleep. His older brother makes him a paper airplane and declares it to be magical. Before going to bed, explains the sibling, the boy is to say a specific spell-like sentence to his paper airplane, which will then turn into a guardian of his dreams at night and dispel his fears until morning. One night there is an air raid warning: the boy, his mother, and older brother get into a bomb shelter, full of frightened children. The older brother likewise teaches them all how to make "magically" protective paper airplanes, believing in which, the children can then sleep calmly. This story from the *Fairy Tales on Leaflets* is based on a typical action from the folktale structure according to Propp: a "donor" (brother) provides a "hero" (boy) with a "magical agent" (paper airplane) (Propp, 1968: 79).

Another war-themed picturebook with the subtitle "Fairy Tale" appeared in 2017 as a bilingual Ukrainian-English edition: *Viina i malen'ka Vira* / *The War and Little Veera* by Julia Kosivchuk. Its text begins in typical fairy tale style: "Once there was The War. She was very mean and ugly" (Kosivchuk, 2017: 5).[13] The War is depicted verbally and visually as a highly abstract but still personified character, having a face with eyes and mouth. According to Propp, one of the seven dramatis personae in folktales is the "villain," who performs three types of action: "villainy," "a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero," and "pursuit" (Propp, 1968: 79). In Kosivchuk's story, the personified War plays the structural role of a villain: she destroys the harmony of the fictional city of Happy People; pursues the hero, a little girl named Veera; and fights with her.

The reason for this pursuit and struggle is that the War[14] wants to steal Veera's favorite toy, a stuffed bunny named Smiley. The urge to protect her beloved bunny gives Veera the strength to resist the villain, but her victory is ultimately owed to a magical agent given to her by her donor-mother: a handful of sunflower seeds that Veera had intended to plant in the schoolyard. She had put them into Smiley's pocket after planting sunflowers with her mother in the garden: "Mama said that if you plant something with love it'll grow into something beautiful! […] We decided to call them the seeds of love!" (Kosivchuk,

[12] Propp emphasizes structural similarities between fairy tales from different cultures.

[13] This is a reversible book; each of the two parts has its own page numbering. The word *viina* ("war") is feminine in Ukrainian, hence its personification as "she."

[14] In the published English text, capitalization of the definite article is not consistent.

2017: 19). When the War snatches the stuffed bunny from Veera, the seeds spill from Smiley's pocket. But fortunately they end up in Veera's hand, as she grabs a handful of dirt to defend Smiley: "She grasped a handful of soil (which happened to have had her mama's seeds of Love) and threw it into the War's eyes" (Kosivchuk, 2017: 20). The seeds suddenly turn out to be magical and transform the War into a giant sunflower – a visual symbol of Ukraine.

Thus the War is defeated in a manner that is at once fantastic and allegorical. The seeds of Love functioning as magical agents refer to the words about planting something with love: in effect, they are sunflower seeds charged or infused with human love. All the characters opposed to the War are shown to be loving with each other: Veera's parents and her best friend Mytryk personify family support and friendship. *The War and Little Veera* thus fills a fairy tale structure with characters and objects that represent abstract concepts of human attitudes. This is a story about the triumph of love, friendship, and family support over violence and villainy.

A similar logic is found in *How War Changed Rondo* (2015), in which personified War is defeated by the residents of a town called Rondo. Their collective effort, guided by three friend-protagonists, is to construct a huge Light machine that produces enough light to dissipate the darkness of War. This fairy tale about light and darkness is visualized through the alternation of bright and dark colors. According to Kachak and Blyznyuk, *How War Changed Rondo* represents the major narrative of contemporary Ukrainian war-themed books for children: "The drama and tragedy of war […] almost always turn into an optimistic visualization of the victory of good over evil, light over darkness" (Kachak, Blyznyuk, 2024: 153).

However, the title *How War Changed Rondo* emphasizes the long-term traces of war. This picturebook does not conceal the problem of trauma, but addresses it through a therapeutic strategy, employing the metaphor of fragility. The story's three protagonists Zirka, Fabian, and Danko are, respectively, a paper bird, a twisted balloon dog, and a lightbulb. Their depictions feature three fragile materials (paper, the thin membrane of a balloon, and glass) suggestive of the vulnerability of human life. Traumas both physical and psychological are conveyed verbally and visually through the injuries suffered by the fragile non-human protagonists: "Danko's transparent body is still cracked around his heart; the edges of Zirka's wings are scarred from being burnt; and Fabian now limps from his wound" (Romanyshyn, Lesiv, 2021: [35]). Mateusz Świetlicki observes that "by using vulnerable non-human protagonists, the authors remove the focus from human tragedy […], but provide readers with a means of emotional identification" (Świetlicki, 2018: 125). This empathic identification would lead to the vicarious experience of frailty turning into resilience and strength, since the paper bird, lightbulb, and balloon are injured, but not destroyed, by violence.

COMBINING REALISM AND FAIRY TALE

Appearing in 2015 and 2017 respectively, *How War Changed Rondo* and *The War and Little Veera* described violent conflicts in fantastic worlds, although they referred thematically to real-world wars, including the one in Donbas. Picturebooks produced after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine respond more directly to the war experience, but still combine realism with structural elements of the fairy tale, particularly the notion of the magical helper. The picturebook *Tse tykha nich, mii astronavte* (2022, *Quiet Night, My Astronaut*, Engl. 2024) by Oksana Lushchevska and Kateryna Stepanishcheva centers on the image of one such helper: the titular "astronaut" who protects a little girl at night, like the paper airplane from *Fairy Tales on Leaflets*.

Quiet Night, My Astronaut is a fictional diary of little Ia from Kyiv who describes the ten days (late February–early March 2022) from the first air attack on the capital to her and her mother's flight and arrival in a safe location. Like the first-person narration in *Traveling Home by Train*, the diary form provides the young reader with a possible structure for dealing with personal war experience. The first entry introduces Ia's protector: "I'm scared, but I won't be afraid. Dad [before leaving for the front – SE] gives me my astronaut doll to hold close. And I wonder, is there a super powerful astronaut in the sky? Watching and hearing me from up above? I believe there is. My astronaut. Keeping me safe" (Lushchevska, 2024: [2]). This entry resembles the fairy tale structure, according to Propp: a donor (father) gives a magical agent (astronaut doll) to the hero (Ia), who then feels supported.

Throughout the diary, the girl addresses her astronaut in the sky, whose presence she feels everywhere. This notion of a personal protector in the sky clearly recalls that of a guardian angel: "There is a map of the starry sky on my ceiling. I look at it and know, my astronaut, that you are looking down on me from up there" (Lushchevska, 2024: [28]). Moreover, the book includes overtly religious references that recall Biblical comparisons of faith in Christ to light, as in John 8:12 ("I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"). For example, Ia's aunt, who has no electricity at home, says to the girl: "What is darkness to us if we have a candle of faith in the heart?" (Lushchevska, 2024: [20]). This diary entry is accompanied by a full-page image of a winged and haloed angel holding a candle, inside an enormous red heart in the darkness. At the same time, the astronaut in the sky is depicted as a big yellow and blue figure resembling Ia's toy. The "astronaut" in question thus represents a syncretic mix of fairy tale/Christian elements that foreground supernatural agency and, most importantly, a child's ability to take comfort in the idea thereof. Both the angel-astronaut here and the paper airplane from *Fairy Tales on Leaflets* share the children's faith in their protective power. Like in *Yellow Butterfly*, the yellow

color in *Quiet Night, My Astronaut* represents light, faith, and, combined with blue, the flag of Ukraine.

Another fictional girl's diary of late February–early March 2022, which also ends with a flight to a safer location, is *Moï vymusheni kanikuly* (2022, *My Forced Vacation*). Written by Kateryna Yehorushkina and illustrated by Sofiia Avdieieva, the book also features an afterword by Svitlana Roiz with advice for young readers on "how to feel safer" (Yehorushkina, 2022: [48]). Here the psychologist suggests employing one's imagination to picture, for example, the presence of a guardian angel. In one diary entry of *My Forced Vacation*, the narrator Vira describes how she and other neighborhood children draw angels in the basement of their house, which is being used as a bomb shelter. This scene can be read as the implementation of Roiz's advice: imagining angels by drawing them. Moreover, this activity has been suggested to the children by their artist-neighbor Niia as "art therapy" (Yehorushkina, 2022: [23]). Therefore, *My Forced Vacation* not only refers to therapy on the level of paratexts, but also includes an explicit mention of a therapeutic activity in the fictional plot. Another entry, accompanied by a full-page image showing the book's characters engaged in prayer, relates that all the neighbors decided to pray together in the basement every evening. Here Vira makes a comment that would be paradoxical in the context of actual religious practice, but that is in keeping with the book's foregrounding of its intended therapeutic function: "Even those who don't believe in God [pray]. Because together we are strong" (Yehorushkina, 2022: [20]). *My Forced Vacation* puts a special emphasis not on supernatural help as such, but on human activity: imagining or drawing angels, praying together. The notion of a supernatural helper appears in this book as a tool to activate human abilities and attitudes, such as imagination and self-confidence ("together we are strong").

In *Yellow Butterfly*, the butterfly also appears from the sky as a helper for the little girl, and at the same time visualizes a transformation in her emotional state. Moreover, the back cover of this wordless picturebook contains a seemingly summarizing quotation from Lesya Ukrainka's famous poetic play *Forest Song* (1911, *Lisova pisnia*): "No, I'm alive! I'll live eternally! / I have that in my heart which cannot die!" (Ukrainka, 1950: 238). In Ukrainka's play, this refers to the nymph Mavka's feelings for a man named Lukash: her heart has learned to love. In *Yellow Butterfly*, as mentioned, one butterfly is connected to a yellow spot on the girl's breast, visualizing something in her heart. The final quote suggests that the yellow color represents not only light and hope, but also love.

Ukrainian war-themed picturebooks tend to feature imagery of loving family members, a category that can include pets and even personified houseplants, like the sansevieria named Frosia in *Secret Stories of Small and Big Victories*. In the chapter "Nevydymi rozmovy. Istoriia, iaku rozpovila kvitka"

("Invisible Conversations. A Story Told by a Flower"), Frosia is the first-person narrator of an embedded fairy tale about love. Here Frosia, who is parched, as the apartment's residents have had to hastily flee, so loves her absent mistress (the family's mother, her usual waterer) that, imagining the latter looking at her affectionately, she blossoms despite her thirst. This is an example of the book's blurring of boundaries between realism (a refugee situation) and fairy tale (a sansevieria-narrator), between empirical and fantastic worlds.

"A Story Told by a Flower" ends with Frosia's summation: "Love is healing. If you learn how to shine to those you love, you can wear it [love] like clothes. People's clothes are beautiful, and they also protect them" (Stus, 2023: 40). Thus, this is a story about a therapeutic mechanism: finding inner strength in one's self through love for others and imagination, as Frosia imagines the presence of her beloved mistress. This fairy tale, where plants can speak, hinges not on magical help but on self-help. According to Propp, this idea is not alien to folktales: "One should also make mention of the fact that the hero often gets along without any helpers. He is his own helper, as it were" (Propp, 1968: 82).

Overall, the analysis of different war-themed picturebooks shows that fairy tale structures are often employed as productive means to address and help cope with traumatic experience. Even the completely realistic narrative in *Traveling Home by Train* includes a crucial allusion to fairy tale plots: an exchange of presents, helping agents, between little Yeva and a kindly train conductor, who is "a bit like a wizard" and calls her "princess" (Savka, 2022: [27–28]). Yeva gives him her toy monkey with the hope that it will assist him on the train and cheer him up. In return, she receives a flashlight, and what sounds like the advice of a folktale donor: "If you suddenly feel sad or scared, turn it on. It magnifies light!" (Savka, 2022: [28]). In this example, allusions to magical help convey the ideas both of self-help (turning on a flashlight) and mutual aid in wartime.

CONCLUSION

Ukrainian war-themed picturebooks are part of a larger international tendency in children's literature. In *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011), Kenneth B. Kidd traces the "merging of psychological discourse and children's literature," particularly in the US, and calls this phenomenon "the triumph of the therapeutic" (Kidd, 2011: XXVI). The most relevant genres for this development are "the picturebook and the adolescent novel" (Kidd, 2011: XXV). In Anglophone picturebooks, Kidd identifies "a strong trend toward the explicitly bibliotherapeutic from the 1960s forward" (Kidd, 2011: 136) – not just discussions about "the therapeutic value of children's books," but also picturebooks created with the goal of helping children cope with a particular kind of distressing experience (Kidd, 2011: 136). Part of

the traced development is a "literary-psychological turn to trauma or recovery writing," with the fairy tale as its major genre tradition (Kidd, 2011: 173, 187).

The bibliotherapeutic use of the picturebook genre and of structural elements of fairy tales is thus not a specifically Ukrainian phenomenon in our so-called "Age of Therapeutization" (Rostek 2024: 113). But as Ukraine faces a war-related range of ongoing traumatic experiences affecting children's daily lives, its children's authors and illustrators have immediately responded with the digital *Fairy Tales on Leaflets* and other book projects. Particular to this moment in Ukrainian culture is the joint effort of various writers to provide support for war-traumatized children, using the available aesthetic tools. Therapeutic writing strategies in contemporary Ukraine represent a new paradigm of engaged children's literature, which responds to an acute social need to protect the mental health of the young generation in wartime.

As multiple crises are part of 21st-century political reality, contemporary political subjectivity includes "technologies of the resilient self," shaping "resilient subjects" (Bracke 2016: 61, 63). Therapeutic writing strategies belong to the politics of wartime children's literature and imply an expectation that young readers should be able to overcome their distress. Therefore, Ukrainian war-themed children's books contribute to the formation of resilient subjects and belong to the overarching political discourse of Ukraine's resilience.

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