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To Calm Your Head: Environment- and Young Reader-Friendly Picture Books and Illustrated Books

Abstract: The article *To Calm Your Head. Environment- and Young Reader-Friendly Picture Books and Illustrated Books* is a proposal for a comparative reading of four works dedicated to children. On their example, it became possible to combine two models of writing about the environmental crisis. The first of them, activist, invites children to various forms of climate action, while the second emphasizes the need for reflection, shows minimalism in the use of resources and includes man on the list of endangered species, thus allowing them to abandon the building of ecological guilt the readers.

Keywords: ecological activism, climate anxiety, picture book

[...] parents seem to think that if they make their child be more active, he/she will learn more and develop faster. The intensity of the unconscious drive upwards, towards the head, the ego and the dominance, is alarming. Remaining “at the bottom“, calming-down, giving oneself a time for experiencing and thinking is a lifestyle which is in decline. (Lowen 2012: 225)

We live under the shadow of the narration about the decline of the world we know. Everywhere we can hear prognoses, warnings, and doomsday scenarios for next decades, repeated like a mantra. Whether we want it or not, we invite children and adolescents to the stories lined with fear. Their representative is the Swedish 15-year-old environmental activist (today already an adult) Greta Thunberg. Since 2019, young people inspired by her protest have been organizing Youth Strikes for Climate, growing in popularity year after year, which proves that even the youngest participants of social life feel obliged to affirm their commitment to the issue of climate and the destiny of the world. However, before they get old enough to be able to participate in this form of activism, they will get access to numerous ecologically oriented publications,

illustrated books, and picture books, in particular. And the number of these publications is growing from year to year. That is why it is worth discuss how the ecological education project presented there is realized, which linguistic, visual, and material expressions are used and how they affect young readers, and their feelings and thoughts.

However, before I try to do so, I would like to reflect on Stanisław Łubieński's text, *Nerwica ekologiczna* [Ecological neurosis], published in his *Książka o śmieciach* [A book about garbage] (Warsaw 2020). The paper deals with the sense of guilt, characteristic of our times, that everyday – by taking a shower, buying, eating, travelling, and being – we contribute to the destruction of our world. Łubieński tells us about his ways of coping with a painful psychological burden, at the same time describing his daily routine, consumer habits, anxiety, and insomnia motivated in various ways. At the end of the text, he writes:

It is dark, but not black, the light from the neighbor's TV set is getting through the window. All the obsessive thoughts slowly become silent, and I can only hear how the refrigerator is humming, and the diode of the bicycle lamp charger is blinking by the bed. The computer in sleep mode is twinkling under the bed. In the radiators, water is trickling, heated by the coal-fired power station. It is hard to sleep under the shadow of the disaster. Everyday new tests, prospects get more and more bleak. Everyday there is a clash between how it really is and how it always seemed to us. It is hard to keep up with the changes, sometimes one would like to cover one's ears, eyes, and mouth. Everyday I fall asleep, thinking that perhaps tomorrow something will happen which will make me have less reasons for frustration. I hope that, together with me, the world will wake up. (Łubieński 2020: 261–262) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

Obsessive talking about ecological issues gives rise to a compulsive need to change the reality and act, but also a sense of helplessness and grief felt at the world which is passing away, today called simply the climate mourning (see Mytych 2022: 153–180). Children's literature which, following the main trends, also frequently deals with ecological issues tells the non-adult audience about the changing world and the humans' obligations to it. Certainly, the narration may go in different ways, we may admonish and threaten young people, as well as encourage them to act. From the children's books shelf, I would like to take four publications, two picture books and two illustrated books; in each of them pictures are very important, they are closely related to the text, and in three cases these are large-format pictures. My choice resulted from the desire to explore different narrative strategies in books for younger (preschool) children. Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska (2023) and Helena Garczyńska (2023) wrote about the relationship between Norwegian and Swedish picture books with environmental issues. I will start with a book from the series about Basia by Zofia Stanecka and Marianna Oklejak. In the volume *Basia i śmieci* [Basia

and garbage], the main character, like Łubieński, is tormented by a feeling of guilt. The story begins with a situation description by the narrator:

Basia left the kindergarten, deep in thought. She did not pay attention to Franek, who accosted her. She did not speak to her Mother. She was walking through the park silently, staring bleakly at the sidewalk. (Stanecka, Oklejak 2019: 2) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

What follows is Basia's dialogue with her mom who, concerned by the daughter's behavior, helps her understand it – the girl feels overwhelmed with responsibility for the world littered with plastic packaging. The daughter's hand is accusingly directed at her mother, who is carrying onions and potatoes in a plastic bag. The question, "do you want to kill a whale?" (trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska), helps the mother and the daughter to find compromise and remedial solutions. It turns out that the plastic bag may be washed and used many times; in addition, with her mother's assistance, the girl may sew a bag out of pieces of cloth and use it doing shopping. However, the bag problem in the story for kindergarten children constitutes only the tip of the iceberg. Soon Basia gets terrified by a prospect of the world without jellies packed in plastic and without plastic straws¹. Once again, her dependable mother finds a solution to the problem, explaining:

Jellies – we may make ourselves [...]. – Or buy them by the weight and pack them in our own jar. And it is really better not to use plastic straws at all. Luckily, there are also reusable straws made of steel or those made of materials which quickly decompose. (Stanecka, Oklejak 2019: 7) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

Concerns for the condition of the world are voiced when Basia, going through the park or being in her own room, sees garbage scattered everywhere: foil, wrappers, disposable packaging. However, this time, too, a solution is found for the sense of helplessness, despair and weeping – a change of habits. Compulsive consumption should be replaced with more thoughtful behaviors, such as using a reusable fabric shopping bags, garbage sorting, and reasonable decision-making what to use and what to throw away. In the end of the story, there is a scene of sewing colorful fabric bags, the girl's dad provides a definition of ecology², collected waste paper is exchanged for an oak seedling which is

¹ "Does it mean that I will never be able to eat jellies and drink through a straw?! – terrified Basia whispered. Suddenly, the world seemed to her a completely different place than it used to be". (Stanecka, Oklejak 2019: 7) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

² "– Ecology is a study of how nature functions and how we influence each other. We [influence] other creatures, but also the Earth, air and water. [And it is a study] of how they influence us – Dad explained. When something is ecological, it means that it has been made out of concern for the good of the world and nature". (Stanecka, Oklejak 2019: 16) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

named Basia in spite of her elder brother's protests. The book has been sponsored by the World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace, and the website *ekoro-dzice.pl*, which classifies it as literature engaged in nature conservation. It certainly supports pro-ecological attitudes among children, suggests how to turn despair into agency and what the youngest recipients of the narrative about the climate crisis can do. It is particularly important that Basia does not solve the world problems on her own, she is emotionally supported and gets practical ideas from her parents. The situation when the child's abilities and sensitivity clash with great challenges related to the climate crisis people face in the 21st century is realistically presented, without becoming too optimistic or falling into pessimistic defeatism.

The main character of the book by Joanna Krzyżanek *Maniutka ratuje świat* [Maniutka saves the world] is older than Basia. This time, the narrative strategy is completely different. The world is described neither by a third-person singular narrator nor by the book characters engaged in a conversation in which one of them has ecological dilemmas, like in *Basia i śmieci*, but here, it is made by the first person narrator, a dynamic and self-conscious girl, who is used to look for those who are guilty of misfortunes in her life, both great and small. When her garbage bag breaks, it turns out that a student is guilty. When she falls off her scooter, the fault lies with her neighbor, Mr. Gęborek. When her glass ball drops down the drain, her friend Tymek is found guilty, and her mom – when the girl's teeth become glued with a jawbreaker (sic!). The character learns of the climate disaster from TV, passionately watched by her neighbor, Ms. Koralewska. Listening to the words coming from the TV set, one may understand why Maniutka tends to say: “it is your fault”. The eco-journalist, Framuga, speechifying on TV, appeals to the viewers in the following way:

– The climate disaster is getting closer [...]. It is just around the corner. All this is, among others, because of trash which is literally everywhere. It is a tree made of plastic bags. There are more bags than leaves. It is a bottle hill, but it is not called like that because of its shape. A straw labyrinth, in fact straw traps. A plastic wave, with plastic jellyfishes. And everything is your fault! Yes, your fault. (Krzyżanek 2021: 14) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

A careful reader can notice that the logic of the narrator who looks for the guilty among the innocent is used on TV, it is the strategy of shifting responsibility to individual consumers instead of implementing systemic changes³. However, the girl, like Basia in the previous book, feels the need to “save the world” and act ecologically in her own backyard. And in fact, she is quite successful, first, thanks to a library survey (“I have spent all the afternoon among books and papers”; Krzyżanek 2021: 26), second, as a result of the

³ This theme requires a more detailed presentation, especially in the context of literature for children who are to solve the problems created by adults and previous generations.

information campaign among neighbors and friends. Thanks to Maniutka, Mr. Gęborek could buy a new TV set with the money he saved when he gave up buying plastic bags and began using a linen shopping bag. Her friend Tymek stopped using plastic straws and decided to construct a rain-draft instead of a straw-draft. The student Julia bought a reusable bottle and she successfully campaigned for an obligatory ecology course for all the students. Maniutka also introduced new rules at home, as she convinced her mom, an aficionado of plastic wrap, to change her habits, and succeeded in giving up small plastic toys. Everything has a positive ending: the girl hopes that the neighbor cooperation may help avoid climate disaster. In this way, the book reinforces the young readers' sense of agency and shows the power of local initiatives. However, as in the case of the narrative about Basia and her garbage problem, the effect of the book mainly depends on rhetorical argumentation and the presentation of possible paths.

A completely different effect on the readers have the two picture books: *Cztery zwykłe miski* [Four ordinary bowls] by Iwona Chmielewska and *Eko Song* [Eco song] by Justyna Zielińska. If asked what *Cztery zwykłe miski* are about, one may say that a little about everything; the rhythm that appears here is not accidental, as everything in the book is rhymed in some way, that is things are related and one results from the other. It is a book about modest housekeeping, managing what we have at our disposal; the bowls become a metaphor of change which is sponsored by imagination, the main 'character' in Chmielewska's works. Joanna Olech comments on the book in the following way:

The author encourages the reader to find the application for four paper disks. They may be turned into a moon, an alarm clock, an umbrella... They may be used to make a tank or a baseball cap. Iwona suggests solutions and encourages the reader to create new compositions and interpret simple geometrical figures in different ways. (Olech 2013) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

These important comments may be complemented by a few words concerning ecological topics, which are not immediately visible. The book does not directly encourage the reader to sort garbage or reduce consumption, but it employs the tactic of playing with shapes – the readers may participate in a simple play concerning different uses of half-circles, which are either an umbrella or spectacles, or windmill blades, which is to make them ponder the mechanics of the world in which we live. At the end of the narrative, Chmielewska introduces texts dealing with more serious issues and the matching pictures. First, the motif of war appears – babies' bonnets are replaced with soldier helmets; next, the motif of emotional life is employed, expressed by a smiling face as well as its opposite – a sad face; all this is represented by means of the shape of four ordinary bowls. Finally, the motif of social injustice appears – the awareness

that some people possess too much, while others have too little. The ending is surprising as it is double. The narrator speaks first, commenting on injustice characteristic of human life.

And although the book and the four ordinary bowls cannot change anything, one may think about it. (Chmielewska 2013) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

This reminds me of Basia and Maniutka, who immediately started to repair the world. Chmielewska shows another path, at first less convincing, as, one may say, mere thinking about human poverty cannot change anything (?). The second ending, which appears two pages later, shows that thinking is followed by acting, which gives us food for thought. The book *Cztery zwykłe miski* is ended with the note:

To create the book, we have used waste paper and old books withdrawn from the library. No one wanted them anymore, now they can live a new life. (Chmielewska 2013) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

Similar notes may be found in other books by Chmielewska. At the end of the book *O tych, którzy się rozwijali* [On those who prospered], the information is provided about old threads bought in a secondhand shop⁴, while the book *Gdzie jest moja córka* [Where is my daughter] is concluded with the commentary on cloth collected and bought for years in similar shops⁵. In this way, Chmielewska indirectly shows how to use discarded cloth and things. Literary texts on upcycling do not directly campaign for changing attitudes, but try to attract the readers, showing what creating consists in, how one may create a new world out of simple elements, how to play literature and art, and how such playing changes our attitude to the limited resources we have at our disposal. In an interview conducted by Katarzyna Kubisiowska for *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Chmielewska said:

I do not know how to organize charity, I am not a volunteer, I save no one – I can share my composure with others. (Kłębek 2020) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

⁴ “The old threads found in a secondhand shop were no longer needed and no one expected they would ever be unwound”. I. Chmielewska, *O tych, którzy się rozwijali*, Wrocław 2013, bs. trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

⁵ “White, translucent organza and all the pieces of cloth which have been used to sew the book were collected for years. They have come from secondhand shops. Organza was hanging somewhere, used as a curtain. Fragments of men’s underpants, pillowcases, curtains, kerchiefs, pajamas, large skirts and girls’ dresses which were used by someone (we do not know who) somewhere (we do not know where) have been sewn together to form a book.” I. Chmielewska, *Gdzie jest moja córka?* Wrocław 2020, bs. trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

Calmness characteristic of Chmielewska's books seems to me the most ecological message to the child of today – the times of excess, great number of stimuli and gadgets, precipitation and permanent noise⁶. The culture of constant stimulation, in which children participate, is put in the brackets in the book. It is expressed in the graphic layout of the described book. Shades of dim beige and warm yellow dominate; the author does not need to attack the readers with a glossy cover and harsh colors. We are in toned-down, hushed up, and thought-provoking aesthetics. One can immediately ask if the today overstimulated children would like it. Paradoxically yes: they are often tired of excess and confused by exaggeration. Carl Honoré wrote about this in his book *Pochwała powolności. Jak zwonić tempo i cieszyć się życiem* [In Praise of Slow] (2004: 259–284). Here, they have an opportunity to rest. And careful 'reading' of the pages of the book will compensate for the apparent lack of colors.

The last publication I would like to discuss is the small book (in comparison to the previously discussed ones) *Eko Song*, published by the niche publisher house Dziką Małpa. It has been written by Justyna Zielińska, an artist from Katowice creating picture books for children. The publication has a square format (14 cm X 14 cm), while all the books discussed above are more or less in the A4 format. It has been published in Polish and English versions. It is a thread-stitched book with a soft cover, printed on recycled paper, whose beige-grey color beautifully emphasizes colorful elements which constitute an integral part of the book message. *Eko Song* is an example of a poetic book which at the textual level is based on parallelism and the repetition of one sentence within which the subject is changed. The author enumerates the sentences:

Elephants can become extinct.
Whales can become extinct.
Gorillas can become extinct.
Walruses can become extinct.
Turtles can become extinct.
Butterflies can become extinct.
Tigers can become extinct.
Rhinos can become extinct.
Bears can become extinct.
Penguins can become extinct.
Animals can become extinct.
Protect them.

⁶ Making the child and childhood part of the capitalist machine producing new consumers seems to be an important topic. Tomasz Olchanowski writes about it: "The consumer-citizen seems to be perfect, all the time cheerful, excited, with controlled hipomania interrupted by cyclic, slight phases of lowered mood, necessary to consume what makes the mood elevated: legal stimulants, products of farmaceutical industry and companies selling impressions and experience". T. Olchanowski, *Kultura manii*, Warszawa 2016, p. 22. trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

Forests can become extinct.
 Protect them.
 People can become extinct.
 Protect them.
 trans. by M. Skórka. (Stefańczyk 2017)

The mantra-like repetitions together with an appeal for different species conservation, including humans, are combined with an interesting artistic convention. Every two pages of the book constitute a background for an image of an endangered species, a small figure of a boy or a girl and a text fragment resembling handwriting. Toned-down colors, beautiful representations of animals in the gouache technique and the simplicity of the book as an artistic object contribute to the message coherence. Children get a work of art which appeals to them to protect the environment, encouraging them to act; in addition, it has been designed as an environmentally friendly production. According to Bettina Kummerling-Meibauer:

A significant number of picture books attracts the reader to its material aspects by the acceptance of the production process and the physical character of the book. It is surprising that this tendency already appears in publications for babies and small children, usually printed on cardboard, sometimes on wood, plastic, cloth or other materials which are difficult to destroy but easy to wash. (Kummerling-Meibauer 2017: 83–84) trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska

In the case of the book *Eko Song*, attracting attention to the materiality of the work of art is related to the coherence of the ecological message and the ecological production of the book Magdalena Howorus-Czajka wrote about this topic (2022: s. 453–463). A book with a glossy plastic cover and chalky paper, produced with a lot of water and various harmful chemicals, speaks to us differently from a book produced with waste paper, thread and a little paint. Certainly, the latter speaks to us more quietly, more modestly, less aggressively. In addition, one begins to think that in fact every object, a work of art as well, involves putting in circulation another object, which may become an environmental ballast. However, in the case of the discussed publication, ecological issues have been treated especially seriously, which was appreciated by the international jury of the COW International Design Festival in 2018. The idea of including humans into the list of endangered species is especially worth mentioning. The phrase: “People may become extinct. Let’s protect them“ (trans. by E. Bogdanowska-Jakubowska), concluding the publication, seems to be slightly subversive. Both in the book *Basia i śmieci* and in *Maniutka ratuje świat*, humans have been presented as guilty of the approaching disaster, which made the two main characters feel the need to do something for the planet. If we become aware that humans are one of the species that may die, and they should be protected like tigers or elephants, we will start thinking ecologically, leaving

aside an unproductive schema related to answering the question, whose fault it is. The adjective *ecological* in this context would also mean satisfying the human needs of safety, relation, belonging, comfort and protection against civilization noise. We live in the XXL world as far as the number of stimuli is concerned, which we have to cope with from our birth. Tomasz Olchanowski in the book *Kultura manii* [Mania culture], analyzing the causes of psychocultural determinants of mental diseases in increasingly young children, has observed great hunger for new stimuli, characteristic of our cultural circle, which cannot be satisfied. Overweening ambitions, parents' excessive expectations, stories of future life success – all of them create a non-ecological environment for the development of another generation of depressive and obsessive consumers. We can try to stop this vicious circle by means of literature whose aim is not to encourage people in the first place to act in the first place but to reflect and connect across-generations, which may generate such an activity. The key issue seems to be the coherence of the message and means of expression. It is hard to believe in an ecological message of a book published non-ecologically, making children to be accustomed to a high level of color noise, visual effects, or even to aggressive rhetoric which leaves them frightened, with a sense of responsibility which they will not be able to cope with.

Fortunately, the activist mode represented by *Basia i śmieci* and *Maniutka ratuje świat*, and the contemplative-poetic mode, less popular, represented by *Cztery zwykłe miski* and *Eko Song*, complement each other. That is why we can find four books on the shelf, each of which responds to different children's needs. *Basia i śmieci* shows the ability of the family to work out children's anxiety concerning the end of the world we are familiar with and change their habits. The book *Maniutka ratuje świat* stresses the child's agency and the power of the local community, which can work on changing different habits. *Cztery zwykłe miski* offers an invitation to play and create the world out of simple elements, and use the power of imagination, social sensitivity, and the ability to modestly use the existing resources. The last of the books that have been discussed, *Eko Song*, shows a possibility to perform ecology without complaining about people and in accordance with economical management of plastic and material resources. The books also differ in number of colors, amount of plastic used to produce them and noise made by the narrator. It is worth putting them on the shelf together to compare the amount of information, anxiety, the sense of guilt, hope, and trust in the future, which we want to present to young readers.

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