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LITERATURA DZIECIĘCA – MEDIACJA KULTUROWA – ANTROPOLOGIA DZIECIŃSTWA  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – CULTURAL MEDIATION – ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD



Filoteknos

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – CULTURAL MEDIATION – ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

Vol. 14

Migration Narratives: Staying, Leaving, Returning,  
and the Question of Migration (In)Visibility  
in Children's and Young Adult Literature

REDAKCJA / EDITED BY  
JESSICA SCHWITTEK, KATARZYNA JENDRZEY,  
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# Studies

Contemporary Transnational Growing Up –  
Interdisciplinary Perspectives



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## Children's and Young Adult Literature as a Space for Reflection on Migration: An Introduction to Thematic and Narrative Perspectives

The lines on the cover of this special issue of *Filoteknos* take on dynamic forms – they twist, intersect, dissolve, and reconnect. Their movement is not linear but rather circular, fragmented, and interwoven. This visual design serves as a metaphor for the migration narratives that emerge from the contributions gathered in this volume. It highlights the multilayered aspects of children's and young adult literature, as well as the many different representations and interpretations of migration herein.

Just as the cover is inspired by the diversity and complexity of migration narratives, the conception and development of this special issue trace back to the international conference held in March 2024 at the University of Wrocław, Poland. This conference focused on migration, identities, and growing up in transnational spaces and was part of the binational German-Polish, interdisciplinary sociological and literary studies project DoDzi<sup>1</sup> – Growing Up in Transnational Families: Children's Perspectives on 'Good Childhood' – which examines childhood and transnational family arrangements. From a sociological perspective, the project focused on how children interpret and evaluate

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym is derived from the Polish title "Dorastanie w rodzinach transnarodowych. 'Dobre dzieciństwo' z perspektywy dzieci" (DFG: 465048370; NCN: 2020/39/G/HS6/01633). Alexandra König leads the German side of the project and Dorota Michułka the Polish side. More information about the project can be found at "<http://www.uni-due.de/biwi/koenig/dodzi/>".

transnational arrangements and what normative patterns of a “good childhood” (Bühler-Niederberger, 2024) are embedded within them (see König, Schwittek, Jendrzey, 2024). Additionally, the study examined how transnational families are reflected and represented in children’s and young adult literature (Jendrzey, 2025; for a literary perspective see Zajac, 2023). The literary studies perspective focused on the interaction between the book and the reader. The analysis explored how children engage with the narratives presented in children’s literature to gain insights into their perspectives on transnational families and childhood: how they position themselves in relation to fictional characters in children’s and young adult literature, identify with or sympathize with them, and how they interpret the depicted family structures in light of their own experiences (Michułka, 2024a; Michułka, Zajac, 2024).

A central aspect that connects both perspectives within the DoDzi project is the understanding and analytical potential of children’s and young adult literature. From both a sociological and a literary studies perspective, it is regarded as a social document closely intertwined with the societal contexts of its time (Dörner, Vogt, 2013). As Grzegorz Leszczyński (2006: 11) emphasizes, it is always embedded in contemporary events and historical experiences, making it not only a literary genre but also a witness to social processes – one that can (re) construct and deconstruct them. In this sense, children’s and young adult literature provides a productive avenue for understanding social dynamics, historical developments, and cultural transformations, as well as the specific interpretative patterns of social phenomena embedded within them. Literary narratives play a central role in this context, as they provide a fundamental framework for making sense of lived reality. They are regarded as a “primary means of organizing experience and a tool for constructing models of reality” (Ryan, 2005: 345). Furthermore, narratives illustrate processes of development and individual transformation within a “past-present-future” schema (Ricoeur, 1988).

The potential of engaging with children’s and young adult literature and the narratives within and around it was explored on multiple levels within the DoDzi project. On the one hand, children’s and young adult literature was analyzed at the textual, reception, and production levels (Vogt, 2014). On the other hand, it was also employed as a tool to create an age-appropriate stimulus for empirical research (see Schwittek, Jendrzey, forthcoming). This methodological approach highlights the dual function of children’s literature: both as an analytical object for reflecting on social processes and as a practical instrument for capturing children’s perspectives on migration and transnational lifeworlds. In order to examine this latter aspect in greater depth, we conducted an interview with Alexandra König, the lead of the German Part of the DoDzi project, which is included in this issue of *Filoteknos*. In the interview, she reflects on the role of children’s literature in her research, its integration into the project, and its methodological application for studying (transnational)

childhood experiences. As the project's findings illustrate, these experiences and interpretations are highly diverse (König et al. 2024). And not least, challenging in regard to traditional understandings of migration.

The findings of the DoDzi project highlight that, from children's perspectives, migration extends far beyond the physical relocation from one place to another. Children frame, interpret, and negotiate migration within transnational contexts in diverse ways, taking into account the perspectives of both migrating and non-migrating actors while emphasizing relational dimensions. They speak about migrations rather than migration, recognizing its various types, contexts, trajectories, and the motives that shape them. This becomes apparent both in children's own accounts (König et al. 2024) as well as in their reception of migration-related literature (Michulka, 2024b). Migration is not perceived as a one-dimensional transition but rather as a dynamic process of reorientation, adaptation, and strategic negotiation within individual and interfamily contexts. While migration can open up new resources and opportunities, it is also often accompanied by loss, uncertainty, and emotional challenges. In short, children incorporate broader interpretations and contexts that transcend traditional understandings of migration, particularly those shaped by methodological nationalism.

In this context, Nina Glick Schiller (1995) and her colleagues already in the 1990s called for a new perspective on migration – one that challenges conventional concepts and makes the complexity of migration processes more visible. They introduced the transnational perspective, which, in contrast to methodological nationalism, allows migration to be understood not as a one-dimensional and irreversible process but as a form of dynamic mobility in multiple directions, encompassing both physical and social dimensions, such as cross-border relationships. Therefore, migration is no longer interpreted as a linear, territorially bound process. Instead, this approach emphasizes the circularity, temporality, and multidimensionality of migration movements (Faist, Fauser, Reisenauer, 2014; Pries, 2010: 15f.). This “transnational turn” and its call for more complex perspectives on migration (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Pries, Seeliger, 2012) is also reflected in recent approaches of literary studies to analyze children's and young adult literature (McAdam, Arizpe, Abou Ghaida, 2024; Świetlicki, 2023; Arizpe, 2021). As the contributions in this special issue illustrate, literary representations of migration capture its complexity and contribute to questioning and renegotiating traditional notions of migration.

With this volume, we bring together international and interdisciplinary analyses of children's and young adult literature that examine narratives about and related to migration. By exploring how migration is represented in children's literature, this volume expands knowledge of these representations and deepens our understanding of migration itself, while also demonstrating how children's literature reflects broader social contexts. Thus, the focus is not

only on analyzing migration and its representation but also on highlighting the potential of children's and young adult literature as an analytical object in its own right. As Susanne Gaschke (1995: 1) aptly states and inspires us: "Children's literature is a complex cultural phenomenon that appears simple to many. One of the greatest deficits in academic engagement with children's books lies in underestimating this complexity, in the refusal to acknowledge its multilayered nature and to consider it methodologically." This issue of *Filoteknos* reflects the complexity of children's literature and the broader socio-cultural discourse on the subject of the new fluid migratory identity, the poetics of migration, new narrative strategies in migration literature for young people, and the subject of the changing family model. In transnational conditions, the literary image of the family in a situation of migratory separation, in fact, takes the shape of a new community that is liminal<sup>2</sup> "beyond borders," moves away from the nuclear model of family towards a group of close people – such as grandparents and relatives – while acquiring new cultural meanings, values, and social senses. Contemporary literature for children and adolescents addressing the changing approach to the child and childhood as a socio-cultural construct reflects these transformations.<sup>3</sup> The cultural differences inherent in the daily life of the country of settlement will also become a challenge for the migrant family of migration-themed books at the level of the setting and plot.<sup>4</sup>

A review of the contributions revealed a highly heterogeneous approach to migration narratives. Not least because all contributions understand migration not merely as physical movement from one place to another, but also incorporate various migration narratives and contexts, which we aim to highlight in the special issue. To structure the diverse perspectives on migration,

<sup>2</sup> More about liminality in children's literature see issue 13 of *Filoteknos* edited by Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg and Mateusz Świetlicki in collaboration with Alicja Wang.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, this is a relatively new issue in the Polish socio-cultural space, which has so far mainly been the focus of sociologists (Slany, Ślusarczyk, Pustułka, 2017; Walczak, 2016; Urbańska, 2009). In the field of Polish literary studies, migration and transnational childhoods have yet to receive a complete monographic study, although several articles have already addressed such issues (Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2024; Gromadzka, 2022; Wójcik-Dudek, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Such books show important moments in the life of the protagonist: the difficult decision to leave of the parents (or one of the parents), the departure of the child protagonist abroad with their family, the moment of arrival in the new country, the search for work by the parents, various situations of confrontation with the new reality, the new country of settlement and attempts to assimilate into the local environment, language barrier and difficulties in communication, peer rivalry, the attempt to confront one's own culture with a foreign culture and determine one's own attitude to the new culture, the attempt to understand it, establish a dialogue, exchange views, then tame the place, adapt to the new conditions, but also make friends (see Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2024; Świetlicki, 2023).

we have organized the contributions into four thematic groups: Staying, Leaving, Returning, and (In)Visibility. However, this categorization should not be understood as the only possible or definitive classification. Many texts address multiple aspects simultaneously. We particularly aim to highlight these overlapping narratives, as they demonstrate that migration in children's and young adult literature is not depicted in a one-dimensional or single-perspective manner. This becomes evident not only in the thematic engagements of the authors with the subject but also in the theoretical approaches of their analyses. Thus, the chosen structure is not intended as a rigid classification but rather as a structural framework that brings central themes and patterns into focus without constraining the complexity of individual contributions. It provides a way to grasp the dynamics of migration narratives and illustrates how different perspectives and storytelling approaches intersect and complement one another.

#### STAYING – REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-MOBILE ACTORS OF MIGRATION

This grouping encompasses not only the physical dimension of staying but also the perspectives of non-mobile actors, as well as a metaphorical understanding of migration. The first thematic section is introduced by Anna Pigoń, who examines migration as both a narrative and structural element in historical and contemporary Polish girls' novels. In her analysis, migration is understood primarily in a metaphorical sense – as an expression of inner development and social transformation. It functions as a key motif of change, symbolizing the protagonists' transition into adulthood. The remaining two articles in this grouping focus on Stayer children, that is, children of migrants who do not migrate themselves. This underscores the fact that literary narratives of migration do not solely adopt the perspective of those who physically move but also reflect the experiences of those who stay behind (Faist et al. 2012: 22ff.). In this context, Dorota Żygadło-Czopnik examines the phenomenon of transnational families as a consequence of parental labor migration. Her contribution analyzes how parental absence is represented in literature and how the lived realities of children who stay behind are portrayed. Here, migration is understood as a field of tension between distance and proximity, loss and continuity. Similarly, Justyna Szumańska and Justyna Zajac examine the representations of non-mobile children, linking them to the literary depictions of refugee (mobile) children. The connection between these two migration experiences underscores that migration is not an isolated event but rather a universal human phenomenon. In literature, migration emerges as a narrative construct that encompasses experiences of boundaries, loss, and uncertainty, but also of hope and adaptation.

## LEAVING – EXPLORING CHILDREN’S AND ADOLESCENTS’ MOBILITIES

The second thematic group – Leaving – comprises four articles that focus on the departure from a familiar place, whether due to war or racial oppression, displacement, or environmental changes. This group is opened by the article by Ewa Klęczaj-Siara, which explores the movement of African Americans in the early twentieth century from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North in the United States. Analyzing picturebooks about African American artists, the author explores the representation of this (domestic) migration and the experience of navigating new social spaces. Here, migration is not depicted as a linear movement from one place to another but rather as a creative and multifaceted process of spatial appropriation, in which identity and community are continuously renegotiated and reshaped. The following two articles examine forced migration in the context of the war in Ukraine, analyzing Ukrainian children’s and picturebooks published after 2014. Svetlana Efimova explores how these works employ therapeutic writing strategies to help children process the traumatic experiences of war and displacement, thereby establishing a “resilience narrative.” Here, migration is understood not only as an individual experience but also as a collective one. This collective dimension of migration – as part of a national narrative rather than solely an individual experience – is also central to Daria Semenova’s contribution. She analyzes the representation of internally displaced children, demonstrating that migration extends far beyond the physical act of relocation. Rather, it is a dynamic process that reshapes identities, social relationships, and the very concept of home. The final contribution in this group, by Larissa Carolin Jagdschian, examines the depiction of displacement as a consequence of climate disasters. The author illustrates that climate migration is not only portrayed as a direct result of climate change but also as a narrative of societal failure. Here, migration is not presented as an individual fate but rather as a global, systemic issue deeply embedded in political, social, and ecological structures.

## RETURNING – MIGRATION AS A RECIPROCAL AND TEMPORAL PROCESS

The penultimate group of articles focuses on the literary negotiations and representations of return migration, with an emphasis on the reciprocal and temporal character of mobilities, which can include both geographical (movement) and/or imagined (return) mobilities. In this context María Alcantud-Díaz analyzes the depiction of return migration in picturebooks, aiming to identify the narratives conveyed within them as well as their societal implications. Here, migration is understood as a multifaceted process that encompasses social,

emotional, and economic reorientation. The analysis particularly emphasizes that migration is not a linear movement but rather a cyclical and dynamic phenomenon that presents both challenges and opportunities for individuals and societies. The complex interconnections of migration are also explored in the contribution by Deepali Agarwal. Through an analytical lens, the author reviews the book – *A Home for the Hargila* – which explores themes of migration, climate change, and the disappearance and return of the Hargila storks in Assam, India. The review demonstrates that migration is not considered in isolation but rather embedded within an ecological and social context. The narrative connects the migration of birds to human migration and its social consequences for marginalized communities, highlighting the intricate interrelation between climate change, social inequality, and displacement. Here, migration is not depicted as an isolated phenomenon but as a process of leaving and returning, deeply embedded in a broader network of systemic interconnections.

#### (IN)VISIBILITY – MARGINALIZATION OF MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND ITS DIVERSITY

The following contributions illustrate how historical developments, publishing decisions, and sociopolitical narratives shape the literary representation of migration. Jana Mikota analyzes the historical evolution of migration depictions in German-language children's and young adult literature from 1945 to the present. Her study demonstrates how thematic focuses and narrative strategies vary across different social and political contexts. Migration is understood as a part of broader societal negotiation processes, which are reflected in children's and young adult literature. The literary negotiation of migration is also examined by Katarzyna Jendrzey, who draws on interviews with Polish publishers of children's and young adult books. Her study highlights a narrative of invisibility and deliberate avoidance, which manifests in publishing decisions and contributes to the limited visibility of migration in Polish children's and young adult literature. At the same time, she reveals that migration is perceived from a publishing perspective as both a socially marginal topic and a politically and socially charged issue. A similar pattern of marginalization is also evident in Russian children's literature, as Ekaterina Shatalova demonstrates in her article. She analyzes how migrants and refugees are depicted in contemporary Russian children's literature and demonstrates that migration is often portrayed primarily as a problem or challenge for the majority society. From her perspective, migration emerges as an underrepresented and stereotyped topic in Russian children's literature, frequently narrated from an outsider's point of view.

The contributions presented in the four groupings focus on analyses of children's and young adult literature, particularly at the textual and production levels. Thematically linked to the volume, but not involving literary analysis, is the

guest contribution by Krystyna Slany and Justyna Struzik, which is also included in this issue. Through interviews and focus groups, the study examines the agency and identity formation of migrant children in Polish schools. Here, migration is not understood as a simple transition from one culture to another but as a dynamic process of negotiating identity, belonging, and social relationships.

Beyond the contributions and groupings, this issue of *Filoteknos* includes the previously mentioned interview with Alexandra König, a sociologist specializing in childhood and family research. As a co-responsible contributor to the Dodzi project, she shares her insights and perspectives on this project as well as on the subsequent project, TraNa.

Traditionally, this issue also features the VARIA and review sections. The VARIA section includes an article by Karolina Szymborska, in which the author examines how various concepts of childhood in philosophical and literary discourses are linked to understandings of time and temporality. She presents different temporal archetypes of the child, navigating between the philosophy of finitude and the philosophy of beginnings.

The review section includes a contribution by Dorota Michułka, reviewing the book *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej*, edited by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek.

For the final words of this introduction, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the authors for their valuable contributions to this issue of *Filoteknos*, as well as to the reviewers for their dedicated feedback and constructive comments, which have greatly enriched this publication.

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# Studies

Staying: Representations  
of Non-mobile Actors of Migration



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## Movement as a Structural Element of Polish Novels for Girls

**Abstract:** Novels for girls constitute a unique genre of literature for children and young adults; its name indicates both the target group and the explicit educational purposes of these works. There are several main structural elements inscribed into novels for girls, one of them being rites of passage. One of the most common ways to exhibit the rite of passage trope (which symbolizes change and the process of maturing of the protagonist) is through movement. In this article, several novels for girls, both from the interwar and the contemporary period (e.g., by Maria Kruger, Kornel Makuszyński, Krystyna Siesicka, and Zofia Urbanowska) were analyzed in the light of their structure, revealing how migrations understood as movements are their fundamental feature and providing the answer as to why this is so. There are various types of migrations in which the heroines engage, such as escape (displaying the function of rebellion), mission (the act of helping one's family, as a result of which the protagonist becomes an adult), or vacationing (during holidays – it is a variation on the popular theme from the novels for boys – centered around adventure). The effect of these movements consists in growing up, meaning that migration in novels for girls constitutes a special narrative device.

**Keywords:** girls studies, movement, novel for girls, space, women studies

### INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSFORMATION OF POLISH NOVELS FOR GIRLS

Novels for girls constitute a unique genre of literature for children and young adults. Its name indicates both the target group and the explicit educational purpose of these works.<sup>1</sup> The first Polish novels for girls were centered on

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<sup>1</sup> Novels for boys also have educational functions, but it is difficult to talk about the development of a separate genre for boys. The novels targeted at them and read by them are travel and adventure novels with a male protagonist, but they are never overtly described as being “for boys”. For this reason, novels for girls seem to be a bit more hermetic in terms of the target group, and at the same time more focused on education and socialization – within the framework of one gender, and therefore separate tasks, goals, and preparation for other life roles.

didacticism and educational models, preparing the intended reader – the recipient of the text – for life in society and fulfillment of the roles of wife and mother.

The beginnings of Polish novels for girls date back to the works of Klementyna Tańska-Hoffmanowa (1798–1845), which were similar to advice writing, instructions addressed to adolescent girls. The first Polish novel for girls is considered to be *A Souvenir of a Good Mother* (*Pamiętka po dobrej matce*, 1819), which is a collection of pointers given to a daughter by her mother. These pieces of advice are of course in line with the worldview of the era and the attitude of the author herself, who was far from espousing emancipatory aspirations, and the main values contained in this work include patriotism, religion, and family. In the context of this work, Zofia Brzuchowska pointed to particularly important fairy tale traditions, to which it owes more “than to the proximity of romance, which not only was not a trustworthy guide to life, but actually led astray into the path of escapism” (Brzuchowska, 1998: 325). Krystyna Kulickowska even noted that in her work Hoffmanowa expressly distanced herself from romance novels and the theme of love in general, exposing instead the models of virtues and behavior that, in her opinion, were appropriate for young patriotic women (Kulickowska, 1970: 103–104). Therefore, in these first works the point was not to show the subjectivity of the heroine, but to convey proper values and moral guidance to the girl reader. Only later, when the genre had become established in the Polish tradition, the works for girls began to be plot-based, the events were developed, and the heroines individualized and diversified.

The development of the genre intensified in the second half of 19th century, which was associated with the spread of emancipatory ideas, changes in worldviews, and shifts in literature, which began to lean toward contemporary, social, and moral themes (Nosek, 2006: 251). After the fall of the January Uprising,<sup>2</sup> due to its historical, political, and social consequences, themes such as impoverishment, decline of landed gentry manors, the role of family, and the value of work were also reflected in the plots of novels for girls (Nosek, 2006: 254). As Anna Nosek remarked, “family issues, indicating the value of the family, promoting exemplary images of it, presenting the ideals of femininity and educational models (in the spirit of patriotic ideas, love of God, family, work) through the figure of the main character are the basic themes and plots of novels for girls in the second half of the 19th century” (Nosek, 2006: 253).

In the interwar period, new types of protagonists emerged: a hoyden, tomboy, rascal. On the one hand, their appearance indicated the growing impact of

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<sup>2</sup> The January Uprising (1861–1863) was a Polish national uprising that broke out in the hope of regaining independence, and after its fall, important social and moral changes took place, such as the impoverishment of certain social classes, the growing role of women in public life, and the redirection of thoughts toward everyday work instead of striving for independence.

the genre. On the other hand it corresponded to the significant social changes of that period, also in terms of upbringing, the role of women, and social divisions.

After World War II, during the period of socialist realism, the genre disappeared from the literary horizon for a dozen or so years, as it did not fit into the educational policy of the time. There were also voices that said, in the face of the post-war legacy of difficult experiences, publishing and reissuing “novels for adolescent girls” made no sense (Kuliczowska, 1970: 109–111). Later, around the 1960s, it returned, gradually transforming into a social novel, a family saga, removing the heroine from the foreground as the only or leading character of the novel (Pytlos, 2014: 74). In modern times, it seems that this genre became outdated, or at least that it radically changed its formula; novels for girls were replaced by romance novels, both adapted to young readers and addressed to women (Wójcik-Dudek, 2017: 57–78).

Marlena Bednarska argues that the novel for girls underwent constant changes throughout the genre's existence, partly due to the fact that “it had to be a mirror of preferred pedagogical guidelines” (Bednarska, 1998: 8). Therefore, each element of its structure is purposeful and fulfills specific functions; this also makes the genre pattern repeatable, fitting into the assumptions of a given era. Anna Kruszewska-Kudelska listed the following features of novels for girls: a specific theme, focused on the issues of family and school life; a clear didacticism, possible thanks to the significant schematization of the plot and the characters; stereotypes and plot patterns, as well as the presence of specific artistic devices, motifs, and fairy tale inspirations (Kruszewska-Kudelska, 1972: 37–38). The fact that many elements are repetitive allows us to distinguish constitutive features and indicate their functions.

#### RITE OF PASSAGE AS A CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENT OF THE GENRE

The novel for girls, as a genre arising from the tradition of sentimental romance, characterized by the primacy of the didactic function, and also closely linked – in terms of topic, structure, and language – to popular culture (Kruszewska-Kudelska, 1972: 67), is a genre with a set order, which assumes the presentation of a certain problem, a successful solution to the difficulties that the heroine encounters, and finally has a compensatory nature. For this reason, the key motif of this type of work is transformation, which is often shown very transparently.<sup>3</sup> This possibility of depicting transformation also results from the fact that the portrayed heroines are at such an age and stage in life that the transformation seems natural and even inevitable. As Małgorzata Chrobak observes, “The main principle of a novel about growing up is the

<sup>3</sup> I mean the genre of novels for girls, which are works on social themes, about growing up, devoid of side plots – e.g., adventure, detective – or at least limiting them to a minimum.

selection of reference points, which are the hero's borderline experiences" (Chrobak, 2019: 199). Therefore, there are several main structural elements inherent in a novel for girls, and one of the most important is the rite of passage to which the protagonist is subjected and which often organizes the entire plot of the work. The rite of passage, which is culturally associated with moving from one status to another (van Genneep, 2006: 30), is of a less structured or literal kind in the novel for girls; its function is fulfilled by various events or sequences of events, but the effect is a change from a small, immature girl into an adolescent (a teenager, a young woman, a young lady).

One of the most common ways in which rites of passage (which affect the transformation and maturation process of the protagonist) are carried out is through movement, which can have both a geographical dimension (on a macro scale) and can also concern the heroine's close environment.<sup>4</sup> The starting point for considerations should be Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, about which Agnieszka Miernik wrote that it was a response to Joseph Campbell's thesis contained in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, according to which women do not travel at all. Murdock pointed out the falsity of this statement and indicated "that a woman's journey is directed towards the integration of personality, turned towards the inner world" (Miernik, 2022: 214). Therefore, it will be an inalienable element of maturation and growth, also reflected in prose addressed to girls. The path that the heroine takes to become mature can be portrayed in many ways; all of them can be simplistically called migration, even if it is a metaphorical migration that would be more about the emotions and experiences of the heroine than the geographical dimension of her journey.

It is indeed the metaphorical migration that we encounter in most novels for girls written in the nineteenth century. At that time, authors focused mainly on social and moral issues, and the works, as Anna Nosek notes, were devoid of adventure or sensational elements, and consequently of fast-paced action [...]. The action in such works was limited to the family home [...] and family surroundings. Leaving home was often presented negatively (if it was for entertainment), and positively only when it was for the purpose of saving the home and family (Nosek, 2022: 36).

Nosek discussed an exception to the novels of that period, namely *Memoires of Exile* (*Wspomnienia wygnanki*, 1844) by Paulina Krakowowa, in which

<sup>4</sup> In this article, I use the terms migration and movement interchangeably, because although the definition of migration includes the movement of people from their current place of residence to a new one, this term can also be understood more broadly, as simply changing the place of residence; consequently, movement is its component. Moreover, the examples I describe – as I will elaborate in the following paragraphs – often contain non-literal, metaphorical movement, related to the transformation that the heroine undergoes and the path she travels internally. I also understand this as migration, but not in the social dimension, but rather in the individual one.

movement played an important role, and consequently so did the categories of “foreigner” and “alien” (Nosek, 2022: 34). She clearly indicated that the journey undertaken by the heroine became a substitute for her initiation (Nosek, 2022: 35). Nevertheless, it is an exception in the context of didactic and moralizing literature for girls, which at that time was very closely related to the upbringing and education program, only later going beyond this template and exploring other types of heroines and models of functioning (Urbańska, 2011: 217–221).

However, very often this migration, this journey, this displacement is literal and visible. This is especially true for interwar and later literature, from the Polish People’s Republic period. This is not only related to the changing social role of a girl or a woman, but also to the development of tourism. It became egalitarian, which, on the one hand, affected the popularization of various regions in literature and even made them fashionable (this also had its educational purposes). On the other hand, it gave rise to presenting heroines in various spaces and situations, which in turn facilitated their initiation. The types of movement that the heroines engage in are, of course, diverse; they perform different functions in the work – also in regard to the heroine herself – and they mark the space in different ways.

In this article, I will focus on the most significant types of journeys or migrations, based on the most famous and the most important examples of novels for girls. The criteria adopted are readership, historical and thematic diversity, as well as significance for literature as such. For this reason, the subject of my analysis will be bestselling works by authors such as Maria Krüger, Kornel Makuszyński, Małgorzata Musierowicz, Krystyna Siesicka, and Zofia Urbanowska. They come from different historical moments, both from the 19th century (Urbanowska), the interwar period (Krüger, Makuszyński) and the present times (Musierowicz, Siesicka).

The three types I wish to describe are: escape, mission, and vacationing. They are not only the most significant and repetitive, but also the most literal.<sup>5</sup> This means that the migrations I describe do not always have a literal, geographical dimension, and do not necessarily involve a change of place of

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<sup>5</sup> Within the theme of migration we can point out various other issues that appear in novels for girls, e.g., social advancement. Anna Kruszevska-Kudelska described it in the context of the novels from the period of socialist realism, when issues related to class differences were an important literary topic. Their presence in these novels emphasizes how topical this genre was, how it corresponded to the reality surrounding the readers. As Anna Kruszevska-Kudelska pointed out, novels about the social advancement were “a contribution to the formation of a new model of a literary heroine, modern in her customs and way of thinking, close to young readers living in a similar social context” (Kruszevska-Kudelska, 1972: 97). Nevertheless, I will not focus on them, although they also contribute to showing the heroine’s growth and change, their metaphorical dimension differs from our main interest.

residence, although such a change often accompanies the movement and the path taken by the protagonist.

## ESCAPE

The interwar period introduced a new, emancipated type of heroine to youth literature, who was not afraid to express her own opinion, who opposed rules and conventions, rebelled, and even represented a kind of untamability. This type was characterized by independence, self-reliance, and a rebellion toward the outside world and its norms. The formation of this type of movement was a consequence of the changes that took place at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in pedagogy. The publication of the book *The Century of the Child* by Ellen Key in 1900 (Polish edition: 1904) initiated paedocentric tendencies, even called the anti-pedagogical turn (Misiak, 2022: 172).

Another important context of this phenomenon, although not directly related to the category of escape, but rather to the types of heroines developed in the interwar period, is the concept of the “waiting” heroine described by Elżbieta Kruszyńska (Kruszyńska, 2009: 167). Such a heroine usually dominated in novels for girls from the beginning of the genre and was replaced (in some texts) in the interwar period by the model of the “participating” heroine (which corresponds to the types of tomboy and rascal heroines that emerged at that time). Kruszyńska referred to sports in her considerations, and above all, she juxtaposed the girl heroine with the boy hero (it is him that the heroine waits for, and then participates in the activity with him), but we can understand this concept more broadly, as referring to movement in general. Participation is the opposite of passiveness (the heroine is waiting), so the emergence of such a character indicates the growing importance of movement for the plot and for the didactic dimension of the work.

An example of a work whose protagonist is so withdrawn from society that Zofia Brzechowska called it “a repetition of the initiation fairy-tale pattern” (Brzechowska, 1998: 326) is *Savage girl* (*Dzikuska*, 1927) by Irena Zarzycka. The story of the titular savage girl, Ita Kruszyńska, is a story of upbringing, socialization, and thus a clear transformation of the heroine, accomplished, of course – in accordance with the necessary elements of the genre – through her feelings for her older tutor, Witold Leski, who, initially performing the role of a teacher and educator, gradually becomes her beloved.

Ita's path is marked by escape, which additionally takes place in a unique natural space, about which Anna Martuszevska wrote that [She [the Savage – A.P.] is doubly a child of nature (this term is used directly several times in the novel), both because she appears against its background and because she is almost a child and behaves ‘naturally.’ [...] Inscribed in [...] nature [...], the heroine turns out to be, despite her young age, or perhaps to some extent

thanks to it, a woman created for love" (Martuszevska, 1978: 223). Therefore, according to the researcher, there is a clear connection between the space in which the heroine moves – and to which she escapes! – and her emotionality, the attitude that will ultimately constitute her capital, allow her to connect with her beloved, and fully socialize. Her escape is caused by the lack of a mother – a distinct role model – and therefore the lack of ability to establish relationships and live in society. It is not without significance that while the starting point is escape, the arrival point is the establishment of a romantic relationship, which some researchers claim takes the central place in novels for girls (Wójcik-Dudek, 2008: 175).

However, the starting point (and the destination) of the escapes carried out by the heroines of Kornel Makuszyński's novels is slightly different. This particular type of movement, the it, escape, becomes an important part of one of the heroines in particular, namely Ewa Tyszowska from the novel *Miss Ewa's Follies* (*Szaleństwa panny Ewy*, 1940, ed. 1957). Left by her father in the care of a tyrant neighbor, Ewa escapes through the window. This escape is described from the painter's perspective, with which the girl soon will become familiar:

Through the window she let down onto the pavement first a bundle, and then – oh my! – a funny dog. She carefully put her finger to her lips, signalling to the mongrel not to let out steam, then threw herself into the arms of some other female creature, who in her white garments looked like a ghost suddenly appearing. [...] The two female creatures hugged each other desperately for a long moment, then the "snub nose" looked out into the street and watched carefully if anyone was coming, finally sat astride the window and began to climb over cautiously. [...] The girl even crouched down after jumping onto the pavement, once again waved her hand towards the white ghost, quickly snatched up the bundle, whistled quietly at the dog and began to walk away with a quick, frightened step. (Makuszyński, 1996: 64)

From the very beginning, Ewa is guided by concern for other people, she is attached to her father – so she misses him – and she cares about her neighbor's daughter, who is her friend. Her escape is, first, a result of helplessness (although it is still an expression of rebellion and independence), and second, it leads to further events described in the novel: the girl meets a young painter and his mother, helps them with their financial problems, arranges relationships between people, overhauls the personality of the surly elder man. The change that took place as a result of her escape from the apartment had both therapeutic and persuasive dimensions.

A brief analysis of the examples clearly shows that escape is an expression of rebellion. Therefore, the presence of this motif is associated with shifts occurring within the protagonist's psyche and is also a catalyst for further events, as it is not the culmination of the story but an introduction to the heroine's transformation. This is significant because escape (an expression of freedom) would

be treated as something that should be eliminated, and the protagonist herself should be tamed (generally speaking, of course, because individual novel realizations depend on the type of work and various contexts).

### MISSION

A mission, which I understand as a task to be performed by the heroine (it may concern both the people around her and be related to her own development), is the most significant type of movement that leads to the heroine's growth. Completing the mission and helping others allows the heroine to become more mature, and take on the role of a caregiver – of her family or other close ones – so a transformation from childhood to adulthood is very distinct. However, we can generalize and define each of the heroine's moves as a mission that is intended to further her development. At the same time, there are many missions that are not necessarily related to moving from one place to another (for example, this could be tied to learning how to work and, as a result, helping the family, as in Zofia Urbanowska's positivist novel *The Princess* [*Księżniczka*, 1886]). Here, however, I understand it more narrowly, as an action that is often risky and associated with danger, and whose purpose is to help loved ones, which in turn results from the relationships the heroine has.

This type of movement is somewhat connected with escape, as the mission is sometimes undertaken against the will or even without the knowledge of adults; it is an independent decision of the heroine, i.e., the first step on the path of her growing up and maturing.

This is very clearly shown by the journey taken by Basia Bzowska, the heroine of Kornel Makuszyński's novel *Argument about Basia* (*Awantura o Basię*, 1937). In it, Basia goes to France to meet his father, a traveler who disappeared years ago. Her mission has a very distinct dimension of maturation and taking on the role of an adult, because for some time Basia takes over the care of her father, who has lost his memory. This "role reversal" is directly indicated in the novel when it is mentioned that Basia taught him things that he had forgotten due to memory loss:

During three months, the arduous march towards self-knowledge took place, such as an infant makes in its first years. A child is taught by his mother, this poor man was led by the hand by a little girl, his daughter, heroically, with passionate persistence, with such immense strength of will [...] (Makuszyński, 1997: 205–206)

Moreover, the episode of care takes place far away from home, which also has significance.

Another example of such an action is the expedition of the heroine of *Miss with a wet head* (*Panna z mokrą głową*, 1934) by Kornel Makuszyński,

undertaken after the death of her father, in order to support the rest of the family. Irenka Borowska goes to Warsaw and then to Zakopane, to find her wealthy aunt and beg her for financial help for her mother and brother. This episode has multiple meanings in the work, one of them being related to the fact that the “Zakopane episode” multiplies her transformation, and this is due to the cultural significance of Zakopane and Podhale in general in the interwar period (Kolbuszewski, 1982: 556). At that time, this area was regarded as an enclave of freedom, a place conducive to the development of male-female relations, a space in which it was appropriate to reside. And indeed, this is reflected even in the case of this novel for girls, as Irenka falls in love with Zbyszek, the son of the landlady with whom she lives, and this youthful feeling only emphasizes and completes the transformation that has taken place in her: from a carefree teenager she becomes a mature, responsible lady. The theme of love, which is rare in Makuszyński’s novels for young people, resolves itself. After leaving Zakopane, Irenka forgets about Zbyszek, which suggests that it was not a dominant element of her transformation: “Her ‘mortal’ love had already left her completely, so Irenka came to the conclusion that it was not a serious disease, just a slight ‘rash’” (Makuszyński, 1994: 183).

While Basia’s and Irenka’s journeys are public and take place with the permission of their family or caregivers, the mission of the heroine of a much later, contemporary novel for girls, another volume of the *Jeźyczada* series by Małgorzata Musierowicz entitled *The Tiger and the Rose* (*Tygrys i Róża*, 1999) is connected with the notion of escape. Laura Borejko, facing problems resulting from the fact that she has never met her father, sets off from Poznań to Toruń in search of him. Therefore, this journey represents a type of mission focused on the heroine herself; she does not want to help others, but rather she wishes to cope with the lack that prevents her from growing up. It is not without significance that Laura is one of the few rebellious heroines in this novel cycle. She refuses to conform to the norms, opposes her family, has a strong personality, and her behavior results from having an incomplete family, and therefore, feeling a clear lack.

An interesting example of a sort of “reversed” mission – not undertaken by the heroine, but of which she becomes the subject – is the journey in time (and at the same time in space) undertaken, without her own will, by Anda, the main character of *The Hour of the Crimson Rose* (*Godzina pąsowej róży*, 1960) by Maria Krüger. It is worth mentioning this work despite the fact that it eludes the framework of realism, and the journey described is simply a step back in time from 1960 to 1880. This is a mission – or a test – that Anda is subjected to by her aunt from the Belle Époque period. This mission contributes most to the heroine’s transformation, as she sees the benefits of her contemporary times and records the social progress that women have made over the decades. Therefore, Krüger’s novel is marked by didacticism, and the two time plans are

necessarily overlapped with space. In the present day it is the space of a comfortable, modern apartment of a Warsaw family, while in the Belle Époque period it is the interior of a tenement house without any amenities, such as a bathroom or other achievements of modernity. The result of Anda's journey is the mending of the relationship with her family and the appreciation of the reality she has to live in. It is worth noting that the aspects of this freedom of modernity that are particularly emphasized in the novel are the freedom to enter into marriage with the person of one's choice and the right to education.

Evidently, the missions undertaken by the heroines of novels for girls are of course diverse, but most often they are connected with emotions, the sphere of family, and relationships. Moreover, they result from an empathetic attitude, and are supposed to lead to repairing the world – to making it a better place. In this way, this motif corresponds to the assumptions, implementations, and functions of the genre. There are stark contrasts in relation to the prose addressed to boys, in which the mission focuses on treasure hunting, adventure, and scientific activities.

### VACATIONING

This type of movement is probably most strongly connected with space itself, and may also accompany the birth or the development of regionalism. This is because the only intention that accompanies the heroines is to be away from home. All the adventures they experience, the relationships they establish, and finally the effect of travel – e.g., maturation – are secondary, and do not constitute the real cause of their journey.

The motif of children's travelling during holidays while experiencing adventures became especially important and popular in the second half of the twentieth century. It was actually anticipated in the 1930s by Kornel Makuszyński with his novels *A Trip Under The Weather*<sup>6</sup> (*Wyprawa pod pseem*, 1936) and the famous *Satan From The Seventh Grade* (*Szatan z siódmej klasy*, 1937), and some traces of this theme can be found even in earlier novels, e.g., in the works of Zofia Urbanowska. Her *A Rose Without Thorns* (*Róża bez kolców*, 1903) can be considered a compendium of knowledge about the Tatras and the Podhale region for children, and its publication coincided with the fashion for the Tatra mountains prevailing in adult literature and culture at that time (Kolbuszewski, 1982: 369–373). The regionalist movement developed, according to Elżbieta Kruszyńska, in the interwar period, and literature contributed to it, as it was an important part of civic education; the researcher provided numerous examples of novels for girls that fulfilled these patriotic goals, and some of them were supposed to be based on the motif or context of regionalism (Kruszyńska, 2009: 164).

<sup>6</sup> The translation of the title is not literal, as the Polish version is untranslatable.

But it was during the Polish People's Republic that the regionalist movement fully flourished. At that time, in accordance with the socialist model of education, sightseeing trips were promoted in prose for young people, and a kind of modern regionalism was created, corresponding to the political assumptions of the authorities. The most famous examples of this are works for boys: novels by Adam Bahdaj, Zbigniew Nienacki, and Edmund Niziurski. In her study about the heroes of prose for children and young people in the Polish People's Republic, Magdalena Chrobak even distinguished two basic trends in the literature of that time, with reference to the 1960s and 1970s, this being detective-adventure works (by Edmund Niziurski, Hanna Ożogowska, Adam Bahdaj, and Zbigniew Nienacki) and novels for girls (Halina Snopkiewicz, Krystyna Siesicka, and Ewa Nowacka) (Chrobak, 2019: 96). Therefore, it is clear that these works are contrasted, it seems, primarily because of their intended target audience. Moreover, space functions differently in them, as the action of the novel for girls focuses on emotionality and the act of experiencing, not on adventure.

However, this does not mean that novels for girls at that time were completely devoid of adventure, action, and consequently of diverse entourage. The type of movement that I have distinguished, and understood as vacationing, would therefore be a variation on that popular motif in prose for boys oriented around adventure. The presence of the motif of rest and vacation allows for the presentation of a completely different space than home, for showing the diversity of the heroine's surroundings; this may involve introducing the idea of regionalism, and therefore be associated with educational and teaching functions.

Examples of this type of novels, which can be classified – at least to some extent – as novels for girls, are texts such as *A Girl and a Boy, That Is a Big Fuss*<sup>7</sup> (*Dziewczyna i chłopak, czyli heca na 14 fajerek*, 1961) by Hanna Ożogowska, *The End of Holidays* (*Koniec wakacji*, 1966) by Janusz Domagalik or *Madness of Majka Skowron* (*Szałeństwo Majki Skowron*, 1972) by Aleksander Minkowski. All of them were adapted into films and gained great popularity, with the last two in particular constituting a clear response to the genre of adventure novels for boys, and even engaging in a kind of polemic with them.

A full-fledged novel for girls is *A Match at A Crossover* (*Zapałka na zakręcie*, 1966) by Krystyna Siesicka, whose plot begins with the protagonist's vacation trip with her mother and sister. It is during their stay that the girl meets a boy, and their relationship will be the setting for further events. The "holiday episode" in the work is not quantitatively dominant in the novel, but it is one that is most full of events that are key to the heroine's future fate, including her transformation. An important context of the holidays for the heroines' situation is also the category of "sacred time." Eliza Szybowicz mentions this,

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<sup>7</sup> The translation of the title is not literal, as the Polish version contains a slang expression characteristic of the time at which the novel was written.

writing that the circumstances of the holidays and the summer resort affect the relationship between mother and daughter:

When during the school year, the mother is “busy, unapproachable, absorbed in work and home, hastily changing from an office dress to any old rag”, Magda finds it difficult to talk to her. The mother at the summer resort, “rested, tanned, filled with fresh air and company she hasn’t had all year”, is a better conversation partner. (Szybowski, 2014: 324–325)

A contemporary example of a work in which summer and vacation space is the basis of the plot, is another volume of the aforementioned series by Małgorzata Musierowicz. In the volume *Nutria and Nervous*<sup>8</sup> (*Nutria i Nervus*, 1994), the heroine takes her teenage nieces on vacation, but, fearing her ex-fiancé’s brother who is harassing her, she escapes from the train to the seaside and goes on a spontaneous journey around Greater Poland and Kuyavia. The fact that the heroine runs away indicates that these distinguished types of movement in the works can overlap, connect with each other, and are not separate or distinct.

This is an interesting journey for several reasons. First, most volumes of the Musierowicz saga are dominated by the urban space of Poznań, which, described in detail, is, in a sense, a separate protagonist. *Nutria and Nervous* breaks with this convention, not only by being a truly holiday novel, but also by referring to regionalist traditions (there are many mentions of local history and topography) or creating a model of a cheap, nomadic travel (the heroines sleep in a tent, bathe in a lake, hitchhike). Additionally, even though the action takes place in the 1990s, it is hard to resist associations with novels for young people from the period of the Polish People’s Republic.

Second, it is a female, girlish journey. The main character is indeed an adult, but Musierowicz slightly expands the boundaries of the genre, because although in the subsequent volumes the heroines are adults, the novels still contain elements characteristic of novels for girls.

Third, this journey is, as in the other examples I have indicated, an element accompanying – and even forcing – the transformation and metamorphosis of the heroine. The result of her escape is the establishment of a relationship with her harasser, and then a love relationship on which they embark together. Therefore, the happy ending is the union of the woman and the man, which would not have been possible if not for the journey.

The examples discussed show the need to discover the province, the region, the nature – especially in contemporary novels, whose heroines are often independent, diverse, and where didacticism is not so obvious. At the same time, there is a clear dependence on the development of adventure novels for boys,

<sup>8</sup> The translation of the title is somewhat difficult, as it refers to the nicknames of the two main characters, and these are related to their idiosyncratic appearance or behavior.

which indicates that novels for girls are not isolated within the literature for children and youth, and that they constitute an equivalent genre.

## CONCLUSION

Novels for girls have a long tradition and many functions, but with even greater diversity and transformations occurring within the genre. The first works fulfilled primarily didactic functions, responding to the educational trends prevailing at a given time. In later years, they responded to pedagogical processes (such as the “anti-pedagogical turn” discussed earlier, initiated by the publication of Ellen Key), exposing heroines who epitomized these transformations. Gradually, girls’ novels morphed into social novels, gender-egalitarian works, or family sagas. However, despite these transformations, it is possible to indicate certain unchanging structural elements and functions that the works were to fulfill and contain. One of these elements, as I demonstrated, is movement, understood very broadly and not always literally, because it also concerns the inner journey, namely the changes that take place within the heroine, and therefore is not exclusively confined to geographical displacement.

Forms of movement described in this article are very different, since they are connected to various types of heroines or functions included in the works. They were also distinguished because they are related to changes in pedagogical thought and, consequently, in the genre itself; particular types of movement became possible or popular thanks to the formation of successive types of heroines (rebels), as well as concepts linked to ideological thought (regionalism). However, all these types sometimes intertwine, resulting from each other – a mission can be possible thanks to an escape, and a vacationing can also be combined with an escape or a mission. All of them, without exception, have one thing in common: it is the effect of those movements that is the act of growing up. This means that the migration in novels for girls is very special, because it leads to a specific conclusion, it is not just an element of the plot, but an important element of the text’s structure, on which the specificity of the protagonist is based.

It can be said that a novel for girls without movement – understood mostly as a transformation – does not exist. This may be an audacious statement, because these novels stem from the tradition of sentimental romance, are similar to social novels, and finally evolve into family sagas. Therefore, they are considered static and spatially limited. However, if we treat the issue of movement more broadly, not only as an act of moving present in the plot, that is, escaping, leaving, going on a journey, but also as an act of growing up, building relationships, changing the environment – then it is clear that these are the issues without which a novel for girls cannot exist, cannot develop, nor fulfill the functions inherent in the genre.

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## The Stigma of Euro-Orphanhood in the Book *Fánek the Starsailor* by Jana Šrámková

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to analyze the artistic representation of the phenomenon of social euro-orphanhood in contemporary Czech children's and youth literature. The starting point for these considerations is the work *Fánek the Starsailor* by Czech author Jana Šrámková. This literary piece serves as a foundation for an in-depth reflection on labor migration as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing social, economic, and psychological aspects. The analysis focuses on showcasing literature as a space that enables a better understanding of the complexity of this issue. In this way, the article seeks to enrich the interdisciplinary debate on the social impacts of labor migration, emphasizing the importance of literature as a crucial element in reflecting on this subject.

**Keywords:** Jana Šrámková, *Fánek the Starsailor*, Czech literature, euro-orphanhood, labor migration

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of migration and integration in the Czech Republic has undergone continuous development since its inception, influenced by (among other factors) significant changes in the political environment between 1990 and 1992, during which both the country's immigration and emigration isolation were broken (Drbohlav, 2010; Dohnalová, 2012). In the Czech Republic labor migration became a common practice after 2004, when the country joined the European Union, enabling the free movement of workers. As a result, the Czech Republic became one of the countries whose citizens emigrated to other EU nations, particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, in search of better working and living conditions (Barša, Baršová, 2005). Although precise data on the number of children affected by euro-orphanhood in the Czech Republic is difficult to determine, it is estimated to impact at least a few percent of the country's children. This phenomenon has had a particularly strong impact on smaller Czech communities, where many individuals left to work abroad, leaving their children behind (Vavrečková, Musil, Baštyř, 2007). Labor migration is

a particularly challenging experience for families, as it involves a series of losses felt by all members (Furdal, Wysoczański, 2006). This situation has a notably negative effect on the mental health of young people, as illustrated in literature through complex stories of children from transnational families whose members were separated as a result of labor migration (Walczak, 2016: 25–37).

The aim of this article is to analyze how the experience of euro-orphanhood is depicted, interpreted, and reimagined in the book *Fánek the Starsailor* (2022) by Czech author Jana Šrámková. This work serves as a significant source of reflection on the complexity of the issue, which has gained increasing attention in literature for children and adolescents, particularly in the context of parental labor migration from Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of orphanhood has been a long-standing presence in world literature, deeply rooted in the traditions of folklore and folk tales, and extensively explored in the classics of various national literatures, including English and American traditions. As Tetiana Kachak writes:

The tradition of depicting orphans goes back to folklore, including folk tales, and is traced in the classics of English, American (Avery 1994) and other national literatures for children (Kimball 1999), and also in contemporary works of art addressed to young readers. The child-orphan appears in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1873), Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913), Betsy Byars's *The Pinballs* (1976), Katherine Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978), Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1982), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), and others/ (Kachak, 2022: 17)

This recurring motif has transcended time, serving as a vehicle for exploring themes of resilience, identity, and social integration, and continues to resonate with readers across generations. Claudia Mills argues that “novels about

<sup>1</sup> Among contemporary literary texts that address the themes of orphanhood and labor migration, it is worth highlighting selected examples from Polish literature, which constitute a significant contribution to the reflection on these phenomena: *Czarny młyn* (2015) by Marcin Szczypiński, *Samotni.pl* (2021) by Barbara Kosmowska, *Ma być czysto* (2016) and *Rozpływaj się* (2021) by Anna Cieplak, and *16:10 do Bergamo* (2017) by Piotr Rowicki. In these literary works, the authors primarily emphasize the negative aspect of labor migration. The cited examples indicate that contemporary Polish prose aimed at children and adolescents serves as an effective tool for “shaping the axiological awareness” of young readers. According to Dorota Michułka's thesis, this literature “not only provokes reflection on human existence but also familiarizes readers with the complexity of ethical issues, particularly visible during the period of adolescence” (Michułka, 2018: 33). The challenging social and existential issues presented in these texts address the problems of adolescence, supporting young people on their journey to adulthood, and helping them better understand their identity, values, and moral dilemmas.

orphaned children reveal a deeper truth about how our society views children and how it views itself.” (Mills, 1987: 237).

In the realm of artistic literature (including children’s and young adult literature), we encounter themes that can be divided into two categories: universal themes (of general significance) and unique (specific) themes. Zuzana Kováčová Švecová characterizes them with the following words:

Universal themes are current global issues for everyone (e.g., love, war, peace, heroism, good, evil, the cycle of life, life and survival, suffering and pain, deception, truth, adulthood, childhood, condemnation, morality). To these universally relevant topics, we can add others that concern contemporary life of the individual and society: for example, the topic of communication, environmental issues related to global environmental concerns, social issues, migration, poverty, wealth, and the blurring of boundaries of time and space. Unique, specific themes in children’s and young adult literature arise from universal themes and mainly concern the individual and their immediate surroundings. These are significant, even pivotal themes of a given moment in life, important events, and concrete issues related to family, a particular place, and the environment in which we live. (Kováčová Švecová, Šimanová, 2021: 18)<sup>2</sup>

Migration, as one of the key phenomena of the contemporary world, remains a topic of significant social and literary importance.<sup>3</sup> The experience of close bonds with loved ones forms the basis for learning to establish interpersonal relationships and develop social skills (Klimowicz, 1988: 72). The phenomenon of euro-orphanhood impacts children’s lives on several levels: emotional, social, and educational (Zawisza-Masłyk, 2008: 40). Childhood is a crucial period for personality development, during which the foundations of a child’s identity are formed. During this time, typically within the family, a child absorbs values and principles for navigating daily life. The term “euro-orphan” is perceived differently in society:

On the one hand, an orphan or half-orphan is a child whose one or both parents have either passed away or abandoned them. Such children are viewed

<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this article were translated by Dorota Żygadło-Czopnik.

<sup>3</sup> Dominik Borowski points to the civilizational changes in which contemporary children’s and young adult literature is situated. He identifies key motifs such as: reconstructed family, blended family, dysfunctional family, euro-orphanhood, addiction, suicide, sexual abuse, rape, sex, violence and aggression, illness, death, religious sects, and others. Borowski emphasizes that this type of literature presents the problems of the contemporary, dysfunctional world, which, on the one hand, allow young readers to identify with the protagonists of their favorite books, thereby fulfilling one of the fundamental functions of this literature. On the other hand, it shows that the breakdown of traditional values and human relationships has become an inseparable element of modern social norms, which children’s and young adult literature seeks to confront, engaging young readers in reflection regarding the contemporary world and the challenges they face (Borowski, 2022).

with compassion and a certain kindness. On the other hand, the prefix euro-implies certain positive associations, reinforced over the years by the media and pro-European institutions, embedding in society's consciousness the notion of something good and valuable. (Stańczyk, 2015: 32)

For many families, migration is a necessity – a survival strategy to support loved ones, invest in children's education, and generally cope with socio-economic challenges on local and national labor markets (Jaźwińska, Okólski, 2001).

Milena Šubrtová emphasizes that contemporary literature for children and young adults addresses all possible topics that children encounter in their daily lives (e.g., the role and place of humans in the world, the value of money and human beings, social and existential issues, migration, war, discrimination, racism, and xenophobia). It seems that introducing new topics to children and young people, thereby providing new stimuli for the development of thinking about sensitive and often controversial issues, is very beneficial. It has been noted that in older school age, a child can already share and assess difficult or borderline life situations (Šubrtová, 2004: 16).

In children's literature, representations of migrant children are appearing more and more, serving as symbolic figures reflecting broader social issues such as economic inequality, limited access to education, and the disintegration of traditional family structures. In these narratives, children are often portrayed as migrating alone or staying behind in their home country after their parents' departure, highlighting their experiences of separation and loneliness. Literature also offers depictions of children in various, often difficult life situations, such as living in refugee camps, being raised in foster families, or growing up under the care of grandparents, thus enriching the discourse on migration with the perspective of the youngest participants in these processes (Kachak, 2022).

This phenomenon, with its multifaceted impact on social, political, and cultural structures, has found reflection in the works of many authors, including Czech ones. Although it may seem surprising, Czech writers have demonstrated considerable productivity in addressing the topic of migration, thereby contributing to the expansion of the literary discourse on issues related to identity, integration, and survival in the context of a changing migratory reality (Zbudilová, 2022). Writers address this topic in various ways, depending on the target age group and type of publication.

In contemporary Czech literature, the topic of migrant children also appears as an important theme, reflecting global issues related to migration and its social consequences. In this literature, images of children in migratory situations are increasingly visible, becoming carriers of complex social issues such as migration-related trauma, identity problems, and the breakdown of traditional family structures. Several books addressing this topic have been published on the Czech market, including *Maja a Kim* (2017) by Iva Mrkvičková,

*Smutno se musí vyšetpat* (2021) by Lenka Rožnovská, *Hvězdy nad Ukrajinou* (2023) by Radka Zadinová, and *Klára a bubáci* (2014) by the Slovak author Petra Nagyová-Džerengová. The issue of social orphanhood in contemporary Czech literature is a topic of particular significance, as literary works addressing this issue reflect not only important contemporary social phenomena, but also the complex challenges and dilemmas associated with them. These works serve as carriers of moral, ethical, and ideological values, providing young Czech readers with guidance on social attitudes and behaviors, while also serving as a crucial tool for shaping their understanding of issues related to identity, social integration, and family. Highlighting the problematic aspects of social orphanhood allows these literary texts to engage young readers in reflection on the condition of contemporary families and society, while simultaneously outlining possible solutions to the challenges faced by individuals struggling with marginalization and loneliness.

In books for younger children, the phenomenon of euro-orphanhood is often presented through simple stories about longing and relationships with caregivers who step into parental roles. For older children and teenagers, this topic is usually portrayed in a more complex manner, addressing emotional challenges such as isolation, difficulties in building a sense of security and stability, and conflicts arising from feelings of misunderstanding (Zajac, 2023). In such literature, authors attempt to portray the situation of labor migration from the perspective of children affected by separation from their parents, as well as from the perspective of caregivers who take on parental roles, such as grandparents or other family members.

*Fánek the Starsailor* by Šrámková stands out as a remarkable work within the realm of children's literature addressing these themes, owing to its emotional and philosophical depth as well as its subtle use of fantastical elements. This work can be seen as an example of literature that transcends traditional genre boundaries, engaging young readers on multiple levels – not only through an intriguing plot but also by offering valuable reflections on growing up, friendship, identity formation, and the search for meaning in life.

#### AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

The writer, screenwriter and theologian Jana Šrámková explores the issue of euro-orphanhood and the impact of parental separation on children in her book *Fánek the Starsailor*. The book features poetic language and dreamy illustrations, making it a unique read for children aged six and up. For this work, she was awarded the prestigious Magnesia Litera literary prize in 2023 in the category of Children's and Young Adult Literature.<sup>4</sup> Jitka Nešporová, in her re-

<sup>4</sup> Magnesia Litera is a prestigious Czech literary award, presented annually since 2002. It is considered one of the most important literary distinctions in the Czech Republic.

view of Šrámková's book published on the iLiteratura.cz portal, highlights the multilayered nature of the text, describing it as sad, beautiful, and above all, immensely necessary. She also emphasizes that this work, although imbued with melancholy, represents an important voice in the literary dialogue, bringing to light universal values and issues that resonate with the reader in a deeply reflective way (Nešporová). The jury of the Magnesia Litera award, in its justification published on the official website of the award, highlights the precise structure of the text, where no part is superfluous or lacking. They emphasize Jana Šrámková's craftsmanship, evident in her meticulous choice of every word, which enables her to deliver a narrative of novelistic character in the form of captivating poetic prose (*Vítěz "Litera za knihu pro děti a mládež" v roce 2023*). Šrámková creates works for both children and adult readers. She debuted in 2008 with the «Icelandic novella» *Peardóttir*, intended for mature audiences, which earned her the Jiří Orten Award a year later.<sup>5</sup> She also writes comic and film scripts, song lyrics, teaches creative writing, edits books, publishes reviews in magazines such as *Respekt* and *A2*, and her columns appear in publications like *Brána* and *Život víry*. In collaboration with other creators, Šrámková has contributed to numerous children's books, blending her literary skills with the talents of illustrators and co-authors such as Alžběta Skálová, Filip Pošivač, Andrea Tachezy, Tereza Šedivá, and Markéta Prachatická. For *Fánek the Starsailor*, she worked with Belarusian illustrator and graphic designer Margarita Khavanski, who currently resides in Prague. Khavanski is renowned for her illustrations with a distinctive, almost dreamlike style that perfectly captures the emotional depth of children's stories.

## FAMILY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Contemporary Czech literature for children and young adults often explores social issues, serving as a literary reflection of the dynamically changing realities of family life. One of the key motifs present in this type of literature is the theme of incomplete or dysfunctional families, which significantly shapes the

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The award was established by the Barrister & Principal publishing house and the *Litera* magazine, and is awarded in several categories. The aim of the award is to promote Czech literature and its creators, as well as to recognize the best books published in a given year. The winners gain the opportunity to achieve greater popularity both domestically and internationally (<https://www.magnesia-litera.cz/>).

<sup>5</sup> Jiří Orten Award is a prestigious Czech literary distinction, awarded since 1987, aimed at honoring exceptional literary debuts by young authors. The award is named after Jiří Orten, a Czech poet who tragically died at a young age in 1941, and whose work remains a symbol of literary talent and boundless creative potential. Orten was one of the most outstanding Czech poets of his generation. The award is presented to authors who have not yet reached the age of 30, and whose debut book stands out for its originality and literary depth. The goal of the award is to support young creators and draw attention to their contribution to Czech literature (<https://www.cenajirihoortena.cz/>).

narrative and axiological structure of many works (Sladová, Lišovská, Hnidáková, 2014: 9). Zofia Kawczyńska-Butrym observes that when considering the conditions and consequences of migration, it is necessary to approach it from two perspectives: the macro-social perspective – encompassing the host country and the country permitting migration, and the micro-social perspective – focusing on individuals, families, and migrating groups (Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2008: 56). From the very first pages of Šrámková's text, we can observe the significant power and symbolism in the story about the effects of labor migration on a micro scale, as the author focuses her attention on children who remain in the country and passively participate in this process. The writer presents to the readers, in the form of poetic prose, the story of a family separated due to labor migration. Due to the father's departure, the family members must adapt to the newly created situation and function as an incomplete family. In the book, events are presented from a child's perspective, which gives them simplicity, innocence, and special sensitivity characteristic of a child's narrative. The child's point of view allows for presenting the world with authentic, unrefined honesty, as well as emphasizing the emotional depth of experiences.<sup>6</sup>

#### POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT: SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The young boy, Fánek, comes from a family living on the brink of poverty, forced to face existential difficulties in a poor, grey reality. The narrative focuses on their struggle, where time passes without clear boundaries or defined rhythm, and space appears as an undefined and unknown place. The protagonist's hometown remains anonymous, depicted as abandoned and partially forgotten, which creates an atmosphere of isolation and alienation:

Many houses were abandoned, and I wasn't allowed into them either. That's why I preferred climbing trees along the old factory. No one had worked there for a long time, the windows were broken, and the plaster was peeling. (Šrámková, 2022: 12–13)

The author deliberately introduced the anonymity of the setting to universalize the action and give it a symbolic dimension. The technique of destabilizing time and space immerses the reader in a state of uncertainty, which reflects the internal chaos and frustration of the protagonist. In the literary depiction of the presented world, the grey everyday life and the lack of a clear perspective on the future become key elements shaping its structure, which, according to Zygmunt Bauman, reinforce the themes of poverty and social exclusion (Bauman, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Stanisław Kozak lists the typical psychological effects of being a euro-orphan as: disrupted mental health, aggression, low self-esteem, difficulties in establishing relationships with peers, and distrust (Kozak, 2010: 119).

## THE DYNAMICS OF BONDS AND EMOTIONS

Parenting and communication with one's own child have always been a significant source of inspiration and have often been reflected in the ideological and thematic components of literary works (Šubrtová, 2009: 69). The text begins with a joyful memory of moments spent with the father, which forms the emotional foundation of the entire story. The narrator recalls:

When I was a little boy, my dad and I often looked at the same book. [...] It was large and in the pictures across the entire page, it had a golden color. We could never really read it because it was written in a foreign language, even in a strange, unknown alphabet. [...] We had plenty of time for it because Dad didn't have a job and used to stay home with me all day. (Šrámková, 2022: 4–5)

The boy's story about his beloved golden book with illustrations, which is part of an undeveloped prologue, marks the beginning of a narrative in which the protagonist's imagination plays a key role. Fantasy becomes a universal experience for him. The content of the reading is not specifically defined. The reader can only assume that it is the *Bible* or a text referring to the story of Noah's Ark. Fánek and his father "read" the book primarily through the pictures and their own imagination, as it is written in a foreign language with an unfamiliar alphabet. Together, they name the animals entering the ark, discover mysterious colors, and invent an alternative ending to the story of a journey beyond the horizon, from which ships sail into the stars. The boy imagines what his journey on the ship would be like to the place where the horizon breaks, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the limits of imagination and the discovery of new worlds.

The book written in an unknown language becomes a symbol of the child's potential to create their own meanings, and the shared "reading" between father and son encourages the creation of new stories and the search for meaning. Therefore, the golden book functions as a symbol – it is both a precious, unique object and a place where magic and dreams are born. In the context of the protagonist's life, the book may also symbolize the spiritual wealth that he must find and understand. The time spent together and the mysterious story create a strong bond between father and son. This is where closeness and love are born, which in the years to come will be put to a hard test when the father leaves for a foreign country to seek work in the "land of happiness."

## REVISION OF TRADITIONAL ROLES

The absence of a parent affects the fulfillment of their previous roles in the family, including controlling, emotional, and caregiving-educational functions (Mitula, 2009: 172–173). In the analyzed text, the protagonist's father, due to the necessity

of ensuring material livelihood (economic function), abandons these roles because the need for survival becomes dominant, causing the aforementioned functions to lose their significance. This narrative technique allows the author to highlight the dysfunctionality of families separated due to labor migration.

#### THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION AND REINTEGRATION: THE MOMENT OF SEPARATION AND RETURN OF A PARENT FROM EMIGRATION

According to Agata Jacewicz, a family separated due to labor migration experiences two key periods of intense stress. The first is the time of separation, which involves the necessity of adapting to a new situation, the absence of a close family member, and changes in existing family relationships. The second is the time of reunion, which, despite the joy it brings, may generate tensions related to readjusting to living together and rebuilding roles and family bonds. Jacewicz emphasizes that these critical moments can have a long-lasting impact on the functioning of the family, including its structure, emotionality, and ability to cope with challenges (Jacewicz, 2010: 202). Fánka's family, separated due to labor migration, goes through two periods of intense stress: the time of separation and the time of reunion. The protagonist remains uncertain about the moment and possibility of his father's return:

When my dad told me he had to leave, I couldn't imagine what he meant. He was always with me. [...] Dad tried to explain that he would be gone for a long time. But I didn't know what long meant, where it started or where it ended. The most important thing was that today Dad was still here, and I lacked nothing. It was mom who cried. That made me sad. (Šrámková, 2022: 8)

The simple yet emotionally charged narrative becomes a space where the child not only experiences personal loss but also begins to understand the complexity of human relationships and the dynamics of family bonds. During the farewell, the parent reminds the boy of what he had taught him during their shared moments with the golden book. He asks him not to forget the lessons he received at that time. The father emphasizes the importance of passing on knowledge and values through shared experience, which becomes not only a source of support but also a way to maintain emotional closeness despite physical separation. Therefore, the act of reminding him of these conversations is aimed at reinforcing in the boy the beliefs and attitudes that may help him in the future, particularly in the context of future challenges related to migration and family separation.

In this way, the father not only strengthens the emotional bond but also initiates a process of independent thinking that will accompany the child during difficult moments. The text reads:

From now on, you're the captain, Fánek. You must be patient, believe, look out, and never lose hope. You must always aim for the horizon. The horizon is the moment I return. We don't know exactly when we'll reach it, but we both know for sure that it's out there somewhere. And one day, you will sail to it. (Šrámková, 2022: 10)

Fánek builds a mental barrier separating him from reality, using the power of fantasy and dreams. His imagination, symbolized by the dream of the coastal water surface, becomes a space where he can briefly escape from loneliness and the hardships of daily life. In his dreams, he breaks the boundaries symbolized by the horizon, which separates the earthly world from the sky, embarking on a metaphorical journey among the stars, like the captain of a ship. According to Dorota Kubicka, such an imagined escapade not only emphasizes the child's ability to sublimate emotions and create an alternative reality, but also points to the role of imagination as a defense mechanism against the everyday experiences of separation and loneliness (Kubicka, 2003: 48). These kinds of defense mechanisms become particularly important in the context of the experiences of children separated due to labor migration, where longing for a parent can lead to a deep sense of isolation.

Therefore, crossing the horizon becomes not only a symbol of dreams of freedom but also a metaphor for overcoming the limitations of one's own psyche and opening up to new, unknown experiences. As Grzegorz Leszczyński notes, dreamlike visions in literature can serve a therapeutic function, acting as a tool that enables the protagonist to process difficult experiences (Leszczyński, 1990: 44). In the discussed novel, the Czech author employs this technique to help the longing boy gradually come to terms with the reality of life without his father, allowing him to emotionally adapt to the new situation. Additionally, they serve as a means of maintaining the bond and love for the father, who is abroad, enabling the protagonist to preserve this relationship despite the physical separation. The boy never stops believing that his father will someday return home.

## THE FUNCTION OF MEMORY

Memory plays a crucial role in the process of building the protagonist's identity, especially in the context of lost contact with an important family member. Andrzej Szpociński emphasizes that memory is not only a record of the past but also a lasting emotional element that fills the void left by what has been lost (Szpociński, 2014: 21). In the context of the discussed text, a strong bond between father and son is evident, even though the father has been living abroad for years. His presence remains vivid in the boy's memory, who still feels an emotional connection to his parent despite the physical absence. The memory of the father becomes not only a reflection of past moments but also

an important element in the boy's identity formation. The image of the father, preserved in memory, serves as a symbol – representing not only recollections but also a longing for family stability and the parent's presence, making it a key element in the protagonist's emotional life. The motif of memory in this story shows how important it is as a mechanism that fills the void left by lost contact and serves as the foundation for the protagonist's emotional struggles.

### PASSION AS SUPPORT IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST LONELINESS

The passion to which the protagonist devotes himself, in addition to creating an inner world, also becomes a form of escape from loneliness. Fánek discovers books written in foreign languages in the school library, which becomes an impulse for him to learn foreign languages so he can understand them and absorb their content:

At school, they opened the library for us. [...] The only problem is that they are all in a foreign alphabet, just like my golden book. [...] I had to learn the whole strange language. Such learning is slow, but that doesn't matter when there's nothing else to do. The more words I know, the more interesting books I can read in the library. (Šrámková, 2022: 47)

The passion serves a compensatory function – it allows the protagonist to escape into new, unknown spaces that fill the emptiness he feels after his father's departure. It can be seen as a defense strategy against emotional isolation.<sup>7</sup>

### THE DIFFICULT TIME OF GROWING UP

The story of the boy is a study of the difficulties associated with the process of growing up. The protagonist, despite his dreams of liberating journeys, confronts the painful experiences of numerous disappointments and losses. The everyday life of the lonely boy, without siblings and deeper friendships, consists of the necessity to fulfill many household duties, which further highlights his existential isolation. In the family home, there remains a sick, aging grandmother, a dying grandfather, and a constantly worried mother. In the life of the main character, an unexpected shift in social roles occurs. Fánek becomes the caretaker of his loved ones, which mentally burdens him but ultimately leads to greater independence and contributes to building his sense of responsibility. In

<sup>7</sup> Marzena Bukowska points to the existence of various strategies for defending against loneliness, among which she mentions forming interpersonal relationships, developing passions, enriching the inner world, and engaging in creative work, both professional and amateur. These strategies serve as adaptive mechanisms that help individuals cope with isolation, offering different forms of emotional and social compensation (Bukowska, 2007: 61–70).

the text, the author presents the psychological and emotional consequences of being a child left behind due to labor migration. The death of his grandfather was a blow that fate dealt him in a short time, plunging him into a state of deep sorrow and helplessness:

A long time ago, the ice melted, the snow melted, the vegetables started to sprout, and Grandpa was still here. He was here in the summer and the fall, and he died only the next winter. Mom cried a lot, and I cried even more. Grandma didn't cry, she just took out her teeth. She never wore them again. (Šrámková, 2022: 32)

In the context of changing roles within the family, a key element is the moment when children begin to play the role of support for adults. As Barbara Małecka points out, this shift represents a particular emotional and existential challenge, as children become caregivers for their loved ones who previously held this role (Małecka, 1997). In the case of Fánek, a protagonist struggling with adolescence, this transition not only changes the family dynamics but also impacts his perception of himself. As Fánek begins to take on the role of caregiver for his grandparents, his responsibilities shift, and so does the way he perceives his place within the family. This becomes even more pronounced in the context of his relationship with his grandmother, whose unexpected loss of a loved one becomes a traumatic experience. As a result of this event, the grandmother, engulfed in grief, unexpectedly seems to age, and her previous independence gives way to the need for support from her grandson. The narrator, witnessing this change, recognizes the importance of memory and caregiving in building family bonds in the face of emotional crises. This transformation is crucial for Fánek's emotional and existential development, as he, like other children facing the aging of their loved ones, must confront new and difficult challenges.

Fánek's close friendship with his schoolmates Marylka and her sister Duša, who experience labor migration, turns out to be a brief episode while waiting for his father's return, which also does not provide the expected support. Additionally, the boy loses hope of getting glasses for his friend, who struggles with vision problems, and her unexpected departure becomes a climactic moment, deepening his sense of helplessness and anger.

Faced with numerous adversities, the protagonist seeks solace in the plane tree's crown, a symbol of escape from reality, but his hopes are brutally shattered when the tree is cut down. To help his family, he tends a garden, hoping for crops that will provide them with food. Unfortunately, the boy's efforts are thwarted when an unknown person steals the fruits of his labor. Fánek encounters numerous difficulties and failures, which are an inseparable part of the process of socialization and the development of adaptive abilities in the face of life's challenges.

The separation caused by labor migration weakens family bonds. The boy feels that his father does not understand the difficulties the family left behind in the home country is facing, which deepens the gap between them, not only in spatial terms but also emotionally:

After a long time, I was once again looking forward to Dad calling. Most of the time, I didn't know what to say to him. There was so much he didn't know, didn't see, didn't experience with us, that I couldn't tell him anything without a long explanation. And there's no time for that on the phone. Only simple and important things can be said, and there aren't many of them. (Šrámková, 2022: 37)

The protagonist is left with only an illusion of closeness. Despite the support from his mother, the boy struggles with the feeling of "abandonment," which negatively affects his sense of security and self-worth. At first, Fánek cannot understand the reasons for his father's departure, interpreting the separation as an act directed against him. The stress and anxiety related to his father's absence during important family moments (birthdays, funerals) lead to somatic and behavioral reactions, such as hysterical crying and a high fever that forces him to stay in bed for several days. Fánek, experiencing longing for his beloved father, struggles with feelings of loneliness, rejection, difficulties in adaptation, and fear of losing contact.

#### THE IMPACT OF EURO-ORPHANHOOD ON SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LIFE

The experience of child abandonment due to labor migration has a significant impact on the social and educational functioning of the young protagonists: Fánek, Marylka, and Duša. The stigma a term referring to children left behind due to economic migration affects not only the main character but also other peers at school, highlighting the widespread social issue that results from labor migration. In the school the narrator attends, euro-orphanhood becomes almost a universal experience, creating a specific community of shared fates, and the absence of parents takes on the character of a social norm: "That many children in the class have their dad or mom somewhere away. That someone stayed at home only with their grandmother" (Šrámková, 2022: 12). This situation deepens feelings of alienation, while at the same time becoming the foundation for a shared emotional language, allowing the children to form relationships based on similar experiences. At the same time, the portrayal of the school environment, where most of the students struggle with similar family instability, reflects broader social processes such as the disintegration of traditional family bonds and their impact on shaping the identity of the younger generation (Trusz, Kwiecińska, 2012). In Šrámková's text, this theme emphasizes both the individual and collective consequences of this phenomenon.

The emotional problems of Marylka and Duša manifest themselves in a lack of motivation to learn, reflecting their difficulties in adapting to the school reality. The situation is further complicated by the lack of a stable family environment: the girls' father has died, and their mother has gone abroad to seek work, leaving them under the care of their grandmother, who struggles with alcohol issues: "In the evening, she locks herself in the room, drinks, and screams, and then starts singing. Sings curses into the night, and people shout for her to close the window, and Marylka is unhappy about it" (Šrámková, 2022: 33). The absence of the mother contrasts with the motif of motherhood, which is often portrayed as a source of strength and protection. Grażyna Klimowicz notes that the presence of the mother determines the wellbeing of the children and influences their relationships with others (Klimowicz, 1988). The mother's absence, visiting the family only twice a year, becomes the cause of an internal crisis and a lack of security in the heroines. The children, deprived of this essential figure of care, are forced to cope with the lack of stability and love, which can lead to long-term emotional difficulties. The grandmother, instead of taking on the role of caregiver, is a burden to the girls, and her alcoholism reflects deeper family crises such as the disintegration of family structure, loss of intergenerational stability, and entanglement in a spiral of poverty, depression, and helplessness in changing one's fate. The elderly woman adopts a passive attitude toward her granddaughters, not reacting to their problems or offering them help. As Jadwiga Izdebska writes, the ongoing disintegration of the family environment is a significant element that highlights the dramatic impact of social changes on the individual (Izdebska, 2000). In this context, the disintegration of the family environment becomes not only an emotional challenge for children but also a key factor influencing their further development and adaptation in society.

According to Wioletta Danilewicz, in the absence of mothers, children more often experience a sense of missing a close person, longing, and loneliness (Danilewicz, 2006: 182). Duša expresses her frustration and stress through rebellion and aggression directed both at her peers and her older caregiver. The girl's longing for her mother to one day take her with her represents a child's yearning for closeness and family unity. This dream functions as a symbol of hope and emotional compensation in the face of loneliness and lack of maternal care. At the same time, it expresses the child's belief in the possibility of reversing her fate, which contrasts with the harsh reality of euro-orphanhood.

Marylka, on the other hand, reacts by withdrawing – she remains silent, has difficulty learning to read, and struggles with low self-esteem:

At school, she sits in the back row and says nothing. Neither to the children nor to the teacher. When someone talks to her, she lowers her eyes, and when she has to read something, she starts crying. Most of the children think she is completely dumb. Even Marylka thinks so. (Šrámková, 2022: 26–27)

The girl loses faith in herself. When Duša leaves, the younger sister suffers from insomnia, which manifests as a physical expression of her inner anxiety and loneliness. The protagonist's suffering is the result of an emotional void caused by the separation. In this difficult moment, Fáněk, offering her his golden book, not only gives her an object but also an expression of care and an attempt to comfort her. The boy, giving away something precious to him, expresses his willingness to sacrifice himself for another person, which can be a symbol of the development of empathy, altruism, and emotional maturity. The book, full of symbolic meanings, becomes a medium meant to alleviate the pain and help the girl find a sense of security during the separation.

### STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH DISTANCE

Modern mass media play a key role in maintaining family bonds even under conditions of geographical separation (Szlendak, 2011). Their widespread availability and ease of use enable regular contact between members of the Fánka family. During phone conversations, the father shares stories about the prospects of a better life, which evoke both hope and ambivalent feelings in the boy, tied to dreams of a reunion. The son's imagined vision of his father's idealized life abroad serves an important narrative function, reflecting a child's attempt to understand and cope with the reality of separation. In Fáněk's visions, the father, existing in a distant, almost mythical space, leads a life of abundance and harmony, contrasting with the emotional void the child experiences in daily life:

I often imagined him walking among flowers or speeding in a car along a smooth road, crossing a river on a thin glowing bridge. I saw him as if I were floating above him in my ship, watching him smile and seeing the wind mess up his hair through the open window. (Šrámková, 2022: 15)

The idealization of the father's life abroad stems from feelings of longing and acts as a psychological mechanism to cope with the painful experience of being left behind. In this way, the narrative highlights not only the child's drama but also the social dimension of migration, which extends to family relationships and shapes perceptions of a "better life." The description of the boy's everyday struggles, such as carrying his father's old bag instead of a school backpack or wearing a repaired coat passed down from his grandfather, contrasts with the image of a better world portrayed by his father. The father's message about the "promised land," where job opportunities and prosperity seem attainable, creates tension between the idealization of migration and the harsh reality of the family's life back home. The father also points out that the "promised land," while full of hope, does not become a space of fulfillment for everyone, highlighting the complexity of the dream for a better future. It creates a contrast that emphasizes the pessimism and realism of everyday life.

## THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE FAMILY

One of the positive aspects of the father's migration is the improvement in the material conditions of the family back home. Financial stability resulting from higher earnings allows the family to meet basic needs and elevate their standard of living: "For my birthday, Mom didn't just bake a thin cake, but an actual birthday cake. A real cake with icing! I couldn't believe it. That had never happened before" (Šrámková, 2022: 23). This simple yet emotional experience becomes a symbol of innocence and the first, pure pleasures, which for the child hold a value incomparable to anything else. In literature on labor migration, it is often emphasized that while separation brings emotional and social challenges, it simultaneously serves as a source of potential economic benefits. These benefits can translate into better opportunities for children and a greater sense of financial security for the entire family (Danielewicz, 2007: 162). This duality of migration's effects illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon and its multifaceted impact on the functioning of families in a socio-economic context.

### THE FATHER'S RETURN: A NEW BEGINNING OR CONTINUATION?

Ewa Zawisza-Masłyk emphasizes that the father's absence from home, particularly in the context of the mother's professional activity, leads to weakened family bonds and can result in feelings of rejection in children. The researcher also notes that the father's return after a long absence may evoke disappointment when reality fails to meet the idealized vision of the "perfect homecoming." The clash with this reality leads to states such as anhedonia, apathy, and emotional emptiness in children (Zawisza-Masłyk, 2008). The father's return home becomes a crucial moment in which Fánek, who has long been living in anticipation, experiences intense emotions – hope and uncertainty. Prolonged emotional tension depletes his psychological resources, and the sudden arrival of the father initially triggers feelings of rejection:

He returned, but I didn't recognize anything about him. [...] And then he said, 'Come, captain.' I didn't want to. I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I didn't want to go anywhere. I didn't have the strength. It was as if I had been holding on by a thread until now, and suddenly it snapped. I couldn't say anything, I couldn't cheer, nor could I make any expression. (Šrámková, 2022: 48–49)

In migration psychology, such an emotional state is often described as a post-migration adaptation crisis (Andrejuk, Winiarska, 2020). At the end of the book, the father takes the son on a shared journey by boat to the horizon, a moment that becomes symbolic of mutual forgiveness and understanding. The lake, as an element of the scenery, serves as a symbol of purification, while

the boat journey suggests a process of transformation. The boat, as a means of transport, symbolizes the transition between two worlds: the past and the future, childhood and growing up. This journey represents the process of rebuilding familial bonds, providing both father and son with the space to express their emotions, ultimately easing past tensions. The act of forgiveness allows them to reconnect, laying the groundwork for restoring their relationship after a prolonged separation.

### A HARMONIOUS INTEGRATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE

The poetic nature of the narrative is enhanced by large-scale illustrations by Margarita Khavanski, which form an integral part of the story. The artist primarily employs a subtle color palette, seemingly inspired by the mysterious hues described in the golden book, further emphasizing the symbolism and metaphorical depth of the story. A striking contrast is created by the nocturnal scenes depicting the narrator's journeys among the stars, where the color scheme shifts to darker tones, and the text is printed in white, visually reflecting themes of transcendence and dreams. The visual tension is heightened by the juxtaposition of delicate, minimalist figurative illustrations with full-page compositions that dominate the pages, building an atmosphere of mystery and otherworldliness. Golden details, subtly illuminating each illustration, add an additional layer of symbolism, evoking dreams and the spiritual richness of the young protagonist. The illustrations, slightly melancholic yet imbued with mystery, create a space for the reader to immerse themselves in the narrative, sharing in Fáne's dreams of stars and ships. As such, the illustrations become not merely decorative but also a tool for constructing a multi-layered artistic message.

### CONCLUSION

The motif of euro-orphanhood in children's and young adult literature is an important research topic that allows for the understanding of the complex aspects of labor migration and its impact on the structure of the contemporary family (Mills, 1987; Mattson, 1997; Kimball, 1999; Sanders, 2008). The mentioned literary examples, including the works of Šrámková, indicate that contemporary prose for young readers is an effective tool for shaping their axiological awareness and supporting them in coping with emotional difficulties.

The Czech writer's work stands out with its multi-dimensional and empathetic approach to the theme of euro-orphanhood. The author presents migration as an ambivalent phenomenon – offering both the chance for a better life and significant emotional costs. Depicting deep family bonds that can endure despite physical separation allows Šrámková to emphasize the therapeutic function of literature, helping young readers better understand their

emotions and challenging life situations. At the same time, her work portrays euro-orphanhood as a social issue, requiring a broader perspective both from the individual and community, which distinguishes it from other literary texts. The use of the fantasy layer in Šrámková's *Fánek the Starsailor* aims to create a space where children affected by euro-orphanhood can safely process their emotions while seeking answers to questions about identity, family bonds, and the meaning of life. The fantastical elements not only help address the challenges of presenting difficult topics in a way that is accessible to young readers but also introduce a universal dimension that allows for a broader understanding of the issues of separation and longing present in the lives of migrant children.

Children's and young adult literature addressing euro-orphanhood not only teaches empathy and sensitivity to difficult experiences but also serves as a medium for reflection on the condition of contemporary families and the challenges associated with global migration processes. Texts such as Šrámková's, which combine emotional depth with social reflection, play a crucial role in shaping young readers' sensitivity, supporting their moral, emotional, and social development.

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## Burdensome Wanderings. The road and the border motifs in selected examples of recent children's and youth literature on migration

**Abstract:** The article reflects on the road and border motifs in selected examples of children's and youth literature about migration. The analogy between the experiences of child refugees and the experiences of children of economic migrants (referred to as "passive migrants") is outlined. According to the authors, the similarity of the experiences of the two distinguished groups presented in the prose promotes reader engagement and tames the audience with foreignness. Exposing in literary narratives the burdensome journey of migrants and the barriers they face, as well as the emotions (fear, helplessness, or despair) and problems they experience (such as loss of home, severed ties with family, a sense of misunderstanding and rejection by those around them, as well as the dream of having a "normal" life) can arouse empathy in the audience toward newcomers from distant continents, and thus help stop adiaphorization. Finally, it induces the addressees to take action, namely to assist those who need it.

**Keywords:** migration, refugee, home, family, foreignness, road, border, literature for children and youth, interventionism

Journey is a universal and timeless phenomenon. As Bartłomiej Kozera points out, "The history of humanity is the geographical dispersion of humans around the world" (2010: 65). However, wandering, in addition to its literal sense, has many symbolic meanings. On the one hand, the word is sometimes understood as a metaphor for human destiny, "the path of life" or the performance of independent acts intended to bring positive change to a person. On the other hand, it can mean "a risky venture, pursuing a goal along a road fraught with obstacles" (Kopaliński, 2015: 331). *Homo viator* thus sometimes leads to the

existence of a wanderer. During his forced travels, he experiences both happiness and dilemmas, loneliness, difficulties, and suffering. Nevertheless, each time he acquires knowledge of the world, he develops and discovers himself (Kozera, 2010: 65).

Nowadays, *homo viator* more and more often has the face of a migrant. The phenomenon of migration, widely understood as “a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence” (Lee, 1966: 49), especially the international one, is a pressing problem of the modern world. Everett S. Lee believes that in the process of any migration, it is possible to distinguish a place of origin and a place of destination. One of the main inconveniences that a migrant must overcome is the distance between these two points (Lee, 1966: 49). Another is the borders, which are delimitation lines, often artificially separating areas considered to be separate entities. They “always have two ‘sides,’ subjectively – an external and an internal one, two borderlands – ‘ours’ (‘ours,’ ‘own’) and ‘theirs’ (‘foreign,’ ‘other’s’) (...)” (Próchnicki, 2012: 35). The movement of the masses often takes on an out of control scale. In 1914 Leopold Caro indicated migration as a self-perpetuating force in his publication *Emigracja i polityka emigracyjna ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem stosunków polskich*. The economist compared population mobility to a surging river which, fed by its tributaries, quickly carries waters across the country (Caro, 1914: 1, cit. per Danilewicz, 2010: 58).

The reasons why people leave their current place of residence and seek a new one range from the need for education, economic factors, political instability and racial, ethnic, or religious persecution, to the outbreak of war or natural disasters. Undoubtedly, the complex relationship between state structures and the individual behavior of citizens – their micro-histories and the resources they have (O’Connell, Farrow, 2007: 17) – has influenced the occurrence of this phenomenon. Julia O’Connell Davidson and Caitlin Farrow note: “There are contexts in which people leave because their homes have been destroyed by war or natural disaster or because they face a stark choice between leaving home or certain and immediate death” (2007: 17). In doing so, both researchers emphasize that the decision made in such situations is usually well-considered, and driven by a desire to raise the standard of living and achieve a goal that, according to the knowledge available to the individual, appears to be obtainable (O’Connell, Farrow, 2007: 17).

The premise of this article is to show how contemporary Polish writers realize the motifs of the road and the border in literature for a young audience. We are interested in literary items that reflect the course of international migration, especially its reasons and consequences. The themes raised are not indifferent to European readers, who are witnesses, sometimes participants, to the ongoing population movements. According to a report prepared by SOS Children’s Villages International, as many as 244 million people migrated between

countries in 2015, including 21.3 million refugees (2016: 1). The intensification of this phenomenon can be seen when we compare the above statistics with information from previous years: “On average in 2015, 24 people were forced to flee their homes every minute – four times more than 10 years ago” (SOS Children’s Villages International, 2016: 1).

Among migrants leaving their own countries are also those who leave to counteract poverty. This group includes Poles who, to quote Wioleta Danilewicz, “Take advantage of new opportunities in response to the difficult economic situation in their place of residence, to the lack of prospects – in their opinion – in finding a satisfying job or looking for new life opportunities outside the country” (2010: 11). The researcher mentions three processes that encourage people to leave Poland for work, namely globalization, post-communist transformation, and European integration (Danilewicz, 2010: 11).

In addition, Poland, as a member of the European Union, faces a profound migration crisis that began in 2021: attempts by migrants from the Middle East and Africa to illegally cross Polish borders. The topic of relocating refugees from other continents on Polish land is recurring in the public debate. Finally, the solidarity attitude of Poles should be mentioned. Since 2014 they have been not only observers of the aftermath of the military actions waged between Russia and Ukraine, but also people involved in assisting (including shelter) war refugees, arriving in Poland massively, especially since 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine took place.

According to widespread stereotypes, migration is mainly about men, while women and children are merely companions on their difficult journeys (King, 2002, cit. per O’Connell, Farrow, 2007: 20). These are misconceptions, as women and children have been (and continue to be) caught up in migration processes from the beginning, often seeking a better, safer place to live on their own. Subjectivity is restored to them (especially to children, who get away with being “invisible” [cf. Dottridge, 2013: 7]) by literature for young readers. This is because it presents portraits of “children on the move,”

moving for a variety of reasons, voluntarily or involuntarily, within or between countries, with or without their parents or other primary caregivers, and whose movement, while it may open up opportunities, might also place them at risk (or at an increased risk) of economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence. (Dottridge, 2013: 7)

Zofia Kawczyńska-Butrym notes that “only in recent years has more attention been paid to children involved in migration in various ways” (2021: 24). This evaluation by Kawczyńska-Butrym is confirmed by the growing number of children’s and adolescents’ prose, whose frequent themes are precisely the burdensome wanderings of children as a result of escalating armed conflicts and economic problems.

## CHILDREN "FROM THAT SIDE"

The reaction of Polish and global publishers to the migration crisis, particularly to politicians' statements against refugees, who were perceived as a threat (securitization of migration), was a dynamic increase in publications treating war-time migration (observed since 2015) (Pietrusińska, 2020: 48–49; Bednarek, 2022). Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska argues that the literary narratives that have emerged (and are still emerging), depicting the image of asylum seekers in Europe, are part of the pro-refugee discourse. The literature studied perpetuates a dual image of the refugee in the minds of readers:

1. The Other-needy (portrayed in the "discourse of solidarity and compassion" as vulnerable and helpless),
2. The familiar-Other (presented in the "discourse of multiculturalism" as similar to Europeans, causal) (Pietrusińska, 2020: 59–62).

Pietrusińska exposes the duality of actual human attitudes adopted by members of societies in the face of increasing migration from the Middle East to Europe (2020: 56). Not all Europeans adopt a solidarity attitude. For example, this can be seen in *Wędrówka Nabu* (*The Journey of Nabu*, 2016) by Jarosław Mikołajewski, which the researcher mentions, or the recently published *Odysejki* (*Little Odessas*, 2023) by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala. In the open ending of Mikołajewski's work, some Europeans point the title character in two directions: half of the crowd, gathered on the beach, shows the little refugee the way to the land, while the others turn her back (Pietrusińska, 2020: 56). The reflection of diverse social attitudes in a literary text should allow viewers to analyze the presented situation and make their own choices regarding their behavior toward migrants. On the other hand, Combrzyńska-Nogala, touching on the extremely topical subject of the difficulties faced by people from the Middle East who are stuck on the Polish-Belarusian border, draws different profiles of border guards. She makes it clear that among them there will be those who ruthlessly carry out their duties ("mustachioed"), which involve chasing "intruders" out of Polish territory, and those who accept them – in accordance with the moral rights they feel – and try to carry out their support ("blue-eyed"). Such a division emerges from the conversation between the guards and Zora, an old woman who helps refugees. The border guards knock on her door in the evening and ask her if she has seen undesirables "hanging around" in the neighborhood:

– **We are obeying orders!** [emphasis mine – J.Sz., J.Z.] – the mustachioed man said angrily.

– Yes, yes – said the grandmother. – Orders are important. I've heard it somewhere when I was her age – she looked down at her granddaughter. – All soldiers say that.

She said it firmly, with horror written on her face, until Nela swallowed her saliva with fear.

– Please don't get involved, or there will be consequences – the mustachioed man repeated.

– ... It seemed to me that failure to help is punishable. Has something changed in our law?

**The mustachioed decided not to discuss it and turned away angrily. The blue-eyed man showed them a discreet thumbs-up before following his colleague** [emphasis mine – J.Sz., J.Z.], and they, after waiting a moment, hung up the green lantern again .... (Combrzyńska-Nogala, 2023: 93)

Combrzyńska-Nogala, by introducing the topos of the border to the *Odysejki* and creating the image of the “bad” and “good” border guard, breaks the negative stereotype of the border guard, which has been present in literature for young audiences up to now, as a border guard who blocks migrants’ ways to a better world. This image of a law enforcement representative is found in *Wędrówka Nabu*. A lone migrant child is unable to get “from that side” to Europe:

– Which way can I enter the lake? – Nabu asked, swallowing tears.

– There is no such place. – replied the first [police officer – J.Sz., J.Z.].

– You can only enter the lake from that side – explained the second.

– But how can you find yourself on that side?

– You can't – declared the first one.

– One has to be born there – added the second.

– But I was born on this side! – the girl began to shout .... (Mikołajewski, 2016: non-paginated)

However, the protagonist traverses this seemingly impossible path, full of obstacles. She wanders through the great desert and finally arrives at a space fenced with barbed wire, separating access to the lake where she would like to swim. Nabu is weak, sore, and injured. In addition, she is thirsty and hungry. Marianna Szumal writes that “each of the barriers encountered is another stage of the journey and involves overcoming more and more of life’s difficulties, which affect the heroine’s development ...” (2021: 358). These adversities are presented not only literally, but also metaphorically. For example, the protagonist bounces off a “wall” that does not exist in reality, which symbolizes societies’ resistance to accepting “Strangers.” However, despite this, eventually Nabu finds herself on the beach of a European country and – submitting to social judgment (Wójcik-Dudek, 2019: 45) – waits for the verdict on whether she will be accepted and allowed to stay in the territory of her choice.

Anna Józefowicz, interpreting *Wędrówka Nabu*, cites the words of Karl Schlegel. He claims that “most of the borders in the world are invisible borders, which run more on our internal maps, in our heads” (Schlegel, 2009: 136, cit. per Józefowicz, 2019: 122). It involves a different way of perceiving the world by a child and an adult. Nabu (like any child) understands neither her otherness nor the brutal rules that prevail in the adult world. She is determined and

hopeful that her fate will improve (finding a new and permanent home that will not burn down). In contrast, the adults (represented by policemen, customs officers, soldiers, and, finally, tourists who know these rules) are indifferent to the girl's suffering. They even show her resentment. The exhausting journey depicted in the work is an escape "from 'broken' reality and adults who build walls" (Józefowicz, 2019: 122). Describing Nabu's childlike imagination and perspective, Józefowicz raises issues of social segregation and exclusion, and asks fundamental questions: "How to explain to a child the boundaries that are not there, the administrative obstacles, the invisible prohibitions that block people? Who sets the boundaries? Is it possible to be born on the wrong side?" (2019: 123).

A refugee is "a person suspended between two worlds" (Łodziński, 2008: 10) – both literally and symbolically – who camps out at the border of countries and faces non-acceptance. An adequate term to describe this "piece of land" on which the immigrant resides is the non-place. Marc Augé calls it "a space that can be defined neither as identity, nor familiar, nor historical" (2008: 128). It resembles a transitory reality (constituted by movement, displacement), contrasted with the reality of residence (constant and secure) (Augé 2008: 136). Moreover, a refugee unwittingly takes part in "rites of passage" making the way from one world (engulfed in war, destruction, and chaos) to another (safe, full of order, and peace,<sup>1</sup> but – sometimes – closed to foreigners) (cf. Gennep van, 2006: 37; Łodziński, 2008: 10).

The protagonist of *Hebanowe serce* (*Ebony Heart*) by Renata Piątkowska, little Omenka, makes a similar journey to that of Nabu. Unlike the protagonist, portrayed in Mikołajewski's book, the boy escapes from Africa to Europe (through the desert and the sea) together with other refugees, and above all his mother. However, the child experiences separation from his dad, who remained in the port because he was deceived by a smuggler. During the difficult crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, mother and child are exposed not only to stress, but also to death. Many of their companions die during a storm. In the end, the protagonists, abandoned by the helmsman but rescued by a coastal patrol guard, end up in a refugee camp on Lampedusa, which is – according to their imaginations – a safe haven. "This place," writes Piątkowska, "was to become their home **for a while** [emphasis mine – J.Sz., J.Z.]" (2021: 37). It can be considered that *Hebanowe serce* ends happily, as the characters manage to make

<sup>1</sup> Literary characters, who are war refugees, see Europe as an asylum – a place where they can find refuge. Such an assessment of Europe can be found in *Moje cudowne dzieciństwo w Aleppo* (*My Wonderful Childhood in Aleppo*) by Maciej Gortat, which tells of the daily life of a Syrian family living in a besieged city. One of the characters, uncle Husajn, while visiting his relatives, persuades them to leave their home and migrate to Europe. He is convinced that in Europe they will greet them with warmth and hospitality (Gortat, 2017: 44–45).

their way to a peaceful country. Nevertheless, the family's future is uncertain. Omenka and his mother continue to live in a state of suspension, they have no permanent place to live, nor do they know what fate has befallen the person closest to them, the boy's father.

The hopelessness of the refugees' predicament – that they are stuck at a point from which they can no longer turn back or go ahead – is also conveyed in other works, such as *Wojna w Kuropatkach* (*War in Kuropatki*) (2022) by Katarzyna Ryrych and *Chłopiec z lasu* (*The Boy from the Forest*) (2024) by Cezary Harasimowicz, which describe the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. In both narratives, the story is told from the perspective of a Polish child – a witness to the “imprisonment” of migrants, as Ryrych notes, “on the border strip, in no man's land” (2022: 71) and the various adult reactions and behaviors to the event.

The literary protagonist created by Ryrych, Mela, comes to visit her grandmother in the countryside. However, this time she cannot enter the forest, because there is a “war” going on in Kuropatki – “so special, so small, that no one knew anything about it” (Ryrych, 2022: 50). Soldiers can be found in the village, with an unfriendly attitude toward those around them. Both children and adults attempt to counter the drama of the refugees hiding in the woods (although Mela joins in helping the migrants in secret from her grandmother). Residents of Kuropatki engage in the “Green Light”<sup>2</sup> campaign, which involves signalling to refugees by lighting a lantern in which house they will receive support (food, clothes, cleaning supplies, and even toys for children, prepared by people). The initiative mentioned above of ordinary citizens and their disagreement with the decision on migrants made by the Polish government (the push-back procedure)<sup>3</sup> are also shown in *Odysejki* by Combrzyńska-Nogała. Both narratives, like all Polish books devoted to the lives of war migrants, belong to the circle of intervention literature (Pietrusińska, 2020: 61; Wądolny-Tatar, 2021; Bednarek, 2022: 84), socially engaged, “anthropologically sensitive” (Świerczyńska-Jelonek, 2011; Józefowicz, 2019: 116), as they aim to arouse readers' sympathy and empathy, and remind addressees of the most important moral principle – humanitarianism (Wawer, 2022: 205). Building the right attitude of the audience toward visitors from afar is facilitated by creating multicultural stories. Weronika Kostecka writes that this process involves, among other things, pointing out to readers the coexistence of different groups and

<sup>2</sup> Spontaneous actions under the banner of “Green Light” were undertaken by residents of eastern Poland in real life. (cf. e.g., *Zielone światło – tam uchodźcy mogą znaleźć pomoc. By nie tracili nadziei, żeby chcieli żyć* [WYWIAD], <https://oko.press/zielone-swiatlo-tam-uchodzcy-moga-znalezc-pomoc>).

<sup>3</sup> Push-back refers to “the practice of actually returning people to the country from which they crossed the border (mostly illegally) without allowing them to apply for refugee status and without initiating other administrative procedures against them, including return” (Baranowska, 2022: 10).

opening up to otherness by “deconstructing the egocentric perception of the world” (2021: 146).

Breaking down the barriers that divide the protagonists, who represent different cultures, takes place during Mela and Frank’s direct meeting with the Other (Sharo) depicted in the work, i.e., the meeting between the Polish children and their peer, located beyond the actual border, marked by the forest area. Karolina Wawer highlights that the “direct interaction has the character of an epiphany” (2022: 212), as it allows the children to understand that this Other is similar to them, while the characteristic to be followed in establishing a community should be humanity (2022: 212). Mela and Franek initially follow the trail marked by the red threads left behind by the refugee. The road leads them through a field of tall corn, reminiscent of the hostile, terrifying space familiar to them from horror movies. The fear accompanying the characters recedes, as they realize the similarity of the emotions they experience (including Sharo’s), especially fear. The importance of affect in cognitive processes is emphasized by Andrzej Dąbrowski, who claims that “the emotional aspect makes our access to the world more complete and facilitates our understanding of our surroundings”. Therefore, thanks to the emotions experienced by young people, there is a “revision of [their] beliefs” (2012: 322) and a rejection of negative thoughts about the Stranger they encounter.

A literary image of space, frightening but arousing curiosity, encouraging exploration, can be found in *Chłopiec z lasu* by Harasimowicz. The topography of the child’s world of the narrator Ala, who appears in the cited work, consists of a safe house and a dangerous forest. Although the girl often crosses its boundary to bring the soup to her father, who works there, she is afraid because she has to “overcome the Fear of Darkness and seep into the forest” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 52). At the same time, she admits that the area, which is not entirely tame, causes ambivalent feelings in her, as the girl enjoys being surrounded by trees (Harasimowicz, 2024: 14). Harasimowicz uses the fairy tale convention and raises ordinary phenomena and emotions to the status of literary characters (through the use of personification; for example, the previously mentioned Fear and Darkness are personified, in addition to: Longing, Loneliness, and Anger. These are the emotional states that Ala feels most strongly). Moreover, the writer sets the action of the book in a significant place – the forest – which is an important stage of the journey undertaken by the protagonist of the fairy tale to reach his goal. It is an area that is a realm of darkness in which it is easy to get lost, and it is inhabited by unusual creatures (Brzeska, Wieszaczewska, 2018: 184–185, 191), associated with mystery and “what is unknown in man and worth discovering” (Rzepnikowska, 2002: 608, cit. per Brzeska, Wieszaczewska, 2018: 191). By introducing the figure of a boy separated from his parents, fleeing the war, and the motif of a metal barrier, the author alludes to what happens on the Polish-Belarusian border. This writing strategy

gives the story – which is an atypical moral-ethical primer<sup>4</sup> – a universal dimension and introduces timeless content, bringing the reader closer to issues such as fear, war, wandering, loneliness, and suffering. Moreover, it depicts the basic values, like selfless help, sacrifice, and friendship.

Ala's behavior (considered strange by her peers) indicates that the girl is characterized by sensory hypersensitivity. For this reason (similar to children with autism spectrum disorders), she feels overwhelmed by sounds and colors, makes repetitive hand movements (stims), and avoids contact with others, especially physical contact (she does not want to shake hands with new-found friends or for her parents to hug her). Instead, she "turns to other – equal – forms of existence" (Domańska, 2008: 32). She hears the cry of trees being cut down by lumberjacks, talks to plants (e.g., an old Oak tree), objects (the mascot Tobias and the damaged little Shoe found in the forest), and animals (the dog As, the mouse Hańcia, and the fox she encountered), which she gives special attention to and whose presence compensates for her perceived Loneliness.

This unpleasant emotional state is initially broken by her finding a sneaker, belonging to an immigrant, and meeting its owner, Elias (the titular boy from the forest). Thanks to the fantasy convention used by the author, a tattered object comes to the fore, and together with the refugee it travels a difficult road, experiences intense emotions, and finally the trauma of the struggle for life. It makes the protagonist aware of the history and experiences of refugees. The sentences articulated by it resemble a description of inner experiences and strongly affect the girl, who from now on begins to understand what Elias feels:

– This someone is very unhappy. This someone has lost a Shoe. This sneaker is very worn out and this sneaker is crying for help. It has a torn sole, is soaked, cold, and lonely, and after all, every shoe must be a pair. I hid him on the hill to rest. (Harasimowicz, 2024: 46)

The importance of a little Shoe as a witness and co-participant in the migration undertaken by Elias' family is underscored by eloquent illustrations, which complement – following the principle of complementarity (Cackowska, 2017: 27) – the verbal message.

Illustrator Marta Kurczewska used the hyperbolization of the little Shoe, which in the picture (Harasimowicz, 2024: 50) is much larger than the girl standing next to it, to emphasize the complexity of the problems faced by refugees, as well as the secret hidden by the protagonist involved in helping the

<sup>4</sup> References to characters from Marian Falski's textbook for learning to read and write are present in Harasimowicz's work. The characters in *Chłopiec z lasu* have the same names as those in the primer – Ala has a dog named As and an imaginary friend named Ola. The association with an uncomplicated children's book also brings to mind the enumeration, which contains several parallel simple sentences beginning with the words "it is".

stranded boy. For Ala, an inconspicuous object has great significance, while someone else would most likely have thrown in the trash. The amplification of the magnitude of the migration phenomenon is expressed verbally and visually. Asked during the lesson to calculate how much four times four is, the girl begins multiplying “destroyed,” “poor and unhappy,” and “crying from pain, longing and suffering” shoes. The result of her memory calculations becomes “an army of wounded shoes ... that have escaped fire, debris and rockets ...” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 154–155). Finally, the protagonist – under the influence of an unusual gesture of a classmate (Andżela’s donation of colorful sneakers to refugees) – sees that it is possible to increase the scale of assistance to war migrants. So, Ala multiplies again, this time “shoes that did not have to flee the war” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 160) and concludes the calculation with the sentence: “That would be a whole army of donated, happy shoes” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 160).

The meeting with the Other initiates a series of changes taking place in Ala. The girl recognizes the dramatic situation of the child and steps out of her comfort zone: she contacts the boy and tries to take care of him, so she first brings him food and later tries to provide him with warm clothes. He gives Elias her most precious toy – a teddy bear, Tobiasz. Handing this mascot over to a new friend involves a sacrifice from Ala, who only hugs Tobiasz daily. Therefore, the several-year-old extends her hand to Elias – both metaphorically as giving someone a helping hand, and literally as she is the first to shake his hand in greeting. Eventually, she brings him home.

The help that Ala offers Elias is not limited to material support. The girl, overcoming her fear again, ventures into the woods to search for the boy’s parents. However, her wandering is interrupted by a fence, which “is moody with sharp, steel teeth, looking like a monster from a menacing fairy tale” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 106). Harasimowicz does not explain the reason for building the steel structure, he leaves this up to the adult reader accompanying the child in the reading. Instead, the author captures the astonishment of the protagonist and her dog at the sight of the unusual and unfriendly wall (an astonishment that will most likely also be shared by the young viewer of the book) and the serious consequences of its presence at the border. It turns out that the dreaded barrier cut the migration path of people and animals.<sup>5</sup> It separated Elias from his parents and disrupted the natural habitat – isolating a pair of foxes from each other, condemning them to helplessness and despair.

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<sup>5</sup> Polish and foreign ecological and scientific circles, opposing the build of a barrier along the border with Belarus, used arguments about the devastation of the Białowieża Forest (including cutting down trees for construction) and the negative impact of this investment on the mobility of animals (especially predators) (cf. e.g., *List środowiska naukowego do KE ws. budowy muru na granicy polsko-białoruskiej*, <https://naukadlaprzyrody.pl/2022/01/31/list-srodowiska-naukowego-do-ke-ws-budowy-muru-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej/>).

The title page of *Chłpiec z lasu* states that it is “a novel for children and adults.” The role of the caregiver is still to supplement the child’s knowledge with the socio-cultural context, and to provide answers to the usually not easy questions troubling the young man, who is just getting to know the world in all its shades (including the dark ones), often giving rise to surprise, fear, or sadness. Hiding facts from a young person, proving the injustice of human actions and the existence of evil, is not the right way to form his identity and cope with problems (Wawer, 2022: 211). However, in the subtitle of Harasimowicz’s book, as well as in its content, there is an emphasis on the need to maintain equality in the adult/child relationship while reading the story, and to achieve what Magdalena Bednarek calls co-presence and, citing Joanna Papużyńska’s words, co-experiencing the story (2022: 90; Papużyńska, 1981: 49).

Significantly, the reading model described by the researcher concerning refugee works implies that both types of audiences adopt the attitude of fellow citizens. The result of the partnership is supposed to be – in addition to the exchange of reading impressions, the disclosure of emotions – the initiation of a conversation about how to change reality for the better, and the initiation of concrete actions (cf. Bednarek 2022: 90–93; Wawer, 2022: 203), to “arrange [the world – J.Sz., J.Z.] equally”; so that it is not a “sad mess” (Harasimowicz, 2024: 141). Harasimowicz, through his exceptional primer, teaches that one should not remain indifferent to the tragedies of others, which do not take place far away at all, but happen right behind our closed, even barricaded doors. It activates audiences of all ages, but – believing in their power to make things happen – does not impose ready-made solutions on them:

- Don’t look away – says Darkness in a firm tone.  
I fight with myself. I look straight into the Boy’s eyes. In his pupils swirl still black balls of fear and pain.
- What should I do? – I ask.
- I won’t give you a hint – replies Darkness. – You must decide for yourself.  
(Harasimowicz, 2024: 54)

### THE EXPERIENCE THAT CONNECTS

The key topos that appears at the beginning and end of *Chłpiec z lasu* is home, symbolizing, among other things, permanence and shelter (Kopaliński, 2015: 64). The framing narration tips the idea that every human needs a safe place to live. Both the fox family and the human family manage to reunite, and Elias and his parents settle into their new home. The illustration next to the text accentuates that the refugee family is taken care of and is “wrapped in cotton wool,”<sup>6</sup> away from danger. Therefore, the happy ending of the novel provides a glimpse

<sup>6</sup> The illustration of the house under a lampshade symbolizes protection from evil.

of how, despite many obstacles, the process of taking root in a new place is possible. Unfortunately, refugees do not always bond strongly with the place where they settle. They feel excluded and alien, like the Ukrainian child protagonists of *Teraz tu jest nasz dom* (*This Is Our Home Now*) (2016) by Barbara Gawryluk. Some of them (e.g., Weronika, who does not want to live in Poland) have a feeling of temporariness and uncertainty. Others (e.g., Romuś and Mikołaj), while showing some difficulties resulting from their unfamiliarity with the Polish language and harassment from their schoolmates, try (with their parents' persuasion) to adapt to the new reality, "because this war is not a movie, it's not a game, it's not a computer game. This war is real" (Gawryluk, 2016: 45).

Similar problems faced by migrant families (difficulties in adapting to the culture of the host country, speaking a foreign language, finding an affordable place to stay, etc.) are faced by transnational families, "whose members are separated physically between two or more nation-states but maintain close ties and relationships" (Shih, 2016: 1). In Polish prose works devoted to migration, many titles describe labor migration. However, among these books there are no images of happy transnational families that do not suffer the negative consequences of separation. The world shown in the aforementioned novels is populated, in addition to the generally perfunctory descriptions of parents going abroad, by distraught child characters left behind in Poland (Zając, 2023: 285). Literary creations reflect the real situation of Euro-orphans. The children's perspective adopted in literature prompts the reader to discuss the psychological condition of young people who experience separation. They often end up in the care of people who are unable to look after them (e.g., ailing grandmothers in need of care; such a situation is described in *Zielone martensy* [*Green Dr. Martens Boots*, 2016] by Joanna Jagiełło or *Samotni.pl* [*Lonely.pl*, 2011] by Barbara Kosmowska) or intentionally causing them harm and forcing them to run away from home (the fate of Cyryl and Nikodem from the novel *Pisklak* [*Chick*, 2017] by Zuzanna Orlińska). Although they do not travel to other countries, they are sometimes stuck between two worlds. They indulge in spirited wanderings, following foreign news and weather forecasts (e.g., Wiktor from *Samotni.pl*) or imagining themselves traversing the road behind an absent parent (e.g., Iwo from *Czarny Młyn* [*Black Mill*, 2011] by Marcin Szczygielski and Lidka from *16.10 do Bergamo* [*16.10 to Bergamo*, 2017] by Piotr Rowicki). "An abandoned childhood," Danilewicz explains, "is usually filled with grief, sadness, longing and – often – rejection of the parent who failed. This childhood is entangled with adult problems" (2010: 118). Alone, deprived of adult support, children are unable to overcome the growing crises. They perceive their youth as a time marked by suffering, and the baggage of their acquired experiences as a borderline position (Leszczyński, 2010: 22). The consequence of the disruption of their bonds with loved ones residing outside the country, among other things, is that they engage in risky behavior (Więckiewicz, 2011: 18), which

goes beyond the accepted social norms and sometimes threatens their health and life (e.g., the protagonists of *Ma być czysto* [It Has to Be Clean, 2016] and *Rozpływaj się* [Dissolve, 2021] by Anna Cieplak).

It seems that the most significant experiences that war migrants and passive migrants (children of parents who went abroad to work [Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2021: passim]) have in common are the loss of home, the breaking of ties with loved ones, the feeling of alienation, the lack of understanding by those around them, and the dream of having a “normal” life. As Zofia Kawczyńska-Butrym notes, “In the course of parental migration, the family home, which gives the child and young person a sense of security and support during the difficult period of adolescence, ‘disintegrates’” (2021: 34). Authors of recent children’s and adolescent prose recognize the universality of migration. Polish children are almost daily participants in it (either as Euro-orphans or companions in their parents’ departures) or observers, thanks to the conversations they hear (on the street, at home), the stories of their peers, the headlines they read in the press, or the television news programs they watch (cf. Bednarek, 2022: 83). To explain the reasons why refugees undertake the burdensome wanderings, writers juxtapose their motivations and experiences with the personal motives of economic migrants for leaving the country, to build a community of experience and influence the misperception of newcomers as enemies.

For example, the recipients of *Chłopiec z Lampedusy* (Boy from Lampedusa, 2015) by Rafał Witek have the opportunity to get acquainted not only with the fate of Tandzin who – as an illegal immigrant – arrived on the Italian island from Eritrea, but also with Andżelika, the daughter of a migrant from Poland who is there legally.<sup>7</sup> The situation is similar in the analyzed *Wojna w Kuropatkach* by Ryrych and *Odysejki* by Combrzyńska-Nogala. Wandering is inscribed in the life stories of the characters we meet. In the first of the aforementioned books, a grandmother, trying to explain to her granddaughter the plight of refugees camping in a nearby forest and the complicated motivations of their wandering, tells the teenager the story of her son. In the past, he was illegally employed in Sweden to get money to build a house in Poland. The man – who despite having a higher education, took an illegal job abroad – did not have to flee the war to save his life, unlike these refugees. As the grandmother supposes, some of these people believed the promise that a better future awaited them in Europe. Labor migrations and wartime migrations are also juxtaposed in *Odysejki*. Combrzyńska-Nogala first presents the odyssey of the Polish woman Petronela Wapno and two girls, the Jewish girl Ryfka and the Romani girl Zora,

<sup>7</sup> Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, analyzing children’s literature about overseas migration of children with their parents, notes that it depicts the Polish child as the Other (“*homo migrans*”), who has to find his way in a foreign reality after going abroad. This literary strategy of role-swapping, e.g., putting him in the role of the Stranger, allows the reader to empathize with the situation of war migrants (Wójcik-Dudek, 2019: 46).

who try to save themselves from death at the hands of the Nazis at all costs. On the other hand, the third part of the book shows Zora's fate as an old woman who, because of the tragedy she experienced (the murder of members of her stock), helps refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border. Moreover, Zora's family continues the Romani tradition of nomadic life, as her granddaughter's parents usually wander the world with their child, currently (this time without Nela) on a contract abroad.

Recent literary works include examples that testify to the portrayal of war migrants multi-dimensionally. Male and female creators try to help readers understand the individual stories of refugees. By appealing to emotions familiar to everyone, they neutralize the fear of foreigners in the addressees. Therefore, the mission of literature becomes – in opposition to the politics of securitization – to counteract adiaphorization, “that is, to exclude migrants and what happens to them from moral evaluation” and thus place them in space for compassion (Bauman, 2016: 43). This literature teaches not only young audiences, but also those adults experiencing co-reading (Bednarek, 2022: 90) with their children. Moreover, like their children, they are co-experiencing what befalls the depicted child protagonists, to overcome the boundary of Fear of the Other, and take prompt action – to give help to those who need it. He further shows that “Each of us is an Odysseus” (Staff, 1978: 120), but not everyone has the opportunity to return to his Ithaca.

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## Leaving: Exploring Children's and Adolescents' Mobilities



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# New Homes, New Playgrounds for Inspiration – The Migration Stories of African American Artists in The Picturebook Format

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze the verbal and visual rhetoric of four picturebooks, *Jacob Lawrence in the City* (Rubin, 2009), *Jake Make A World* (Rhodes-Pitts and Myers, 2015), *The Block* (Hughes and Bearden, 1995), and *My Hands Sing the Blues* (Harvey and Zunon, 2011), which tell the story of young Black artists – Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden – who find their new homes in New York’s Harlem in the context of the Great Migration. The narratives reveal how the artists perceive the unknown space, how they cross boundaries between the past and the present, and how they incorporate their new experiences into art. Drawing on the theory of “Black geographies” (McKittrick, 2007; Hawthorne, 2019) and “critical geographies of the home” (Blunt and Dowling, 1996), the paper explains how the picturebooks struggle with black despatialization and preserve the landscape created by African American migrants. It draws attention to the specific visual language of the books which recreates the atmosphere of the Black home in the urban environment. The analysis of the selected picturebooks is based on the visual grammar of Kress and Leeuwen (1996) and the working strategies of Painter (2014).

**Keywords:** African American children’s literature, picturebooks, Black space, Great Migration, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden

## INTRODUCTION

More than one hundred years after the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance movement, an explosion of Black art and culture in the northern American cities caused by the Great Migration, African American artists are experiencing a resurgence of sorts.<sup>1</sup> The groundbreaking exhibition *The Harlem Renaissance*

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Migration took place from 1916 to 1970. It was the largest movement of Black people in the history of the United States. About six million African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North in order to escape racial oppression and pursue

and *Transatlantic Modernism*, held at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) February through July 2024, featuring 160 paintings of the most prominent Harlem Renaissance artists, led to a growing interest in the continuing legacy of Black arts from the early decades of the twentieth century (Esposito, 2024). The show also contributed to international debates on the impact of the Great Migration on the process of creating new Black communities in northern cities that became home to several million African Americans escaping from the racially segregated South. Amongst the most stunning exhibits of the collection are the paintings of Jacob Lawrence from *The Migration of the Negro* series (1940–41),<sup>2</sup> which depict the vibrancy of the process of migration, as well as Romare Bearden's six-panel collage *The Block* (1971), celebrating the heartbeat of Harlem with the images of its private and communal spaces.

Both of the artists spent their childhood in Harlem during the time of the Great Migration. Bearden moved to New York from North Carolina as a young child in 1914. Lawrence, born in New Jersey, came to Harlem as a thirteen-year-old to join his mother in 1930. Surrounded by crowds of newcomers trying to establish their new homes in the northern city, the artists became chroniclers of the Black community. They captured the nuances of everyday life as well as the process of Harlem becoming the mecca of Black culture in the northern part of the country. What the artists observed in their own homes as well as in public spaces was skillfully transferred into their elaborate visual narratives of the Great Migration.

Bearden's and Lawrence's portrayals of the Black community in New York's Harlem have inspired authors and illustrators of children's books to explain the process of Black migration to very young readers. Within the last few years U.S. publishing houses have released several migration stories of Lawrence and Bearden in the picturebook format. This article aims to discuss four picturebooks that focus on the impact of New York's Black community on the artistic development of the young migrants as well as the ways they render portrayals of the southern Black homes.

*Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, a Young Artist in Harlem*, written by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts and illustrated by Christopher Myers, tells the story of a thirteen-year-old boy who finds inspiration for his art in the sounds and colors of Harlem. The book was published in 2015 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York to accompany the exhibition of Lawrence's works of the Great

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better living conditions. New York City was one of the most popular places amongst migrants from the South. The Great Migration led to a cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance, the development of Black culture in northern cities (Imani, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration of the Negro* (1940–41) consists of sixty panels accompanied with short texts, consisting of four to twenty words, which guide the viewers to recognize specific aspects of the migration narrative (<https://lawrencemigration.philipscollection.org/>).

*Migration – One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Serries and Other Visions of the Great Movement*. The picturebook’s illustrations depicting the private and public space of the Black community, marked with vivid colors, strong lines and schematic figures, resemble the style of Lawrence’s own paintings. The book is also complemented with six images from Lawrence’s *Migration of the Negro* series, which add authenticity to the story. The second picturebook, *Jacob Lawrence in the City* (2009), written by Susan Goldman Rubin, uses exclusively the artist’s original paintings as illustrations. Comprising eleven images of city life, it is a celebration of all things that make places like Harlem home for people from all walks of life.

Jeanne Walker Harvey and Elizabeth Zunon’s biographical story of Bearden, *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden’s Childhood Journey* (2011), introduces young readers to a boy from North Carolina who migrates to the North and finds his new home in Harlem where he begins his experiments with visual arts. The book shows how the young artist captures his memories of the southern home he left behind and how he sees his life in the urban setting. Lowery S. Sims and Daisy Murray Voigt’s *The Block* (1995) differs from the other picturebooks discussed in this paper. The book combines parts of Bearden’s collage painting of the same title with a collection of Langston Hughes’s poems on Black lives in Harlem. Bearden’s sights of inner city life and Hughes’s lyrics help the readers envision all the sights and sounds of living in a Black urban community.

Drawing on the theory of “Black geographies” (McKittrick, 2007; Hawthorne, 2023) and “critical geographies of the home” (Blunt and Dowling, 1996), the article explains how the picturebooks struggle with black despatialization and preserve the landscape created by African American migrants. It draws attention to the specific visual language of the books, which recreates the atmosphere of the Black home in the urban environment. The analysis of the selected picturebooks draws on the existing methodologies of studying picturebooks (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth, 2014; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Kress and Leeuwen, 2006; Arizpe, Noble, and Styles, 2023), including the visual rhetoric of the illustrations, the interactions between text and images, and the ways they create the meaning of the stories.

## BLACK SPACEMAKING

Although Black people in America have always been emotionally bound to certain locations, over the last two decades, one can recognize a growing academic interest in the cultural significance of Black spaces, which is caused by the current discourses that try to despatialize African Americans’ sense of place, arguing that Black communities no longer exist. The scholars of Black Geographies (McKittrick; McKittrick and Woods; Hawthorne), an interdisciplinary field of

study exploring the relationship between humans and physical environment, believe that Black locations cannot be neglected or erased from public memory because they are sites of social activism and creativity. In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick argues that “Black lives are necessarily geographic” (McKittrick, 2006: xiii). African Americans have a deep sense of belonging to specific communities, which become their spiritual homes even if they do not have material possessions there. In their foundational 2007 volume *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, McKittrick and Clyde Woods argue that Black people’s contributions to geographical locations should be perceived as political acts and expressions. With their social and cultural activism, they make certain areas their own homes, thus transforming the general perception of the place and rejecting false conceptions of Black neighborhoods as sites of crime rather than creativity and socialization. As Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis argue in their study *The Black Geographic Praxis, Resistance, Futurity*, blackness is “not just a subjectivity that experiences, that is impacted by external means of definition and manipulation, but instead a situating force, a place-making apparatus that in every geographic context makes its location more meaningful, more substantial, more human” (Hawthorne, Lewis, 2023: 5).

Black homemaking is a complicated process. As Dan Bulley points out, it is never politically neutral, and especially in the context of migration when home is constructed as a contested space, “a product of selected inclusions and exclusions” (Bulley, 2015: 190). Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling propose the idea of the cultural geography of home to analyze Black domestic territories. They define home as “a material and an affective space, shaped by everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations, memories and emotions” (Blunt, 2005: 506). In order to study home as “a multi-layered geographical concept” (Blunt, Dowling, 2006: 2), they have drawn out three components of the cultural geography of home. First, they propose to analyze home as simultaneously material and imaginative. Second, they point out the nexus between home, power and identity, arguing that “a place is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location” (Blunt, Dowling, 2006: 25). They use Doreen Massey’s idea of ‘power geometry’ whereby people are differently positioned in relation to, and differentially experience, a place called home. Third, they argue that home is “multi-scalar,” which means that it is neither public nor private but both – “Home is not separated from public, political worlds but is constituted through them: the domestic is created through the extra domestic” (Blunt, Dowling, 2006: 27).

Using the concept of Black Geographies as well as Blunt and Dowling’s idea of cultural geography of home as a theoretical framework for the analysis of African American picturebooks about Black home makes it possible to recognize its multiple functions and varied meanings depending on geographical location and cultural background.

## THE SOUTHERN HOME

The process of making a new home cannot be separated from one's memories of the previous locale. While the material home can be left behind, the emotional sense of belonging to that place does not easily fade. The biographical story of Romare Bearden, *Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey*, reveals that forgetting the past is even harder than the drive to discover the new location. The book shows the boy's family's transfer from North Carolina to New York during the Great Migration. Inspired by Bearden's own collage, *Watching the Good Trains Go By* (1964), as well as jazz music that Bearden loved himself, the author tells a poetic story of a migrant family leaving behind the old life in the South and finding their new home in Harlem.

The illustrations depicting the character's life in the rural South are combined into a collage format, which echoes Bearden's stylistic approach and allows the book to foreground a wide array of Black experiences.<sup>3</sup> Bearden called his collage paintings "visual jazz," which reflected a variety of social issues concerning the lives of African Americans, both in the South and in the North. Similarly, the book's collage-like illustrations, being a combination of realistic faces, painted landscapes and cut-out images of trains and urban architecture, reveal the thrills and stresses of leaving home in the rural South and finding a new one in the urban North.

There are two sides of migrant's experience presented in the story: the nostalgic reflection on the past and what is left behind, and uncertainty about the new life in the unknown location. Although the trip to the North is the main part of the story, it draws attention to what will never be forgotten – the southern fields and gardens, trains leaving the southern stations, and the time spent with grandparents. As the narrator says while staying in his Harlem studio:

Like a flower, I have roots in my Carolina past,  
roots sunk deep in my childhood long past.  
The people and the places are in my art to last. <sup>4</sup>

The book likens finding home to a process of artistic discovery. Initially the descriptions of how artworks are created might seem like the background information, but once we discover that these are collage paintings about Black life, this part of the story takes on a different meaning. It emphasizes the need to be creative in making one's new home, as well as creativity in response to adversity experienced by many Blacks in the U.S. The title of the picturebook, *My*

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<sup>3</sup> According to many art scholars, the genre of collage, based on combining pieces of paper or fabric produced by different people into one whole work, is a perfect art form to represent a variety of voices on Black life (Bishop, 2007; O'Meally, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Three picturebooks selected for this article are unpaginated: *My Hands Sing the Blues*, *Jake Makes A World*, and *Jacob Lawrence in the City*.

*Hands Sing the Blues*, is a direct reference to the Black tradition of telling spontaneous stories, in the literary form, in music or art. The motif of creating art is like a frame, opening and closing the book. The first two double spread pages of the book show the young character sitting over the canvas and recreating his North Carolina past – sticking the image of a train upon Bearden's famous painting *Watching the Good Trains Go By*. The story ends with several verses of how the artist creates his paintings while staying in Harlem:

I'm like a singer calling out, then holding back.  
 I'm like a trumpet player blowing loud, then dropping back.  
 When I put a beat of color on an empty canvas,  
 I never know what's coming down the track.

The uncertainty of what comes out of the artistic endeavors is a metaphor of the migration experience, which is always marked with insecurity about the future. However, an artist can make the most of it and reverse negative feelings into a passionate approach to what is to become his new home.

The visual narrative of the Black migration, as presented in the picturebook, offers a new insight into the cultural meaning of the southern Black communities. As McKittrick points out, "The poetics of landscape discloses the underside, unapparent histories and stories ..." as well as "creates a way to enter into, and challenge, traditional geographic formulations without the familiar tools of maps, charts, official records, and figures" (McKittrick, 2006: xxii). The images of the South in Harvey and Zunon's story show the relationship between the main character and the physical landscape which is broken by the process of migration. However, even if disconnected from the original place of living, the Black community survives. Though it might be threatened and alienated from the new urban setting, it thrives and makes history thanks to its strong sense of belonging to a culture rather than just physical location. Thus, it proves that Black spacemaking does not have to be limited to a specific location but can take place anywhere. Yet it does not mean that the past is erased from memory. The story of Bearden's migration points to "the geographic relationship between the past and the present" (McKittrick, 2006: xxvii). While staying in his new northern home, the young artist draws on his earlier experience and transfers his conception of Black life into the new setting. Like many other Black residents of the northern cities, he marks the new space with Black southern culture. As McKittrick points out, "geography is also a terrain through which blackness makes itself known" (McKittrick, 2006: xxvii).

### THE NORTHERN HOME

The stories of Jacob Lawrence's migration to the North are focused on searching for an at-home feeling in the new location rather than bringing the past

life into contemporary moments. In the process of adaptation within the geographic shift, the sense of home is found both in the private space and the public locality. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts' story *Jake Makes a World*, illustrated with vibrant pictures by Christopher Myers, depicts the development of future artist Jacob Lawrence, who is inspired by the atmosphere of his new surroundings. Being part of the Great Migration, he has just found his new home in Harlem and tries to understand the nuances of living in the northern city. The illustrations allow the reader to absorb the spirit of Black life by gazing into the main character's apartment as well as exploring the streets with their most typical community centers.

The picturebook begins with a double-spread illustration showing young Lawrence and his brother inside their Harlem apartment. The readers can easily recognize the special atmosphere of the Black home. It is created with the image of the quilt, which is part of the southern tradition brought by Blacks to the North (Wahlman 2001; Mazloomi 1998). Used as a home decoration or a bed cover, the quilt brings to mind the tradition of enslaved persons producing patchworks out of small pieces of fabric. Quilting was a means of expressing Black people's creativity. Nowadays, whether they are used as artworks or everyday objects, quilts have a special meaning in African American families, as the one in the story. Placed in the center of the home, the quilt gives the boys a sense of security in the new place in terms of comfort and belonging. The quilt produces a new space, bringing into contact unrelated objects, people and places.

The following illustrations reveal how the private space and the public space merge into one and become the home of the protagonist of *Jake Makes a World*. Initially, the image of the young character lying in bed covered with a quilt contrasts with the dark purple architecture of the city, visible through the window, which divides the secure space of the home and the unknown parts of his neighborhood. In the next illustration, the colors of the quilt are transferred to the window frame and some of the buildings outside. "With first light, the dancing dark shadows begin to fade. Then the colors come again," says the text on the same page. The colors symbolize the warm atmosphere of the place which spreads from Black people's homes into the streets and again from the public space into the private area. The young character is looking out of the window as if he was trying to leave his homeplace and taste the hustle and bustle of the street. The colors seem to arouse the readers' curiosity about the place. What we can see behind the window looks like a painting – a blue sky with a clear skyline marked with a yellow touch of paint, which is intended to evoke a positive attitude towards the presented world.

The readers are further invited into exploring the Black community once the window frame is breached by some elements of the city. In their study of visual narratives, Claire Painter, J.R. Martin and Len Unsworth maintain that

“the effect is to make greater connection with the reader’s world and often to construe the breaching element as breaking through constraints” (Painter et al., 2014:109), which is true about the bounded images in Rhode-Pitt’s story. When the frame is broken to include a larger space within the picture, the semiotic world of the story is no longer separated from the reader. The following illustrations, unlimited by any margins or frames, invite the reader to explore the town’s architecture as well as its unique atmosphere of the streets. The strong colours and distorted figures with a variety of gestures and movements symbolize life-affirming African American culture. Black men passionately play chess and checkers in front of their home. A boy sells flowers in the street, shouting for people to come down. A preacher tells people about God, and across the corner on a stepladder someone else preaches about freedom and equality. All of these activities represent the vibrancy of the place as well as a sense of community it gives to its residents, which encourages the readers to explore other characteristics of the Black culture.

Despite the stigmatization of Black neighborhoods in popular media, the book makes readers of different races want to become part of this community. They are offered an insight into a Black way of life which is not marked with crime and violence but emanates with friendliness and openness to strangers. For white readers it might be their first contact with a positive image of Black space. For Black readers, struggling with a variety of social and economic issues, the book is a reminder that Black life is worth celebrating.

Obviously readers of different races might construct different meanings of the story depending on their background knowledge of the presented culture as well as their assumptions about the other race. Accordingly, the books can be interpreted through the lens of the culturally situated reader response model developed by Wanda Brooks and Susan Brown. The scholars take into account the “homeplace position,” which is informed by four supporting positions: ethnic group, community, family and peers (Brooks & Brown, 2012: 78). Although textual features of books featuring diverse cultures should not be ignored, in the case of African American literature being interpreted by white readers, ethnicity seems to play the most significant role. Given the fact that many young African Americans live in urban ethnic communities, associated with distinct cultural markers and experiences, the readers’ immersion in this specific environment is also an important factor in the process of meaning making of the story. As Brooks and Brown point out, “The community position can be seen as the children use urbanized understandings to compare character image and persona with realities of their own community” (Brooks & Brown, 2012: 81). As outsiders to the community, the readers might respond with curiosity about the other world, and, depending on the kind of expectations they hold, either accept or resist the presented reality. In general, picturebooks about other cultures are always educational and serve as tools of intercultural connections. As

Evelyn Arizpe concludes, picturebooks are inclusive of diverse cultures and challenge exclusionary views (Arizpe 2023: 137).

Irrespective of the race of the reader, the Black community presented in the picturebook can be a source of inspiration for creating works of art that reflect the mood of the location. Through the eyes of the main character of the story – a future artist, the readers absorb every single detail of the streetscape. Once Jake gets to Utopia House where he attends art classes, he transfers his observations into paintings. The illustrations in this part of the story depict a teenage boy involved in doing different hands-on activities. He transforms the sounds and colours of Harlem into a large African mask that symbolizes the Black community:

Jake takes a stick of charcoal and draws a pair of eyes to see everything the people on the street see. He draws one pair of ears to hear all the shouts and songs, one mouth to carry all their voices. All the faces Jake sees on the street become one face. (Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, 2015)

Conventionally used to cover one's true identity, the metaphorical mask has been a means of Black survival in racist America (Black, 2005). However, in Myers's illustrations it no longer speaks to the need to hide one's racial allegiance but becomes a trope of the collage of voices that contributed to the richness of Black culture, thus manifesting the feeling of racial pride. As well as this, the image of the mask reminds readers of where the Black people come from. The mask is a link between the past and the present. Although their journey from Africa to America and then the migration within the country, from the South to the North, was long and strenuous, they never failed to maintain their Black community spirit that still nurtures contemporary African Americans.

Another work of art made by the young artist is a replica of a Harlem street made in a shoebox. It looks like a collage, which includes cardboard chessmen, tiny boys folded from construction paper, Black women wearing dresses cut from magazines, buildings made of matchboxes, and the street paved with sandpaper. The scene is full of life and emotions. The illustration of the young artist playing with "his Harlem" expresses his strong attachment to the place. As the accompanying text says: "Jake's Harlem has all the shouts and songs and noises of the Harlem outside, but here they are not sounds. They are colours, they are shadows dancing, they are rhythms, they are light." Harlem is no longer a strange area for the boy. He feels at home both in his new apartment and in the public space. To use Jenny Bavidge's words, the book's character is a "proto-flaneur wrestling some agency from the situations of the streets and forging [his] own space for self-definition" (Bavidge, 2014: 58). Thus he develops his own relationship with the city, and, with the imagination of an artist, he acquires new ideas for his creative work.

*Jake Makes A World* presents Harlem as a space of inspiration and a source of empowerment for African Americans. The city offers the young character the opportunity to explore the neighborhood's colours, rhythms and textures, and rearrange them into his own visual narratives of Black life. Finally, he appropriates the place as 'his home' – as a site of creativity, support and resilience.

The public space of Harlem as an extended home is similarly represented in Susan Goldman Rubin's picturebook *Jacob Lawrence in the City* (2009), which celebrates Black urban life with eleven paintings by Jacob Lawrence accompanied with several rhythmic statements from a child narrator. The combination of the simple text in bold typeface with well-known canvases creates the impression that Harlem streets are home to both ordinary people and artists for whom the location is an inspiration for new artistic creations. Although some of the compositions show only part of the original paintings, they draw readers' attention to nuances of Black life in an urban setting.

The book's cover, based on Lawrence's painting *Poster Design . . . Whitney Exhibition* (1974), features a Black couple walking with two young children along a busy street in Harlem. In the background we can see ladders and three construction workers of different races who are building someone's home. There seem to be no racial divisions in the public space, and African American residents can walk freely throughout the neighborhood. The illustration creates a homely atmosphere. It is used again at the end of the book together with the caption: "I love the city's sights and sounds! And most of all its beat!", which makes readers believe that Harlem home is all about having positive emotions.

The first illustration inside the book is a general view of the neighborhood. Reprinted from Lawrence's painting *This Is Harlem* (1943), it offers an introductory map of Harlem with the main streets and sidewalks, as well as a variety of "third places" where the residents meet after work – bars, churches, funeral homes, or barber shops.<sup>5</sup> Although the illustration seems to offer a wide panorama of the city, only a careful reader will notice all the details revealing a special character of the place. As Richard Powell describes the painting, "Though not immediately apparent, this rendering of a community is deeper than mere documentary reportage and illustration: it delves into the very psyche of the urban experience" (Powell, 1992: 3). Colorful patterns on apartments buildings, as well as such details as stained-glass windows or fire escape ladders highlight the everyday life of the place, which inspired Lawrence to create his vision of the new home.

Another painting reprinted as an illustration of the busy street in Harlem is *Brownstones* (1958). The picture brings readers closer to people's homes. It

<sup>5</sup> The term "third places" was coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg, and is defined as follows: "Third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places. The phrase 'third places' derives from considering our homes to be the 'first' places in our lives, and our work places the 'second' " (Oldenburg 1996–97, 6).

presents a busy sidewalk in front of three tenements, with many people moving around or staying inside their apartments. There is a couple pushing a baby carriage, a woman carrying groceries, and a crowd of children jumping rope, bouncing a ball or attending to a dog. Some figures are visible on the front porch as well as in the windows, which offer readers a glimpse into Harlemites' private lives. The accompanying text reflects the rhythm of the street scene: "Walk the dog and bounce a ball, swing a rope and jump up high," indicating the variety of activities you can do in a Harlem block. Similarly, the illustration of Black girls playing in the street, a reproduction of Lawrence's *Children at Play* (1947), further conveys the special atmosphere of the street. As Patricia Hills has observed, "children's play reflects the community. Activities of children have meaning and give a community its sense of generational continuity" (Hills, 2009: 190). The accompanying text suggests the games the girls play – "Gather round and clap it out – Shimmy, Shimmy, Pow!" – which is an old jump rope song popular in Black communities. In the African American context handclapping games, different forms of jump rope or cheers have always been a significant part of community building in such an inclusive space as the urban street. Such activities gave young people a sense of belonging and helped them to maintain positive self-esteem.

The story of Harlem in Rubin's picturebook is not limited to street life. Several illustrations feature individual Harlemites doing different kinds of jobs – builders, carpenters, typists, and students studying in the classroom. All of the pictures make a visual narrative of Black life in the new conditions, far away from the southern rural landscapes and amongst urban blocks offering a different lifestyle. The accompanying text sets a positive tone of the story. The pictures of the street are provided with the following comments: "But first it's time for fun," or "So much to do, so much to see – a treat on every street," suggesting that apart from everyday chores there is more to do in the Black neighborhood.

Jacob Lawrence's observations of Harlem streets served as an important inspiration for his art. The paintings are informative as far as everyday life is concerned. They are perfect materials for picturebook illustrations, and, if combined with catchy phrases, they offer an exuberant narrative of Black urban life.

A more detailed observation of Harlem streets as well as private homes is provided in *The Block*, published in 1995 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The picturebook combines the work of two African American masters – Langston Hughes's poetry about living in Harlem and Romare Bearden's six-panel collage *The Block* (1971), which reflects his observations of a new northern location. The block is a basic unit of American urban communities. This is where people socialize, do business, or hang out with friends. In the Black context the block has a special meaning. As an extended home of many African Americans, it is an area where social rituals take place, where young generations learn from the old ones, and where new art and culture is produced (Patillo, 2007).

Bearden's block consists of several tenement houses, images of apartments as seen through the windows, a church, a barbershop, as well as numerous encounters in the street.

In the Introduction to the picturebook, Bill Cosby – at that time still a national icon – stresses the significance of the verbal narrative and visual narratives in the construction of the meaning of the book: "If Bearden gives us the sights, then Langston Hughes gives us the sounds" (Sims, 1995: 6). The poems speak with the voices of ordinary Harlemites struggling with everyday life, preachers with their sermons, or artists singing out their concerns about the Black community. The words are echoed in Bearden's paintings which depict church congregations, street musicians, and the hustle and bustle of the streets. Putting selected parts of Bearden's panel into a sequence of scenes taking place in various city locations offers a new insight into Bearden's art. Although his collage illustrations are based on his memories of living in Harlem during the period of the Great Migration, they allow readers to revisit their current beliefs about the Black community, which is undergoing physical changes while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness.

Most of the illustrations show the communal aspect of living in Harlem. There is an image of a Baptist church located in one of the tenements, decorated with stained glass windows contrasting with the brownish color of the building façade. The accompanying poem "Testimonial" expresses the religiosity of the Harlem community which can gather anywhere to praise God: "But I don't need no piano, / neither organ / nor drum / for to praise my Lord!" (Sims, 1995: 17). The church gives the people a sense of belonging, which is especially helpful in the times of crisis. The Harlem congregation is also depicted in the image of the funeral home. While a group of Black men are carrying out the coffin and several women are moaning on the sidewalk, above the building we can see angels lifting a human body to heaven.

The picturebook demonstrates that there are lots of other occasions when members of the community get together. Hughes's poem "Corner Meeting" placed next to a composition of two images – children playing in the street in front of the barber shop and street musicians on the sidewalk – expresses the essence of Black community life. The poem enumerates what they need to have fun – "ladder, flag, and amplifier: what the soap box used to be" (Sims, 1995: 24), as well as a good speaker who "catches fire" (Sims, 1995: 24). The street corner is one of the space markers that characterize Black urban life. While mainstream media tend to focus on the corner as a site of crime and violence, Black artists and authors contextualize the place as a site of community gathering. As sociologist Elijah Anderson has put it, street corners "provide settings for sociability and places where neighborhood residents can gain a sense of self-worth... Here they can sense themselves to be among equals, with an equal chance to be somebody... This is their place" (Anderson 1978/2003: 1).

Although the streetscape dominates most of the illustrations depicting Harlem as an extremely busy place, a careful reader will find stories of individual Harlemites within the larger narrative. Some pages include several images coming from different panels, simultaneously showing what is going on in the streets and how Harlemites are spending their time in their private locations. Sometimes these are contrasting images, for instance, a picture of people dancing in the street is placed next to the images of miserable solitary figures staying in their homes, isolated from the rest of the community. One illustration shows a lonely man sitting on the steps of his tenement. As the accompanying poem "Late Last Night" says, he seems to be crying due to his disappointment with a romantic relationship. Another illustration, being reproduced from the middle panel of Bearden's collage, depicts a green tenement house. A Black man looks out of the window and talks to a woman standing on the sidewalk. Hughes's poem, "Juke Box Love Song," speaks with the voice of the man who address his lover with an invitation to dance according to the rhythm of Harlem:

Take Harlem's heartbeat,  
Make a drumbeat,  
Put it on a record, let it whirl,  
And while we listen to it play,  
Dance with you, till day-  
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.  
(Sims, 1995: 15)

This kind of interaction gives us a sense of intimacy of Black life in Harlem. It allows us to invade people's privacy and see how living in Harlem shapes their minds and attitudes. Bearden's block is a dynamic landscape, a home to many Blacks who find a sense of belonging in a location that links them to their southern roots.

Although it is obvious that the authors of the selected picturebooks tried to provide children with the most positive images of the Black ghetto, so that they would no longer be associated only with poverty, crime and social exclusion, a careful reader will find a counterpoint to the nostalgic depictions. Harlem was an overpopulated racial ghetto when Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden moved there. Many of the people who flocked to the streets where the artists played as boys ended up there because the apartments were cramped and stuffy, poverty caused strife in families, and many Blacks could not afford to rest and entertain themselves in private establishments. There were no parks or safe playgrounds nearby, and the street was for many Harlem residents a space where they could earn extra money by selling fruit and vegetables and thus support their families.

By inserting the original paintings by Lawrence and Bearden into the stories, the picturebooks' creators problematize the retouched, nostalgic world

of books about Harlem. *Jake Makes a World* includes six panels from Lawrence's *Migration Series*. Two of them portray the poor living conditions of the new migrants – small cramped apartments with little furniture and no kitchen facilities (Panel 10 and 48). The other panels depict crowds of Black migrants arriving in northern cities. With such great numbers, it was hard for them to find jobs and accommodation, which affected their quality of life. Bearden's *Block* is also packed with details revealing difficulties of Blacks living in the North – housing problems, death issues, or community conflicts. Despite the drawbacks of living in Harlem, it emerges as a better option than staying in the South and facing unending hardships of Black life.

Artists like Lawrence and Bearden, as well as contemporary picturebook illustrators, do not eliminate negative aspects of living in the North. Instead, they portray the multiplicity of Black experience, marked with racial injustice and economic trouble, but not reducible to these issues.

## CONCLUSION

Black home is not limited to a specific geographic location but can be easily transferred if there is a need to migrate. In their study on home and near-home territories, Ralph B. Taylor and Sidney Brower argue that "Home does not end at the front door but rather extends beyond" (Taylor, Brower, 1985: 183). The statement perfectly defines the social context of Black homes in America. As the selected picturebooks demonstrate, the Black home stretches not only across geographic boundaries but also from domestic area to public space. Private apartments adjoin and merge with sidewalks, porches, clubs, or churches. The stories of Harlem demonstrate the impact of public space on Black people's private lives. Many African American migrants gather in public spaces for sustenance, where they support each other in the process of adapting to a new home. As Ray Oldenburg argues in his study on third places, the streets, as public gathering places, "serve as 'ports of entry' for visitors and newcomers to the neighborhood where directions and other information can easily be obtained" (Oldenburg, 1996–7: 7). Harlem public space brings Black migrants together – children searching for play companions, amateur artists and musicians or church congregations. Except for giving Black people a sense of home, Harlem's third places offer a stimulating cultural setting for artistic creation. The sounds and colors of the Black community are easily transferred into nuanced works of art reflecting the unique experience of a Black migrant.

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## Therapeutic Writing Strategies in Contemporary Ukrainian Children's Books about War and Refugee Experience<sup>1</sup>

**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.<sup>2</sup> 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 picture-books 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).<sup>3</sup> 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,

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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. Aksónova, 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> Therapeutic writing strategies, which aim to shape readers’ emotions, correspond to the “cultural politics of emotion [as] shaped and shared by texts

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> The term “paratext” was introduced by Gérard Genette (1997 [1987]).

<sup>6</sup> The Ukrainian writers under discussion include two who live in the US (Julia Kosivchuk, Oksana Lushchevska).

<sup>7</sup> 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]).<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

## 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"

<sup>10</sup> This is part of the bibliographic information at the beginning and end of the book. Cf. Stus, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> As stated on the foundation's homepage: <https://biloruska.foundation/en/fairytales-therapy-for-children/>.

and the “helper,” with the latter rescuing the former and solving their difficulties (Propp, 1968: 79–80).<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> 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,

<sup>12</sup> Propp emphasizes structural similarities between fairy tales from different cultures.

<sup>13</sup> 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.”

<sup>14</sup> 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 astronave* (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 rozpozvila 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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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# Old Home, New Home, Common Home: War-Induced Internal Displacement and Mental Maps of Ukraine in Ukrainian Children's Literature since 2014<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Ukrainian children's literature has actively responded to the waves of displacement following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and the start of the war in the east of Ukraine and the 2022 full-scale invasion. The article looks at stories featuring internally displaced children and adolescents across age groups and genres. These children's books both provide displaced children with relatable examples of coping with traumatic experiences and inform the children from the host regions, thereby preparing them for empathetic communication with the newcomers. The article argues that narratives of displacement contribute to a reconfiguration of the mental map of Ukraine offered by children's literature, which previously favored locations considered worthy of tourist attention. Instead, Ukrainian children's literature since 2014 provides imagery of a personal connection to a wider list of regions, including both the regions most affected by the warfare and the host regions. Finally, these books featuring IDPs emphasize the interrelation between regional and national identity and problematize the understanding of home. The concept of home is explored here at various levels, from the familial space to the space of immediate experiences in the hometown, to an environmentally distinct home region, and to a more abstract national homeland.

**Keywords:** displacement, IDPs, home, mental maps, refugees, space, Ukrainian children's literature, 21<sup>st</sup> century

"Mom said [...] that being a resettler is not bad, just very sad. She said that we hadn't done anything bad and we're in no way different from those who are not resettlers. It's just that we resettled, while their home has always been here."  
(Voitenko, 2023: 36)

Like the adult character in Olha Voitenko's 2023 picturebook *Kozhna hru-dochka zemli* (*Every Clump of Soil*), Ukrainian authors writing for children

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responded to the perceived confusion of children regarding the changes in society and their own lives, engendered by the start of the war in the east in 2014 and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. War-related themes include children's experiences of leaving home for a safer region and other children's encounters with such newcomers in their hometowns. Formerly, encounters with inhabitants of other regions of Ukraine in children's books with contemporary settings took place mostly in the context of characters' visits to relatives or sightseeing trips. These were presented as exciting adventures opening new perspectives, followed by a return to the normalcy of the familiar home. The occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in the spring of 2014 and the subsequent start of the war in the east caused over a million people to leave their homes in Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (regions) and to resettle in other parts of Ukraine over the next few years (*Yak zminylasia...*, 2018). The full-scale invasion in February of 2022 uprooted millions more, including over five million people who left Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022) and over seven million estimated to have been at least temporarily displaced internally (IOM, 2022: 10).

Like Ukrainian literature for adults, children's literature has reflected on these events from an early stage, although the number of publications dealing with this topic grew substantially after 2022. This article will argue that this increase reflects the change from treating war as shaping the experiences of only a minority of the population to treating it as something that affects virtually everyone in the country, accompanied by thematic shifts within the stories of displacement. Stories of displaced children and adolescents recur in Ukrainian children's books across age groups and genres. These texts offer relatable stories to help those displaced make sense of their experiences and provide models for empathetic communication to their compatriots from the host regions. My analysis is based on the understanding that children's literature *constructs* what displacement looks like and means, no less than it *represents* the actual experiences shared by many Ukrainians.

This article examines the main themes in children's literature associated with the portrayal of displacement from the occupied and war-affected regions of Ukraine. Stories of wartime displacement are understood here broadly as the corpus of texts that depict characters leaving their homes because of occupation or the dangers of war, as well as texts whose characters have left their homes in the past. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of internal displacement, i.e., resettlement to another region of Ukraine. Stories of displacement abroad require separate attention and are only briefly mentioned for the purpose of contrast or to the extent that they portray fleeing through Ukraine's territory. The corpus of texts includes texts for preschool- and elementary school-aged children (including picturebooks), middle-grade books, and books for

younger adolescents.<sup>2</sup> Young adult (YA) literature, which depicts experiences of those on the verge of (legal) adulthood and is aimed at similar-age readers, requires a separate analysis.<sup>3</sup>

This article argues that narratives of displacement participate in a reimagining of the mental map of Ukraine offered by children's literature. Ukrainian children's literature since 2014 offers representations of personal connections to a broader list of regions, including regions of origin most affected by the war and host regions. Moreover, books depicting IDPs emphasize the interrelationship between regional and national identity, both of which become more salient for protagonists in the face of external threat, and problematize the understanding of home.

### “WAR IS JUST HALF A DAY AWAY”: THE SHIFTS OF THE MENTAL MAP

Stories about war, including displacement, contribute to a reconfiguration of the mental map of Ukraine, especially when young readers have a limited repertoire of previous sources adding to this construct. Mental or cognitive maps – a term borrowed by literary studies from social sciences, primarily from psychology and behavioral geography – refer to the “necessarily incomplete and schematized” constructs (Bjornson, 1981: 54), a heuristic idea of space and environment that is formed in every individual under the influence of both real-life experiences with the said space and cultural texts (Kitchin, 1994: 9). While every reader's mental maps will have idiosyncrasies, depending on extraliterary experiences and personal interpretation, literary geography provides tools to analyze the potential contribution of individual texts or corpora (by author, genre, or period). For example, certain geographic areas might be left “undocumented” or, on the contrary, populated densely (Reuschel & Hurni, 2011: 293), thereby becoming central to the cultural imaginary of a period. In the present corpus of displacement-themed children's literature, places and entire regions that previously had

<sup>2</sup> The target age group has been identified based on a combination of factors, including style, age of protagonists, and publishers' paratexts. The distinguishing of books “for younger adolescents” as a separate category, as far as the strategies for communication with the implied reader are concerned, follows the developing conceptualization in Ukrainian criticism of children's literature where an author may be referred to as, for example, “author of children's (*dytiachoi*), adolescent (*pidlitkovoi*), and YA (*yunatskoi*) literature,” implying these to be distinct categories.

<sup>3</sup> Some noteworthy YA titles about displacement include *Liniia Terminatora* (*Terminator Line*, 2022) by Tetiana Stuzhuk, *Yuna. Viina* (*Yuna. War*, 2022) by Svitlana Vertola, *Zero* (*Zero*, 2023) by Yuliia Iliukha, *Mii dim – viina* (*My Home is War*, 2023) by Nastia Melnychenko, and *Yara* (*Yara*, 2024) by Marusia Shcherbyna. Although they are published in more recent years, all except for the last title focus on the events before 2022.

no significant presence appear on the mental map, albeit in a negative context of violence, trauma, and loss experienced by the displaced characters.<sup>4</sup>

Most significantly, war itself appears in children's literature as a spatial entity distinguishable on the mental map of the country. "War is just half a day away," muses the protagonist of Halyna Kyrpa's 2015 picturebook *Mii tato stav zirkoiu* (*My Dad Became a Star*), as if the word "war" referred to a place rather than a complex web of events (Kyrpa, 2015: 32). A similar conception of war as spatially defined seems to underlie the depiction of an adventure in Andrii Bachynskyi's *Detektyvy z Arteku: Taïemnytsia Kamianykh Mohyl* (*Detectives from Artek: The Mystery of Stone Tombs*, 2017), in which crossing an invisible line between the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts seems to immediately free the protagonists from the danger of repercussions for their confrontation with separatist characters.

This understanding of war as a spatial entity on the mental map in texts that refer to the period before the full-scale invasion contributes to the way children's literature imagines encounters between peers, who have drastically different experiences, despite meeting in the shared spaces of residential neighborhoods or educational institutions. In describing these, the authors alert their implicit readers to the need to be empathetic to newcomers to their regions, tolerant of those behavioral differences attributable to the trauma response, and cautious about actions that might retrigger it. For example, in the picturebook *My Dad Became a Star*, the interaction between a displaced girl from the Luhansk region and two protagonists from other parts of Ukraine revolves around their attempts to "somehow entertain her so that she forgets her [hometown of] Shchastia at least for a little while and stops crying" (Kyrpa, 2015: 31). In Olena Maksymenko's *Psy, yaki pryruchaiut liudei* (*Dogs Who Domesticate People*, 2021), a displaced newcomer to the school class is perceived by his new classmates as weird because of his acute trauma of nearly losing his sister in a shelling, and the protagonist calls for empathy for him. However, most often this message is offered through negative depictions of the misunderstanding of displaced characters by the natives of peaceful regions, which

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<sup>4</sup> For more on mental maps, see Guelton, 2023; Gould & White, 1986. Despite the confusion arising from the homonymic usage of the same term to refer to concept mapping, I prefer the term "mental maps" for the sake of the present analysis over some other terms used to discuss literary representations of geospaces to emphasize two aspects important in this context. First, the interplay between extraliterary knowledge about places with those provided by the cultural texts to provide the reader with a working scheme for making sense of the space. Second, the fact that despite the usage of the word "maps," these constructs are often not like actual cartographic maps (Kitchin, 1994: 3–5) in that heightened salience of certain features of space and environment create non-Euclidean spaces, where elements that are geographically close appear to be worlds apart; sizes and distances are distorted because of emotional and evaluative connotations.

often takes the form of outright confrontation and bullying. This is explored in varying degrees of detail in Voitenko's *Every Clump of Soil*, Olha Kuprian's *Myroslava ta inshi z nashoho dvoru* (*Myroslava and Others from Our Block*, 2021) and Maksymenko's *Dogs Who Domesticate People*. Depictions of bullying are usually accompanied by bullies being confronted and corrected by other non-displaced characters and/or reforming and apologizing for their harmful treatment of IDPs, both of which send a message to the implied non-displaced readers about worthy models of behavior.

After the full-scale invasion, this treatment of war as a spatial entity gives way to the understanding that posits war as a temporal entity. For example, in Olha Kuzhdina's *Detektyvna ahentsiia "SAM" v Uzhhorodi* (*Detective Agency SAM in Uzhhorod*, 2023), the protagonist Sonia, even though she is physically in the safer space of the western Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod, experiences the time frame defined by the war as so abnormal that she finds it incompatible with birthdays and does not want to celebrate hers (Kuzhdina, 2023: 139). Similarly, in *Yabluchna sharlotka, spechena u horakh* (*Apple Cake Baked in the Mountains*, 2024) by Sasha Voitsekhivska, the eponymous dessert and the idea of a "tourist" visit to another region of Ukraine become a symbol of everything incompatible with the temporal setting of war. The implementation of the plan to hike in the mountains and bake this cake is only possible when the war is over, not when the characters are able to move to a relatively safer space.

In contrast to the texts that refer to the earlier period of the war, the mental maps in the children's books that refer to the events after 2022 no longer foresee a division between "war-affected" and "host" regions, nor a clear division between displaced persons and "hosts." For example, Kuzhdina's protagonists take on the "mystery" of free food for refugees and discover that the majority of care for displaced people is provided not by long-term Uzhhorod residents, but by people from other regions, many of whom are displaced themselves, as only one in the list of "suspects" they question appears to be a local (Kuzhdina, 2023: 37–45). A panoramic image of children in wartime, depicting a collective experience shared by residents of different regions, is also offered in the picturebook *Dity povitrianykh tryvoh* (*Children of Air Raid Alarms*, 2022) by Larysa Denysenko, which presents 20 scenes portraying 31 children during an air raid alarm in the early days of the full-scale invasion. They hide in shelters or help with volunteer efforts: in their hometowns, on their way to evacuation, or already evacuated to other regions of Ukraine or abroad. Some of the characters appear to have been already displaced from Donbas or Crimea earlier and now are chased by the dangers of war for the second time, yet this seems to be only one facet of the spectrum of collective war experiences, just as in Kuzhdina's list of volunteer "suspects," some are marked with two hometowns from which they were displaced in 2014 and 2022. Interestingly, neither list envisions that a person may have called several places home for reasons other

than displacement due to war and occupation, such as relocation for education, work, or family reasons. This implicitly creates the misconception that every person would prefer to stay where they were born if it were not for the dangers of war. "It seemed that there was no safe town left in Ukraine; no one knew where a rocket would 'fly' next," posits Hanna Osadko's *Dubochok z viiny* (*An Oak Sapling from the War*, 2023), where displaced families from places as different as Kyiv, Kharkiv, Siverodonetsk, Sumy, and Shepetivka are temporarily hosted by protagonists in Berezhany in western Ukraine (Osadko, 2023: 30). Even so, they provide shelter, not because Berezhany is significantly safer, but merely because it is located on the way to Shehyni, the border crossing to Poland, the direction that the protagonist's family briefly considered taking as well. Thus, children's literature constructs an image of a more homogeneous experience of war after the full-scale invasion, devoid of the intra-group conflicts and prejudice that were often a major theme in texts about the earlier period.

Together with the characters who may hear about places for the first time when they meet IDPs from there, the reader learns about these localities and puts them on a mental map. However, it is noteworthy that while YA titles tend to situate the stories of their soon-to-be-displaced protagonists in specific and recognizable urban spaces,<sup>5</sup> children's books are vaguer in identifying the occupied or war-affected localities when they depict events there.<sup>6</sup> In *Dogs Who Domesticate People*, *Apricots Blossom at Night*, and *Every Clump of Soil* alike, the setting of the war-affected town that people end up leaving can best be characterized as "a small town in Donbas," which allows the story to be generalized to the experience of those who encountered the war in any other small town near the front lines.<sup>7</sup>

When specific places are mentioned, it can be argued that this is done for their symbolic significance rather than out of considerations of realistic representation. This is the case with the town of Shchastia, which is both the abandoned home of the displaced girl in *My Dad Became a Star* and a place

<sup>5</sup> For example, the teens in *My Home is War* engage in artistic guerilla activities in the very specific urban setting of Donetsk before leaving the city after two years in occupation; the protagonist of *Terminator Line* is missing very specific elements of the Donetsk city space as he reconstructs his life and identity in Kyiv; and *Yuna. War* shows two teens' precocious love in Ilovaisk, a town in Donetsk oblast, before the war pulls them apart to different sides of ideological and state borders.

<sup>6</sup> This strategy, which recurs when the story is centered around IDP characters and their experience in their unnamed hometowns that they left, is opposed to a different one when IDPs are secondary characters encountered by the non-displaced characters: in that case, they would be briefly identified by their town of origin, which itself is seen as a major identifying feature, implying that they were displaced by war.

<sup>7</sup> This strategy suggests that which is distinguished by Silje Neraas in her analysis of a Norwegian picturebook *Vanishing Colors* about refugees' experiences, where intertextual and intervisual references allude simultaneously to civil wars in Syria and in Bosnia, which would be the reasons for different generations of Norwegians to encounter refugees who have experienced war and destruction (Neraas, 2021: 454).

frequented by the narrator's father, a military doctor, in *Every Clump of Soil*. The town of 12,000 people in the Luhansk region was recaptured by the Ukrainian military in 2014 but remained dangerously close to the front lines for the following years, yet it is hardly its size or strategic importance that brings this toponym to the pages of children's books. Instead, it is the literal meaning of the name, "happiness," that makes it worth mentioning, to emphasize the discrepancy between the town's name and the misfortune of war. "Have you ever been to Shchastia?" asks Kyrpa's character, answering himself: "We were lucky [*poshchastylo*] not to have been" (Kyrpa, 2015: 31). This emphasizes the fact that the small town, which was barely on the radar of most Ukrainians before it became a war zone, is now firmly associated with the unfortunate events of the war. "Shchastia is a place where happy people used to live, but because of the Green Men,<sup>8</sup> people there are no longer happy, they are sad. Just like in the place from which we were dispersed," explains the child narrator of *Every Clump of Soil*. Thus, the name of the town becomes an allegory for the goals of the Ukrainian military fighting in Donbas: "Dad believes that the planes will fly again, and we will return home, and people in Shchastia and everywhere will be happy again. This is what he says" (Voitenko, 2023: 77).

At the other end of the displacement dynamics, children's literature depicts situations in which characters learn about a particular city for the first time because they are temporarily relocated there. If the child reader happens to be familiar with the city in question, he or she may read the character's encounter from an ironic distance and find it amusing. For the unfamiliar reader, these places may be associated on the mental map with the character's experience of evacuation, which may be a distorted understanding. "Uzhhorod is a terrific city! Everything is free here!" exclaims the protagonist of *Detective Agency SAM in Uzhhorod*, perceiving the distribution of humanitarian aid to the incoming refugees to characterize regular practices in that city (Kuzhdina, 2023: 18). In Hryhorii Falkovych's poetry picturebook *Rudi i chumatskyi shliakh* (*Rudi and the Milky Way*, 2023), focalized through a dog character, the city of Kolomyia, where the family from Kyiv finds refuge, is similarly presented to the reader as if its characteristics defined by the current moment merge with its more stable features: "Kolomyia [...] smells of bread and cats, smells of strong coffee, dust, medicine, and war" (Falkovych, 2023: 6).

The development of mental maps of Ukraine, to which children's books about displacement contribute, is not intended to be purely informative. They also invite their implied readers to explore the notion of national belonging. Younger children, who are not yet expected to have the conceptual apparatus for complex ideas around self-identification, are invited to view belonging as an extension of their understanding of home. Therefore, the concept of home

<sup>8</sup> Voitenko here plays with the term that was often used in the media in 2014 to refer to the Russian military, primarily in the context of the occupation of Crimea.

is explored in these texts at various levels from the familial space to the space of daily routines in the hometown, to an environmentally distinct home region, and to a more abstract idea of the national homeland.

### HOME AS AN IMMEDIATE SPACE

The notion of state sovereignty and its violation by the occupying army may be too abstract for younger readers to fully grasp. Consequently, the viciousness of war is presented primarily through the imagery of domestic space rendered unsafe and the eerie transformation of the urban environment through the destruction of its inherent elements and the disruption of daily routines. The drastic change that makes the domestic space unhomely and the daily concerns of peaceful life irrelevant, even though no actual destruction has yet taken place, is illustrated in the double-page spreads for February 23 and 24 in Kateryna Yehorushkina's poetic picturebook *Moi vymusheni kanikuly* (*My Enforced School Break*, 2022): "That was yesterday. And today I sleep in the bathroom" (Yehorushkina, 2022: 7). This picturebook and many other texts show how families recreate surrogate domesticity in the basement shelters because regular above-ground dwellings are vulnerable to air raids.

The picturebook *Dim* (*Home*, 2024) by Kateryna Tykhozora presents Home as a personified entity that is not simply a static refuge, but (in the child protagonist's imagination) becomes an active agent that protects the family as they take shelter in the basement during a bombardment (Figure 1).

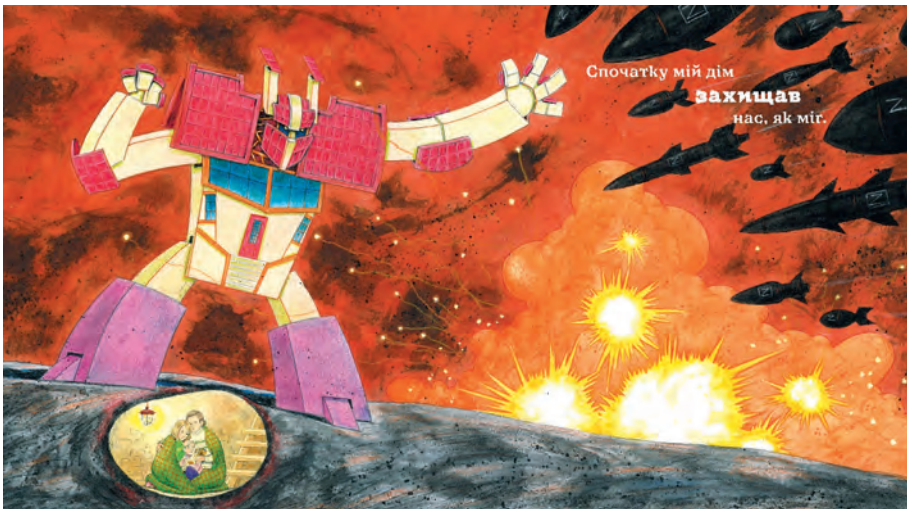


Figure 1. "At first, my Home protected us, as it could." Reproduced with permission from "Ranok" publishing house. It is noteworthy in the context of further discussion that the composition of this spread follows the traditional logic of picturebook visual language, situating the "home" space on the left and the dangers of the unknown on the right (Nodelman, 1988: 135).

However, these double-page spreads are surprisingly devoid of any details of the surroundings, which distinguishes this picturebook from other depictions of the abandoned hometown that usually portray the private home as seamlessly connected to the urban environment in which the child's daily routines took place.

In *Every Clump of Soil*, a section titled "Our Home Was There Once" lovingly describes the protagonist's extended living space, which includes the apple tree in the garden under which her rehabilitated hedgehog lived, the kindergarten at the end of the street and a school building "thirty-eight steps further," a pond with resident waterfowl, and the "grannies" of her neighborhood (Voitenko, 2023: 16–19). The specificity with which the narrator describes her hometown underscores the fact that this space was her entire world. Once the narrator lets the reader in, it is easy to share her uncanny feeling at the idea that "villages, towns, schools, and kindergartens [...] still stand, but not all of them," and that the family left the hometown once "the houses began to shake" (Voitenko, 2023: 16, 19, 24). The protagonist of *Abrykosa zatsvitaiut unochi* (*Apricots Blossom at Night*, 2022) by Olia Rusina witnesses a similarly eerie transformation of his hometown: "The walls had little holes in them, as if some giant crazy woodpecker had come and pecked everything." Moreover, the school was "not at all the school Ustym remembered [...] the second floor lacked a part of the wall and ceiling, and there were bricks in the high grass" (Rusina, 2022: 93–94). In both cases, the emphasis is not on documenting what happened in the city, but on conveying the eerie feeling to the child reader, achieved through unanticipated comparisons such as the "shaking" of houses to the shaking of blocks in the Jenga board game, and the shelling marks on buildings to the results of the work of a giant woodpecker. What seemed large and stable is discovered to be vulnerable to the arbitrariness of vile external forces.

Children's books also often emphasize how natural spaces that were typical settings for the protagonists' routines become dangerous for both humans and wildlife. For example, Voitenko's rewilded hedgehog is taken in by the family and then moves with them to safety because their former town is not considered safe for either humans or hedgehogs. Rusina's story begins with the protagonist's search for his dog, which he fears for because of its lack of understanding of the unnatural man-made changes: "Above all, Ustym was afraid that it would go somewhere where it was forbidden to go and encounter a landmine" (Rusina, 2022: 10). One of these places is the poppy field on the outskirts of town. Clearly connected to the tradition of depicting the poppy as a symbol of war and its losses, but not requiring its recognition by the child reader, this shot adds to that tradition by depicting a poppy field as a seemingly pristine, yet deadly, place (Rusina, 2022: 12). In *My Enforced School Break*, one of the emotional highlights of the story is the double-page spread where the protagonist, still hiding in a basement, imagines her and her friends' "beloved forest, where [they] used to go on picnics" and expresses the hope that the squills, "which must be in bloom right now," are safe (Yehorushkina, 2022: 24–25). The visuals of the spread suggest that

this also applies to the forest's resident squirrels and birds, who are depicted on the trunks and branches of the trees, and thus, in the protagonist's imagination, removed from the danger of landmines on the ground.

The portrayed disruptions of the domestic space, which becomes unsafe even if physically intact, are usually the prelude explaining the need for the protagonist's family to relocate to another region. Here, immediate impressions about differences, such as those related to typical elements of the landscape, are combined with the discourse on regional identities, especially in books at the older end of the range of children's literature.

### THE "LAND OF SPOIL TIPS" AND OTHER REGIONAL IDENTITIES

In Andrii Kokotiukha's *Potaiemni dveri* (*The Secret Doors*, 2023), the 12-year-old protagonist's resettlement in Kyiv after the start of the war in the east is referred to as "leaving his native city, his native land of spoil tips (*terykonovyi krai*)" (Kokotiukha, 2023: 7). Kokotiukha's adventure novella is a rare example of a story centered around a protagonist who (initially) adheres to the Russian-backed separatists' understanding of the conflict over the identity of Donbas and the collective memory of World War II. His regional identity becomes even more salient after his move to Kyiv, as the difference in self-identification from Kyivites based on regional origin is strengthened by perceived ideological discrepancies. Clearly, the author's point is that such an increased salience of regional identity is heated up by those who use versions of collective memory for ideological purposes and is thus an aberration from what someone's natural connection to their region of origin should look like. Throughout the novella, the protagonist's quest pushes him both to discover his ancestral connections to other regions of Ukraine and to reconsider the meaning of his identity as a native of the "land of spoil tips."

The story in Bachynskyi's duology *Detectives from Artek* (2014, 2017), which explores differences in regional identities within Ukraine and negotiates a common ground between teenagers from different parts of the country, begins well before the start of the war. However, the second book in the series culminates in the events of the summer of 2014 in the Donetsk region. Resettlement from the war-affected region does not happen here, but the rejection of this choice is itself noteworthy. Serhii, one of the adolescents central to the duology, and an adult secondary character both explain their reluctance to resettle (despite the potential problems with the separatists after helping other protagonists) by stating the idea that this place is their home, and they will not leave it so easily (Bachynskyi, 2017: 212, 234, 259). However, when Serhii declines the invitation to stay with his friends in central or western Ukraine, the author fails to reiterate that the character had already moved from his hometown of Rovenky in the Luhansk region to stay with relatives in Volnovakha in the Donetsk region shortly before, after his home was destroyed by a missile. An implicit

understanding is that this move, although a significant event for Serhii, did not violate the principle of staying within his “home” region. The implication here is that there is a level of understanding of “home” that encompasses the entirety of Donbas, in which it is opposed to other regions of Ukraine. Statistical data show that the government-controlled parts of Donetsk oblast were the primary destination for IDPs who chose to leave the separatist-controlled regions (UNHCR, 2015), suggesting that there is indeed a large group of people who subscribe to Bachynskyi’s notion that staying in the oblast is less of a “leaving home” moment than moving elsewhere in Ukraine.

The fully conceptualized self-identification with the native region in children’s literature is usually ascribed to adolescents, as in the two examples above, as opposed to a more experiential sense of belonging in a space where important life events took place, which the authors ascribe to younger children. Both Kokotiukha’s and Bachynskyi’s approaches to the identity of their teenage protagonists suggest that regional self-identification became salient under the influence of older family members. However, children’s literature about displacement also draws attention to the disruptions of such “inheritance.”

For example, in *Apricots Blossom at Night*, a family moves from a soon-to-be-occupied town in the Donetsk region to the city of Dnipro before the protagonist’s sister is born. Weighing the pros and cons of temporarily leaving their hometown for better access to healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth, they hope that the war will end soon enough for their newborn daughter not to remember that she was not born in their hometown. In the epilogue, set in 2021, the family still resides in Dnipro. The elder brother still longs to return to his hometown, while the sister shares the expectation that after such a visit they would come back to Dnipro (Rusina, 2022: 131–132). Clearly, she has grown up to develop a sense of attachment to the city where she has spent her entire life, despite her family’s intention to move to Dnipro only temporarily. This family dynamic underscores the fact that a hope to restore the status quo is only an illusion and that despite the characters’ emotional attachment, returning home is hardly possible even after the end of occupation.

The depiction of a very similar tension between older and younger family members’ understandings of home in *The Cool History of Ukraine from Dinosaurs to Nowadays* by Inna Kovalyshena (2021) sheds additional light on the nature of regional identity and underscores its difference from cultural identity. The book features four children from different Ukrainian cities. Two of them live in their hometowns, while two others were displaced in 2014 or shortly thereafter: Sashko moved from Makiivka in the Donetsk region to Zaporizhzhia, while Aliie moved from Crimea to Ivano-Frankivsk. Both were too young to have conscious memories of their native regions. Sashko resents that his mother still refers to Makiivka as “home,” claiming *his* home to be in Zaporizhzhia (Kovalyshena, 2021: 90). Aliie, in contrast, shares her parents’

sense of belonging to the Crimean Tatar culture and their longing to return to their ancestral homeland. This difference in two children's self-identifications underscores the fact that, unlike those in the culturally distinct migrant communities, the representatives of the first-and-a-half or second generation after internal displacement within the space shared by the same national culture are not supposed to inherit their parents' sense of a distinct identity.<sup>9</sup> After negotiating their ideas of home, Sashko and his mother come to a consensus that the importance of continuing to consider Makiivka their home lies in defying the occupiers' narratives about ownership of the region, rather than in distinguishing it as a unique place where they belong (Kovalyshena, 2021: 90–91). This is clearly different in the representation of the displaced Crimean Tatar family. Crimean Tatars, the representatives of the minority nation of indigenous people of Ukraine, are portrayed as having ties of very different levels to Crimea, their ancestral homeland, and to the rest of Ukraine, even as their full participation in the Ukrainian political nation is underscored. In this sense, the stories of Ukrainian children going abroad as refugees resemble those of Crimean Tatars displaced from Crimea more than those of other IDP Ukrainians. The linguistic and cultural difference from the population of the host country keeps cultural and national identity as Ukrainian a salient component of the protagonists' self-identification, while at the same time gradually levelling out perceived regional differences, as can be seen in texts like Iryna Holub's *Ilariia in Lithuania* (2024) and Halyna Tkachuk's *Blue Notebook* (2023).

Interestingly, there is a certain reluctance to discuss what exactly the displaced characters might experience as different and based on what characteristics the residents of host regions may see those characters as different. Differences in linguistic habits, religious practices, local versions of customs and collective memory narratives are explored only by some titles for adolescents. Texts for younger children and middle-graders might mention that IDPs were ostracized by the host population, but almost fully ignore which cultural differences might have triggered such othering, thus creating a more monolithic idea of Ukrainian identity for young readers.

#### “OUR HOME COUNTRY THAT LOOKS LIKE A DOG”: IMAGINING UKRAINE AS A SHARED HOME

Children's books about war and displacement often present these events as the characters' first encounter with the concepts of statehood and national

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<sup>9</sup> For comparison, scholars believe that children's and YA literature has developed certain conventional scripts to talk about the identity crises and the reconciliation of different elements of “bicultural identity” among offspring of diasporic or culturally distinct migrant communities. On the example of English-language YA titles that deal with second-generation experience of teens of Indian origin in the UK and US, see Superle, 2010.

symbols, and thus strive to be one of the first texts to explain them to their young readers. This is especially characteristic of books aimed at the youngest readers, who are not yet expected to have learned these concepts in school.

This is true of Sonia, the preschool protagonist of *Every Clump of Soil*, who has little understanding of human concepts of space beyond the familiar places in her hometown. To explain the changes in her family's life due to the "arrival" of the war, Sonia's mother must first explain the concepts of international borders and state sovereignty over territory, all in a way that is accessible to a four-year-old. Therefore, the metaphor of "protecting one's soil" is explained through literal clumps of soil, and the child is invited to decide whether the actions of an invading army are more akin to physically taking a toy from another child or pushing a sibling out of a comfortable chair (Voitenko, 2023: 11). Since such picturebooks are often consumed collaboratively, with an adult reading to a child, these creative explanations can initiate an iterative process in which the child and the adult together verify the child's understanding of concepts that are removed from the material reality but nevertheless crucial in affecting the child's life in ways that were not as obvious before the war.

Voitenko's Sonia learns about a broader space of national home through mapping her experiences on a schematic representation – that is, she participates in creating a mental map of the national space:

Grandpa shows us Ukraine and traces with a marker its outlines that look like a dog. "Here's our land/soil!" he says every time. "Here's our country. This is Ukraine, we live here. Right here!" Then Grandpa shows us *oblasts*. They are these slabs that the country is divided into. "Here is where we came from," and he shows two patches on the map filled with red color. "These are Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. And this is Crimea – it was completely taken by the Green Men." (Voitenko, 2023: 14)

The schematic outlines of Ukraine on the map become meaningful to her as she develops an understanding of how the territories united by its borders are similar. Thus, the outlines of Ukraine – what Benedict Anderson calls a "map-as-logo" – though arbitrary by nature, become one of the signs symbolizing the protagonist's developing sense of belonging to a national community (Anderson, 2016: 175). From the imaginative explanations offered by her adult relatives, Sonia develops a new, broader meaning of home:

Grandma says that we all live in one home. [...] Because our home is our land (this one, which looks like a dog). We are all one family [*ridni*] and we all have to protect every clump of our soil and each other (Voitenko, 2023: 62).

The picturebook *Home* by Kateryna Tykhozora similarly depicts a case of displacement due to war as a reason for a child to reconsider what the notion of home entails. After a family's home is ruined in shelling, they travel through

other regions and then abroad in the hope of eventually creating a new home. Six spreads are devoted to moments *en route* away from home and (except for the spread where the characters are moving toward the reader) each spread with an identifiable direction of movement suggests that it is from left to right. Other vehicles and characters in the background are shown moving from right to left, signifying emergency services, humanitarian aid, and military personnel moving toward the frontlines, which are thus identified as located “to the left.” This depiction of movement is consistent with the conventions of picturebook visual language, which Perry Nodelman has identified as universal, at least for the cultures that use left-to-right writing systems: that “figures of characters pointed toward the right are moving forward” and that movement away from home is to the right (Nodelman, 1988: 163–164). The spreads stop following this rule when the family “reach[es] the boundary of [their] native land,” that is, the state border, from which the boy, the mother, and the dog plan to proceed abroad, while the father plans to “return” (Figure 2).

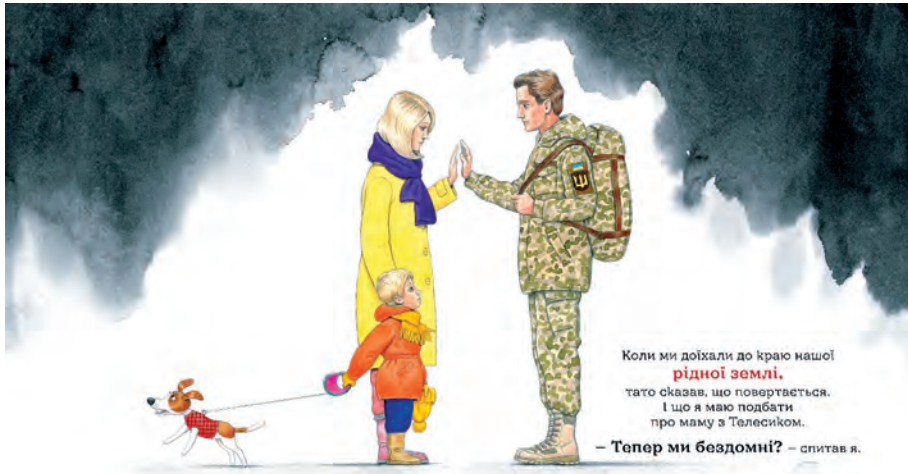


Figure 2. “When we reached the boundary of our native land [...] Are we homeless now?”  
 Reproduced with permission from “Ranok” publishing house.

It can be inferred from the fact that from this point on he is shown in military uniform that he is going to the frontlines, which is spatially equivalent to “home.” However, on the five spreads depicting their parting interaction, the family’s planned movement “forward” is to the left, while the father’s planned “return” is to the right. I argue that this scene being set at the state border motivates the alignment of the viewpoint with that of a map, which overrides the previously relevant rules of visual narration of movement. By depicting the movement “forward, to the evacuation” as a movement to the left and to the west, and the movement “back, to the frontlines” as a movement to the right

and to the east, the picturebook joins all the other visual representations in creating a mental map situating Ukraine in relation to the European countries that became the main destination for refugees. In the physical printed book, the gutter is used on this spread to separate the parents, emphasizing the distance-despite-proximity between them at the parting scene. The laws restricting the border crossing by draft-aged males, active in Ukraine since February 2022, forced many Ukrainian families to deal with the reality that only adult women relatives would accompany children to the safety of neighboring European countries. Interestingly, it is only at the border crossing that the question of becoming “homeless” is raised, just like in Holub’s *Ilariia*, rather than at the moment when the physical home was destroyed or left behind, thus offering the notion of the entirety of Ukraine as the national home.

While books for the youngest children that deal with war-related displacement often depict the child protagonist’s first encounter with abstract notions of national home and its attributes, such as the flag, state borders, and representation on a map, protagonists and readers who are school-age are expected to be familiar with these notions. However, books for this age group often depict a child protagonist’s first re-evaluation of these attributes as something to which they develop a genuine emotional connection, rather than a formality promoted by the school curriculum, which may have been their understanding before the war and displacement. This is one of the themes explored in Maksymenko’s *Dogs Who Domesticate People*, in which the protagonist Mirka discovers a change in attitude toward national symbols after returning to her formerly occupied hometown:

At school, from the first grade, they heard about state symbols. About the meaning of the colors [of the flag]. They learned the words to the national anthem. Before now, Mirka was never touched by it. A flag is just a flag. But now she was terribly annoyed by the thought of a foreign flag hanging from the town hall. It seemed very wrong (Maksymenko, 2021: 14).

Unlike the implied reader of the titles for younger children, who is expected to accept the explanations, including those about the new abstract notions of the national home, at face value, the adolescent readers are assumed to already have an ironic distance from the overly formalized discourse of national belonging offered by the school. Thus, books that straddle the middle-grade and YA categories, such as Maksymenko’s, offer examples of protagonists bridging the gap between lived experiences and values and the formal discourse of state symbols. This theme is further explored in YA titles that focus on even older characters who are imagined as having more autonomy in decisions about their lives and basing those decisions on values and ideas about national belonging. In stories about occupation and displacement, such decisions most often boil down to the choice of whether and where to relocate. Unlike texts for younger

readers, books for adolescents also explore the alleged hybrid self-identification of Donbas residents, which has been used extensively in the separatists' and aggressor's propaganda. Secondary characters in *Dogs Who Domesticate People* temporarily resettle with relatives in Russia or consider it among options for their future, before deciding to build their lives in Ukraine, albeit away from their hometown, because of the burgeoning importance of their Ukrainian national identity inspired by the events they have witnessed. This theme is more consistently explored in YA titles.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article considers the corpus of Ukrainian children's literature thematizing internal displacement away from the dangers of war and occupation. Texts for children contemplating these new experiences started appearing as early as 2015, though their number increased exponentially after 2022. The experience of war and displacement is construed quite differently when the period of the war in the east is considered as opposed to the period after full-scale invasion in 2022. Those stories that are set before 2022 tend to focus on the gaps and misunderstandings between peers, while texts about displacement after the full-scale invasion tend to construct a more homogeneous experience of war, suggesting that there is no place left for any prejudice or stereotypes in mutual treatment of residents of various regions of Ukraine, which obviously neglects aspects of real life's complexity. Moreover, these more recent texts offer a valuable addition to the international children's literature depicting refugees, as they discuss the topic of displacement, construing the implied reader as someone who might be sharing such experiences rather than someone who needs to learn about it as affecting a marked minority of others.

This treatment of war-related experiences as facets of the same experience, rather than characteristics that create impermeable boundaries, is understandable when one considers that one of the central functions of this corpus is to invite young readers to participate in the imagined community of the Ukrainian nation in a way that few other thematic clusters within children's literature do. Through texts about war and displacement, children learn about the external attributes of this imagined community: that it inhabits the space that extends to those schematic lines on the map called state borders; that it is associated with certain symbolic representations, such as the colors of the national flag; and that it is currently – at the moment of the authors' interaction with their implied readers – at war with an external aggressor. More importantly, children learn about the intrinsic meaning of this imagined community, its identity and values: the value of safe domesticity, a space where people could realize their right to happiness, and an environment that could be safely shared by human and non-human inhabitants alike, all of which become more

important as they are threatened by war. Aware that they are addressing a traumatized generation that has been exposed to too much at too young an age, children's authors offer these children strategies for coping and making sense of things, never leaving the reader without hope for the future. As Mavis Reimer points, home in children's literature is as much a feeling as it is a specific place (Reimer, 2021: 95). By emphasizing that the feeling of home can be recreated elsewhere and extended to the entire country, Ukrainian children's literature promises that displaced children are never fully homeless, even if they have lost their physical home.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Åsa Warnqvist considers the picturebooks about refugees in terms of the categories of home and homelessness (Warnqvist, 2018). Interestingly, in the corpus analyzed in this article, the displacement never leads to an experience similar to that of an unhoused person, so homelessness as well as belonging to home space is explored more on an existential level.

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## Flight Due to Climate Change in Jostein Gaarder's Novel *2084: Nora's World*

**Abstract:** This article deals with the topic of flight due to climate change using the example of the utopian youth novel *2084: Nora's World*. Unlike previous novels about flight, in this utopian book for young people, flight due to climate change is not conceptualized as leaving the old home and attempting to cross borders. Instead, the flight is told retrospectively. The focus is not on the experiences during the flight, but on the reasons for the flight: climate change. Climate change as the cause of the flight is told in two different time levels: In the narrated present and in the narrated future. But only in the narrated future the refugees flee due to climate change. Due to the logic of time, climate change as the cause of flight is presented as a changeable natural event. The article discusses how the novel is told about flight due to climate change and what significance the concept of time has for the young adult novel *2084: Nora's World*. So the article addresses an existing gap and, with reference to current theories of time, shows how flight due to climate change is narrated in the utopian young adult novel *2084: Nora's World*.

**Keywords:** flight, climate change, young adult literature, time concepts

### FLIGHT AS A MOTIF IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

In the (history of) children's and young adult literature, or rather since the twentieth century (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13), the motif of flight has exhibited a long-lasting and differentiating spectrum of forms on a narrative and symbolic level (Jagdschian, 2024). In children's and young adult novels flight is usually conceptualized as leaving the old homeland after the people concerned have been violently persecuted due to their political, social, or religious beliefs, or sexual orientations. During their flight, they try to cross borders and are in search of new homes. In addition to persecution, the causes of flight can also be wars (see Hopp, 2021: 26–34; Wanzek, 2021: 14–25; Bernhardt, 2022: 155–180; Vach, 2023: 131–154). Recently more and more novels have been published that tell of flight due to climate catastrophes (Mikota, Pecher, 2020:

8–18), such as *2084: Nora's World* by Jostein Gaarder (2013) or *Before and After: Survival is not enough* (2019) by Nicky Singer. Both young adult novels tell the story of flight because of climate catastrophes (Stemmann, 2022: 25–36). Gudrun Pausewang's *Die Wolke* can be seen as a precursor to these novels, which tell of an escape due to climate catastrophes (see Conrad, 2020: 213–226). This article will deal with this previously unexamined representation of flight due to climate change using the example of *2084: Nora's World*. The first step is to define what is meant by the term climate refugee. Building on this, the young adult novel *2084: Nora's World* will be categorized in a second step. It is striking that the depiction of flight due to climate change is mostly embedded in a utopian setting. The utopian narrative concept indicates that the depiction of flight is based on a special concept of time. The concept of time that characterizes the depiction of flight due to climate change will be worked out in a third step, in order to put into perspective how flight due to climate change is depicted. Intertextually, the title refers to the novel *1984* by George Orwell, who warns of the dangers of totalitarianism in his novel. Although *2084: Nora's World* also warns of the consequences of climate change, it emphasizes more the responsibility of the individual to deal with the consequences of climate change. Here, too, there is implicit criticism of states that do little or nothing to protect the climate.

## CLIMATE REFUGEE

Typologically, novels about flight due to climate catastrophes can be categorized as the newly emerging genre of climate fiction (Trexler, 2015) or climate change fiction (Mehnert, 2016). Both are genres that focus on the effects and social and psychological consequences of global warming. The double designation of the genre – climate fiction or climate change fiction – already indicates that there is disagreement as to whether the novels are about flight due to the climate or due to climate change. Even the terms climate and climate change are problematic. Horn and Heidenreich emphasize that there is no such thing as climate or climate change. Climate and climate change are fictitious constructions (Heidenreich, 2022: 96; Horn, 2024: 301). Accordingly, the associated concept of the climate refugee, which is often used to thematically describe the novels, cannot be used without reservation. Biermann and Boas define the climate refugee as

people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: rise in sea level, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity [...]. This definition covers climate refugees in both industrialized and developing countries. However, in practical terms only climate refugees in poorer developing countries will be an issue

of international concern, cooperation, and assistance. It is people in developing countries who are most likely to be compelled to leave their homes and communities, owing to low adaptive capacities, their often vulnerable location vis-à-vis climate change events, often high population densities, existing hunger and health problems, low level of GDP per capita, often weak structures of governance, political instability, and other factors. (Biermann, Boas, 2012: 292)

In Biermann and Boas' definition, various climatic changes are listed as reasons for leaving the old homeland: sea level rise, extreme weather events, drought or water scarcity. Carsten Felgentreff objects to these simple cause-and-effect models, arguing that only push factors are taken into consideration (Felgentreff, 2015: 143). Her studies – *Aesthetic proper times. Time and representation in polychronic modernity. The time of the climate. On the temporalization of nature in literary modernism* – show that novels about climate change actually reveal transformation processes of nature. Literature about climate change not only explains the consequences of human intervention on nature, but also reflects on these in the narrative world. In these novels the climate is linked to specific periods of time, the characters become projection figures for dealing with nature, and the narrative becomes a technique for shaping nature (Hamel, Horn, Nitzke, 2019: 301–324).

#### CLIMATE REFUGEES IN UTOPIAN LITERATURE

Specific time periods or concepts of time can also be identified in young adult literature about flight due to climate disasters. Gabriele von Glasenapp categorizes specific children's and young adult novels about climate change as utopian literature rather than climate (change) fiction. Utopia is a term coined by Thomas More in 1516. Based on his study of early modern novels, he has developed a formal and content-related model. According to him, utopias are characterized by the fact that they present an ideal design of a future community (Innerhofer, 2007a: 795). Closely linked to the utopia is the anti-utopia, better known as dystopia. Stauffer and Dziudzia interpret dystopia not only as a counter-image, but also as a failed utopia (Stauffer, Dziudzia, 2022: 13). Dystopia is usually understood as an anti-utopia, which does not conceptualize ideals, but rather shows the social consequences (Innerhofer, 2007b: 795). Dystopias reverse the characteristics of utopias. In utopian novels for children and young adults an apocalyptic scenario is often developed as a potentized version of the environmental equilibrium (von Glasenapp, 2013: 78). The diegetic future of a changed nature is always traced back to the conditions in the narrated present by continuing the foreseeable consequences of climate change in the narrated present. Utopian narratives about climate change fall back on patterns of behavior that Martin Seel has recorded as three rules for utopians, among others: "Let all utopias make distant possibilities foreseeable in order to make

tangible possibilities visible here and now” (Seel, 2001: 753). Utopias conceptualize what a future could look like if climatic conditions and causes such as CO<sub>2</sub> exchange do not decrease. This is the reason why Wilhelm Voßkamp assigns utopian novels a future-orientated, fictional rehearsal (Voßkamp, 2013: 23). The characters become examples that reflect and show what it looks like in the fictional world in which species and animals that are currently dying out no longer exist. Above all, utopias construct specific temporal logics. They do not have a linear time sequence that reconstructs the past either from the future version in the present or from the present. According to Voßkamp, the future designs fundamentally (implicitly or explicitly) refer critically to the past present (Voßkamp, 2016: 11). Utopias exhibit self-reflexive temporal logics. With reference to the previous thesis, that the representation of the climate is bound to specific time periods, that the characters become projection figures of the possibilities of dealing with nature and that narration becomes a technique of shaping nature (Hamel, Horn, Nitzke, 2019: 301–324), the question arises as to what extent the self-reflexive temporal logics of utopian novels characterize narrative techniques about climate and escape. The following section examines the self-reflexive temporal logics of dystopian young adult novels and the extent to which these characterize the poetological representation of climate flight. This will be illustrated using the example of the young adult novel 2084: *Nora's World*.

### 2084: NORA'S WORLD

Jostein Gaarder's young adult novel 2084: *Nora's World* was first published in Norway and was translated into German in 2013. It was nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize in 2014. The theme of the novel is the future consequences of climate change, which 16-year-old Nora reflects on with her friend Jonas and her therapist Benjamin. It is clear from the peritext that the young adult novel does not solely address the topic of climate change. The novel has a special time structure:

In her dreams, 16-year-old Nora experiences what things will look like on Earth in 2084 if we carry on as before: the sea level has risen, climate refugees are moving around, camels are grazing in the north and countless species have become extinct. [...] But can the insights from Nora's dreams prevent the nightmare of an ecological catastrophe? (Gaarder, 2013: n.p.; own translation)

Based on the temporal information, it can be concluded that the novel has two time levels: The year 2084 as the narrated future, and a temporally unspecified narrated present in which the protagonist Nora dreams of the future consequences of climate change. The dream alluded to in the peritext establishes the connection between the narrated present and the narrated future.

Taking up Rüdiger Steinlein's typology of children's literary dream narrative aesthetics, the dream in Gaarder's young adult novel cannot to be interpreted as a literary motif (Roeder, 2020; Schäfer, 2023), but rather as a narrative model (Steinlein, 2008: 72). Based on the peritext, the dream can be seen as a narrative model which has two diegetically staged time levels and connects them with each other.

The change of time levels from the narrated present to the narrated future is not only introduced by passages such as "Nora was curious to see what she would dream" (Gaarders, 2013: 29; own translation), but also through the change in typography. Hartmut Hombrecher interprets the change in typography as an indication of a change in the narrative situation, time, or space (Hombrecher, 2024: 15). In the novel, the change in typography can be interpreted as an indication of a change in the time level: from the narrated present to the narrated future. The dream tells of catastrophes that begin in the narrated present and lead to a scenario in the (narrated) future in which the consequences of climate change feared in the narrated present have come to pass: the extinction of plant and animal species (Gaarder, 2013: 31) or flight due to climatic conditions. In the dream, temporal contingency is thus staged in the form of the "not-yet-being" (Voßkamp, 2013: 13). Wilhelm Voßkamp identifies the depiction of the potentially possible as a characteristic of utopian literature (Voßkamp, 2013: 13). Therefore, Gaarder's young adult novel *2084: Nora's World* can be categorized as utopian literature. The novel focuses on a young protagonist whose dreams make her concerns about the future narratable. Maren Conrad identifies concern about the future as a catastrophe as a characteristic of the warning utopia in children's and young adult literature in the 21st century (Conrad, 2020: 217). This warning also characterizes the present novel, as Nora's great-granddaughter recognizes the future in the narrative: "There was no lack of warnings back then" (Gaarder, 2013: 37; own translation).

However, the novel cannot be reduced to the fact that enough warnings have been issued during the narrated present. In both time levels, subjective experiences in dealing with nature are reflected, which show the individual concern about global warming not as situational, but as having serious consequences for the collective. The two time levels become a means of organizing and presenting perceptual perspectives on the climate and climate change. For example in the future an acoustic noise is always heard when an animal species such as the iguana has finally become extinct (Gaarder, 2013: 31). The experience of the extinction of animal species is also made in the narrated present and recognized as the first signs of climate change (Gaarder, 2013: 10). Nova – the character in the narrated future – and Nora – the character in the narrated present – are both protagonists who are concerned with climate change, but also recognize that their political immaturity is the

cause of their fear. Therefore, the contents of the dreams about the (narrated) future are not told in a linear fashion, but are explicitly taken up in the narrated present and shown as an incentive for action, as this quote demonstrates: "She had to return to her dream and fix something there" (Gaarder, 2013: 40; own translation).

Thus the narrated present and future exhibit a circular time structure (Marsden, 2004: 96), as Nora takes what Nova experiences in the future as the starting point for her commitment to climate protection. Nora is no longer just in the tradition of those characters who become climate activists in the ecological children's and young adult literature of the 21st century, as Anna Stemmann emphasizes with numerous examples (Stemmann, 2022: 25). In the utopian novel, climate change is also not staged solely as an "ecological crisis," as is constitutive of the genre for ecological children's and young adult media (Lindenpütz, 2000: 728). Instead, the present and future ecosystems are placed in correlation with each other as the character Nora attempts to mitigate the consequences of climate change in the narrated present with her project to save animal and plant species (Gaarder, 2013: 143). In the narrated future, Nova also mitigates the consequences of climate change by helping climate refugees to recover (Gaarder, 2013: 78). In other words, Nora transfers the experiences she gathers in her dream with her great-granddaughter Nova into the narrated present in order to change the distant future. Due to the circular narrative form, the possibility thinking inscribed in utopian literature (Voßkamp, 2013: 13) is no longer merely a projection into the future, but the narrated future is changed in the narrated present. Thus the narrated future implicitly influences the actions and reflections in the narrated present, as Nora reflects the experiences in her dreams in the narrated present. The temporal sequence is reversed in this utopian novel. The past present is shaped on the basis of the narrated future. Therefore, the narrated future becomes a reservoir of ideas about nature and climate change in the narrated present. The connecting element remains the dream. Nature remains an object of discourse in order to show the consequences of climate change (in the narrated future) or to act (in the narrated present). However, nature is neither a space for exploration nor for action, as we know it from contemporary ecological media for children and young people. With the change of time levels, the dystopian scenario inscribed in utopian literature is recognized as an expectation of the future that is already potentially valid now.

Climate refugees occupy a prominent position in this context. This is because the climate refugees are the link between the narrated present and the narrated future. While Nora sees climate refugees as a potential consequence of climate change at the beginning of the novel, which then occurs in the narrated future, she has to recognize this at the end of the novel:

Many symptoms of global warming have become apparent much earlier than the pessimistic calculations of climate researchers would have led us to expect. Millions of people are already suffering the consequences of a development that we only warned about a few years ago. We are seeing more and more examples of destructive climate disasters such as floods, heatwaves and forest fires, and people are having to flee their homes... (Gaarder, 2013: 210; own translation)

The climate refugee becomes an imaginary figure who not only appears in the future, but also makes us aware of the consequences of climate change in the present. Thus the fictions of the future that were initially created in the dream are fed into the narrated present, so that the initially potentially possible consequences of climate change do not become an unspecific modelling mass, but are shown as an actual effect in the narrated world. What is possible in the future is not depicted as a fraying vacuum that manifests itself in a multitude of possible futures. The climate refugee becomes an actual effect of global warming.

This distinguishes the utopian novel about climate refugees from contemporary escape novels, which explicitly tell of leaving the old homeland, of attempts to cross territorial borders without valid visas and in search of new homelands. This genre-typological pattern, which can be found in historical and contemporary novels (Jagdschian, 2024), is not present in the utopian novel. Utopian novels about flight and climate also differ from current migration novels, which report on arriving in society and present the experiences of flight as retrospective memories in order to explain, for example, the traumatic behavior of refugee children (Rösch, 2017; Rösch, 2018: 2–23; Rösch, 2019: 338–358). Utopian novels about flight due to climate change are, as in the present novel, versions of the future, not fiction, as the narrated future is not presented as an alternative, potential world, but as a world that already exists. Since the focus is no longer on space, but on the time levels, it can be concluded that the narrative concepts have changed. How and what characterizes utopian novels about fleeing climate change and to what extent the genre-typological understanding of escape literature for children and young people (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13) should be expanded will be discussed in the following conclusion.

## CONCLUSION: TIME SKETCHES IN CLIMATE FLIGHT NOVELS

In the introduction, the genre of escape literature for children and young people was understood to mean leaving one's old home, crossing borders, and searching for new home(s) (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13). This structural spatial model cannot be found in this young adult novel about flight due to climate change. The novel *2084: Nora's World* does not tell of escape routes. The refugees either appear as secondary characters or there are reports about

refugees due to climate change in Africa. The refugee character does not appear in the novel with her feelings, thoughts, and worries, as is otherwise familiar from escape novels (Jagdschian, 2024) or migration novels (Rösch, 2018). The causes, such as floods or heatwaves, are not experienced, but only mentioned as reasons.

As Felgenhoff critically notes with reference to the concept of the climate refugee, the novel thus avoids presenting a simple cause-and-effect model. The refugee is portrayed as an effect or consequence of climate change. However, to reduce the function of the depiction of the climate refugee to this one-sided role would not take sufficient account of the special concept of time on which the novel is based. This was emphasized in the study. The refugee due to climate change becomes an object of discourse at the level of the *histoire*, in which ideas about the potential effects of climate change are spelled out: the loss of home. On the level of discourse, the figure of the refugee due to climate change is used as an example to connect two time levels: The narrated present and the narrated future. Due to the circular time structure (Mardsden, 2004: 96), the narrated present becomes a place of negotiation (Koschorke, 2017: 114) as to what extent the conditions that favor climate change can still be stopped or not. The diegetic time levels in the young adult novel not only are a constitutive element of the narrated world (Martinez, Scheffel, 2012: 215), but also serve as a critical reflection on the flight due to climate change. In the narrated world, the future does not become a variable bargaining chip in the present that can be considered at will. The diegetically staged future is static and any efforts to reduce the causes of climate change (such as the greenhouse effect) are portrayed as hopeless. Due to the circular time structure, the protagonist and her friend Jonas realize that simply thinking and talking about measures to combat climate change is not enough. Only if everyone were to stand up for climate change would it be possible to turn away from it. This utopian possibility is not presented in the novel. The novel ends – as is typical of the anti-utopia – with an apocalyptic outlook that the extinction of species can no longer be stopped. Using the example of the climate refugee, the novel *2084: Nora's World* presents a subjective view of the individual confrontation with climate change without radicalizing it. Instead, time as an element of the narrated world is used as a means of organizing and staging subjective perception and reflection on climate change. This was already recognized by Gamper and Hühn, who understood the concept of time as “a fundamental phenomenon of human understanding of the world and self-understanding” (2020: 9). With reference to this, Bernhardt and Tönsing (2021: 9) concluded that human perception can be structured along the category of time, as the present study has also shown. In the novel, the refugee serves as a projection figure as one of many possible effects of climate change and not as an identification figure to illustrate what it means to flee due to climate change.

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# Studies

Returning: Migration as a Reciprocal  
and Temporal Process



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# “Will this be Home, or Will we Return one Day?” Return Migration Themes in Children’s Picturebooks, Embracing Diversity and Acceptance<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article examines the different categories of return migration in picturebooks targeted at young readers. Return migration, the process of individuals or families returning to their country of origin after residing abroad, is a multifaceted phenomenon with significant cultural, social, and psychological implications. This study conducts a basic thematic analysis of picturebooks that portray return migration scenarios. It examines how return migration is represented, the various categories it encompasses, and its potential effects on young readers. By examining the narratives presented in these picturebooks, this article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of migration experiences within children’s literature and their broader societal implications, entailing the knowledge of fighting against poverty through migration and accepting diversity.

**Keywords:** return migration, picturebooks, young readers, children’s literature, representation, cultural diversity, SDGs

## INTRODUCTION

When we hear about migration, we automatically make a mental association with people fleeing their countries of origin, “poor” countries, due to war, political or religious intolerance, or systemic poverty. However, there are some facts that we do not usually contemplate due to “the growing diversity of migration categories (ranging from economic migrants to refugees and asylum-seekers)” (Cassarino, 2004: 1) and migrant students. People migrate from all countries, in all contexts, and for very different reasons. Striking media examples are those of elite athletes or the so-called “brain drain,” specialists in

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all fields who go to a country where they find better working conditions than those they can obtain in their own countries. Also, as García-González explains, “other specific form of [migration] is known [as] “quiet migration” (Weil), that is, internationally adopted children” (2017: 7) is not taken into account in the collective imaginary as migration. The second aspect that we do not bear in mind is return migration. The cases of people who migrated from their countries one way or another and for different reasons have gone back “home,” sometimes to stay and improve the lives of their people, that is, change their status from migrant to an active asset to their native community.

Migrant literature for young readers can be varied, both thematically and structurally. Nevertheless, it seems that the portrayal of the migration experience and the complications of the adaptation process play a prime role in this literature (Pourjafari, Vahidpour, 2014). This is the case of *Stepping Stones. A Refugee Family's Journey* (2016) by Margriet Ruurs, wonderfully illustrated with pictures made of stones by Nizar Ali Badr. This work tells the story of Rama's family, who are forced to leave everything behind because “the war came to our country.” Rama's family sets off to seek refuge in Europe, taking only what they can carry on their backs. By the end of the story, Rama says, “Will this be home, or will we return one day?” This question prompted a reflection on the presence or absence of picturebooks that depict migrants returning to their place of origin. If such books existed, then what diverse circumstances might lead migrants to return? This line of inquiry formed the foundation of the research question guiding the present study. The justification for the choice of picturebooks as the corpus of research is that they often act as a bridge between adult and child perspectives, enabling researchers to analyze how complex phenomena such as migration are translated into narratives that are accessible to young readers while still retaining depth. The ability of picturebooks to distill abstract concepts into relatable and tangible experiences makes them an ideal medium for examining return migration. Although the primary focus of this study was not on the visual design of the publications, the selection of picturebooks was motivated by their capacity to encapsulate return migration narratives in an engaging, relatable, and emotionally resonant format. Further research could delve more deeply into the role of illustrations and their relationship to the text in conveying migration experiences. Nonetheless, even in this study, the picturebook format was deemed essential because of its unique ability to present these themes in a holistic, multimodal manner that transcends the limitations of text-only narratives.

Return migration “concerns the detailed description of the journey from homeland to the new land and the notion of return, which portrays the migrant character's feeling aroused by a visit to the former home” (Pourjafari, Vahidpour, 2014: 689). Children's experiences in the context of return migration have garnered increasing attention from researchers (Baldassar, Merla,

2013; Nesteruk, 2019; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, 2009). This phenomenon encompasses various experiences, from voluntary returns driven by personal or economic factors to forced returns due to legal or political circumstances. Understanding return migration is crucial for policymakers because it affects labor markets, social cohesion, and development efforts in origin and destination countries (Cassarino, 2004). Moreover, return migration has significant implications for individuals and families, influencing their sense of identity, belonging, and socioeconomic status (De Haas, 2007). In today's globalized world, where migration is increasingly common, examining the patterns and impacts of return migration is essential for addressing its challenges and opportunities (Arizpe, Colomer, Martínez-Roldán, 2014; Vullnetari, King, 2008).

There is broad scientific evidence that literature for young readers can be a valuable tool to develop more excellent initiative, understanding, and active participation in everyday environments, including those related to conflicts of all kinds in which the acquisition of citizenship competence plays a relevant role (Alcantud-Díaz, 2024). Since the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (United Nations, 2015), children's literature has increasingly addressed themes like peace, conflict, equality, poverty, and hunger, often linked to migration. These books help young readers connect local experiences to global issues, fostering critical thinking while offering an enjoyable reading experience (Alcantud-Díaz, 2024). Therefore, children's literature serves as a foundational platform for shaping young minds and fostering their understanding of societal dynamics, including the complexities of migration. Examining how migration is portrayed in picturebooks gives scholars and teachers insights into how cultural narratives, stereotypes, and identities are constructed and conveyed to young readers (Botelho, Rudman, 2009). Through critical engagement with migration narratives in children's literature, scholars contribute to broader discussions on the role of literature in promoting empathy, intercultural dialogue, and global citizenship (including knowledge about SDGs) among future generations.

Therefore, this article has three primary objectives. First, it aims to identify picturebooks written in or translated into English that focus on the theme of return migration. Second, if such picturebooks are identified, the study seeks to conduct a basic thematic analysis to examine whether they depict diverse return migration scenarios, thereby establishing distinct categories of representation for return migration in picturebooks. Third, the article endeavors to analyze the narratives in these picturebooks to contribute to a deeper understanding of migration experiences as represented in children's literature. This analysis also aims to explore the broader societal implications of these works, including raising awareness about combating poverty through migration and fostering acceptance of diversity.

## METHODOLOGY

The research method used in the present chapter followed various stages. First, a substantial investigation was carried out to look for different picturebooks related to return migration to accomplish the first objective. The selection criteria were that the works were picturebooks (not novels), written or translated into English and/or Spanish. The timeframe was bound to the twenty-first century. The country was not taken into account to be able to find as many titles as possible. To do so, the primary source was the IBBY Honour List (from 2002), complemented by searches in Google and Google Scholar using different entries in Spanish and English. The keyword entries were: conflict, deportation, escape, exile, environment, freedom, immigration, migration, refugee, return, and war. These words were used either isolatedly or combined (e.g., return migration). Words such as environment or war were used since there are many real-life examples of migration related to these topics.

Second, elementary thematic analysis was used after finding some examples because it involved identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes within qualitative data. Researchers use this approach to uncover common threads or concepts across a dataset. Thematic analysis is widely used in social sciences and qualitative research to explore complex phenomena (Braun, Clarke, 2006) across various disciplines.

In the present case, since preliminary research was conducted to create the thematic axis, a vast amount of research was implemented on different categories of return migration. After finding Cerase's (1974) four different types of return migrants, which was the basis for my categorization, and considering the different representations of return migration in the picturebooks found, I created an extended list of return migration categories composed of six types:

1. Return of failure: migrants who could not integrate into their host countries or have been forced to return for many reasons.
2. Return of retirement: those who go back home to spend their retirement or that of some relative.
3. Return of improvement: those who think that the skills and the money acquired abroad have turned them into assets for change in their families or communities.
4. Return to visit and meet origins: those who temporarily return to their origin communities but have already settled in the host countries.
5. Return after a war or conflict: those returnees who had been forced to leave due to war or conflict (and had not previously intended to leave).
6. Return through memories: those migrants who cannot go back to their original countries but somehow go back through their memories.

This categorization accomplished the second objective of the present chapter, that if such picturebooks are identified, the study seeks to conduct a basic

thematic analysis to examine whether they depict diverse return migration scenarios, thereby establishing distinct categories of representation for return migration in picturebooks.

In the third stage, the found books were classified according to one of the categories described to state the thematic axis. Then, I focused on the story's description and relationship to the different representations of return migration. The study focused mainly on the text and only superficially on the visual literacy (Arizpe et al. 2014) that the found works provided due to space constraints.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the extensive search provided some works on return migration, the majority were novels, with only a limited number of picturebooks identified on this topic. Within the 24-year period encompassed by the search, eleven works were located. This fulfills the first objective of the current chapter: to identify picturebooks, either originally written in or translated into English and/or Spanish, that address the theme of return migration. The second phase, corresponding to the second objective of this research, involved conducting a preliminary thematic analysis to determine whether these works portray diverse scenarios of return migration, thereby enabling the establishment of distinct categories for representing return migration in picturebooks. Table 1 presents the categorization of the identified works according to the six previously defined categories.

Table 1. Categorization of the identified works according to the six previously defined categories.

| Title                                              | Author                     | Year and publishing company       |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Return of failure</b>                           |                            |                                   |
| Still Dreaming: Seguimos Soñando                   | Claudia Guadalupe Martínez | 2022, Lee and Low Books           |
| I Wish You Knew                                    | Jackie Azúa Kramer         | 2021, Roaring Brook Press         |
| <b>Return of retirement</b>                        |                            |                                   |
| Grandfather's Journey                              | Allen Say                  | 2008, HMH Books for Young Readers |
| This Is Not My Home                                | Vivienne Chang             | 2023, Brown Young Readers         |
| <b>Return of improvement</b>                       |                            |                                   |
| Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa | Jeanette Winter            | 2018, Clarion Books               |
| <b>Return to visit and meet origins</b>            |                            |                                   |
| 14 Cows for America                                | Carmen Agra Deedy          | 2009, Peachtree                   |
| My Two Border Towns                                | David Bowles               | 2021, Kokila                      |

| Title                                                        | Author                | Year and publishing company   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Lleva un libro en la maleta<br>(Take a book in the suitcase) | Virginia Read Escobar | 2011, Editorial Santillana    |
| Return after a war or conflict                               |                       |                               |
| The Last Garden                                              | Rachel Ip             | 2020, Hodder Children's Books |
| Paloma Voló                                                  | María Jesús Guardado  | 2021, Editorial Planeta Chile |
| Return through memories                                      |                       |                               |
| Homeland                                                     | Hannah Moushabeck.    | 2023, Chronicle Books         |

After this categorization, I analyzed the narratives in these works to contribute to a deeper understanding of the return migration experiences that they represent.

RETURN OF FAILURE:

This category includes returnees who could not integrate into their host countries or who have been forced to return due to stereotypes, non-adaptation to the new culture, or homesickness. Two examples match this category: *Still Dreaming: Seguimos Soñando* (2022) by Claudia Guadalupe Martínez, and *I Wish You Knew* (2021) by Jackie Azúa Kramer.

Migrants in this category return to their or their ancestors' communities, such as Mexicans forced back to Mexico from the U.S. Many children exemplify "the transnationalization of childhood," growing up with ties to two nations, languages, and cultures (Sánchez, 2007: 260). This is what narrates the bilingual English-Spanish picturebook *Still Dreaming: Seguimos Soñando*. It is a story of the forced repatriation between 1930 and 1940 of more than 2 million Mexican Americans who were living in the United States.

In *Still Dreaming: Seguimos Soñando*, a Mexican-American family is forced to flee their home in the United States of America due to a dangerous political situation that threatens to break their family apart. The story is narrated from the perspective of a child whose father lacked papers. Fearing that he might be deported to Mexico, the family made the difficult decision to leave Texas voluntarily, even though the mother and son had lived their entire lives in the United States. They drive past empty and abandoned houses since other families in the same situation have already left. They get to the Mexican border and are forced to cross it toward Mexico. This bilingual book's cover features the bittersweet family's leaving (sad faces looking forward, but butterflies around them which represent hope), drawn in diverse tones and shades that beautifully capture the emotions coursing through the child's mind (looking sadly backward to his home) during their challenging journey.

In *I Wish You Knew*, Estrella and her family live in the U.S. Suddenly, her father must leave because he was not born there, like her, but in Ecuador and had to be deported. Estrella misses him and wishes everybody knew how she felt and how the situation affected her in every aspect of her life. This is represented on the colorful cover, representing Estrella's wish to be with an adult. She feels alone. The school environment wraps up her and her friends, making them not feel alone. This story is about how deportation causes pain and divides families and the importance of community amid uncertainty. This story represents the social media movement #IWishMyTeacherKnew,<sup>2</sup> a movement started by a teacher at Denver Public Schools who wanted to find a way to understand her students better. Those students were primarily Hispanic and shared with her their everyday struggles to adapt to their new environments.

#### RETURN OF RETIREMENT:

Included in this category are migrants who go back home either to retire or to assist a retired relative. Two examples have been found: *Grandfather's Journey* (2008) by Allen Say and *This Is Not My Home* by Vivienne Chang.

*Grandfather's Journey* is a children's picture book about a young Japanese man who traveled to the U.S. during the Meiji era. He loves California but returns to Japan to marry. Afterward, he and his bride settle in California and have a daughter. Nostalgic for his childhood, he moves his family back to Japan. While happy to reunite with his hometown and friends, they relocate to a bigger city for his now-grown daughter, who had only known city life. She marries and has a son (the narrator). The grandfather later longs for California again but cannot return due to World War II. Ultimately, his grandson retraces his journey and understands his love for both homes. The cover shows sepia tones reminiscent of a family album in which we cannot decide whether the man in the picture is the grandfather or the grandson. This kind of work helps to reinforce inaccurate stereotypes affecting minorities that had to migrate for different reasons, and it reflects an authentic portrayal of Asian American migrants (Aoki, 1981; Pang, 2012; Rodríguez, Kim, 2018).

*This Is Not My Home* is a humorous return migration story about finding a home in unexpected places. The authors explore children returning to their parents' countries of origin and discovering it can feel like home. In the story, Lily's family moves to Taiwan to care for her elderly Ah Ma. Initially, Lily is upset about leaving her life behind, as shown on the cover: "This is not my backyard barbecue. This is not our car; these are not my fireflies... This is not my home." With her family's support, she learns the true meaning of home and begins to embrace it. Berglind (2022) notes that Lily's shift in perspective may

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<sup>2</sup> <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/16/denver-teachers-reality-check-heart-wrenching-moving/25915533/>

help “kids processing their culture shock due to a move.” As Ley and Kobayashi (2005) explain, return migration is often considered by migrants but only carried out later, typically during retirement, when they can live securely in their homeland.

#### RETURN OF IMPROVEMENT:

This category includes those returnees who think that the skills and the money acquired abroad have turned them into assets for change in their families or communities. As Cerase explains, it refers to people who “are prepared to make use of all the means and new skills that they have acquired during their migratory experiences” (1974: 251) to reach their objectives in their origin countries. Nevertheless, these return migrants can either be innovators for their communities and become agents of change or impact their families’ progress (not to jeopardize their communities’ situation and traditional structure).

One example belongs to this category: *Wangari’s Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* (2018), written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter. It is about migrants who have acquired skills and/or money abroad and become assets in their families and/or communities. Also, in many cases, the main characters get a grant to study in another country and become trained to go back and help their people.

*Wangari’s Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* tells the story of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. Upon returning to her native Kenya, once lush with trees, she is shocked to see the forests gone. Determined to reverse this, she begins planting trees in her backyard: “I can start replacing some of the lost trees here in my backyard, one tree at a time. Start by planting nine seedlings.” The cover illustrates this with simple organic African patterns, lively pastel shades, and a scene of Wangari crouching and planting tiny seedlings. Gradually, other women join her, planting rows of seeds under her guidance despite opposition from authorities. Eventually, “everyone hears about Wangari’s trees and her army of women who have planted them.” Her passion, vision, and determination sparked significant change in her community after returning home.

This book represents how Wangari Maat started The Green Belt Movement,<sup>3</sup> an environmental organization that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods. In addition, this book shows how children’s literature works toward representing the “poor” world to the “rich” one by connecting and promoting issues related to return migration, eco-literacy, indigeneity, and women’s rights (Smulders, 2016). This work is an excellent example of how return migration “came to be considered

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>

as both a movement back to normal that restores pre-conflict natural and social order as well as a movement forward to change in which returnees contribute to development and peace-building” (Houte, Davids, 2014: 71).

#### RETURN TO VISIT AND MEET ORIGINS:

According to Carling and Erdal, return visits to the country of origin are a specific “transnational practice” (2014: 4) that interacts in numerous ways with possible return migration (Asiedu, 2005; King, Lulle, Mueller, Vathi, 2013; Lulle, 2014; Mason, 2004; Oeppen, 2013). Three examples match this category: *14 Cows for America* by Carmen Agra Deedy (2009), *My Two Border Towns* by David Bowles (2021), and *Lleva un libro en la Maleta* (Take a Book in the Suitcase) by Virginia Read Escobar (2011), illustrated by Lucia Sforza.

*14 Cows for America* narrates the story of Kimely, a true story of a Maasai returning to Kenya – depicted on the cover with the warm colors of that continent – from North America, where he has lived for the past few years to study medicine. He goes back to ask for help from the American people after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> in New York. In this case, the short-term return experience has the effect of letting the main character go over his balance of belonging (Oeppen, 2013), reinforcing his significant ties to the country of origin and accentuating his sense of closeness to his community of origin, but without creating the desires for moving back since he has an excellent job as a doctor in the United States. This transnational experience re-engages social and cultural ties (Lulle, 2014) with his Massai community.

*My Two Border Towns* is a picturebook about the daily life of a boy who lives on the U.S.-Mexico border. He lives in the American area but visits “the other side” every Saturday morning, just down the street from his school, with his father in a weekend ritual. There, they spend time with friends and family, have a meal at their favorite restaurant, carry out some errands, and share the responsibility of community care by checking in with friends seeking asylum and dropping off the supplies they need. The other side is a twin of where he lives, just across the bridge over the *Rio Grande*. This book exemplifies community care and praises life’s intricacy, fluidity, and vitality on the U.S.-Mexico border. The cover shows both worlds in two colors and the main character in both.

Border areas host an exceptional type of transnational life because their bi-national communities are geographically linked, simplifying a continuous exchange of people, ideas, commerce, and culture. This geographic closeness makes transnational living more available to more people living on both sides of the border (Fussell, 2004; López, 2020: 243).

In *Lleva un libro en la maleta*, “a girl will return to her native Dominican Republic for holidays after living in Spain for three years” (García-González, 2017). Yaniris’ mother decides to return to her country of origin for holidays

after three years of working in Spain. Yaniris came to Spain as a child. This book represents her difficulties in the new country: “How difficult it had been to adapt, the new school in Spain was huge, the playground was huge, the accents were different, the leaves on the trees were different.” Luckily, she had started to read; she remembered the library of her hometown with its almost empty shelves. Now that she is going back with her family on holiday on the island, she decides that the best gift she can bring is a book, as shown on the cover of the work: “if each of us carried a book in our suitcase, our school in Hatillo would be filled with books [...]. With books you travel, with books you dream, books protect you, they accompany you, they have coverage everywhere, they don’t need batteries, plugs, or wifi, you can read them anywhere.” This picturebook represents how education and reading can improve the lives of children. *Lleva un libro en la maleta*<sup>4</sup> is also a cultural association that, with the help of various people and organizations, collects books and school materials for schools in the Dominican Republic.

#### RETURN AFTER A WAR OR CONFLICT:

The international political landscape is marked by war across all continents. While the wars in Ukraine and Palestine dominate the media, ongoing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Nigeria, and parts of South America persist. Many are forced to flee their homes without preparation. Once the conflict is settled, they return to their homes, or what is left, sometimes “to a rehabilitation center or newly created settlements, their area of origin or previous residence having been destroyed by war” (Arowolo, 2000: 61). Surprisingly, despite the international outlook described above, only two examples were found: *The Last Garden* (2020) by Rachel Ip and *Paloma Voló* (2021) by María Jesús Guardado.

The first story, *The Last Garden*, set in a war-torn city, follows a little girl caring for the last garden. As bombs draw closer, everyone must flee and abandon their homes. Despite being left alone, the garden’s scattered seeds begin to grow. When the girl and her friends return to their shattered city, they find new plants, offering a metaphor of hope for return migrants as shown on the cover, illustrated with vivid colors in the foreground but with the smoke of bombs and warplanes in the background. “War gardens worldwide” inspired *The Last Garden* and commemorated war gardens (Kenneth, 2008) and gardens for peace-building worldwide (Helphand, 2006).

In *Paloma Voló* (Paloma flew), the war is caused by a dictatorship that makes Paloma and her family flee without even the chance to pack their things. They have to run for their lives. After time has passed and she has gotten used

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064403091315>

to her new country, Paloma returns to her country of origin, which she barely remembers: “A different but familiar country was waiting for us... At first I missed the country that my parents didn’t seem to remember.” This is a journey toward identity, an allegory of freedom since the name of the main character, Paloma (dove), represents peace, as shown on the simple but effective cover. From 1973 to 1990, the Chilean dictatorial regime was characterized by the persecution and oppression of dissidents. Overall, the regime left thousands of dead or missing people and tortured prisoners. It also drove around 200,000 Chileans into exile. This picturebook is the representation of that.

### RETURN THROUGH MEMORIES

Return through memories covers those migrants who cannot return to their original countries but somehow return through their memories. One example found is *Homeland* (2023) by Hannah Moushabeck. Memories play a significant role in the field of migration. A growing body of research has explored how “migrants foster nostalgia, maintain cultural identity, and create a sense of home in their new environment through food, music, clothing, objects, or routine home-making practices” (Marschall, 2020: 302). Even though migrants are wholly integrated into their new world, their home world is “like a palimpsest” (Donohoe, 2014: 18–20) and will always rise to the surface.

*Homeland* is a love letter to home and to the family that sticks up to the hopes of people who transcend borders and cannot go back home. This picturebook narrates the story of a Palestinian father and his daughters who cannot return home physically, but they do it through their daily memories. Every night, as bedtime approaches, the three young daughters are impatiently waiting for their father to return home to tell them stories of a faraway homeland – Palestine. A window to the Old City of Jerusalem opens through their father’s memories, and the five senses come into action. The three girls can hear the sounds of juice vendors beating rhythms with brass cups, smell the argileh drifting through windows, and see the doves flapping their wings toward home. These diaspora daughters can also feel love for a place they have never been and will never be. As their father’s story goes by, they know they will always return through his memories. These memories are present on the cover in the shape of an album; around it, the whole family and, in the background, their city of origin, all the ingredients of the story.

All these literary representations offer readers opportunities for empathy, understanding, and reflection on the experiences of return migrant children. Thus, return literature needs to emerge to show various narratives of the social, cultural, economic, and political features of migrants’ lives when returning to their original places, usually to become an asset to their families and their communities, becoming a bridge “between the home and the world” (Bhabha,

1994: 13). The migration of people fleeing from bombs, famine, persecution, and intolerance on the grounds of religious, sexual, gender, or political diversity, among many other reasons, as shown in most of the picturebooks detected, contrasts with the migration of athletes in all sports, scientists, and experts in all disciplines, all of them potential return migrants (that are not reflected in the picturebooks found). What Bhabha (1994) calls “a global cosmopolitanism” is then being established in return migration picturebooks, a representation of a society in which those migrants that produce can stay since those communities that take part in

such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to “diversity” at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor.[...] [T]his mode of cosmopolitanism moves swiftly and selectively from one island of prosperity to yet another terrain of technological productivity, paying conspicuously less attention to the persistent inequality and immiseration produced by such unequal and uneven development. (Bhabha, 1994: xiv)

Carling and Erdal (2014) emphasize the link between return migration and transnationalism, showing how migrants sustain ties with their home countries both abroad and after returning. Thus, literature for young readers is an effective way to highlight the emotional, social, and cultural complexities of return migrant children.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the intersection of return migration studies and children’s literature to understand better how the experiences of return migrant children are portrayed in picturebooks. While such books exist, they are rare, with only eleven identified works addressing this topic. These works fall into six distinct categories, reflecting the diverse circumstances that lead migrants to return. The intersection of return migration studies and children’s literature offers valuable insights into the lives of return migrant children and their families. Representations of return migration in picturebooks are crucial for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and promoting cross-cultural understanding. By analyzing these literary works, scholars, educators, and students can better understand the complexities of return migration and its impact on children’s well-being and development.

Further research is needed to explore the nuances of return migration experiences and their portrayal in literary works to advance knowledge and promote social inclusion and equity. Furthermore, since finding examples of literature on return migration for young readers was challenging, a more in-depth

search in other sources, such as the Bologna Ragazzi Award or White Ravens of the International Youth Library in Munich, will be carried out. In addition, it is estimated that one out of four migration experiences imply a return to the migrant's country of birth (Azose, Raftery, 2019). Therefore, thousands of stories about returnees in every NGO, media, or street could be the basis of new picturebooks, fostering higher production. This could help children understand their situations or those of their friends and acquaintances trying to cope with their "double identities," their transnational identities as fruit of the blending of migrants' origins with the identities they gain in their host countries. Moreover, a more detailed analysis of the illustrations will be carried out since, as Arzipe et al. put it, "with their characteristic blending of exceptional artistic images with narratives that often arouse complex emotions and their invitation to explore the language of the visual, picturebooks [...] invite readers to use their precious knowledge and then to reassess and extend it alongside new ideas and feelings" (2014: 32).

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## Climate Change and Refugees: Images of Leaving and Returning in *A Home for the Hargila*: Book Review

**Abstract:** This review discusses the visual layers in the graphic picturebook *A Home for the Hargila* by Nalini Ramachandran and Pankaj Saikia. The story follows three girls in Assam, India, and tells the story of the disappearance of the endangered “Hargila” birds (Greater Adjutant Storks) in the region due to climate change and human intervention, and their subsequent return. The review will discuss how visuals are used as a narrative technique in this picturebook to convey emotions and expressions related to migration, climate crises, leaving, and returning to the child reader.

**Keywords:** graphic picturebooks, climate refugees, migration, Hindi, endangered species, visuals

Developed as a graphic narrative, Nalini Ramachandran’s picturebook *A Home for the Hargila*\* (*Room to Read India*,<sup>1</sup> 2023) – illustrated by Pankaj Saikia – follows three young girls in Assam, India, and seeks to tell the story of the disappearance of the endangered “Hargila” birds (Greater Adjutant Storks) in the region. Based on real-life efforts by the Hargila Army,<sup>2</sup> led by Purnima Devi Burman, to protect the endangered bird, the picturebook shows young readers a glimpse of how wildlife species are affected by climate change and human action. The 36-page picturebook takes the reader through the journey toward the birds’ eventual return to the girls’ village. It is interesting to note that the

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<sup>1</sup> Room to Read is a global organization transforming the lives of millions of children in low-income countries by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education. Founded in 2000 on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children®, their model focuses on deep, systemic transformation within schools in low-income countries during two time periods which are most critical in a child’s schooling: early primary school for literacy acquisition and secondary school for girls’ education. See [www.roomtoread.org](http://www.roomtoread.org).

<sup>2</sup> As Daniel Graham notes, “Led by Dr Purnima Devi Barman, the ‘Hargila Army’ or ‘Stork Sisters’ movement rescued the greater adjutant stork from the brink of extinction” (Graham 2024).

Hargila Army comprised 10,000-odd women and their efforts, and the author of the story chooses to channel this in the story via three girl protagonists supported by older women in their families.

This review will explore the visual layers in *A Home for the Hargila* in order to explore the role of visuals as a narrative technique in graphic picturebooks. In this instance, the illustrator Pankaj Saikia (who hails from the state of Assam himself) uses visuals to convey emotions and expressions that intricately build the subtext of the picturebook – touching upon difficult topics such as migration, climate crises, and leaving and returning for the child reader. The book is aimed for young readers in the age group 8–12, in the Indian context in which Room to Read India runs program libraries in underserved government primary schools.

At the beginning of the book, visual space and geography is outlined as an important element of the story through a map that helps us locate where each of the three girls live, “in Tak-Tak Village, a big village by a small lake,” while also giving the reader a glimpse into what their living conditions and environment look like. Pakhi lives in a small hut amidst greenery, and Kakoli lives on stilt houses (which implies that the area frequently gets flooded). On the other hand, Haseena and her family’s makeshift tent-home seems to be on the outskirts spatially, and next to the local dumping grounds – indicating a predisposition to potential climate-linked disasters.

As the story builds, we see various examples of how climate change seems to have affected the girls’ village life – the local weatherman ‘Mausam Mamu’ (Weather Uncle) seems to be frequently making wrong predictions. A simple announcement from him declaring ‘no rain this week’, signals the onslaught of a flood, and as the village-folk scurry home for shelter, Mamu is left alone in the rain, among a deserted landscape. As the storm subsides, the illustrator skillfully brings in images of post-flood destruction very common in news reports from north-east India in a manner that is age-appropriate for children. Characters use makeshift rafts to traverse the village, and occupants of the stilt houses look around miserably. These images of movement, while not “leaving” or “returning” to the village itself, indicate how precarious life in the village has become in the midst of a climate crisis, wherein the survival of homes and even people may not be guaranteed.

When the hero of the book – the Hargila bird – is introduced, the illustrator displays its dramatic entrance through the creative use of movement and shadowy silhouette, painting the creature as a long-lost myth or legend. As the story progresses, the narrative ascertains this further. Older women across the village talk about the bird in poetic terms, with a focus on larger-than-life features and sound imagery. There is an underlying nod toward the gravity of climate change’s effects on women – which further get exacerbated for women of lower castes and classes, and/or minority religions. The first visual image the reader

gets of the Hargila is hand-drawn in chalk by Pakhi's *aita* (grandmother) on a wall, followed by an artistic motif of the bird depicted in local folk-weaving style as Kakoli's *khuri* (paternal aunt) narrates a myth around it. The bird remains visually ephemeral to the reader.



As the story reaches its climax, panels show silhouettes of the Hargilas leaving Tak-Tak Village in a flashback, driven away by community members who believe that the bird is too dirty for them to co-exist with. Haseena then draws a pivotal comparison between the Hargilas leaving (a loss of biodiversity for the village) and her family having had to migrate from their homeland. Hints in the story point toward Haseena and her family being refugees from the nearby country of Bangladesh, now having to live in Assam as part of a local Muslim community of garbage collectors.

Both these instances of “leaving” are mesmerizingly mirrored across two facing pages of the picturebook. The illustrator uses the same visual style to draw the comparison. One of them “leaving” is more symbolic – the expulsion of the Hargila birds by Gojen and his friends indicates the years-long process of human intervention wiping out animal habitat. The other is based on stark socio-political reality, and is in this case more permanent. The leaving of the Hargilas is still captured in local memory for a generation of village elders. However, Haseena’s family’s migration seems to be a traumatic reality only for her, and they remain resigned to a life as part of the rag picking community.



After the flashbacks, the three girls set their minds on finding the elusive bird and bringing it back to the village. Then, the narrative shows us the return of a singular Hargila, as the girls spy the bird perched high upon the local dump yard. An adult explains that these areas, once marshy, served as the species' habitat and roosting site before their disappearance. Here, the reader may expect a joyous image of the Hargila's return, but what happens is unexpected. The bird appears ragged as it consumes decaying meat from the dump yard, horrifying the girls and serving as a call to action for them as well as the book's implied reader.



As the girls become determined to rally the village around bringing Hargilas back, images of the bird appear in the book in different ways. Pakhi learns to paint from *aita*, and paints it across the village, Kakoli uses a hand puppet of the bird's head to narrate stories about the Hargila's majestic past, and Haseena and her mother use plastic bags from garbage to create toy figurines of the bird.

As the book moves toward its resolution, the illustrator uses a wordless page of panels to show the Hargila's large frame juxtaposed with its nemesis – the infamous Gojen uncle who was responsible for the bird's previous exit from the village. Gojen, one of the two featured male characters in the story, seems to stand in for human greed, a lack of empathy, and a foil for the three protagonists and their families' values. As the Hargila makes yet another attempt to return to its home in this scene, it is met with the stereotypical conservative figure in Gojen, who is hesitant to allow his village to be "polluted." The clever use of bird-like features for the man to mirror the Hargila indicates an uneasy reckoning with the self for the human race. In the absence of the written word, the narrative progresses with Gojen contemplatively accepting the Hargila back into the village, indicating hope.



In this way, illustrations in *A Home for the Hargila* contain images of leaving and returning that complement the narrative and provide nuanced notes of individual and community identity. The story makes for a visually interesting attempt to introduce the complex themes of climate change refugees to young readers in the context of the global majority.

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# (In)Visibility: Marginalization of Migration Narratives and Its Diversity



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## Migration in German-Language Children's Literature after 1945

**Abstract:** How is migration dealt with in German-language children's and young adult literature? This article focuses on the development of West German children's and young adult literature since the 1960s. During this period, the first labor migrants came to West Germany and children's and young adult literature also turned to this topic. The question of who tells these stories also comes into focus. Selected key texts will be used to illustrate the changes in relation to migration in West German children's and young adult literature.

**Keywords:** migration, German children's and young adult literature after 1945, childhood

„Wir sind laut, wir sind wütend, und wir lassen uns nicht mehr unterdrücken. Wir wollen nie mehr leise sein,“<sup>1</sup> writes Betiel Berhe in her book *Nie mehr leise* (engl. *Never Quiet Again*), published in 2023, in which she uses her own biography to show the connection between racism and classism. She calls for different voices from different communities to be united to work together for a pluralistic and just society. Her demands also have something to do with children's and young adult literature, without her mentioning it. After all, the voices also include accepting the different perspectives of a post-migrant society and giving everyone a voice. This also applies to children's and young adult literature. However, an examination of German-language children's and young adult literature reveals that themes of migration, flight and leaving familiar surroundings are not currently prevalent in contemporary children's literature. Instead, there is a rich historical tradition of such themes in (Western) German-speaking countries. In the 20th century, particularly after 1933, several narratives emerged that focused on children and their parents fleeing the country due to the rise of the National Socialists (cf. the works of Erika Mann,

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<sup>1</sup> English Translation: "We are loud, we are angry, and we will no longer be suppressed. We never want to be quiet again."

1990 or Lisa Tetzner, 2005; 2004; 1992). In the immediate post-war period (1945), literature began to portray refugees from the East who sought refuge in the West. Since the 1960s, children's and young adult literature has been dominated by labor migration, but also by various escapes to West Germany. However, a paradigm shift became evident after the year 2000, with the emergence of literature by authors with a migrant background. This new body of writing eschewed mere description in favor of allowing the experiences of migrant characters to be articulated. This article employs seminal texts of German-language children's and young adult literature, as defined by the introduction of novel themes, narrative strategies, and discourse surrounding the subjects addressed, to illustrate the historical progression and developmental phases of the genre. The period under scrutiny encompasses the years from 1945 to 1989, during which time the literary landscape of children's and young adult literature in both East Germany and West Germany was distinctly delineated. The article focuses on West German children's and young adult literature, with a particular emphasis on the depiction of migration.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANT/POST-MIGRANT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Foreignness, the encounter of literary characters from different cultures, nations, or ethnicities is one of the „am häufigsten verarbeiteten Alteritätserfahrungen“ (Büker, Kammler 2003: 13)<sup>2</sup> in children's and young adult literature. In relation to content, the experiences of alterity depicted in children's and young adult literature following 1945 predominantly address the subjects of flight, migration, arrival, and travelling or moving from a rural to an urban environment, and vice versa. The depiction of migration is intricately linked to the portrayal of foreignness and otherness. Until the 2000s, "foreignness" could be categorized as follows: 1) The "foreigner" as a guest; (2) the cultural "foreigner;" (3) the outsider type; (4) the fantastic "foreigner" (Büker, Kammer, 2003). They tell of their arrival in the new country, of language problems and the sometimes-difficult integration. The theme is still developed through friendships, which, however, are hierarchical, as will be shown. Important topics such as language loss and growing up in multilingual contexts play a subordinate role. Children with migrant experiences are in the background, are not active players in the plot, and their origins are often criticized. It was only after 2000 that this categorization was slowly dissolved, and more and more primary works appeared in which there were migrant voices. This dichotomy is gradually shifting toward a perspective that accentuates the plurality of the German migration society and seeks to reflect the diversity of life plans in children's and

<sup>2</sup> English Translation: "most frequently processed experiences of alterity."

young adult literature (Karimé 2016). Following the year 2000, a growing number of primary works have emerged featuring migrant voices (see also Hodaie, 2020 and 2024: 155–176). A notable development in children's and young adult literature is the increased representation of a migrant society. The theoretical debates on interculturality and migration/postmigration have been subject to a shift from intercultural pedagogy to intercultural communication since the 1960s. The children's novel has also been characterized by the debates since the 1960s, as the following remarks show, and is changing. Until the 1990s, children's literary texts were characterized by paternalistic narratives (Haas, 1998a; Kliever, 2004), and friendships between children with and without a migration background were often guided by the principles of tolerance and empathy toward the foreigner. However, it was not until the 1990s that significant changes began to emerge, largely influenced by translations, particularly from English (Weinkauff, 2013: 45). In the late 20th and early 21st century, an intercultural society was considered the norm, and democratic coexistence was a part of children's everyday lives. Consequently, the concept of cultural hybridity became particularly popular in children's literature, with child and adolescent characters moving in a world where they repeatedly gain different cultural experiences. However, this togetherness was not idealized.

#### 1960S AND 1970S IN WEST GERMANY: LABOR MIGRATION IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The recruitment of foreign labor at the end of the 1950s gave rise to a new scope of migration processes, and Weinkauff differentiated between "new and autochthonous minorities" (Weinkauff, 2006: 660) in West German children's and young adult literature. In the ensuing decades, a new genre of text came to the fore, which has come to be termed "migrant literature." This category of problem-oriented children's and young adult literature has been the subject of considerable research. The first children's literary texts appear in which child protagonists meet children with a migration background who have come to Germany, Switzerland, or Austria with their parents. The texts were written by authors without a migrant background. Weinkauff (2013: 38) differentiates between two patterns of representation for the late 1960s and early 1970s:

- (1) guest worker problem
- (2) multicultural society

She describes Pepino from the children's novel *Komm wieder, Pepino* (1967) by Eveline Hasler as the "erste Gastarbeiterkind der deutschsprachigen KL" (Weinkauff, 2013: 13).<sup>3</sup> The plot is set in Switzerland and tells the story of Pepino, who is allowed to travel to his parents who work in Switzerland, after a long

<sup>3</sup> English translation: "first guest worker child in the German-speaking KL."

separation, and misses both his home and his grandfather on the island of Elba. With the help of a friend, he finally finds a home in Switzerland. The texts from the 1970s focus on children from Italian and Turkish families who must settle in Germany. Weinkauff rightly notes that the genre spectrum is broad – from picture books to texts for older teenagers, but that certain motives pervade. These include friendship and a wrongly accused child with experience of migration (see also Weinkauff, 2006: 665ff).

The children's novel *Benvenuto heißt willkommen* (1973) by Hans-Georg Noack will be presented as an example. It is about saying goodbye, leaving home, and settling into a new home. The child characters are accompanied by friends who support them. At the centre is the boy Benvenuto, whose name means "the welcome one" (Noack, 1973: 5). He was born in Brelone, a small village in Italy. The poverty is great, there are hardly any jobs, and because of its location, the village has not yet been developed for tourism. Benvenuto's father decides to go to Germany and earn money there. He dreams of opening a hotel in his home village. Several men follow them, but the women and children stay behind. After a few months, the father decides to bring his family to Germany. The home he left behind plays a subordinate role; instead, the focus is on life in the new city. The novel can be categorized as part of the problem-oriented children's and young adult literature of the 1970s, as new themes are included.

A heterodiegetic narrator guides us through the story, only occasionally providing insights into the character's inner life and focussing on the plot. At the same time, the narrator evaluates and comments. He portrays the family as hard-working, friendly, and ambitious and repeatedly tells of their failures. Homesickness, language loss, and learning a new language characterize the family's everyday life; Benvenuto slowly gets used to the new country but repeatedly experiences everyday racism and encounters prejudice. But Noack does not tell a story of friendship between a boy with and a boy without migration experience, instead focussing on the Italian family and their situation in West Germany. Noack develops a contrast between Benvenuto's childhood in Brelone and his arrival in Wolfsburg. The narrative commences in the hometown of Brelone, which is portrayed as impoverished yet characterized by amiable and accommodating individuals. Benvenuto's childhood is initially happy, but this changes because of the increasing poverty conditions, eventually forcing the family to migrate. The initial impact of this migration is evident in the shift in climate, with the initial warmth giving way to the harshness of German winter. The changes are initially felt in the climate: the weather is warm, while the arrival in Germany is in winter. The boy does not feel welcome, experiences (everyday) racism, and realizes how difficult it is to make friends. His childhood home becomes a paradise in the memories he has irretrievably lost. Because even the dream of the hotel that was to be built in the Italian village bursts in the Federal Republic. We do learn something

about Benvenuto's feelings, but it is not told from his perspective. Benvenuto and Roberto's speechlessness is hinted at in dialogues; they speak grammatically incorrectly, but Italian phrases or neologisms that unite the two languages are absent from the novel. It ends with an outlook: Benvenuto will not return to Italy, if then only as a tourist, because "[s]icher wird er hier nicht mehr leben wollen"<sup>4</sup> (Noack, 1973: 142), but he may want to visit the place of his childhood. Thus the narrator implies that Benvenuto has decided in favor of a life in West Germany. The boy initially experiences Germany as a place of transit, living in a confined space and hoping to return soon. However, eventually the place becomes a new home, and he returns to his childhood home as a guest.

In these texts, characters with a migration background are reduced to their experiences of migration and are developed as the "others" who must be helped by characters without migration experience. Since the 1960s, there have been changes and demands for (children's and young adult) literature from the global South, as well as for dialogue-based storytelling in encounters between people from the global North and South.

#### 1980S AND 1990S IN THE WEST GERMAN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

It is evident that a significant number of children's novels published since the 1980s have focused on the depiction of friendships. However, these literary works have been critiqued for their tendency to perpetuate stereotypes. As Dagmar Grenz observed in 1992, these novels have been unsuccessful in effectively portraying Turkey as a foreign entity or in acknowledging the nuances of German culture from an external perspective (Grenz, 1992: 37). Based on this criticism, authors with a migrant background began to write children's novels in the 1980s. The initiators were Rafik Schami and Eleni Torossi with their contribution *Den Trägern der Zukunft erzählen, ein Plädoyer für Kinderliteratur in der Fremde* (1985/86):

Die Zugehörigkeit eines Autors zur Minderheit ist eine unentbehrliche Voraussetzung einer glaubwürdigen Literatur der Minderheit. [...] Das technische Handwerk ist nicht im Stande, die fehlende Zugehörigkeit zur Minderheit zu ersetzen. (Schami, Torossi 1985/86: 26)<sup>5</sup>

They complained about the lack of literature by authors with a migrant background and criticized the depiction of children's lives.

<sup>4</sup> English translation: "he will no longer want to live here."

<sup>5</sup> English Translation: "An author's belonging to the minority is an indispensable prerequisite for credible minority literature. [...] The technical craft is not able to replace the lack of belonging to the minority" (Schami, Torossi, 1985/86: 26).

Until the 1990s, there were children's literature texts with paternalistic narratives (Haas, 1998a, Kliwer, 2004) and friendships between children with and without a migration background, which were criticized for their portrayal of migrant characters. It is not the children with experience of migration who become active players in the plot, but they are helped by child characters without any experience of migration. These are often guided by the principles of tolerance and empathy toward foreigners, which creates an imbalance, especially as migrant actors must prove themselves, for example through hard work.

In addition to texts dealing with labor migration, children's literature is also published that depicts the arrival of immigrants of German descent from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The children's novel *Ben liebt Anna* by Peter Härtling, which has since become a classic, was published as early as 1979 and, according to Weinkauff, is also one of the „innovativsten [...] deutschsprachigen Kinderromane der vergangenen dreißig Jahre“<sup>6</sup> (Weinkauff, 673). She sees a further difference in the fact that the arrival of the repatriates is described from their perspective, while the texts that talk about migration usually look at the events from an outside perspective.

In the 1990s, there were further changes and children, and young adult literature set new trends. The author Zoran Drvenkar was born in Krizevci (Yugoslavia) in 1967, but moved with his family to Berlin at the age of three, where he spent his childhood and youth. He described his childhood and youth in his two novels *Niemand so stark wie wir* (1998), which was also his first novel and won the Oldenburg Children's and Young People's Book Prize, and *Im Regen stehen* (2000), with which he was nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize. The story *Niemand so stark wie wir* (1998) centers on Zoran, who grows up in 1970s Berlin and is about 12 years old. He is friends with Adrian, Eli, and Karim, who spend their free time together and only occasionally think about their origins. His real life takes place in the children's group. Family and school, on the other hand, are less important and are sometimes even perceived as disruptive. Zoran's family looks like this: his mother continues to cook Yugoslavian food and rants in Serbo-Croatian; his father misses his homeland and at the same time tries to give his family a good life in Germany. The family would like to go to Yugoslavia every year, but due to a lack of money they must stay in Berlin. Zoran enjoys spending his summer holidays in Berlin with his friends and hardly misses his former homeland. But far more important than everyday Yugoslavian life at home is Zoran's immediate environment in Berlin: he is out and about on the streets with his friends, they play football together, talk about girls and growing up. Although the boys grow up in different families and with different languages, they speak German with each other and then speak their mother tongue at home. To put it simply, Zoran experiences a socialization

<sup>6</sup> English translation: "most innovative [...] German-language children's novels of the past thirty years."

in the boys' group that certainly shapes him just as much, if not more, than his family and thus his Yugoslavian origins. According to Annette Kliewer in her article *Pädagogik der Vielfalt: Zoran Drvenkar: Niemand so stark wie wir* (2004), Drvenkar has broken new ground with his novels and paved the way for a new migrant literature, but also developed a different approach to interculturality within children's and young adult literature (Kliewer, 2004).

According to Gina Weinkauff, translations from English in particular set new trends in the 1990s. There are also children's literature texts that react to the attacks by right-wing extremists and take a clear stance against racism. The best-known text, which is still read in schools today, is probably *Milchkaffee und Streuselkuchen* (1996) by Carolin Philipps, which must be critically analyzed due to its stereotypical and racist portrayal. For example, Sammy, the son of Eritrean parents, is reduced almost exclusively to his appearance, knowledge about his origins and culture is avoided, and instead his adaptation to the majority society is praised. Therefore, Becker rightly states that intercultural communication in Byram's sense does not take place (Becker, 2020: 125). Interest in Sammy's parents and their life in Eritrea is not demanded.

#### CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE SINCE 2000

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the notion of a post-migrant society has become a prevailing concept, and democratic coexistence has become an integral part of children's daily lives. Consequently, the concept of a multicultural society has gained significant popularity in children's literature. However, rather than idealizing coexistence, these texts address challenges such as right-wing radicalism and exclusion. It is noteworthy that there are still texts authored by individuals without a migration background. These children's novels are distinguished by the presence of friendships, diverse groups of children, and a de-hierarchical approach to interpersonal interactions. The child protagonists exhibit a positive acceptance of their respective cultures and a favorable view of linguistic diversity. However, an examination of these texts reveals the continued utilization of binary modes of representation, suggesting a persistent perception of migration as a problematic phenomenon.

In 2012, Kirsten Boie published the crime novel *Der Junge, der Gedanken lesen konnte* (2012), which is modelled on Andreas Steinhöfel in terms of genre but also represents a significant development within the field of intercultural children's and young adult literature. The narrative is presented from the viewpoint of the protagonist, Valentin, who immigrated to Germany from Kazakhstan with his mother. The narrative is set in a new city following a move, during the summer holidays, and centers on the protagonist Valentin's exploration of his new surroundings. Through his interactions with the character Mesut, whose parents hail from Turkey, Valentin becomes

involved in the resolution of a criminal case. A notable aspect of the narrative is the shift in perspective, as it is an account narrated by a child with a migratory background. This offers readers a divergent perspective. In the sequel *Gangsters must be clever* (2022), Kirsten Boie employs multi-perspective storytelling, depicting the events from the perspective of Valentin on one hand and Jamie Lee (from Abduction with a hunting leopard) on the other. The author successfully navigates the intricacies of combining multiple markers, thereby ensuring a multifaceted narrative. Valentin, who hails from a migrant background, is acquainted with Jamie-Lee and her mother only superficially, yet he astonishes both Jamie-Lee and her brother by displaying a profound knowledge of their lives. However, it is noteworthy that the multilingual polyphony, the interweaving of new languages, and the emotional world of migrant children are depicted, despite the migrant perspectives. The character of Mesut, who oscillates between two cultures, is employed by Boie to illustrate the experiences of the third generation.

After 2000, titles by other writers with and without experience of migration began to appear. Slowly, children's and young adult literature also developed that is characterized by representatives of the second and third generation of labor migration and can be described in part as post-migrant. Post-migrant does not refer to a newly created genre, as the texts are too diverse in terms of content and form. Erol Yildiz suggests thinking of the term "postmigration" as analogous to post-colonialism/post-colonial studies:

In Analogie zu dieser Auffassung des Postkolonialismus bedeutet die Idee der ‚Postmigration‘ zunächst, die Geschichte der Migration neu zu erzählen und das gesamte Feld der Migration radikal neu zu denken, und zwar indem die Perspektiven derer eingenommen werden, die Migrationsprozesse direkt oder indirekt erlebt haben. Im Gegensatz zu gängigen nationalen Narrativen wird im postmigrantischen Diskurs nicht nach integrativen Leistungen von (Post-) Migranten gefragt, es rücken vielmehr Prozesse von Entortung und Neuverortung, Mehrdeutigkeit und Grenzbiographien ins Blickfeld. (Yildiz, 2014: 21)<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, post-migrant does not mean overcoming migration, but rather the "associated discrimination, marginalization, etc. of migrants and the demand for recognition of diversity in a migration society" (Rösch, 2017: 78) and, according to Yildiz, post-migrant strategies can also be understood as

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<sup>7</sup> English Translation: "In analogy to this view of postcolonialism, the idea of 'postmigration' initially means retelling the history of migration and radically rethinking the entire field of migration by adopting the perspectives of those who have directly or indirectly experienced migration processes. In contrast to common national narratives, the post-migrant discourse does not ask about the integrative achievements of (post-) migrants, but rather focuses on processes of dislocation and re-localisation, ambiguity and borderline biographies" (Yildiz, 2014: 21).

cultural learning processes (Yildiz, 2014, Rösch, 2017). Questions of belonging and exclusion from the dominant society also play an important role, which are discussed in the context of a concept of home. Experiences of migration, exclusion, multilingualism, racism, and thus marginalized knowledge are also made visible in children's and young adult literature and call into question common narratives, including those about migration. In the current children's and young adult novels, it is primarily the children and grandchildren of labor migrants who have their say and tell another view of the last decades in the Federal Republic of Germany. This generation of children and grandchildren have different experiences to their parents and grandparents but are often reduced to their status as people with a migration background. However, new themes also flow into the primary works and the discourse. The authors, who are the third or fourth generation to live in Germany, ask about the meaning of life in a post-migrant society and talk about oscillating between cultures/nations. Ultimately, it is about the question of what home means. However, the search for a home of one's own, the inner turmoil and disorientation characterizes not only those who came to Germany either as labor migrants or refugees, but also their descendants. It appears to be a „generationenübergreifendes Bedürfnis [zu handeln], das soziale Dynamiken und Prozesse in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft maßgeblich beeinflusst“ (Behrendt, 2022: 8).<sup>8</sup> Heimat in literature, Heimat in migrant and post-migrant texts for adult readers is widely received in research and the media. At the same time, these works also make it clear how topical and multifaceted the term Heimat is. It is an open and polyvalent term that should no longer be used in the singular, but in the plural. Homeland summarizes what is reflected in society and in the media: experiences of homelessness and the search for a home. In the current discourse, more and more voices are being heard, individual experiences are being told, and thus different meanings are being attributed to homelands. This makes it clear that stories, narratives, and experiences about flight and migration share universal experiences on the one hand, but on the other hand each story is also individual and thus one cannot speak of homogeneous migration experiences. It is evident that narratives concerning flight and migration encompass both universal and individual experiences. Consequently, it is inaccurate to assert the existence of homogeneous migratory experiences. The texts avoid simplistic positions and depict the characters not only as victims, helpers, or perpetrators. The characters are not merely reduced to their experiences as migrants and are narrated from the perspective of marginalized voices.

Nevertheless, in the children's novel *Pembo. Halb und halb macht doppelt glücklich* (2020) by Ayşe Bosse and illustrated by Ceylan Beyoglu, Dimitrova

<sup>8</sup> English translation: "cross-generational need [that] significantly influences social dynamics and processes in post-migrant society."

plays with Bosse's title, because while Bosse already refers to a happy dual identity in the subtitle, in Kanak kids the girl Desi is half adapted and fully in between. This allows for a more complex examination of one's own identity and thus also one's homelands. Pembo and her parents, who hail from Turkey and Germany respectively, have been compelled to relocate from their previous domicile in Turkey to Germany. Her father has acquired a hairdressing salon in Hamburg, thereby achieving a long-standing aspiration. The family's relocation was accompanied by significant emotional upheaval, particularly for Pembo, who experienced a sense of loss as she parted ways with her extended family and social circle. The family's subsequent arrival in Hamburg stands in stark contrast to their previous life in a coastal village, where they were greeted by a frigid and dimly lit environment. The novel incorporates Turkish vocabulary, with a vocabulary list comprising Turkish words and their translations at the commencement of each chapter. These words pertain to domains such as food, family, and other elements that are integral to everyday life. These Turkish words are imbued with positive connotations, presenting a loving image of the country that serves to contrast the descriptions found in children's and young adult literature of the 1980s (see also Bjegac, Simon, 2024: 169; Weinkauff, 2013). Author Andrea Karimé (2016) is in favour of a different form and, in line with author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's postulate of not telling a "single story," calls for counter-stories for younger readers. In her children's books, she shows diversity as a matter of course, has characters with and without a migration background, and, above all, uses different languages in the characters' speech. The childlike characters in her works – *Tee mit Onkel Mustafa*, *Nuri und der Geschichtenteppich*, *Sterne im Kopf und ein unglaublicher Plan*, *Kaugummi und Verflixungen*, *Antennenkind* or *Der Wörterhimmel des Fräulein Dill* – move between the European and Arabic worlds. They are not victims even when they are being bullied. They act and become active. For example, Nuri from *Nuri und der Story Carpet*, who tells her story in the style of Scheherazade and receives recognition. Karimé's characters do not want pity, but are full of imagination, full of stories and want to tell them. She doesn't reduce her heroes to what they can't do but shows them with strengths. For example, even if they still must learn the new language, they are not deficient. Your characters may be new to a country, but they may also have parents from different cultural backgrounds. In the hybrid identities, she skilfully interweaves both cultures and shows above all that multilingualism is an important asset for the formation of one's identity. This includes, for example, the tapestry of stories reminiscent of fairy tales from the Arabian Nights and the telling of stories, but also the use of Arabic words, phrases, and sentences. She shows children who do not hide their hybrid identity. In Karimé's literary works, the form

of multilingualism assumes a pivotal role, manifesting in various ways. Her novels and poems are replete with a multitude of languages, underscoring the intricate nature of linguistic diversity. At times, individual words are integrated into the sentence without undergoing translation, while at other times they manifest as complete sentences necessitating interpretation within the context of the text. Furthermore, Karimé employs a playful approach to language, incorporating neologisms and engaging with linguistic creativity. Other authors talk about their childhood experiences and, like Christian Duda in his novel *Gar nichts von allem* (2017), depict violence in families alongside everyday racism. There are still texts written by authors without a migration background. These children's novels are still characterized by friendships, diverse groups of children, and a de-hierarchization of their interactions. The child protagonists accept the respective culture and take a positive view of linguistic diversity.

Children's literature is replete with examples of narratives that deal with the themes of flight and arrival. Indeed, the subject of flight has a long-standing tradition in the realm of children's and young adult literature. For example, in German-speaking countries, there has been a prolific production of literary works concerning the flight and arrival of various minority groups over the past three decades. The focus of these narratives is on the present, and they encompass both works by authors with no personal experience of flight and those with such experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The examples presented tell of different experiences of migration. The characters have similar experiences of loss, speechlessness, and arrival in a distant place. However, while the early works after 1945 tell of children with migration experiences, the view of the inner lives of the child protagonists is slowly changing. Authors with and without migration experience change the main characters and tell their stories from the perspective of the migrant child. What migrant authors have in common is the change of languages, multilingualism, and the multiplicity of identitarian affiliations. Even though children's and young adult literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries develop different concepts of migration, these are initially described in terms of content, and it is only the migrant authors who succeed in tracing the various facets.

In children's and young adult literature, migration is thus used as a discursive and dialogical concept and in the post-migrant texts, the "previously hidden, marginalized stories and types of knowledge become visible" (Hill, Yildiz, 2018: 7).

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## “Behind the Scenes”: Migration as (not) a Topic in Children’s and Young Adult Books from the Perspective of Polish Lilliputian Publishers

**Abstract:** Children’s and young adult literature is seen as an astute and critical observer of societal conditions, social tensions, and processes of change, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between literature and society. It is a medium acting as a diagnosis of the times, reflecting the real world of young readers while at the same time having the ability to question and deconstruct it. In this context, it is unsurprising that societal issues such as migration are increasingly being used as central motifs in children’s and young adult literature. Numerous analyses deal with this topic, with many considering books as an access point to experiences and objects of investigation. However, the production level is often overlooked. This article takes an alternative approach by adopting the perspective of children’s and young adult book publishers, who act as key figures in the field of literary production and whose decisions play a decisive role in shaping the range of literature on offer. Based on twelve interviews with Polish publishers belonging to the so-called Lilliputians, the study examines how publishers perceive migration as a literary theme. The analysis follows the methodological principles of grounded theory and identifies three central patterns of interpretation that explain why migration is considered a “difficult narrative” for Polish children’s and young adult literature. Migration is seen, on one hand, as a peripheral topic for Polish society and as a topic existing outside children’s world of experience, and on the other hand as a socially and politically tense and threatening issue. The analysis shows how children’s and young adult literature either incorporates or omits social phenomena and in doing so can have a deconstructive effect that could initiate social change. However, this transformative function of children’s and young adult literature has so far been used only to a limited extent, particularly regarding the topic of migration.

**Keywords:** Lilliputian publishers, children’s and young adult literature; social order; production level; child experience space; migration

## MIGRATION AS A LITERARY TOPIC. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL REFLECTIONS

Migration trends can be observed throughout the ages. They belong to and characterize the cultural history of mankind and are an integral part of political, social, and societal realities. They create a cultural and social experience that is often anchored in the collective memory of a society through literature, including in children's and young adult (YA) literature.

The relationship between literature and society can be thus understood as "a constant reciprocal process of constitution and exchange" (Farzin, 2016: 4). On the one hand, children's and YA literature functions as a social document or product of social conditions (Dörner, Vogt, 2013: 2), with an emphasis on its role as a close observer of social circumstances, social areas of tension, and processes of change. On the other hand, literature is to be understood not only as a reflection of society that represents "excerpts from the real, empirically established experiences of adolescents" (Minges, 2010: 30) but also as a means of (re)constructing and deconstructing societies (Becker, 2007; Rösch, 2013). Given the interaction between literature and society, it is therefore hardly surprising that topics such as migration are increasingly being addressed in literature for young readers and – albeit still hesitantly<sup>1</sup> – analyzed academically.

From the perspective of literary sociology, literature can be considered on four levels, namely: textual, reception, production, and field (Vogt, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. Contemporary academic studies in Poland on the topic of migration in children's and YA books focus mainly on the textual level<sup>3</sup>, concentrating on two thematic areas: The (labor) emigration of Poles and immigration to Poland. Researchers of the first area analyze, for example, the challenges of growing up in a different cultural environment (Gromadzka, 2022a, 2022b), including by focusing on transnational family constellations (Zajac, 2023; Rembowska-Pluciennik, 2024; Jendrzey, 2025) and the experience of Polish refugees' emigration in the context

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<sup>1</sup> Until recently, sociological researchers in particular have paid little attention to children's and YA literature as a subject of analysis. Not until the 1970s and 1980s did the sociological view of children and childhood, and thus also of children's literature, change (Honig, 1999; Hunt, 2005; Singer, 2011; Bühler-Niederberger, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> At the "textual level," three central questions are pursued: What and how is something depicted in books, and what is its relationship to the non-textual social world in terms of content or structure? At the "reception level," the reading of literary texts is viewed as a social practice that is itself influenced by framework conditions (such as social background, age, and education). At the "production level," the institutional, legal, and economic framework conditions for the production and distribution of literature are investigated, as well as their possible influence on texts. The last level – "field" – understands and considers the various aspects of the sociality of literature (text, reception, and production) as components of a structured social context (Vogt, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> A limited number of analyses at the reception level can also be found (e.g., Michulka, 2024).

of their lives in exile (Lutomierski, 2019). The second area relates to the increasing study of representations of immigration, whereby researchers address the question of how experiences of flight and the realities of refugees' lives are represented in books for children and adolescents (Żygowska, 2017; Wójcik-Dudek, 2019; Pietrusińska, 2020). In addition, some studies analyze the representations of the figure of the "other" (Chrobak, 2014; Smoter, 2017). In this context, however, Anna Fornalczyk-Lipska (2017) argues on the basis of her analysis of Polish books on national and ethnic "otherness," or cultural diversity, that there is a noticeable lack of books that address this issue. This underscores the "dearth of [literary] reflection on the coexistence of different cultures in one territory" (Papuzińska, 1996, cit. per Fornalczyk-Lipska, 2017: 28).

In this article, the analytical focus on children's and YA books is shifted from the textual to the production level. As such, books themselves are not at the center of this study; instead, an alternative and as yet underutilized approach is adopted that focuses on the perspective of publishers of children's and YA literature. Publishers are understood here not merely as book producers but more so as "constructors of frames" (Hojka, Jamróz-Stolarska, 2022: 267), whose decisions significantly shape and facilitate the supply of literature for young readers and as actors through whose lens the supply of children's and YA literature is always viewed (Zarych, 2016; Magerski, Karpenstein-Eßbach, 2019: 139) – understood as literary gatekeepers. It is therefore surprising that their perspective has hardly been considered in previous research on children's and YA literature (see also Hojka, Jamróz-Stolarska, 2023).

Publishers' perspectives take center stage in this article, whereby the analysis looks "behind the scenes," making it possible to consider processes, decisions, and actors in the literary field even before a book becomes an object of reading interest and is made available to readers<sup>4</sup>. The focus here is on publishers belonging to the Lilliputians, a term used to describe publishers characterized by the following five features: They were established after the year 2000; they were relatively small at the time of their founding; they are independent; they publish exclusively or predominantly children's and young adult books; and their books are of high literary, artistic, and editorial quality, setting them apart from the existing children's book market (Biernacka-Licznar, Jamróz-Stolarska, Paprocka, 2018: 10f.). This publishing collective is distinguished by its members' roles as "idea-makers": They are viewed as actors who integrate new cultural patterns and thus potentially act as catalysts of social change (Biernacka-Licznar, Paprocka,

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<sup>4</sup> Before a book reaches the hands of readers, it passes through the hands of numerous literary actors. In addition to the publishers, these include the authors, illustrators, and translators who help shape the book (Magerski, Karpenstein-Eßbach, 2019: 131). However, as Cackowska (2013) notes, the release of a book onto the market does not necessarily mean it will reach the hands of the youngest readers. Both gatekeepers such as parents and grandparents, i.e., non-professional facilitators, and professional actors such as teachers, librarians, and educators play an important role in a child's literary environment.

2016: 145). Their philosophy is to take children and youths seriously – as competent readers – and to consider their (literary) demands more than has been done previously. Using Anselm Strauss's (1998: 12) term, Lilliputians can therefore be described as a specific "discourse community" following a distinct logic, thus differentiating it from other publishing communities.

Previous studies on the perspective of these publishers (see Biernacka-Licznar, Paprocka, 2016; Biernacka-Licznar et al., 2018) emphasize their innovative contributions to the Polish children's and YA book market, encompassing both artistic and editorial quality as well as the tackling of complex literary topics such as death, sexuality, and war – themes that have traditionally been considered too "difficult" or "problematic" for young readers. It is striking that the topic of migration has so far been neither a central motif nor widely thematized in Lilliputian publishing catalogues (Biernacka-Licznar et al., 2018). This draws attention to the question of how publishers deal with the (non-)presentation of complex topics and what considerations they make in doing so. As the analysis by Bożena Hojka and Elżbieta Jamróz-Stolarska (2023) shows, publishing decisions – whether in the selection, presentation or marketing of topics – can lead to social controversies. These arise above all when children's and YA literature challenges the idealized (adult) notion of childhood, for example by addressing social taboos or through a discrepancy between the content of a book and the socially prevailing norms and values that are expected to be conveyed to young readers (Hojka, Jamróz-Stolarska, 2023). Migration can be considered one example of such a charged topic that has the potential for controversy in both media and political discourses – for instance in the context of anti-immigration rhetoric (Pietrusińska, 2020). These controversies are reflected not only in the public debate but also at the textual level. For example, literary representations, such as those of transnational families in children's and YA literature, are interpreted as a break with the normative ideal of a "good childhood" (Jendrzey, 2025).

Given the social controversies surrounding both the topic and publishing activities, it is particularly interesting to explore the publishers' perspectives on migration as a literary topic for young readers: How do publishers perceive migration as a (potential) literary theme? To what extent do they consider it relevant or (in)suitable for children and adolescents, and what arguments do they use to support this? These questions are analyzed in the context of how publishers' interpretations are anchored in the social context and what implications this can have for literary and non-literary realities.

#### RESEARCH METHODS, ANALYTICAL REFLECTION, AND INITIAL FINDINGS

The results presented here are based on guided interviews with Polish publishers from the so-called Lilliputians, conducted in the period between 2020

and 2022. Based on the previously established definition, Katarzyna Biernacka-Licznar et al. (2018: 21f.) categorize a total of 16 children's book publishers under this label; this list was used for the following study. Representatives from 12 out of the 16 publishing houses agreed to interviews. The objective of the interviews was to gain insights into the publishers' subjective perceptions and constructions of the world, i.e., "how the individual experiences, understands and constructs the world for themselves" (Misoch, 2019: 7). Thus, the interviews were conducted in a narrative style and the interview guide itself contained only keyword-based topics, which were adapted to the conversational dynamics and focal points emphasized by the respondents. One thematic focus of the guide was on the publishers' interpretations of the literary topic of migration<sup>5</sup>.

The analysis is based on Strauss's (1998) methodological approach, whereby all twelve interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed. The initial coding of the material revealed certain commonalities in the use of arguments, with migration not considered a literarily established topic in the publishers' own catalogs. This largely shared assessment, which I have identified as a pattern of interpretation (Schwab-Trapp, 2008: 175), persisted even when I directly mentioned books (including from their own catalogs) whose representations could be labeled and understood as "migration" stories, for example, those featuring families and/or family members who leave their home country for various reasons, such as working abroad. Migration as a literary theme was consistently framed as "not a topic," which led to an analytical "irritation" (Charmaz, 2014).<sup>6</sup> "Not a topic" was referenced in a general, even somewhat abstract sense. It was, therefore, unclear at this stage whether it was a question of relevance, of its suitability as a literary theme, or of the topic's attractiveness. Further analysis involved a targeted search for patterns and references to explain from the publishers' perspectives why migration is viewed in this way and not comprehensively addressed. Ultimately, it became clear that migration as a (literary) theme is interpreted as a "difficult narrative." Consequently, three interpretive patterns were identified that describe and explain why the topic is placed in this category and what exactly is meant by "difficult narrative."

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<sup>5</sup> The idea to interview these children's and YA book publishers arose during preliminary research for the binational (German-Polish) project "Dodzi," (DFG: 465048370), one part of which was devoted to literary representations of transnational families and migrations and the normative notions of good childhood embedded in them. To find out more, visit the project's homepage: [www.uni-due.de/biwi/koenig/dodzi/](http://www.uni-due.de/biwi/koenig/dodzi/); see also the guest interview in this collection.

<sup>6</sup> The publishers' argument that migration is "not a topic" irritated me, as it contradicts my own perception of Polish migration history and processes. Migration is deeply rooted in Polish identity and has been repeatedly recontextualized by historical upheavals, not least due to EU accession in 2004, which led to an increase in intra-European emigration (Kaczmarczyk, Okólski, 2008; Okólski, Salt, 2014; GUS, 2020).

## MIGRATION – “NOT SUCH A LIVELY, EVERYDAY TOPIC” IN POLAND

An initial pattern of interpretation that is repeated in the interviews is that the topic of migration is not relevant to Polish society. While in some cases, the topic is seen as something “completely, completely inappropriate for our [Polish] reality”<sup>7</sup> (Pub. Purple)<sup>8</sup>, most interviewees were somewhat more nuanced. They drew comparisons<sup>9</sup> to other European countries and emphasized that, “compared to Germany, France, and the rest of Europe, this is not such a lively, everyday topic in Poland (laughs). So, not in a daily societal discussion” (Pub. Violet). Poland is seen as an exception in Europe, with migration (experiences) having little relevance as either a phenomenon or subject of societal debate. Compared to other countries, the situation in Poland is described as “somewhat calmer” (Pub. Yellow), particularly regarding the immigration processes in Europe since 2015. Not least, the interviewees substantiate their observations and interpretations of the contrastive (social) dynamics of migration (on the textual level) by emphasizing that migration as a book motif “frequently occurs in foreign proposals” (Pub. Purple), and at the same time, they point to a lack of books and book proposals on this topic by Polish authors.

In some cases, publishers point to tentative yet possible changes regarding migration trends in Poland: “Perhaps this will change, because we are mixing thanks to the internet and the opening of borders” (Pub. Purple). Nevertheless, publishers do not (currently) view migration as an integral part of the normal state of society or everyday life in Poland, as reflected by the absence of significant social discussions about it. This is based on an understanding of migration that is defined almost exclusively as immigration. Simultaneously, emigration (including, for example, the increasing temporary emigration following EU accession) from Poland is hardly considered.

Regarding the absence of migration discussions, publishers also thematize a societal (un)willingness to address the topic. From their perspective, Polish readers are seen as recipients who are “not willing” (Pub. Blue) and “not interested” (Pub. Purple) in engaging (literarily) with the topic of migration. In short, “the Polish reader is not looking for such a thing at all” (Pub. Purple). In this context, Marta Pietrusińska (2020) speaks of a certain exclusion of this topic, suggesting a specific and narrow target group: Readers with an open and tolerant attitude who want to actively engage with the topic – although given

<sup>7</sup> All interview excerpts were translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the publishers to ensure their anonymity.

<sup>9</sup> Such social comparison processes play an essential role in the subjective formation of opinions about external circumstances, i.e., in the perception and interpretation of the world, and can be observed on all three interpretation levels (Kopp, 2014: 602).

the limited supply and distribution of these books, they must search specifically for such content.

In contrast, the interviewees point to other societal events that were visible in society and public discourse at the time of the interviews (2020 – 2022) and accordingly incorporated as themes in children's and YA books. They reference two topics in particular: first, the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in an increased demand for books to supplement and partially replace the lack of school lessons during lockdowns and for books about topics such as hygiene and physical contact; and second, the reckoning with the Catholic Church's abuse scandals, which gained widespread public attention in Poland due to the release of a film on the subject<sup>10</sup>, and which publishers subsequently addressed:

When Sekielski's sensational film about sexual behavior in the church came out last year. Suddenly many people were looking for books on sex education. [...] That's how we choose our books. If there is a social problem, if there is an aspect [...] then we decide to publish it. (Pub. Red)

It becomes clear that literature does not exist outside of society (Dörner, Vogt, 2013: 2f.), rather that societal phenomena interact with literature by offering certain topics. However, there is no obligation to incorporate them, and it cannot be assumed that they will hold the same relevance for all (literary) actors. After all, what is considered a "social phenomenon" and how it is anchored in literature (also) depends on the interpretations and prioritization of the publishers themselves. In this context, the producers of children's and YA books are actively involved (as literary gatekeepers) by wielding their influence over the design of literary works. The quote above ends with the interviewee saying: "All over the world, social issues influence what is created, but what is published depends on individual publishers" (Pub. Red). Therefore, certain topics and aspects may not be considered, creating blind spots in literary representations.

#### MIGRATION – NOT PART OF THE "WORLD AROUND THE CHILD"

According to the second interpretation pattern, migration is also seen as a literary theme that has no connection to the reality of Polish children's lives. One interviewer formulated this as follows:

We try to publish books that show the reality, the actuality, the world around the child that they deal with, but that, that's not... that's not a problem that Polish families are facing now. That's why we don't have a book like this. (Pub. Red)

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<sup>10</sup> The film in question is by Tomasz Sekielski, whose works deal with the abuse scandals involving Catholic priests.

What is defined in the quote as “not a problem” is the topic of migration, which, as the quote illustrates, does not represent the reality, actuality, or world around the Polish child and therefore does not necessitate literary anchoring. Following this reasoning, a topic such as migration should reflect the immediate reality of young readers in Poland and must be “culturally close” (Pub. Purple). This stipulation is based on the sensualist idea that children can only truly internalize that which they can sensually experience and lies within their horizon of perception and experience (Ewers, 1995: 35f.). Consequently, the three aspects – reality, actuality, world – that are framed as a complex structure of children’s experiences and perceptions do not refer to representations of a “big world” in the sense of a broader societal context. Instead, the publishers operate with an idea of a child’s world that is limited to ethnic and cultural homogeneity within the national framework. This is particularly evident by the fact that publishers repeatedly emphasize the socio-cultural and national role of the context in which a book (about migration) for young readers must be located. Simultaneously, they argue that there is a lack of such books and stress that the foreign alternatives deal with “distant analogies” (Pub. Pink), which are deemed unsuitable for publication for young Polish readers. The following quote exemplifies why one publishing team ultimately decided against publishing a book on the topic of migration:

Maybe there are books somewhere that show this in a culturally closer context, the problem of migration<sup>11</sup>. But that book was simply about migration from one country to another, [...] on the African continent, [...] and I think it was simply intended for a European child. It wasn’t interesting for a Polish child because they probably couldn’t identify with the hero. Anyway, when we were analyzing it at the time, it seemed to me that if the plot of this book took place here, preferably in Poland, then maybe yes [we would have published it]. (Pub. Purple)

The construction of different, European experiences becomes apparent again, with the experiences of Polish children contrasted with those of their European peers. In relation to (global) migration events, it is even implied that Polish children are not seen as “European children” (the interviewee explicitly says “for *a* European child” rather than “for *other* European child,” which would have included Polish children), highlighting the significance of a differing migration experience compared to geographic belonging.

As the quote suggests, it is not only the thematic field itself that is decisive but also the specific narrative structure and mode of representation through

<sup>11</sup> An aspect that has not been systematically examined in this article is the strong association of migration with “problems”: Migration is presented almost exclusively as a problem that requires intervention. Other possible perspectives, such as migration as an opportunity for a better life or as a path that enables access to intercultural relationships, are largely absent.

which this theme is conveyed. The narrative localization of migration processes remains outside Polish children's tangible frame of reference due to geographical and cultural distance and therefore cannot be integrated into their immediate lifeworld. The Polish child lacks points of contact and thus a certain "involvement" or possibility of identification<sup>12</sup>. In this context, we can speak, as one interviewee put it, of migration's "spatial obligation" (Pub. Gray) as a literary topic: It should be anchored within the geographical and national borders of Poland as well as correspond to the image of society with which Polish children are familiar. This image, according to the interviewees, is one of a culturally and ethnically homogeneous society:

I lived abroad for a few years, in the USA. And actually, this multiculturalism and the fact that the world is so colorful [...] in general, the world is colorful, Poland is a very homogeneous society. Everyone here is white. (Pub. Blue)

Those who deviate from the "norm" of whiteness are interpreted as being outside Polish children's world of experience.<sup>13</sup> Along the same lines, one interviewee formulates a hypothetical and almost provocative question regarding the possible publication of such a book: "But how can we publish a book in which the boy is dark-skinned on every page, and the book is for three-year-old children?" (Pub. Blue).

The example cited is just one of many in which interviewees refer to the skin color of child protagonists (see also below), particularly to the problem of depicting children as "black," when they talk about migration as a literary theme. Generally, migration is closely linked to the topic of racial visibility or visible minorities (Song, 2020), whereby external appearance comes to the foreground. Using the definition of migration presented in the first part of this analysis, it can be extrapolated that the interviewees interpret migration primarily in connection with the immigration of "non-whites."

Regarding the avoidance of such representations and migration topics, it must be emphasized that a kind of (self-)censorship can be identified, which is often critically examined by the interviewees. In doing so, they distance themselves from their own decisions and problematize the associated emotions:

We wonder, but...I'll just say it, we're afraid. It bothers us [...], you know what's strange? What I noticed? [...] I didn't pay attention to it at all before, but when I ordered [book] samples, for example, and they were looked at by my

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<sup>12</sup> Another example of how migration is perceived as abstract and distant from the (especially younger) Polish children's world of experience is the suggestion that, if addressed at all, it is best done in a metaphorical way, ideally "about the animal world" (Pub. Purple). Notably, the fictional world created here is perceived as less abstract and distant from the "real" experience of Polish children and adolescents than is the topic of migration.

<sup>13</sup> For the lack of such representations at the textual level, see Kamińska, 2005; Fornalczyk-Lipska, 2017.

colleagues, sometimes the book was rejected because one of the characters had a different skin color. (Pub. Blue)

This highlights the susceptibility of children's and YA books – and of migration and its representation – to social controversies, characterized by contradictory polemics, judgments and views (Hojka, Jamróz-Stolarska, 2023: 11). At the same time, the social constraints<sup>14</sup> (Bourdieu, 2016) to which publishers are subject as actors in the field and that influence their decisions become clear. These strong emotions, controversies, and constraints are linked in no small part to the social and political resistance the publishers address, which is discussed in more detail in the following section.

### MIGRATION – “A RATHER RISKY WORD”

A third interpretation of why the topic of migration is a “difficult narrative” follows the reasoning that it is risky and can provoke resistance: “You know, we are afraid of this topic. So far, we haven’t published anything [...] you know, but I will say it this way, we are afraid” (Pub. Blue). The subject is fraught with fear, highly problematic, and controversial – descriptors that publishers frequently use when explaining why they have decided not to publish a book with a migration story. They refer to the societal resistance that is inherent in conservative Polish society:

Unfortunately, as I have learned and our whole team has learned, we are a very conservative society, and we already know that certain topics don’t resonate with us. Or, I don’t know, you have to have great courage to present them. (Pub. Blue)

The statement that it requires “great courage” to choose migration as a book motif shows that there is not only a passive societal disapproval, but likely also active resistance. Building on the theme of societal unwillingness (see p.5 in this article) to engage with the topic, the implication here is that publishers are reluctant, if not categorically opposed, to embracing migration as a literary theme, fearing that it will trigger negative societal reactions and controversy – for example, when portraying “non-white” protagonists, as previously mentioned. In some cases, the topic is considered so controversial that publishers deem even using the word “migration”<sup>15</sup> to be risky:

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu (2016) conceptualizes “constraints” as social forces that shape individual agency and limit decision-making freedom by prescribing and normalizing specific patterns of behavior and practice.

<sup>15</sup> For a broader context, see also the article by Jakubowski (2018), which deals with the socially pejorative perception of the word “uchodźca” (Polish for “refugee”). The article demonstrates how certain words can also provoke resistance in other areas of society.

I think that the word "migration" still has a rather negative connotation in our Polish language. It could be that this is due to the fact that when the publisher writes (...) and when a blurb appears, that is, the note on the back of the book, he uses a rather risky word. Some publishers prefer to express this differently [...], leaving out the difficult word. (Pub. Yellow)

This avoidance tactic illustrates a kind of linguistic euphemism in which difficult or risky words and thus topics are not named directly. Such logic may explain why some publishers do not talk centrally about migration in children's and young adult books. While discussing a book with a premise of family migration<sup>16</sup>, one interviewee explained:

This is not a book about migration. This book is about all sorts of things, a lot of different things – about growing up, about the search for love, about divorce, about losing love, about friendship, about different topics. About tolerance, about accepting oneself. (Pub. Orange)

Many aspects of the story are mentioned, yet migration as a possible theme is not even considered. Instead, aspects of growing up abroad in different societal contexts are emphasized. In this way, migration is approached indirectly without explicitly placing the topic in the foreground.

Regarding the avoidance of the topic and even the very term "migration," publishers often refer to a sense of resignation on their part when it comes to wanting and/or being able to manage the possible consequences and challenges – such as economic losses or the risk of damaging the publisher's image – if they were to address the topic of migration in books. In this context, they allude to resistance, especially political resistance:

Because it is well known that the attitude, at least in Poland, towards migrants – I am not talking about society, but about the government – is terrible. Therefore, the government will probably also impose a certain narrative here. (Pub. Purple)

The mention that the government is likely to "impose a certain narrative" indicates that political actors (may) try to control how migration is perceived. Migration is a topic in which political and social power relations become clear, especially when the social order and its associated expectations and norms are threatened. The interaction between literature and society, as outlined in the introduction, becomes evident here.

It is important to reiterate, however, that the publisher's comment refers not to society as a whole, but specifically to the government, suggesting a possible discrepancy between general public opinion and the political agenda – at least from this interviewee's perspective and with regard specifically

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<sup>16</sup> To preserve anonymity and avoid possible indications of the interviewee's identity, the title of the book is intentionally not mentioned.

to Poland. Ultimately, the examples provided show the extent of social constraints in this area. As such, we can recognize the different interests of various actors, which are likewise associated with their respective positions and corresponding agency.

## CONCLUSION

The reciprocal process of constitution and exchange between literature and society are clearly visible at the production level of children's and YA literature. The analysis shows, on the one hand, how literature addresses social phenomena by offering interpretations or omitting certain topics and, on the other hand, how it has a deconstructive character that can initiate social change and challenge existing structures. However, this transformative function of children's and YA literature has thus far been employed only to a limited extent. Despite positioning themselves as "drivers of change" (Biernacka-Licznar, Paprocka, 2016: 145), publishers have demonstrated a certain reticence in this area – mostly around the topic of migration. A specific interpretation of migration is used, understood by the interviewees as "visible" migration processes. In this context, they discuss in particular the immigration of "visible minorities," which is interpreted with regard to the (contrastive) social and political situation in Poland compared to other societies.

As the analysis demonstrates, migration as a literary topic is ultimately presented as a narrative that is difficult to develop and establish in a Polish context. Publishers interpret and justify this narrative based on the social order, which is challenged by this topic. The three patterns of interpretation, as developed in this analysis, illustrate why and how this order is challenged and understood.

The first two interpretations center around the argument that the topic is not sufficiently anchored in Polish reality: It neither concerns Polish society nor is representative of it. This also includes younger readers, children and adolescents, at whom such books are targeted. Migration is presented as an issue that does not reflect the experiences of Polish children. Society is generally perceived as disinterested in and unwilling to engage with the topic, young readers as unable to identify with migration. Both society and children are thought of as incapable of seeing that the world is different. At the same time, a distinction must be made here: Some publishers attribute the lack of willingness exclusively to adults, particularly parents as significant gatekeepers (Cackowska, 2013), whose decisions determine whether a book reaches a child, rather than to children themselves. This aligns with the Lilliputian philosophy of viewing children as competent actors.

The third pattern of interpretation refers to argumentations that consider migration a motif in literature with the potential to incite social and political

resistance. Accordingly, migration is seen above all as a controversial and potentially charged topic in the Polish (non-)literary world, making it difficult to establish the narrative of migration. This applies not only to the topic itself but also to its embedding and treatment in a highly contested medium, namely children's and YA literature. In this sense, Hojka and Jamróz-Stolarska (2023: 12) refer to a quote by Olga Buchina<sup>17</sup> and summarize that the "power of children's literature is often underestimated, and at the same time it is often seen as dangerous and in need of controlling."

Finally, I would like to reflect on the presented results with regard to the social contexts and circumstances at the time of data collection and analysis. They are of great relevance, particularly in terms of the interactions between literature and society, as illustrated here, and the publishers' understanding of the interpreted social order. A central question arises: What happens when social conditions change? The significant political and social developments triggered by the war in Ukraine (which began after the interviews and analysis were conducted) have shed new light on migration dynamics in Poland. In this context, it is important to ask to what extent the publishers' interpretation of migration and its representation in literature may have changed since then. It is especially interesting given that current events have significantly changed a central element of publishers' interpretation of migration, namely as an immigration phenomenon, as well as the visibility of migration, both in society in general and in the world of (Polish) children. Examining these changes and incorporating them into future analyses opens up the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of how political and social developments can shape migration narratives and offers the opportunity to grasp more comprehensively the dynamic discourses surrounding migration as a (non-)literary topic.

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<sup>17</sup> For the original text, see: Bukhina 2019.

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## Image of Migrants and Refugees in Contemporary Russian Children's Literature: A Case Study of Alexey Oleynikov's Works

**Abstract:** The war in Eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014 and accelerated after Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has resulted in the displacement of millions of people, including children, with over 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees recorded in Russia as of the end of 2023. In light of the increasing number of refugee narratives in children's literature across the world, and in the wake of anti-immigrant policies and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants and refugees in Russia, this article analyses the representation of migrants and refugees in contemporary Russian children's literature with special attention to the works of Alexey Oleynikov – *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* [2015] and *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'sya* [2021]. Focusing on both text and image, I inquire into discourses on authenticity and "otherness," as well as agency and voice of migrants and refugees.

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, war, migration, refugees, children's literature

Russia has long been both a destination and a source country for migrants. According to the latest statistics compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of 2024 there were around 12 million international migrants in Russia, making it the fourth-largest migrant population in the world (IOM, 2024: 124). The main flow of migrants to Russia comes from post-Soviet states, particularly from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), due to a visa-free regime, some knowledge of the Russian language and cultural affinity. Performing (often illegally) low-paid and physically demanding jobs that are unattractive to the local population, these labour migrants have become an indispensable part of the tapestry of Russia's daily life. The backside of this tapestry is an upsurge in racism and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants enabled by the support of the state and fueled by mass media (Kuznetsova, 2017; Hoang, 2020; Avrutin, 2022). Depictions of migrants in the Russian media and government reports are associated with "mounting organized crime,

the expanding shadow economy, social disruptions, cramped and often dangerous housing conditions, and increasing stress on social infrastructure” (Hoang, 2020: 64), as well as with spreading “dangerous diseases” (Kuznetsova, 2017: 151). The recent wave of migration to and from Russia was triggered by the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014 and in February 2022 escalated into the devastating war in Ukraine. This unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees has intensified the already existing hostility towards migrants and ethnic minorities (regardless of their migrant status). At the same time, the war has caused a historic emigration wave of an estimated one million Russian citizens.<sup>1</sup> Despite being one of the leading countries of both origin and destination for migrants, Russia has surprisingly few contemporary children’s books presenting migration experiences as “a living reality for present day children” rather than “something belonging to the past” (Hope, 2008: 297). This article will shed light on some of the few attempts to break with this underrepresentation of migrant experiences in Russian children’s literature, focusing on the issue of authenticity and other/self-representation.

Defining authenticity in children’s literature is a contentious issue, and many scholars have developed various definitions and criteria. Since contemporary Russian children’s literature has not yet fully developed a new language for depicting ethnic diaspora, as well as a theoretical apparatus for its analysis, I will resort to Western models. Fox and Short, in *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children’s Literature* (2003), explore various definitions of authenticity, noting that it cannot be confined to a single meaning. They discuss the perspectives of scholars like Bishop, who focuses on accurately reflecting cultural perspectives (20), and Howard, who emphasizes the reader’s sense of truth (25). Contributors to their collection agree that the key issue is not whether cultural authenticity should be a criterion but how to establish appropriate standards, especially when texts are written by outsiders. Hope highlights that autobiographical stories about migrants carry particular authenticity (2017), while Park Dahlen raises concerns about the subjectivity of perceived authenticity (2021). Scholars like Yokota argue that insider perspectives are more likely to present culturally authentic views, although this can sometimes clash with personal authenticity or risk essentializing identities (1993). Moreover, outsiders may still provide valuable perspectives, helping to make unfamiliar cultures more relatable, as noted by Gamble and Yates (2008). While Bishop contends there is no set formula for authentic literature (2003), Yokota offers ‘practical’ criteria, such as cultural detail richness, authentic dialogue and relationships, in-depth treatment of cultural issues, and the inclusion of members of “minority” groups for a purpose (1999: 159–160). The *CLPE Degrees of Erasure* 2018 framework similarly identifies superficial portrayals in

<sup>1</sup> There is no precise data, as many Russian citizens have since either returned to the country or relocated from their initial refuge.

literature. Gopalakrishnan suggests that authentic books should be culturally and historically relevant (2011), well-researched, and thought-provoking. Similarly, Short presents a comprehensive set of criteria, emphasizing authors' cultural connections and research depth (2011). Despite these guidelines, Smolkin and Suina remind us that no culture is uniform, making authenticity inherently nuanced (quoted in Fox & Short 2003). Following this very brief inquiry into the authenticity concept, I will look at the strategies employed to depict migration and migrants in two contemporary Russian texts for children. Who is telling migration stories, and what kind of stories do they tell? Can they be considered authentic, and if yes, to what degree?

### "MOM NEVER SPEAKS TO STRANGERS"

One of the first contemporary Russian books to touch on the theme of migration was a 2015 *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* [Say "Hello!" to Me]<sup>2</sup> written by a popular Russian journalist, educator, children's author, and poet, Alexey Oleynikov, and illustrated by Natalia Yaskina. Reminiscent of Peter Sis' *Madlenka* (2000), it tells the story of an eight-year-old Moscow boy, Vasya, who meets representatives of different countries (including ex-Soviet states) living and working in the Russian capital. Each of the 12 encounters is accompanied by an illustrated spread containing information on the geography, history, and culture of the country in question, as well as the reasons for migration to Moscow. The choice of Moscow for the story setting is justified by the author by the simple fact that it is "the biggest city in the country, where most people relocate to" (Oleynikov, 2016), which also happens to be his hometown that he knows best. According to Oleynikov, the idea of creating this book belonged to the founder and editor-in-chief of Samokat publishing house, Irina Balakhonova, who wanted to follow the "Western trend of diversity and multiculturalism in children's books and adapt it to the Russian reality since the issue of intolerance towards migrants in Russian society is just as serious (if not more acute) as in the other countries."<sup>3</sup> The book was planned to be aimed at children aged five to ten, which predetermined the choice of the format – an engaging picture-book with elements of nonfiction. The book opens with quite a straightforward publisher's preface explaining their intent:

We thought if we explained who migrants really were, why they were forced to leave their home, if we told children their stories and open the door to their culture, if we honestly admitted that our ancestors (with few exceptions) were once migrants too, there would be less fear and more warmth around.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translation from Russian are mine.

<sup>3</sup> By "Western" Oleynikov means British, European, and American (Oleynikov, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The book is unpaginated.

Despite the publisher's good intentions, this introductory note clearly indicates the juxtaposition of "them" and "us," implying that the book's targeted audience is non-migrant readers. This is also emphasized by the decision to make a non-migrant Moscow-born character the protagonist. Following the literary tradition of the children's texts where "exciting" things start happening when parents are not around, the story begins to unfold with the boy's parents leaving for vacation in Greece. His Auntie Gelya, who has fled Ukraine's Donetsk region, is here to look after Vasya and introduce him to the concept of migration as they are running daily errands in the neighborhood. Due to her work in the past (as a construction company accountant), Auntie Gelya has traveled all over the USSR and can find a common language with everyone. Unlike Vasya, who, being raised in a typical Moscow way (cautious and distant)<sup>5</sup> is not used to welcoming strangers:

At the entrance, the street cleaner is shaking off his broom and looking at me with his black eyes. His smile is suspicious. I hid behind Auntie Gelya just in case. Mum never speaks to strangers, let alone street cleaners. And she forbids me to do so. (8)

This is not just a warning of a concerned parent about stranger danger; this kind of danger is directly related to the common belittling and even racist perception of a migrant as a potentially harmful person. From "his black eyes" to a "suspicious smile," Vasya is reproducing in his thoughts the typical "othering" tropes. But as Vasya observes Auntie Gelya interacting with Alisher (the cleaner) and using some words in his native Tajiki language, he sees how Alisher lights up. After that, Vasya asks her to teach him her ways with people, particularly how to say "Hello" in their native languages. This interaction is then followed by an illustrated spread containing information on geography (including distance from Moscow), history, and cultural traditions of Alisher's country, as well as the reasons for his migration to Moscow. The informative aspect of the book is reinforced by the use of maps. Uncomplicated in nature, they provide visual support to verbal descriptions, contextualizing the narrative and confirming to the readers the accuracy of information presented in the book – a common strategy used in nonfiction picturebooks (see Goga & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017).

Meticulously drawn by award-winning Natalia Yaskina, visual elements of all informative spreads include the depiction of the country's map, its flag, and representatives of the nation wearing colorful traditional clothes and being engaged in a celebration of their country's main national holiday which involves a food feast (with the names of some dishes spelled out) which helps to acquaint children with new cultures. According to the author, it was of crucial

<sup>5</sup> Of course, it does not mean that all families in Moscow raise their children this way, but, according to the author, this was a deliberate exaggeration to prove a point.

importance to include a textual description of each country's national holiday, as well as its visual representation, following the common trend of Western children's books celebrating diversity and multiculturalism. The endpapers provide a brief vocabulary of basic words from each of the countries (e.g., *me, you, hello, home, friend, thank you, mom, and please*) and their Russian transcription. Each language is also accompanied by the image of a country's national dressed in traditional attire. However, some readers found such representations a bit "archaic" and even "stereotypical" (Oleynikov, 2019), stating that it reminded them of the numerous Soviet encyclopedias for children about different cultures and nations of both the Soviet Union and the world. To them, *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* projects the negative feeling of a restorative nostalgia for the Soviet past with its seeming praise of multiculturalism and solidarity.

Throughout the book, Vasya meets migrant characters from the following countries and regions: Tajikistan, Moldova, Tatarstan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, China, Chechnya, Georgia, Yakutia, Armenia, and Ukraine. The book creators provide two reasons for the countries' selection. First, despite claiming to have conducted proper research, they were relying on the principle of "whom you would most likely come across on the streets" (Oleynikov, 2016), which, again, might be read as "stereotypical" – something that Russian children are expected to see both outside, on the streets of Moscow, and in the media. The second reason was purely rooted in the book's design. The publisher wanted to feature "visually diverse landscapes" to keep the child reader interested and focused. For this reason, it was decided to include a migrant character from Yakutia – to break down landscapes more familiar to a child's eye with a cool-toned image of Yakutian snow.

If we look at the gender composition and migration reasons, out of twelve, only three characters are females, while migration is caused by both push factors (war, political persecution) and pull factors (higher quality of life, employment, study, marriage, reuniting with family). Despite the author's aim to introduce children to as many types of migration as possible, the dominant reason for migration is seeking a higher quality of life and getting a better-paying job to provide for their families back home. The occupations vary from quite common, migrant-associated ones (street cleaner, plumber, house painter, taxi driver) to more: "ordinary," not typically associated with migrants (dentist, jeweler). The characters themselves are not based on real people and instead represent rather "collective" images,<sup>6</sup> which, in a way, continue certain existing stereotypes, both in terms of visual representation (e.g., their looks) and in the choice of their new occupations (e.g., Armenian migrant as a music teacher, Yakutian migrant working with rare gems), which however unintentionally, still has a negative impact on how children perceive migrants.

<sup>6</sup> According to the illustrator, the images were created before Oleynikov's text (from personal correspondence, 2025).

However, due to the book's quite formulaic and repetitive structure and its focus on an informative component, there are no judgment-based evaluations or any other thoughts related to the construction of us/them divides voiced either by migrants themselves or by the protagonist, apart from the ones mentioned in the very beginning. The author partially acknowledges the issue of stereotypes; however, he admits that for the purpose of the book (introducing migration to non-migrant children), this was a necessary and unavoidable decision to show migrants as typical "others," which, according to García-González, "give[s] a sense of cohesiveness to the in-group" (2017: 66).

The last country that Vasya gets to know is Ukraine. As his auntie starts speaking Ukrainian on the phone, Vasya suddenly realizes she is using a different language: "all of a sudden, she started babbling in some mysterious language! It sounded almost Russian, but I couldn't understand a word" (52). As Vasya explains further, all this time, he thought his auntie was making up her own words to sound funny. This perception of the Ukrainian language as something funny and inferior to Russian is acceptable from a child's perspective. However, it is also quite common for the whole Russian society in general.

As for the reasons for Auntie Gelya's migration, the reader learns the following: "The worst cause of migration is war. It is not only soldiers who die but also civilians who are killed by hunger, disease, and shells. Now that there is a war in Ukraine, Auntie Gelya is living with us. She is a displaced person. But we believe that the war will end soon, and then we'll be able to just go and visit each other!" (55). Written in 2015, these words did not age well. Moreover, due to Russia's recently introduced war censorship laws<sup>7</sup>, it is simply no longer possible to even mention "war in Ukraine" in children's texts published in Russia. As it is the case with all other migrants' backgrounds in this book, such migration "explanation" provides quite a limited perspective: the readers are only told that there is a war, however, this section avoids a more in-depth discussion of the root reasons turning it into what Vassiloudi refers to as "a self-created condition" (2019: 38). Acknowledging the unstable political situation in the country, the publisher admits that they have spent three and a half years working on the book and constantly rewriting it "to keep it up to date as the authorities built either ghettos or registration centres for migrants" but also "not to speak vaguely about complex issues" (Balakhonova, 2015).

The book has two endings. It is Vasya's eighth birthday, but his parents were delayed at the airport and could not make it in time. Instead, in the best traditions of multiculturalism, all his new migrant friends are showing up unexpectedly, bringing presents and their traditional food to the festive table. All

<sup>7</sup> Introduced in 2022, these laws criminalise spreading of "fakes" and "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces (Articles 207.3 and 280.3 of the Criminal Code), carrying a maximum sentence of 15 years. In 2022, both publisher and author signed an open anti-war letter.

the dishes are numbered and have brief descriptions. And then Vasya wakes up and realizes it was all but a dream, and his parents are already home. Such a dream can be considered symbolic and nostalgic as it clearly demonstrates both the boy's and authors' desire to live in one friendly world or at least to long for the world that once used to be peaceful.

The book was very well received (after all, it is one of the first books on the Russian market on this topic), with some readers calling it "a fiction story, a map, and an atlas of intercultural communication."<sup>8</sup> However, there was a fair share of criticism, too. Some critics suggested that ideally, such a book should have been accompanied by several regional editions as migration flows and diasporic compositions differ from region to region. Oleynikov recalls the books being accused of showing the signs of "Chauvinism, Moscow snobbery and even fascism" (Oleynikov, 2016). Apart from the selection of countries, readers were puzzled by the decision to make the child protagonist interact with adult migrants and not child migrants. It reminded them of post-imperialism legacies – a white boy is being served by migrants. As Vassiloudi writes, "an outsider to the community, a foreigner, is accepted and integrated only after he proves he has something to offer in return – in other words, when he is deemed useful to them" (2019: 44). Even if this "acceptance" is just taking part in a boy's birthday from a dream. One might think of the old-fashioned children's books where a traveler exploring foreign lands would be showered with presents. Oleynikov himself partially agrees with this "ethnographic nostalgia," as he calls it, but emphasizes that there was no other way around it (Oleynikov, 2019).

Although written by an internal second-generation "migrant" who has conducted diligent research, *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* can be considered authentic only nominally. It is one of those books that "are often recommended because of how they seemingly give us access to immigration [...] [and] enrich the worldview of the local child with new perspectives" (García-González, 2017: 66). In reality, it only scratches the surface around the concept of migration, offering somewhat limited exploration of migrant feelings on the matter, as well as reader's engagement in deeper discussions about why these people became migrants in the first place. Nevertheless, it is still one of the first attempts to break the underrepresentation of migrant experiences in Russian children's literature, and such innovation must be applauded.

### "EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT HERE"

Having taken into account some of the criticism voiced towards his first book on the topic and switching the focus from migrant adults to migrant children,

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<sup>8</sup> From *Labirint.ru* book reviews, one of Russia's most popular online bookstores: Alena. (2019, March 21). [Online review of the book *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»*, by A. Oleynikov]. *Labirint.ru*. <https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/509396/>.

Oleynikov went on to create another book – *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'tsya* [Run Can't Stay, 2021]. This comic was also a commissioned work, created in partnership with UNHCR Russia, and features seven stories about 'ordinary' school students in Russia who are refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, CAR, DRC, Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Unlike his previous book, it is based on real-life events and reveals the difficulties that refugee children and their families have to overcome. Illustrations are provided by the students of the Comics Studies program at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, with each story illustrated by a different artist in order to get "different voices and different images" (Oleynikov, 2021).

*Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'tsya* falls under the broad category of ever-growing "refugee narratives" or "refugee stories," which, according to Vassiloudi includes "narratives in picturebook, graphic novel, comic, or animation format produced independently by authors, based on fictionalized versions of lived experience" (2019: 35). Such narratives share some common elements (not necessarily presented within one text), such as "home-away-(new)home" structure, "happy closure," the accompanying explanatory paratext, and an endorsement by international or local refugee relief organizations, while their functions include raising the awareness of non-refugee child readers, developing empathy towards less fortunate/privileged, and inspiring to make a change (Hwang & Coneway, 2017; Hope, 2018). Sub-genre of migration literature, refugee stories "reflect *forced* migration, which, while sharing many aspects of migration literature, have other agendas" (Hope, 2017, 17). So, what is the "agenda" of Oleynikov's book?

The book starts with an introductory note, which is devoted to the description of the UNHCR work and defines the aim of the project as follows: "We really wanted to show the life experiences of *your* peers, who had to seek refuge in Russia. Although sometimes they might face challenging times, they still dream, think, ask questions, and hope for the best. *They* are just the same as the rest of *us*" (7, italics mine). This juxtaposition of "they" and "us" clearly indicates that the book's targeted audience is non-refugee readers, which is also emphasized by the section "How You Can Help"<sup>9</sup> on the last spread, which puts the reader in the position of a benefactor – a common criticism voiced about some of the Western refugee books for children (García-González, 2017; Vassiloudi, 2019).

According to the contact person at UNHCR, a total of seven stories from numerous interviews with refugee children were offered to Oleynikov, and he picked all of them and then "played with the narrative." Apart from that, the

<sup>9</sup> This includes the following: "Spread information about refugee relief organisations; Be kinder to people regardless of their nationality; Donate money to UNHCR or other partner organisations; Become a volunteer in one of the partner organisations; Donate products and clothes to partner organisations" (137).

names of the heroes and their countries of origin were changed in 95 percent of cases.<sup>10</sup> The name change is expected, but the country change seems a bit unnecessary and jeopardizes the whole concept of authenticity, as if it is not important to respect the origin of refugee people and their lived experience. It makes one wonder how the original interviews for this project were conducted, whether children's parents/relatives participated, and to what extent other aspects of the stories were fictionalized for the dramatic effect.

As I was curious whether the children participating in this project were presented with the final product and what their opinion about this "playing" with such a highly sensitive narrative was, I reached out to UNHCR. However, they did not provide answers to these questions. Regardless of that, it would have been pertinent to provide this information either in the preface or afterword to the book to make the process more transparent. Scholars have long noted that while there are many refugee children's books (especially picturebooks), very few are written by refugees themselves. As a result, refugee children, who often find themselves in the position of mere "observers of the disruptions to their own lives," are once again deprived of autonomy and control over their lives, albeit on paper (Oranç & Veryeri Alaca, 2017: 165). Oranç & Veryeri Alaca point out the therapeutic benefits of collaborative creating narratives, which, apart from reducing post-traumatic stress, "contribute to meaning-making and identity development among refugees [...] by enabling the reconstruction of memories, the reinterpretation of the present and the imagining of new possibilities" (2017: 156). By taking control over the original refugee narratives, Oleynikov and other creators of the book not only risk limiting the value of narrative therapy but also may unintentionally constrain opportunities for refugee children's personal development.

When discussing refugee narratives, it is important to differentiate between diasporic and non-diasporic texts as it affects the functions of such texts. According to Martin & McDaniel, who take an authorship rather than an audience approach, "only authors who originate from the countries they write about or who are descendants of those who do can write diasporic literature" (2021: 55). According to these authors, rather than simply raising the awareness, diasporic texts "affirm the experiences of children in those communities, letting them know that they are not alone" (2021: 55). Diasporic texts thus tend to be more focused on sharing experiences and emotions caused by the same or similar trauma, while non-diasporic texts lean towards the enlightenment of a reader. Although it might not be the case with all such texts, *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'sya*, despite being based on interviews and engagement with real child refugees, cannot be considered a diasporic text in Martin & McDaniel's understanding. This is also emphasized in the introductory note with its us-them

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<sup>10</sup> From personal correspondence, 2022.

divide and focus on non-refugee readers. However, it still can be considered authentic as it is written by an “outsider to the culture who collaborate[s] with an insider to strengthen authenticity” (Short, 2011).

Each of Oleynikov’s stories is introduced by an informational double spread that provides a reader with the historical context, while the story itself occupies from seven to ten double spreads with a top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading order, which is guided by the arrangement of panels. The first page is devoted to a short introduction of the character, including their age, interests and hobbies, the reasons for immigration to Russia, and the difficulties associated with the refugee condition: separation from family and friends, loss of homeland and identity, displacement, rejection, lack of safety, bullying, unemployment, paperwork bureaucracy, etc. Such structure allows both the author and the illustrator to focus on capturing and transmitting emotions rather than setting the scene.

At the end of each refugee story’s introduction, the reader is presented with a set of open rhetorical questions. For instance, the story about George, who had migrated from CAR, asks the reader: “Will he stay in Russia? Will he reunite with his father? Will he ever walk the streets of Moscow without feeling unsafe?” (70). What differentiates this book from similar Western ones is the lack of a “happy closure,” or any closure for that matter. Each of the seven stories ends quite abruptly without giving any answers. Such an open ending can be again treated as a deliberate lack of agency on the refugee part as if readers, after familiarizing themselves with this book and taking action to become agents of social change, might have an impact on their destinies. However, the author provides a different explanation:

Their stories are not finished. They are still going on. No one knows what will happen next. Many have been living in this uncertainty for years. [...] And I thought it wouldn’t be right for me to provide a happy ending. The aim was not to write a glamorous story, but to evoke a strong emotional response from teenagers to the difficult reality of life, to share these problems. (Oleynikov, 2021)

Using an unaccounted-for war as a reason for displacement and skipping the emblematic journey part, Oleynikov’s text is focused on a ‘new home’ part and integration process told from the first-person perspective. However, some stories do delve into the traumatic memories of the characters. According to some critics (Moran, 2007; Salzman & Rosenberg, 2006), the impossibility of representing trauma by means of a traditional language makes a comic or a graphic novel the most appropriate medium for such narratives as Cathy Caruth states, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an *image* or event” (1995: 4–5, *italics mine*). Due to the unique character of the time-space relationship in comics, which, according to McCloud, “are one and the same” (1993: 100), the comics medium allows for the visual simultaneousness of the past and the future, which is achieved through back-and-forth reading of panels.

This sense of timelessness can also be reflected through the use of bleeds and images that “fill an entire page to the edge” (Earle, 2017: 49).

The author has placed all characters within the space of one school, although due to their age and Russian language skills, they all study in different classes. In the text, they do not interconnect with each other directly; however, such strategy attempts to show that they are more connected than one might think, although this slightly undermines the extent of the “based on a true story” claim.

The first story is about Marva, whose family moved to Russia from Afghanistan when she was three years old, and now she is in the eighth grade, plays in a school basketball team, works in a café, and dreams of applying to the university. Unfortunately, her family, especially her father, thinks that she should quit school and help her mother at home, as this is where a woman belongs. Apart from the introduction, the verbal text is limited to the internal thoughts of the character, speech balloons, and several instances of onomatopoeia, which is typical for comics. Since the text is rather sparse, the tension is achieved through visual elements, the use of evocative black-and-white illustrations, high contrasts, shadows, lines, and color blocks.

The story starts with Marva sitting in a history class and being triggered by the teacher's mention of Afghanistan. Her memories are presented with very dark panels, which are dominated by black color, contributing to its prominence and attention-grabbing. The panel is not limited to one page but invades the gutter and the space between the panels, and continues over to the next page, which reminds of a picturebook technique. As panels shape the sense of passing time, we might say that Marva's traumatic memories are still not entirely in the past.

Unlike another girl character from the next story, Marva is allowed to play sports at school, but she is also forced to wear a headscarf once outside, and she can no longer walk alone, so either her brother or father meets her after school. Her reaction to this is shown through facial expressions: cheerful with bright, wide-open eyes at school and suppressed, with eyes looking down once she is around her male relatives. She is not arguing with her brother but obediently follows him like a shadow, which is depicted in the middle right panel.

After that, we learn that her father is planning to make Marva marry her uncle because he is “a good person and has a good job” (26), and that is exactly how he married Marva's mother. In the final spread, we see Marva in bed, lying under a black duvet covered with white stars, with one of the stars depicting her thoughts on wanting to do something more interesting with her life than marriage, which can serve as a little glimpse of hope since this is the end of the story. A similar experience is presented in Jasmine's story, whose father is not allowing her to participate in gym classes together with the boys as her family needs to “protect her honor.” The final spread depicts the shadow of her father

shaped almost like a monster, while the falling snow covering muddy roads, a herald of the coming change of the seasons, can also be interpreted as a symbol of hope and a fresh start.

Despite commonly faced refugee problems (language barriers and cultural differences, lack of legal status and state support, poverty, social exclusion), the book seems to make a clear gender-based distinction: female characters are more troubled by internal, family-related issues (e.g., overprotecting relatives who insist on wearing a headscarf and doubt the value of education), while male characters are more subject to external issues such as racism, society, and school bullying, etc.), like, for example, Abdul who is being attacked by an old woman on a bus: “Don’t we have enough of you?! Go home to collect bananas. Shame on you!” (35) or George who is being provoked on the street because of his skin color. Even one of the female characters admits in her story that she would have been stopped for checks on the streets more often if she was male, and especially “if they knew that I speak Arabic” (128). However, such gender division is not necessarily present in real life, as female immigrants face just as much bullying at school/on the streets. In the book, it is both local children/teenagers and adults who demonstrate hostile attitudes towards foreigners. Second-generation migrant characters, who were born in Russia and who are more confident in their language skills and cultural awareness, are not having an easy time either, like, for instance, Pierre: “I’m local. I was born here. But no one believes me. In every new school they ask me the same question. As if they’ve never seen a person with a dark skin” (90).

Despite all the difficulties faced by the characters (“Everything is different here. Different clothes. Different people. Different weather” 59), almost none of them feel nostalgic for the lost homeland. Most of their recollections are associated with war and destruction, fear and loss. The only exception is 16-year-old Ibrahim. His mother was born in Azerbaijan. During her studies in the Soviet Union, she got married and moved to Yemen, which they had to leave due to the war conflict. Although Ibrahim understands a little bit of Russian, it is not enough for him to study with children of his age; that is why he is still in the sixth grade. Working part-time as a loader to help his mother and sister, he is escaping from reality by dreaming about “pre-war Yemen, a golden time of peace and quiet.” “I once used to have the sea. We had a garden. Not a big one, but we loved it. Our house was by the sea. You just need to walk down the street and here it was. The port, the ships. I never wanted to become a sailor. I just liked to look at the sea. That’s what I miss the most” (104–105). To strengthen his fascination with the sea, his story opens with the line “Call me Ibrahim” (103), an allusion to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. The lack of nostalgic feelings expressed by other characters can be explained by their age difference: those who have left their home country too young mostly remember their home through the tragic memories of their families.

Just like in *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»*, the representation of migrant characters, both female and male, in this book is slightly leaning towards the stereotypical one. This is especially evident with the depiction of Muslim girls who are forced to wear headscarves and marry older relatives. Jasmine, who is very dependent on her environment, is trying to fit into the new world: making friends at school and playing with other girls during PE classes, which is forbidden by her father. Here, we have the conflict between the traditional Islamic culture of the parents and the culture of the outside, accepting world, not to mention that in some schools, headscarves are strictly forbidden by the administration. According to the author, the black headscarf was used to mark her as “different” and separate her from the Russian girls, and in this way, to show the child’s inner conflict. There are some problematic male representations in the book, too. For instance, Pierre from the Congo is extremely good at football, which taps into the stereotypical (not necessarily a negative one) image of “poor African village boys” playing football for days on end in hopes of getting noticed by talent scouts while the story of George, who has arrived from the Central African Republic, is written in rhyming verse imitating rap which – as creative as it might be – can also be considered as a reductive stance. Oleynikov, who in 2019 wrote a whole different comic in rap verse about school bullying, believes that the rap format makes the texts more accessible to modern Russian teenagers, evoking in them more resonance and empathy.

According to the project spokesperson, no real photos were used in the process of creating illustrations: students relied purely on their imagination and text descriptions. Nevertheless, all migrant children are illustrated as culturally diverse. Characterized by quick, simple lines, their images depict different skin tones, body types, hairstyles, facial expressions, and clothing. The style of illustrations, in general, is dominated by dark and grey tones and shades, which might come across as frightening, especially against a stark white background. However, such a restricted palette of colors can also be symbolic, reflecting the narrow-mindedness of the locals towards refugees.

In 2021, the book was adapted for theatre as part of the World Refugee Day art festival taking place in Moscow. Called “documentary performances,” these were a series of headphone-verbatim performances where actors listen to the characters’ direct speech in real-time and broadcast it to the audience. This was followed by more stage adaptations in 2022–2023 across Russia, including amateur adaptations produced by various summer art camps. In 2022, the UN Refugee Agency and Ethnosphera Centre for the Promotion of Interethnic Education also produced a methodological handbook for the comics containing practical tools for conducting interactive sessions with students in schools. Theatrical adaptations, as well as an inclusion into the school curriculum, can be seen as *Bezhat’ Nel’zya Ostat’tsya* exhibiting the early signs of a canonization process.

## CONCLUSION

As windows and mirrors, migration and refugee narratives can be powerful vehicles in shaping children's self-images and images of others, as well as their attitudes toward other nationalities. This is especially relevant in turbulent environments like today's Russia, where creative freedoms are increasingly stifled, and the very act of producing works that address such sensitive and complex topics is an achievement in itself. Echoing Ludmila Ulitskaya's book series for teenagers titled *The Other, Others, About Others*<sup>11</sup>, which began back in 2006 and ceased to exist for political reasons, Oleynikov's texts represent one of the rare attempts to raise awareness of migration problems and create a much-needed contemporary image of refugees and migrants in Russian children's literature.

However, the inherent outsider's position often present in children's literature, combined with the lack of a new, nuanced language for depicting ethnic diasporas and a theoretical framework for analyzing such representations, slightly undermines the authenticity of both texts under analysis. Due to the clear juxtaposition of "they" and "us" in the paratexts, both *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* and *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'sya* are targeted at non-migrant readers, who are put in the position of benefactors – a common flaw that these two texts share with some of the Western refugee/migrant books for children. Drawing from personal teaching experience with migrant children and an understanding of the psychological challenges they face in a foreign cultural environment, the author brings valuable insights to the texts. Despite this background, both books occasionally slip into problematic representations, binarism, and a certain "Sovietness." The visual and verbal depiction of characters, the representation of their qualities and emotions through actions and choices, as well as their relationships with peers and adults at times taps into stereotypical tropes, perhaps in hope to encourage empathy in the reader, who is forced to look at the characters represented as the poor unfortunate "others."

Nevertheless, despite these "shortcomings," Oleynikov's texts remain an important and simply necessary predecessor, serving as a call to action for future authors to explore these narratives with greater nuance and depth. Their existence is a testament to the resilience of literature in challenging times.

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<sup>11</sup> Dedicated to various topics in cultural anthropology and ethnography, this series was aimed at sharing information about representatives of other cultures and their traditions and fostering mutual understanding and respect. I want to thank the reviewers for bringing my attention to this series.

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## Guest Contribution



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# Migrant Children's Agency in a Polish School and Their Sense of Identity.

Based on the Results of the Project

*Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue  
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation (CHILD-UP)*

**Abstract:** This article examines the agency of migrant children in Polish schools and their negotiation of hybrid identities in the context of national identification, drawing on qualitative research conducted within the CHILD-UP project (Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation). The study, conducted before the large influx of Ukrainian refugee children following Russia's 2022 aggression, focuses on the challenges and conflicts migrant children face and the strategies they use to navigate school environments. The methodology included 27 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions with migrant children aged 9–14, conducted across two regions in Poland. The research explored children's agency in relation to peer interactions, conflict resolution, and their participation in school life, as well as the formation of hybrid identities through interactions with their host and home cultures. The findings highlight the importance of peer networks in fostering a sense of agency and belonging, as well as the significance of creating inclusive educational spaces that respect children's diverse cultural backgrounds. The study underscores the relational and dynamic nature of agency, shaped by the interplay of individual autonomy and interdependence within the school environment. Hybrid identities are shown to emerge as fluid and negotiated constructs, reflecting children's adaptation to complex socio-cultural contexts. This research contributes to understanding migrant children's lived experiences and offers practical insights for the development of responsive and inclusive public policies in education. It also advocates for schools as dynamic spaces of intercultural dialogue, emphasizing the need for participatory approaches that empower migrant students and promote mutual understanding.

**Keywords:** migrant children, school, agency, peer networks, hybrid identity

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to present the agency of migrant children in Polish schools. We explore the challenges and conflicts these children face, as well as the ways they address and resolve them, applying the concept of hybrid identity to illustrate how they negotiate their agency in terms of national and/or transnational identifications. Additionally, we offer recommendations based on the conducted research.

The article draws on findings from the project *Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation* (CHILD-UP), H2020 (GA 822400),<sup>1</sup> which ran from 2019 to 2022 (<https://www.child-up.eu>). The project aimed to show how children's agency can empower them, enabling them to influence the integration process and even transform or shape relationships within the classroom, school, and family. Although global research on the situation of migrant children often incorporates their agency and subjectivity (Moskal, 2023), such studies remain relatively novel in the Polish context.

The research team also examined how students participate in complex interactions and express their needs regarding school, fair and equal treatment, and understanding their language skills, academic achievements, or mastery of specific subjects. In other words, the study problematized how children actively work to overcome barriers in both school and the wider community. It can be argued that the CHILD-UP project allowed researchers to diagnose changes in the conditions for integration shaped by the system, social policies, various decision-makers, professionals (teachers, intercultural assistants, and social workers), as well as by the children and their families themselves (Warat, Struzik, Ślusarczyk, Slany, Ratecka, Szydłowska-Klakla, 2022).

In this article we present selected results from qualitative research conducted with migrant children attending a Polish school.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the research we conducted illustrates the state before the huge influx of refugee children after Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. At the time of conducting our research, there were relatively few migrant children

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<sup>1</sup> The project partners were: Department of Studies on Language and Culture – Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy) – coordinator Zentrum für Forschung, Weiterbildung und Beratung – University of Dresden (Germany), Jagiellonian University Krakow (Poland), Université de Liege (Belgium), University of Northampton (United Kingdom), Malmö Högskola (Sweden), Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (Finland), International Institute of Humanitarian Law (Italy), European School Head Association (Netherlands), Federation des Regions pour la Recherche, l'Éducation et la Formation (France).

<sup>2</sup> Polish qualitative research report: <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CHILD-UP-D5.2-Poland.pdf>; comparative report of research conducted among partner countries <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MS16-Report-on-qualitative-analysis.pdf> was prepared by the authors of the project.

in Poland, and those who arrived faced a lot of barriers and difficulties. At the time of conducting our research, there were approximately 54,000 foreign children studying in Polish schools. For comparison, according to the Ministry of Education and Science, 183,461 Ukrainian students are those who came to Poland after the start of the Russian invasion and have the status of a war refugee, another 103,073 are Ukrainian citizens who do not have this status but have been here before. This totals 286,534 Ukrainian pupils who are educated in Polish institutions, according to data from the Ministry of Education and Science.<sup>3</sup> Poland, as a "new" EU country, has relatively recently become increasingly attractive to migrants, mainly due to "the narrowing of the gap in living standards between the 'old' and the 'new' EU" (King, Okólski, 2019: 25). The phenomena and processes associated with the enrolment of such a huge number of children into the Polish educational system become a fundamental turning point in terms of the broadly understood policy of responsiveness to the numerous and complex needs of migrant children, including educational needs. Earlier migrations, as well as those after 24 February 2022 are clearly changing the social and cultural landscape of the Polish school.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, research projects focusing on the experiences of migrant children can be of great importance not only for expanding knowledge about the phenomenon under study, but also for the development of public policies, as they provide knowledge about schools as spaces of learning, emotional spaces, relational processes, and intercultural dialogue from the perspective of the children themselves.

Our research is a contribution to the recognition of the experiences of the migrant child in the Polish school, the process of multicultural education and multicultural dialogue. The voice of the children themselves was important in our study. Our study aligns with critical research on migration and childhood, applying a paradigm that focuses on the child as a distinct social actor with their own agency, decision-making capacity, and autonomy, even while remaining in relationships of interdependence with others (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, Lam, 2001; Moskal, 2023). It is worth noting that during the project, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, which had a significant impact on the research.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rp.pl/edukacja/art39462041-ile-dzieci-z-ukrainy-jest-w-polskich-szkolach-i-przedszkolach-poznalismy-dane> (accessed November 20, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Due to the lack of visibility of Ukrainian children in Polish schools, the Ministry of Education introduced of 1.09. 2024 refugee children from Ukraine will be covered by annual pre-school preparation, compulsory schooling and compulsory education (secondary schools) in the Polish educational system – analogously to Polish students. Online learning will only be available to pupils who in the school year 2024/2025 are studying in the highest programme class in a school functioning in the Ukrainian education system. Family benefit 800+ and Good Start will be paid to refugees from Ukraine provided that their child is in the so-called pre-school, primary school or secondary school. <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/uczniowie-z-ukrainyimportant-information-for-parents>.

Prolonged restrictions led to the closure of all schools in most of the countries<sup>5</sup> involved in the project, making it impossible to carry out the study as originally designed. Nevertheless, the research team took these difficulties as an opportunity to set new tasks, and the project's research objectives themselves were expanded. The majority of our interviews were conducted directly with the children on a face-to-face basis. Occasionally an online interview was included when offline meetings were not feasible. We mention this because this crisis context in which the research was conducted (pandemic, migratory and economic crisis and, later, war-induced crisis) significantly informs not only the research process itself, but also the research questions, which needed to be reformulated "live" as it were, responding to changing conditions and opportunities. In our case, the concepts of children's agency (understood as participation and decision-making processes), as well as hybrid identity (defined through being constructed in communication), central to the theoretical framework of the project, demanded a new conceptualization that took into account the significance of crisis (chronic, temporal, distant, and near) in the experience of migrant children.

#### A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY OF THE CHILD AND CHILDHOOD. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In the CHILD-UP project, in undertaking research on the situation of migrant children in Europe, we applied a perspective based on concepts of child agency (child-centered approaches) and hybrid cultural integration. The mobility of children, which leads many of them to experience transnational childhood, requires the use of a child-centered approach (Ni Laoire, Carpena-Mendez, Tyrrell, White, 2011; Tyrrell, White, Ni Laoire, Carpentena-Menez, 2013). This requirement stems from the assumptions of the new sociology of childhood (1970s), in which the child is seen as an active subject, a reflective actor who can tell us a lot about their experiences, events, and the connections between transnational migration and their childhood. Viewing children as passive actors, which was previously common in the sociology of childhood, primarily resulted from studying children as "victims" or merely witnesses of conflicts and violence caused by wars and the migrations of their parents, who were the key decision-makers regarding the nature and course of migration. The paradigm shift toward treating children as active agents is reflected, among other things, in the use of various qualitative or participatory methods that allow children to have a voice (Christensen, Prout, 2012: 42; Hogan, 2012; Scott, 2004; Baraldi, 2014) and in designing research "with children," not just

<sup>5</sup> Vide policy brief relating to the pandemic <https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/D2.10-Policy-brief-1-revised.pdf>.

“on children.” Children are no longer seen as “migratory baggage” (Orellana et al., 2001), but rather as active agents influencing many spheres of family and social life (Scott, 2004: 122). They are seen as individuals who act and influence their own lives and the lives of others, as well as what happens around them. With this new perspective in childhood studies, children become actors who make decisions within specific broader social conditions, responding to what life brings, measured by their own means and capabilities. This approach has often been incorporated into migration studies, including those focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, which have demonstrated that children, like adults, actively shape migration and integration processes through their emotions, thoughts, and actions (Klaus, Lévy, Rzeplińska, Scheinost, 2018; Pacek, 2022). From this perspective, schools are also analyzed not as institutions imposing behavioral patterns and social norms, but rather as spaces co-created by multiple actors, including migrant students (Strzemecka, 2015; Moskal, 2023; Orellana et al., 2001).

By using tools and concepts derived from new childhood studies in the CHILD-UP project, it was assumed that to understand the experiences of migrant children in school, it is essential to study the school as a social and educational space where complex social relationships are continuously reconstructed and negotiated, in which children express their agency, and shape their hybrid identity. In this way, attention was drawn to the fundamental importance of education in the integration process of children, asking about access to education, the quality of the knowledge provided and its absorbability, as well as the methods used by teachers and educators and the forms of support available to them in teaching migrant children.

Additionally, a non-essentialist interpretation of cultures and cultural identities was adopted to show the process of constructing a hybrid identity among migrant children. Hybridity is understood here as the result of a complex web of interactions aimed at “opening up many possibilities for how narratives can intertwine and be expressed” (Holliday, Amadasi, 2022: 11). This approach emphasizes understanding identity as fluid, dynamic, and constructed through the process of communication and interaction with others (Baraldi, 2021: 26). Therefore, the concept of “hybridity” refers to two aspects: (1) facilitating narratives about personal cultural trajectories negotiated in classroom interactions; (2) incorporating into these narratives various conditions, events, and changes related to the experience of migration. In this non-essentialist perspective, the school classroom or school is a place for sharing narratives about personal cultural trajectories, thus creating small cultures (Holliday, 1999), which represent cultural environments that are close to individuals. In this view, the classroom – and any other social context experienced by children – is seen as “multicultural” because it supports the creation of diverse small cultures rather than being a sum of individuals with predefined cultural identities.

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role, allowing different cultures and hybrid identities to manifest and appreciate one another (Baraldi, 2015). This means that integration in social contexts is always hybrid integration, i.e., integration is based on the negotiation of meanings. Therefore, integration cannot be considered a reduction of cultural variability; rather, it signifies the enrichment of social systems through the diversity and flexibility of personal cultural trajectories produced in specific social situations. According to Claudio Baraldi (2021: 27), there are three key outcomes that can emerge from social interventions and policies grounded in non-essentialist theories, which view identity as hybrid. First, by promoting a negotiated construction of cultural identity, it becomes possible to avoid rigid traditions and divisive social constructs. Second, children labeled as “migrants” can actively participate in shaping their identities and transforming their social environments. Third, integration can be approached as a process of hybridization, steering away from assimilationist frameworks. Notably, hybridity here pertains not to individual identity itself but to the dynamic negotiation of identity within specific contexts, such as classroom interactions.

Another key concept for the research is migrant children’s agency, which is the main theme of this article. In the project, we define children’s agency by their active participation based on the availability of choices of actions that strengthen their role in changing social arrangements in the classroom or school (e.g., the course of interaction, influencing the way they are assessed, solving difficult situations) (Baraldi, 2021). While children’s active participation can take place at any point in communication, achieving agency requires promoting children’s right to active participation in relation to choice and social change, enabling them to acquire epistemic power (Baraldi, 2015), i.e., rights and responsibilities to access and produce knowledge in the hierarchical arrangement of the school.

Critical studies of childhood point out that in the dominant vision of agency it often appears as a process or individual resource, ascribed to the individual, that its “positive” dimension is most often discussed, neglecting its negative potentiality (both in terms of what we need to sacrifice to exercise our agency and also what the potential consequences of agential acts might be) (Holloway, Holt, Mills, 2019). Questions about the possible reproduction of oppression in the context of expressions of agency are also less frequently raised. In addition, it is emphasized that the vision of agency proposed by the social sciences is based on the assumption of the “innocence” of children and young people to make grounded and reasonable decisions.

This ignores situations in which this normative pattern is transgressed and the actions taken by young actors are seen not as an expression of agency, but rather as a problem to be solved (e.g., in relation to minors’ involvement in armed conflict, living on the street, taking psychoactive substances). In looking

at these assumptions, researchers critically studying agency ask themselves about the importance of the relationships in which children and young people function for expressions of agency (Bartos, 2012; Vanderbeck, Worth, 2015). Moving beyond the embedded liberal thought view of the concept in question, studies of the Global South, for example, point to an inter-relational and inter-dependent understanding of agency – children and young people act causally (or not) precisely because they are in relationships and function in a variety of dependencies. These considerations are also relevant in the context of child migration, as they reveal the complex social landscape of mobility and shaping identities.

The complex relationships in which migrant children function (relationships with family and carers, relationships with school, relationships with country of origin and host country) reveal many areas in which agency can be enhanced or constrained. Migration itself offers many possible scenarios in which children's participation and decision-making can be both minimal and on par with adults. This indicates that agency must always be understood contextually and take into account the whole network of dependencies that can shape it.

## ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY

As highlighted, in this paper we present selected findings from qualitative research conducted with school-aged migrant children. This research has helped to understand and deepen a number of important issues previously raised in quantitative research in the CHILD UP project.<sup>6</sup> The research in Poland covered children aged 9–14 years, although children aged 5–6 years and 15–16 years were studied in partner countries. The classification of school age according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was followed. Research with children took place in two time-frames as a result of the second and third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. In October 2020, contacts were made with schools: some of these were schools with which quantitative research had been collaborating, but new school establishments were also included in the study. The research was conducted in two schools in the Lubelskie Voivodeship and five schools in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The selection of schools and their invitation to participate in the study were based on the presence of migrant children among their students. As mentioned in the introduction, the research was conducted before Russia's aggression against

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<sup>6</sup> The CHILD UP project conducted a large quantitative study, the results of which can be found on the project website. 673 surveys were conducted with children, 621 with parents, 35 with teachers, 21 with social workers, and 10 with intercultural assistants. [https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CHILD-UP-Report-on-the-analysis-of-quantitative-data\\_FULL.pdf](https://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CHILD-UP-Report-on-the-analysis-of-quantitative-data_FULL.pdf).

Ukraine, meaning the number of migrant children in the Małopolska region was relatively low at the time. Additionally, we aimed to ensure that these children represented diverse migration trajectories (refugee experiences, economic migration). This led to the decision to include schools from the Lubelskie region in the study. It is important to note that several invited schools declined to participate in the study. The primary reasons cited were significant workload pressures on staff due to various responsibilities and the constantly changing regulations affecting school operations during the pandemic. Additionally, some schools responded that their experience working with migrant children was so limited that their participation would not align with the research objectives. A total of six focus group interviews (FGIs) and 27 individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in October 2020 and from May to June 2021. All but three of the in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, as were all FGIs. The migrant pupils participating in the FGI included pupils from ISCED levels 1 and 2 (14 girls and 10 boys). The research was conducted among economic migrant children of Ukraine, Belarus, and among refugee children, who were mainly from Chechnya, but also from Tajikistan and Turkey (Kurdistan). Of the pupils participating in the IDI, seven were at ISCED level 1 and 20 at ISCED level 2. The majority of IDI participants (13 girls and 14 boys) were from Ukraine and Belarus. During some interviews with children, their parents, siblings, and cultural assistants were present. The presence of intercultural assistants, as well as family members, was due to organizational arrangements. Some interviews took place in schools and the presence of an assistant was a formal requirement to ensure the safety of the child. The intercultural assistants were also involved in translation, as not all children knew Polish well enough to participate in the interview on their own. The presence of family members was also related to the organizational aspect – parents brought their children to the interviews. Their knowledge of Polish was sometimes weaker than their children's, so the translation aspect rarely played any role.

Consent to participate in the interview was given by both the parents or guardians and the migrant children themselves. The interviews and individual interviews were guided by a pre-prepared script with a list of questions, while remaining open and flexible to topics and issues relevant to the research participants themselves. Boredom, frustration, and reluctance to answer questions were treated as autonomous expressions of the child to stop the interview or move on to another block of questions. Similarly, enthusiastic and committed responses were read as a desire to expand further and go deeper on a particular issue. Conducting the research involved several ethical challenges. The presence of intercultural assistants or guardians during interviews could provide a sense of security and facilitate translation. However, it also had the potential to limit children's freedom of expression. Where possible, the research team prioritized ensuring the child's autonomy in responding by

directly encouraging them to answer questions and share their own narratives. Observations regarding third-party influence were documented in researchers' notes immediately following each interview.

Some interviews took place in schools, where the prevailing norms (such as the need to be prepared for lessons, assessment of knowledge, and skills) could influence the dynamics between the researcher and the child. Acknowledging this, the team explicitly communicated that there were no right or wrong answers in the interview and that all reflections were welcome. To enhance children's participation, the team emphasized following the child's lead and narrative rather than strictly adhering to a pre-prepared list of questions. Transcriptions of individual and group interviews were coded using MAXQDA and then subjected to problem-based analysis.

## FINDINGS

This section is dedicated to discussing the key findings of the study related to the agency and hybrid identity of migrant children in Polish schools. The first part addresses how the children perceive their agency in interactions with peers and how they express it in conflict situations. The second part illustrates how children with an immigrant background understand their identity, experience it, and manifest it.

### CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

The Polish school is no longer a nationally homogeneous school. This creates a situation in which it faces many challenges in terms of welcoming foreign pupils, preparing curricula, extending the competence of the teaching staff, working on multicultural education at school and conducting dialogue with migrant pupils. In addition to old divisions such as gender, social class, and place of residence, these new dimensions differentiating pupils' experiences such as ethnic group, nationality, migrants, religion, and social status are emerging in schools. Taking into account the intersectional perspective, the Polish school is becoming a complex task-affective structure, both on a micro-social and macro-social scale.

In the CHILD-UP project, the research focus was, among other things, on school situations in which pupils were actively involved in the life of the school, decided on their development paths, built and maintained relationships that were important to them, and manifesting their agency or not. We tried to show which circumstances of the complex school structure make migrant children feel listened to, important, and empowered. The interviews with the children showed that male and female pupils feel empowered and decisive when they can push through an action by themselves or in cooperation with others, e.g., solve a conflict, take an action they are interested in, enforce their rights.

It was important for the pupils to have the possibility to express their thoughts, an open and safe atmosphere in the classroom, and the inclusion in the process of behavioral grading.

In this analysis of agency in the school context, we distinguish three problem areas: first, we show how agency can be understood and expressed by migrant children and under what circumstances it can occur; second, we highlight the role of peer networks in shaping agency; third, we look at children's actions and different expressions of agency in the context of conflict situations.

#### EXPRESSIONS OF AGENCY IN SCHOOL

The children's narratives reveal that agency within the school context can manifest in various ways. On the one hand, migrant children actively utilize the resources available to them, such as engaging in dialogue or debate with teachers, provided that they have access to these opportunities. On the other hand, it is crucial that they feel comfortable within the school environment – built on mutual trust between students and teachers – so that they can freely draw on a range of actions and behaviors without hesitation (Baraldi, 2021). Instances where migrant children were prompted to speak up, such as requesting a higher grade, often arose from feelings of unfair treatment by teachers or from the structure of the classroom, such as co-determining behavior grades. The following two quotes, taken from interviews with a 13-year-old girl from Ukraine and a 13.5-year-old girl from Belarus, respectively, illustrate how migrant children actively negotiate their participation in school life and the methods of assessment.

**Researcher:** “Well then what, you didn't fight for yourself?”

**Girl:** “That was when I was talking to the lady that it wasn't very fair, that for example my friend had the same task done as me and why did she get more marks than me when she should get the same amount. The teacher replied that it was a bit of a different grading system because with her it came out a mark neither minus nor plus.” (PL\_I10\_CH\_G)

**Researcher:** “What's it like for you with the behaviour grade, does the teacher alone decide or do you?”

**Girl:** “As I remember it was always us who also decided what grade someone would get.

**Researcher:** “What did it look like?”

**Girl:** “We would write the name on the board and the lady would say, for example, how many [negative or positive] comments or no comments at all one had and then we had to [decide] whether good or very good for behaviour.”

**Researcher:** “How did you feel about that?”

**Girl:** “I felt good about it.” (PL\_I9\_CH\_G)

Students also appreciate opportunities to participate in democratic structures within the school, such as student government, and to engage in support systems for those in need. Migrant children particularly valued resources like

additional Polish language lessons, the ability to ask for clarification when they didn't understand classroom material, and other forms of support in their native languages. At the same time, they understood the boundaries set by teachers, such as restrictions on using Russian during lessons (as in the following case of a 14-year-old girl from Ukraine who moved to Poland with her parents in 2020), recognizing these as necessary for achieving educational goals.

**Girl:** "We had that extra Polish language."

**Researcher:** "Here at the school?"

**Girl:** "Yes. I still have these extra lessons twice a week, Wednesday and Thursday. On Wednesday at our place, it was remote and on Thursday we would come to school. But it wasn't always, at the beginning it was remote as well, but then you could go to school and we went. The teacher still knows Russian, she can say something in Russian, but she wants us to talk in Polish. And we say to the teacher during this lesson, the teacher very rarely uses this Russian, at the beginning she often spoke it, but then more Polish words, more and more, and this is also good practice." (PL\_I4\_CH\_G)

#### PEER NETWORKS AND EMPOWERMENT

The existence of peer networks and support from fellow students is crucial for maintaining positive relationships at school. Migrant students emphasized the support they received not only from their Polish peers but also from their Ukrainian classmates attending the same school. They particularly appreciated the hospitality and assistance offered by other students, often highlighting small, everyday acts of help that became essential for their daily survival, especially in the early stages of their time at a Polish school. This underscores the emotional dimension of school life – peer networks provide a sense of comfort and emotional resilience, helping students navigate challenges more effectively.

**Researcher:** "What helped you feel comfortable at this school?"

**Girl:** "Friends were more helping what to do, showing where what was located, talking." (PL\_I1\_CH\_G)

**Girl:** "Actually, first I came to this school I met with my classmates, and they prepared like... How do you say it?"

**Researcher:** "Say in Polish."

**Girl:** "Flashcards. So like cards, so in English for me, 'How are you?' 'How are you?', numbers. So it was like... They were very welcoming to me. So yes." (PL\_I22\_CH\_G)

Migrant children who had arrived at the school earlier played a significant role, as they had acquired some experience and knowledge on how to navigate school relationships. By supporting their newly arrived classmates, they often became "connectors" between the school community and the new students. This bridging role was recognized and valued by the teaching staff,

as it helped facilitate smoother integration and provided essential peer support for newcomers.

#### CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THE FACE OF SCHOOL CONFLICTS

Attention was also drawn to conflict situations at school, particularly disputes with other students. Most of the boys and girls interviewed expressed a reluctance to seek teachers' help in resolving conflicts. They often viewed these disputes as too minor to involve staff or feared that involving teachers would escalate the issue, making it seem more serious than it was. Instead, handling conflicts independently reinforced their sense of agency, autonomy, and decision-making abilities. This approach also strengthened their relationships with their peers, as they learned to resolve issues on their own terms.

**Researcher:** "And do you sometimes argue with your classmates or colleagues about something? Are there any problems in the class?"

**Boy:** "Well, one time I had an argument with them. Yes, for 2 days, but then we settled everything, because we had that time remotely after all. We had Teams. So I set it up there with Zuzka, my friend, and she set everything up..."

**Researcher:** "You were the only one who argued, or did several people argue?"

**Boy:** "Only that I argued with my friends. Then the whole two days after that I didn't go to them. And on the third day I didn't go, then we settled everything, we reconciled and one such." (PL\_I8\_CH\_B)

**Boy:** "Well it was going well at the beginning, and it's going well now. I only had two, so to speak, opponents, I think, that I didn't like, I mean there they were talking bad about someone, so to speak. (...) Well, not just about me. Generally they didn't like that I was the first student who came from Ukraine, and so they showed themselves, that they were so proud of themselves, that they were so cool, and that I was from Ukraine and such a nobody, you could say. And I think I had one opponent recently, so to speak, on my side. I had a lot of very colleagues from the beginning, and now I have a lot, which is less than a class, possibly even a whole class. And I still have so of this opponent, of the two of them, one."

**Researcher:** "How did it happen that you pulled him over to your side?"

**Boy:** "And I don't even know. We just started talking and he started smiling at me somehow and such trivial things, and they become friends. I didn't tell a teacher, that you have some problems, because they have their problems, a lot of kids have their problems." (PL\_I21\_CH\_B)

Two boys from Ukraine shared with us their conflict situations that they were able to resolve. One of these conflicts had an ethnic background. However, as one of the boys summarized it, "Children have their problems and solve them on their own." This means that they prefer to try to resolve issues with their peers independently, using the resources and opportunities available to them. One of the collected stories illustrates the complex experiences of a fourteen-year-old boy from Ukraine, who recounted being falsely accused of stealing a phone he had

actually found. He described the situation as disastrous, and when asked about the resolution of the incident, he admitted that the problem was never fully resolved. The boy feels alienated in Poland, lacking friendships and connections at school, and does not feel any sense of belonging to his host country or the local community. He openly expressed a desire to return to his country of origin.

**Researcher:** "And have you ever felt you were treated unfairly?"

**Boy:** "Well, there was one incident where I found a phone from class. A friend gave it back to him [on my behalf], and he said I stole it. Well, that was fatal."

**Researcher:** "Did that somehow get resolved or not?"

**Boy:** "Well, it did manage, but not really." (PL\_I15\_CH\_B)

This narrative complicates the idea of agency. On the one hand, it highlights the boy's dependencies – on his parents' decision to move to Poland, on the rules of the school he was placed in. On the other hand, his lack of well-established relationships with his classmates limits his ability to navigate conflict or difficult situations independently. This lack of social integration leaves him with few options for action, underscoring the importance of social connections in enabling agency in school environments.

## HYBRID IDENTITY OF MIGRANT CHILDREN

The concept of hybrid identity among migrant children is shaped through a process of negotiation and interaction between elements of both the host country and the country of origin. This identity is dynamic, fluid, and often reflects the interplay of social, economic, political, and situational factors. Migrant children actively participate in the construction of their identity as they adapt to changing socio-cultural contexts (Baraldi, 2015; Amadasi, Holliday, 2022).

Hybrid identity is often explored through the ties and relationships migrant children maintain with their country of origin, including the language spoken at home and their everyday practices. The results of our study suggest that these dimensions reveal what can be described as a child's "travelling self," constantly navigating between two worlds. Although the project did not explicitly ask children to define their identity, their statements indirectly point to the ongoing formation of hybrid identities, as they live between different cultural spheres. This process is reinforced by the efforts of many parents to nurture the culture, religious practices, and family ties connected to their home country.

For example, refugee children from Muslim countries are often raised according to the principles of their religion, which remains central to their upbringing. Parents serve as the primary authority figures, exerting significant control over their children's lives. Some migrant children, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, resist the assimilative efforts of Polish schools, as seen in their refusal to participate in certain activities like religious education or physical education

classes for girls. This resistance highlights the role of family social and cultural capital in preserving a strong sense of attachment to their homeland culture.

Many children speak of their country of origin with a strong emotional resonance, expressing a deep sense of loss associated with migration. They describe the loss of cherished homes, family members, and close relationships left behind. This sense of nostalgia and longing is a recurring theme in their narratives. For example, a 13-year-old boy from Belarus openly stated that he doesn't like Poland because he doesn't have many friends here.

**Researcher:** "And do you like living here at all?"

**Boy:** "Not very much at all."

**Researcher:** "And what don't you like, what's difficult?"

**Boy:** "Well, I don't have many friends. And that's about it." (PL\_I5\_CH\_B)

Migrant children also talk about the "lost" experiences and passions they cannot pursue in Poland due to cultural differences or limited resources. For example, one boy reflects on how he misses the freedom and social interactions he had in Ukraine:

**Boy:** "[I miss] my friends and the fact that I understand everything."

**Researcher:** "And do you remember saying that you always walked from morning to evening in the street?"

**Boy:** "When there were holidays, I used to go from six in the morning until nine in the evening and play with everyone." (PL\_I17\_CH\_B)

Maintaining cross-border connections is a crucial indicator of a strong attachment to the homeland. Migrant children use instant messaging services like Viber, Discord, and Telegram to stay in touch with family and friends. Grandparents, in particular, play a key role in creating a transnational bridge between generations. For some children, these relationships were sustained through holiday visits, although the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly curtailed such interactions.

Language plays an important role in shaping children's sense of belonging. In private spaces, migrant children frequently communicate in the language of their country of origin. Children from Belarus, Ukraine, and Chechnya often use Russian at home, watch Russian TV shows, and engage in online activities in Russian. This multilingualism also extends to other contexts, where conversations may take place in several languages depending on the situation, task, or the family member involved. For example, a Chechen boy describes his family's multilingual communication patterns:

**Boy:** "At home they speak Chechen and Russian and Polish when they have to explain something to their parents... I watch films in Polish to understand something, and the rest I watch in Russian." (PL\_F4\_CH)

While many children use Polish instrumentally for communication, language also emerges as a tool for identity formation. In most cases, children clearly identify with their country of origin, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Chechnya, or Kurdistan, while acknowledging that Poland provides safety and refuge. Poland is seen by many children as a place where they can secure their future. Despite their strong attachment to their country of origin, most express a desire to remain in Poland while maintaining ties to their homeland through visits and family connections.

Another significant aspect of children's identity involves daily practices with their families. Children describe how they spend time together, whether through watching TV, playing games, eating meals, or engaging in religious practices. These activities, such as preparing traditional meals, offer a way to preserve their cultural heritage at home. For example, Chechen children often eat a combination of Polish and Chechen cuisine, while Muslim families celebrate religious holidays as part of maintaining their cultural identity. In this way, they describe their identity as dynamic and fluid, composed of many "small cultures" and subject to change.

**Researcher:** "And tell me what dishes you eat most often at home. Are they Chechen dishes or Polish dishes? Because you have been living in Poland for a long time."

**Girl:** "Oh yes. A lot of Chechen dishes are cooked by my mother from Polish products. Well, of course we eat Polish products because it would be difficult to import Chechen products to Poland. But these are all Chechen dishes." (PL\_I25\_CH\_G)

The hybrid identity framework offers a multi-layered, dynamic understanding of how migrant children negotiate their sense of belonging and identification. Conducting a longitudinal study 10–15 years from now would provide further insight into the development of this complex process, shedding light on who these young migrants in Poland ultimately become and how they perceive themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the research conducted as part of the CHILD-UP project was, among other things, to examine how migrant children navigate the school environment, overcome barriers, and utilize available resources and opportunities. We were particularly interested in how, in the Polish context – a country that for decades has been primarily an emigration society – the school as a social space is co-constructed by migrant children.

At the core of the study, in line with the adopted paradigm of childhood studies, was the emphasis on the voices, experiences, narratives, and

reflections of the children themselves (Ni Laoire et al., 2011; Tyrell et al., 2013). The goal was to understand how they perceive their own agency and identity.

With regard to the concept of agency, our focus was on a participatory perspective that moves beyond an individualistic framework to highlight the significance of relationships and interdependence in children's actions. We treated the school as a network of relationships co-created by migrant children. Based on their narratives, we demonstrated that one of the key factors enhancing participation is the relationship with peers, which strengthens and improves children's involvement in school life. Even when these relationships are conflictual, children who feel supported by others are able and willing to resolve difficulties independently. They also appreciate when their voices are heard, for example, regarding feelings of unfair treatment in assessments or their involvement in evaluating others.

These important findings compel us to once again underscore the benefits of the new paradigm in childhood studies. This paradigm enables us not only to see the child as a distinct social actor with their own reflexivity and decision-making but also to adopt a different perspective on the migration process, revealing the multitude of ways migration is experienced depending on one's position within the family (Orellana et al., 2001; Scott, 2004; Struzik, Pustulka, 2017). Similarly, the way we define schools is changing; schools are seen as dynamic spaces shaped by many social actors and experienced differently by each individual.

The concept of agency is also closely linked to how children think about who they are. Following the perspective of hybrid identity, we assumed that identity is neither static nor reducible to one dominant culture. Instead, it is fluid, changeable, and embedded in the "small cultures" in which children communicate and, in doing so, create the meaning of their "self."

Looking at the collected narratives of migrant children, we clearly see the significance of multiple cultures in their stories. On the one hand, they refer to their country of origin, often understood through the lens of "left behind" relationships with loved ones, enduring friendships despite migration, favorite dishes, or their native language. On the other hand, they incorporate elements of the host country into their world – its language, infrastructure, and newly formed relationships.

The meanings assigned to these distinct elements are created through acts of communication – when children talk about themselves, manifest their distinctiveness and similarities, and highlight the evolving nature of their experiences (e.g., forming friendships, linguistic development). Hybridity allows us to move beyond thinking about identity in terms of national identification, to problematize these notions, and to show how they are used by children themselves in conversations, games, and learning processes.

Based on the statements of the children regarding their experiences within the school environment, several key recommendations emerge for creating a more inclusive and supportive space for migrant students. First, there is a pressing need to address areas of conflict between Polish and migrant children, both within the school and in out-of-school spaces. These conflicts often stem from misunderstandings, stereotypes, and cultural differences, which can escalate without appropriate interventions.

A critical step in this process involves raising awareness among teachers, school management, parents, and intercultural assistants about the existence and impact of hostile attitudes toward migrant children. It is essential to sensitize these professionals to the various forms of exclusion and discrimination that migrant children may face, ensuring that they are equipped to recognize and counter such behaviors effectively.

Moreover, the implementation of anti-discrimination workshops for both students and teachers should be prioritized. These workshops would serve as platforms for developing a deeper understanding of diversity and for building strategies to address conflicts, violence, ridicule, and teasing within the school environment. Such training would also offer mediation techniques to handle incidents of bullying or exclusion, fostering a more harmonious and respectful school atmosphere.

Supporting the academic needs of migrant children across all subjects is another crucial recommendation, with particular attention to Polish language and history. Given the importance of these subjects in the Polish curriculum, additional support should be provided to migrant children, allowing them to improve their grades through alternative assessment methods, such as oral discussions, rather than relying solely on written exams. This approach would accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of migrant students, ensuring they have equal opportunities to succeed.

Fair and unbiased assessment of migrant children's work is also essential. Teachers should avoid any tendencies toward bias or favoritism, ensuring that migrant children are evaluated based on their efforts and abilities, rather than their background. Promoting fairness in assessment would contribute to a more equitable educational environment.

Additionally, fostering camaraderie, cooperation, and an appreciation for multiculturalism within the school community is vital. This can be achieved through activities that encourage collaboration and mutual respect among students of different backgrounds. Schools should actively promote understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity, helping to build a sense of unity among students.

Recognizing the complex identities of migrant children, including their religious and cultural practices, is another important factor in creating an inclusive school environment. Schools should be mindful of these practices and

make efforts to accommodate them, ensuring that migrant children feel respected and valued for who they are.

Finally, it is essential to support and celebrate the multiculturalism of the Polish school system. Schools should not only recognize the diversity within their student body but also actively promote it as a strength. By fostering an environment where all students, regardless of their background, can thrive and feel a sense of belonging, the Polish education system can become a model for inclusive and equitable education.

In conclusion, these recommendations emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges faced by migrant children in Polish schools. By focusing on conflict resolution, anti-discrimination efforts, academic support, fair assessment, and the promotion of multiculturalism, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

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## Interview



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## Beyond the Pages: Children's and Young Adult Literature and Sociological Research Through the Dodzi Project Alexandra König in an Interview with Jessica Schwittek and Katarzyna Jendrzej

*Professor Dr. Alexandra König is based at the University of Duisburg-Essen, at the Institute for Educational Science, where she leads the Work Group Socialization Research. Her research focuses on childhood and family studies, with a particular emphasis on the question of what is understood as “good parenthood” and “good childhood” in different societies. These research interests led to the development of the DoDzi project, for which she assumes the leadership of the sociological research component.*

**Jessica Schwittek and Katarzyna Jendrzej:** We are delighted to welcome you for this interview as a Principal Investigator, alongside Dorota Michulka, and as a co-initiator of the DoDzi project – particularly since this edition of Filoteknos has emerged within the framework of the project. Our focus in this interview is on the sociological perspective on children's and young adult literature and the way you use books as stimuli for data collection with children. We look forward to your insights and are eager to begin with our first question. As a sociologist, what is your perspective on children's and young adult literature and what potential do you see in this medium (for social analysis)?

**Alexandra König:** As a sociologist, books, as well as films and pictures, offer me impulses to think about society or to gain insights into worlds that are normally closed to me. As a sociologist, however, I don't regard books as

a depiction of society or social phenomena. Rather, from a sociological perspective, books, whether crime novels or children's books, are a way of "telling about society" (Becker, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. They are a medium in which social phenomena are interpreted, represented, and processed for readers. Accordingly, historical analyses of children's books, for example, are an extremely exciting way of gaining insight into the variability of narratives about childhood and thus always about society as well. As a family and childhood sociologist, I also use children's books as stimuli in my research with children. In other words, rather than analyzing books, I instead use a book excerpt to stimulate a conversation with children. This is how we proceeded in the DoDzi project, for example – at least in one part of the project.

**We have already introduced the DoDzi project in the preface, but we would be delighted if you could share more about the project's beginnings – such as its inspirations, initial ideas, or the thematic focus that shaped its development.**

The DoDzi project was inspired by the observation that mothers who migrate abroad to work temporarily and during that time leave their children behind at home are often devalued in public discourse. There are several studies on this from different countries. It has been shown in Poland, for example, that the term "Euro-orphan" has been used in media debates since around 2008 to label children and that this is accompanied by a scandalization of mothers who work abroad. At the same time, we have observed that the discourse on such cross-border family constellations is predominantly shaped by adults and is therefore strongly adultist in its framework. However, little is known about how children perceive this issue and what perspectives they bring to it. For me as a sociologist of childhood, a central concern is to understand the perspective of children. Thus, in the DoDzi project, we investigate the question of how children in Poland perceive and evaluate this family constellation. In the sociological part of the project, our team in Germany approaches this question through group discussions with children, while the literary team in Poland is interested in how children understand and receive stories about transnational family life as told in children's books.

Not least, with your PhD thesis, Katarzyna, we also focus on analyzing children's and young adult books. In doing so, we explore different perspectives – both by analyzing the text and image levels and by interviewing publishers of children's books. This sociological work builds a wonderful bridge between the two main parts of the DoDzi project, that is, between literary studies and sociology.

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, H. (2007). *Telling About Society. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing*. University of Chicago Press.

**Children's and young adult literature connect the two parts of the DoDzi project. Can you explain what role children's and young adult literature plays in the sociological part of the project? Can you expand on the initial thoughts you formulated in your first answer?**

Our Polish colleagues are the experts when it comes to children's and young adult literature and its reception. In the sociological part of the project that we are responsible for in Germany, books serve primarily to facilitate discussions with children. We are interested in how children perceive and evaluate transnational family life, regardless of whether they themselves have experience of such family life or not. Since the focus is not on biographical experiences but on children's ideas of what a "good childhood" is, we conducted group discussions with children between the ages of 12 and 14. We read aloud an excerpt from the children's book "Tata gotuj kisiel!" [Papa Makes Jelly; own translation], written by Barbara Stenka (2016)<sup>2</sup>. In this passage, Aśka, the young protagonist, learns that her mother is going abroad for three months to work. This is followed by a heated conversation between the daughter, mother, and grandmother, who each present different advantages and disadvantages of migration. The passage worked quite well as a stimulus in our group discussions to find out what children find problematic about this family arrangement, but also under what conditions they consider the absence of a parent to be acceptable. What they address differs significantly from what is discussed in the debate about Euro-orphans.

**Can you describe the extent to which the methodological approach (a children's book as a stimulus for the group discussions) proved successful, as well as what challenges it posed?**

First of all, it was not easy to find a suitable book or passage. The passage couldn't be too long or too complicated. It needed to appeal to the children in some way, i.e. by drawing on their experiences and knowledge and inviting them to think and talk together. Furthermore, the passage couldn't present only a single view of the transnational family, so that the children would feel more invited to position themselves between the different perspectives. As you can guess, we searched and experimented for a long time. We also had to extensively modify our interview guidelines after a pre-test. For example, based on the first group discussion, we realized that, in some of the children's statements, we were unable to distinguish whether they were trying to present their own perspective on "good childhood" or Aśka's perspective. Accordingly, we modified the interview guidelines to talk more specifically about Aśka in a first

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<sup>2</sup> Stenka, B. (2016). *Tata gotuj kisiel!* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura.

block of questions and then in a second block about their own positions on Aśka's mother's migration plan.

**You are not a “migration sociologist” in the strictest sense of the word, so why are you interested in researching transnational families and childhoods? What insights have you gained from the DoDzi project so far? What has surprised you?**

As a childhood and family researcher, the temporary migration of fathers or mothers, perhaps even both, is an extremely interesting phenomenon because it breaks with the conventional expectation that parents and children live together in one place. Of course, we know of many constellations where this is not the case (after a divorce or the death of a parent, in the case of unknown paternity, for refugee children, within the global elite, etc.). My idea is that phenomena that are discussed as deviating from the norm are a good indication of the prevailing, self-evident assumptions about good childhood and family. What surprised me most in the analysis of the group discussions is how differentiated the children's views of transnational family life are. They argue less on the basis of universal needs of the child, which demands the permanent presence of mothers – as we can read in numerous media reports. Rather, the children discuss conditions under which the temporary migration of one parent can be legitimate. It is striking that the temporary absence of a parent is problematized to a lesser extent in the group discussions. Instead, they problematize the fact that children are often involved in such important decision-making processes only at a very late stage, so that they have neither time to understand the decision nor an opportunity to help decide where and how they will live during this phase of parental absence. For us, it becomes clear how important it is to capture children's voices. DoDzi has also shown the importance of considering the context of transnational families. There are many highly relevant studies on transnational families, but they are generally focused on non-European countries. These findings on transnational families are hardly transferable to the European area. For example, the distance between Poland and Germany is different from that between the Philippines and the USA, and both the legal conditions of labor migration and the economic situation of the migrants differ. All of these are essential framework conditions for transnational family life, so it is essential to expand the academic debate to include the perspective of children as well as labor migration within Europe.

**The follow-up project also focuses on growing up transnationally. Why is the topic interesting? Even beyond academia?**

While in the DoDzi project we captured children's perceptions of transnational families through group discussions, in the follow-up project – TraNa – we

want to focus on children's biographical experiences and their ideas for their futures. We were probably a little too cautious in the first project to ask the "affected children" directly about their personal experiences, because we considered the topic to be too sensitive against the background of its socially charged nature. Of course, it is certainly a phenomenon that requires a sensitive approach, but through the group discussions with the children and conversations with individual children that took place on the side, we learned that and how we can talk to children about the topic and, yes, even more, that some of them want to talk about it. With the TraNa project (PI in Germany: König/Schwittek; PI in Poland: Michulka), we now want to follow up on an important finding from the DoDzi project that has so far received little attention in research (or in children's books), namely the question of how images and knowledge of abroad are conveyed and shaped in transnational families and how transnational capital is generated or denied. Our starting point is that socialization in a transnational family arrangement has relevance for how children view and position themselves – in Poland, Europe, or the world.

Overall, we hope that our research leads to a better understanding of the perspective of children: Which impositions and/or opportunities emerge for children growing up in a transnational family arrangement and what do they consider a "good childhood." It is important to incorporate the perspective of children into the often very moralizing and scandalizing discourse led by adults and to make their perspective more accessible to teachers, for example.

**To what extent has the DoDzi project changed your perspective – on migration, but also on children's books – both professionally and privately?**

During the course of my research, it became increasingly clear to me that books are more than just helpful stimulus material for sociological thinking. Books are highly relevant media that interpret the world for us in a certain way and offer us readers a certain view of the world. Accordingly, analyses of the "migration narratives" in children's books, such as those compiled in this edition of Filoteknos, are valuable.

**Thank you for the interview and for sharing your perspective on children's and young adult literature, as well as for providing insights into the sociological aspects of the DoDzi project. We look forward to continuing our exchange and building on the work of the DoDzi project within the framework of the follow-up project TraNa.**



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## Once Upon a Child... Toward a Philosophy of Beginning

**Abstract:** This article offers a philosophical and literary theorization of the child's relationship with time. The author explores how the dispute around the temporal nature of children in the philosophy of beginning influences children's literature. The texts aimed at young readers play a significant role in shaping this debate and building the ontological concept of a child being toward time. This debate is vital to evolving child time archetypes: *puer disputationi*, *puer aevum*, *puer aeternum*, and *puer tempus*. These archetypes signify a shift in our understanding of the child's relationship with time and its finitude. Moving beyond the classical opposition of being and becoming, the author introduces the concept of emergence, referring to the process of forming new and complex temporal patterns of childhood.

**Keywords:** children's temporality, philosophy of beginning, children's literature, time archetype

The title phrase announces the topic of my article. "Once upon a child" is a paraphrase of the opening formula found in fairy tales "once upon a time," which introduces a chronosophy into children's ontology. I want to show that the child has always been entangled in dialogical discussions on the temporal nature and the child's understanding of temporality. I am trying to determine how the philosophical dispute regarding the temporal nature of children has influenced children's literature and the discourse of *children's studies*, reshaping how we discuss and understand childhood. Different understandings of temporality – whether regarded in transcendent or existential categories – have affected and determined the cognition of a child's being. Conceptualization from Plato's presence to Augustine's eternity, from the Cartesian imperative of duration to Bergson's eternal psychological time, from Heidegger's persistence fearing for its finitude (Heidegger, 2002: 2) to Arendt's natality shaped either the vitalist or the thanatical image of the child's temporal nature, situating it on the two opposite verges: at the end or at the beginning of time, forming contrasting

images of the child's nature (Szymborska, 2020). Children's literature reflects these evolving views, depicting childhood through lenses of either the philosophy of finitude or the philosophy of beginning, each shaping cultural representations of childhood's temporality. By addressing the temporality intrinsic to these notions, I want to consider how these discourses have changed the structure of temporal representations and our understanding of childhood. My goal is to explore how the philosophy of beginning shapes a new identification model that reconsiders our assumptions about time and temporality in relation to children as social agents and childhood as a distinct stage in life. In this context, I aim to create a typology of child-time archetypes to systematize and categorize the recurring patterns and models that represent childhood's temporal identity found in literature and philosophy. This approach will help clarify how children's experiences of time are constructed and understood.

#### BEFORE THE BEGINNING: FROM *PUER DISPUTATIONI* TO *PIER AEVUM*

Emma Uprichard, in *Children as Being and Becomings: Children, Childhood and Temporality*, argues that a child is entangled in a discussion about time as the opposite dimension as being or becoming, and the temporality intrinsic to these. The notion of "being" suggests a state where the child is seen as an active social agent in the present, whereas "becoming a child" is seen as an "adult in the making", emphasizing future potential over present realities (Uprichard, 2008). Uprichard, drawing on Prigogine's views on time, suggests integrating both perspectives into understanding childhood as "being and becoming a child". Childhood is understood in this context as a marker of time throughout life. The becoming child discourse considers the ageing child, where time is an ontological property of that person.

Uprichard's linkage of "being" to "becoming" suggests a more nuanced philosophical understanding than the contemporary sociological propositions that Jenks, Proust, and other researchers addressed (Qvortrup, 1991; James, Prout, 1997; James, James, 2004). However, this perspective is still unsatisfactory to understand the time nature of childhood for a few reasons. Firstly, it reinforces the connection to the hierarchical adult/child dualism without involving contemporary conceptualizations, like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of "becoming-child". This "pervasive rationalisation and normalisation of stage theory, in its relentless chronologism – as David Kennedy observes – sees childhood as over before it begins" (Kennedy, 2013: n. pag.).<sup>1</sup> Second, while involving the social context aligns with contemporary

<sup>1</sup> The concept of "becoming-child" in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy provides a rich framework for understanding the temporal ontology of childhood because it focuses on fluidity, transformation, and the potentiality of existence rather than fixed catego-

philosophy by emphasizing the influence of societal structures of temporality on childhood construction, it underscores the importance of the epistemological evolution of transcendent time construction throughout history and conceptions of subjects related to them. By examining childhood through these blueprints of childhood within the philosophy of beginning and finitude, I want to reveal that the idea of a child's "being and becoming" is more complex and requires deeper historical and philosophical context from the beginning, where all the time considerations about a child have started. I will also address how it foregrounds questions about how time constructs identity, experience, and existence.

The child's temporal nature of being and becoming balances both in literature and philosophy between two horizons: the philosophy of finitude and the paedocentric philosophy of the beginning. Heidegger's philosophy of finitude frames a child's existence within the constraints of mortality, viewing childhood as a series of temporal encounters that reveal a finite nature. This aligns with Uprichard's concept of "being and becoming a child," positioning childhood within a tension between present experience and future potential, often interpreted through an adult-centric lens of progression toward adulthood. Contrastingly, the paedocentric philosophy of the beginning introduces a different narrative arc, complicating the time perspective with eschatological chronosophy and affective criticism. Here, childhood is seen as a unique temporal experience shaped by the interplay of memory, loss, and the foundational aspects of life.

The philosophy of beginning is not new, yet it is rarely recognized as a distinct and widely acknowledged philosophical concept of childhood. In the following reflections, I propose this concept as a unique way of experiencing childhood through the perception of time, the impact of affect, and our attitudes toward the beginning of a child's life. The inspiration for such an approach comes from Bergson's text, particularly his portrayal within the framework of the concept of beginning in the *Time and Free Will* (Bergson, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Bergson's concern with finding a valid starting point starts with a difference:

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ries or developmental stages within the proposed typology of "being and becoming." "Becoming-child" positions childhood not as a fixed state but as an ontological category defined by its openness to time and transformation. This perspective enriches debates about what it means to "be" a child, emphasizing how children exist within and beyond adult-imposed structures of time and identity. It asserts that childhood exists as its own plane of immanence, characterized by its intrinsic value and potential rather than its role in achieving adulthood. This process also addresses the contemporary understanding of child-time nature, which evolved from more traditional aspects of the ontology of child-time nature (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein also formulated the philosophy of beginnings in *Philosophical Investigations*, where he delved into the nature of language, meaning, and the foundations of philosophy. None of the philosophers, though, attributed these conceptualizations to a child (J. Shotter, 2000).

the actual beginning. In this respect, Bergson positions it as the first principle, beginning from an indifferent being. A less is taken for a more, and we fall into a simple vision of intensities. In the final instance, the opposition of two terms that differ in nature is only the positive realization of virtuality that contains both. The role of intermediary degrees is precisely in this realization. They place one in the other, the memory in movement. Bergsonian demand is understanding why the thing is this rather than something else. It is a difference which explains the thing itself and not its causes. Seen in this way, childhood is understood not as a stage of age but as a signifier of experience of time. It includes not only the time of being a child but also how adults perceive childhood temporality – as not being, being and/or becoming a child, but also various temporal becomings of a child, which may vary in different cultures.

I propose to apply what I term the philosophy of beginning (gr. *filosofia tis archís*) to examine the child's being in its temporal nature, primarily understood in terms of its foundation toward the cyclical side of time, which was linked later into a linear time. This tendency refers to the being of a child that fights the concept of finitude and re-envisions childhood in *children's studies*, apart from instrumentalist assumptions that endlessly defer the recognition of a child as anything but a potential adult, centering instead on the child's unique ontology and capacity for continuous renewal. In this context, the child's experience becomes a continuous process of becoming, embodying the potential for endless new beginnings. The child is seen as embodying circular and linear time, a symbol of beginnings integral to existence. Ontologically, the child transcends being or becoming within a dialectic of timelessness and finitude.

To understand this dialectic between these philosophical perspectives of finitude and beginnings, we must think about the child before the beginning when a child was considered a pure timelessness, being a part of the Divine and representing the first Ur-image of the eternal child archetype. Therefore, until philosophy and religion were accompanied by the conviction that God is *Summa Essentia*, the child was perceived as *puer disputationi* – a timeless being. This term implies that a child exists beyond the confines of time, in a perpetual state of being that extends beyond temporal limitations. Ontologically, the child was neither being nor becoming, merely representing a hypostasis of a child, its incarnation, but not in a materialistic way.

We can find the mythological representation of the *puer disputationi* in the myth of divine child in ancient Egyptian and Greek symbol of the child-deity Harpocrates placed in the "Ouroboros" symbol, which gained a meaning of unity, a symbol of eternity and infinity, which marked the beginning and the end and self-renewal of natural cycles, periodicity of time, birth, and death. Soon, it became an archetype of child rebirth and timelessness and the first matrix of a child's identification, where the child had no beginning or end. Crispijn de Passe's emblem *Finis ab origine pendet* captures this transformation

underscoring the Latin sentence “In the end, is my beginning.” From this perspective, the child could never die because it existed in a mythical, reversible, eternal time.

We can find this notion in Augustin’s tractate *De civitate Dei* (413–427 C.E., Augustyn, 2002), stating that being in death leveled time and considered being in categories of divine timelessness. The child in this plan was only a contingent, incomplete being conceived of as *infiniti*; his/her subjectivity was embedded in the concept of immortality. The child’s identity was inseparable from sacred time, representing humanity’s aspiration to transcend earthly struggles and attain eternal bliss. This notion equates the child’s beginning with the birth (but without an end), achieved through liturgical time (Kairos) that transcends death into a new beginning.

In modern times, this symbolism shifts as secular and religious understandings of time diverge in European cultures, especially in the 19th century. Now, a child exists in both sacred and secular times. Mircea Eliade explains that sacred time is circular, allowing people to re-enter an eternal present through ritual, where archetypes recreate the original act of creation (Eliade, 1987). With this draft, there is a need to raise the child to the rank of a myth, to the highest holiness or deity status, to preserve the child’s status quo, which earlier represented the archetype of *puer disputationi*. This image develops into the *puer aevum* archetype, an eternal child who, though touched by time at birth, is sublimated to timelessness through ritual, symbolizing everlasting innocence.

In the philosophical treatise *Fear and Trembling* (I ed. 1843), Søren Kierkegaard defined this essential incongruence of being-a-child with “the paradox of faith”, stating that Abraham could never lose his son Isaac because he ultimately belonged to God (Kierkegaard, 1982). The situation changed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as faith in a child’s eternal life weakened, and dialectics of *Fear and Trembling* determined the relationship between children and time. Fearing losing children, people wanted to capture them in present nature for eternity. Myths and rituals like Uroboros become a way of preserving and recovering a child in the plane of eternal time, keeping him/her transcendent and unchanged. Western culture of consolation emerged, as seen in Antoniewicz’s *Poselstwo aniołka w niebie do matki na ziemi*, where a deceased child assures his mother of eternal life in God, awaiting reunion (Antoniewicz, 1870).<sup>3</sup> The 19th-century children’s literature echoed this soteriological

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<sup>3</sup> The literary examples used in the paper represent the most illustrative text within time archetypes. The criteria for selecting the corpus of literature included thematic relevance, historical and cultural diversity, and philosophical depth of either child being, becoming, or being and becoming. While a more detailed analysis of their plots is necessary, the breadth of the issues explored in this study is too vast to permit an exhaustive examination of each example, which would require treatment as an independent subject of inquiry.

view, portraying the child as reborn into a new ontological state after death, yet mentally and physically preserved as a child, belonging both to God and their parents.

This timeless notion of the child evolved into a nuanced, vitalist interplay between timeless essence and temporal reality, reframing the child's ontology. It resonates with Hannah Arendt's formulations of the philosophy of beginning; outlined in *Love and Saint Augustine*, transcending Heidegger's notion of mortality. Arendt's philosophy of beginning is called natality or birth. *Principium*, in her thought, suggests the governing role of the Creator, whereas *initium*, symbolized by birth, becomes the capacity of the firstborn individual. *Initium* refers to the beginning of man's soul, which pre-memory allows the deity to enact the story of humankind. It allows him also to become (*fieri*) (Arendt, 1996: 169). It transcends the Heideggerian philosophy of finitude to the ontological concept of infinity. Arendt notes: "Once we assume the perspective that we no longer view life as >>before death<< but as >>after death<<" (Arendt, 1996: 76). This devaluation of the end, the course of life itself, is leveled out from the beginning, and the end is no longer separated but has become identical in the encompassing concept. This thinking affirmed life itself, whether short or long. The weakness of Arendt's concept concerning this situation is that, paradoxically, natality does not apply to children. In other texts, especially *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*, Arendt argues that beginning is only possible in the public sphere, from which children should be kept away (Arendt, 1978).

Nineteenth-century literature reveals a new dimension of childhood to the beginning, depicting death as a new beginning that transcends the destructive influence of Thanatos. Based on the power of *initium*, the child is portrayed as eternally alive. Through the new beginning, the child is revitalized and depicted *ab origine*, following what was at the outset. This theory applies only to children who have passed away in childhood. This sets the stage for a natural progression of life after death, and thus it represents the vitalist concept of a child's life. The child's timeless essence endures but undergoes a metamorphosis into a more profound comprehension of temporality. The child is now acknowledged within the interplay of their timeless core and the temporal reality that envelops them, signifying that there is no past or present significant relevance to its existence. Arendt's argument envisions such a form of being but does not attribute it to the child. It should affirm a child's life since it understands it as a new being. Each new birth (symbolical, physical, eschatological, etc.) guaranteed this beginning.

This opens the concept of childhood that transcends social beginnings in the *puer aevum* stage, encompassing a sense of eternal beginnings in one's biography, life, and afterlife. This beginning is presented as a source of meanings yet to be explored, reflecting on the child as a signifier of circular and linear time. The beginning is not an end but represents a sense of being intertwined in nostalgia, preserving a childhood marked by two dimensions of time perception.

“TIME (IS) A CHILD CHILDLING...”  
CHILD’S FALL IN TIME AND THE BEGINNING  
OF *PUER AETERNUS* ARCHETYPE

By the end of the nineteenth century, the traditional understanding of child temporality was no longer sufficient. The high death rate of children and the increasing secularization of society necessitated a shift in perspective. This shift, crucial to our exploration, extended the concept of eternal time in Christianity to include unbaptized children. It also marked the progression from *puer aevum* to the *puer aeternus* archetype, a profound transformation in the perception of time and the child symbol from sacred to profane, and a reevaluation of sacred time for a broader population.

In the *puer aevum* stage, the child symbolized eternity, embodying perpetual youth, innocence, and a timeless essence beyond conventional time. However, this construction of temporal childhood in the nineteenth century raised two profound philosophical questions. First, within the philosophy of beginning, regarding the temporal and ontological nature of a child after death: Does it grow up or remain in child form forever? Second, could a child, within a new beginning acquired through death, remain in a hospitable previous form but experience a future life and duration apart from the conventional perception of time or become a new form of being?

The emergence of the *puer aeternus* archetype represents a more complex interplay between time and the eternal child, which tries to answer these questions. Unlike the pure timelessness of *puer aevum*, it combines a sense of perpetual youth with a resistance to growing up and an engagement with life’s temporal challenges. The child, once eternal, now engages with the temporal realm, marking the beginning of a complex archetype that marks the intersection of timeless and temporal aspects of existence.

The child begins to experience the temporality and challenges associated with the passage of time in the afterlife, which relates to Heraclitus’ thought: “Time (is) a child childing; its realm is one of a child.” A double relationship is affirmed in this sentence: the time of childhood (*aion-pais*) and the power of childhood (*basileie-pais*). The child being was not only eternal but actively engaged in the process of time unfolding and introducing aspects of change and metamorphosis either on a biological or spiritual level. Walter Kohan interprets this aphorism as the mode of being of a child as a form of circular empowerment:

[...] that there is another way of living time that could be seen as a childlike way of being, one that belongs to a child. [...] In other words, [...] in relation to time, a child is very powerful, more powerful than any other being. If in terms of *chrónos*, the child is at the beginning, in a first, undeveloped stage of being, in terms of *aión* there no more being more realized than a child. (Kennedy, Kohan, 2008:7)

Heraclitus views childhood not as a mere life stage but as a realm marked by intensity – a form of aionic time that represents a potent, vital force in human experience. This perspective suggests that unlike in Chronos (linear time), where a child is at an early stage, in Aión (eternal time), the child embodies a fully realized existence, showing a unique power over finitude. As David Kennedy remarks, a non-chronological, aionic experience of a child's time begins and, together with it, a non-chronological concept of childhood as a state of beginning. The aionic nature of a child evokes a “form of temporality that is not constructed through divisions and one-directional sequences” (Kennedy, 2013: 4).

This way of thinking led Deleuze and Guattari to understand Heraclitean childhood as a period of life and a specific strength, force, or intensity that inhabits a qualitative life at any given chronological time (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983). Childhood is liberated from a particular stage in life and viewed as a “zone”, a region of the psyche, a way of being in time that can be acquired at any moment of existence, an intensity that inhabits all chronological times. However, Alain Badiou critiques this perspective in *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, arguing that Deleuze's emphasis on immanence and eternal return, as exemplified in the concept of the eternal return of difference, leads to a dead-end, negating genuine change and progression. Moreover, the Deleuzian vision of being is the infinite reservoir of “dissimilar productions” in a virtual reality of transcendence (Badiou, 2000:45). In this context, childhood loses its transformative potential, becoming trapped in an endless loop of sameness, which resembles how *puer aeternum* conceptualizes the temporal nature of a child. Badiou contrasts Deleuze's Platonic notions of being with Aristotelian reflections on bios, zoe, and the soul, highlighting how Deleuze's virtual self resembles the fabricated image. While this allows childhood to persist in an eternal time, shaping experiences beyond its chronological constraints, the soul of being gains linear temporal qualities, which become partially entangled in zoe, creating a hybrid state of being in time that extends into new dimensions.

This interplay raises questions about how childhood is represented in literature and its implications for understanding time and identity. Children's literature plays a pivotal role here in childhood's temporal ontology, as it triggers various philosophical disputes. In the 20th century, children's literature reimagined child beings, initiating the *puer aeternus* archetype, drawing on messianic vitalism and a post-secular, aionic understanding of time.<sup>4</sup> Initially, it related to the secularized theology of creation, which was based on the concept of a child's non-material, virtual and non-chronological existence. It also

<sup>4</sup> We can find the sources of this belief in the “messianic vitalism” in the sense that Agata Bielik-Robson gave to this concept, where a child is an exceptional being that acquires the features of a being endowed with the fullness of life, something given in the mystery of salvation, unfulfilled (A. Bielik-Robson, 2004: 89).

empowered Heraclitean, aionic understanding of a child's time in post-secular eternity.

The literature presents two sides of the child's temporality in the *puer aeternus* archetype. Carl Jung highlights the archetype's divine, positive side, as seen in *Little Prince*. Conversely, its shadow side emerges in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, where the child embodies eternal childhood within the timeless realm of Neverland. Peter Pan, embodying death and eternal recurrence, traps lost boys in an unchanging state of being-child, reflecting Heraclitus' notion of *child child-ing in the realm of time*. Within the narrative, the child is granted the agency to choose whether to remain within the Aion time or choose Kairos. Peter Pan assumes an eternity akin to a deity who can take life but not bestow it.<sup>5</sup> However, Wendy, representing femininity and life, disrupts this stasis by enabling children to mature, challenging the endless cycle and affirming the possibility of progression beyond eternal recurrence. The perpetual nature of childhood in Neverland can be interpreted through the lens of Deleuze's concepts, where time folds back upon itself, potentially ensnaring individuals in a cycle of sameness as they become-child.

Posthumously, the child undergoes a metamorphosis through a new beginning into a new duration of childhood, governed by different laws of the time of eternal presence but preserving the same ontology, an idea that Clementine Beauvais describes as "locked in time" (Beauvais, 2015: 22). This archetype, aligning with Piaget's views on time, reflects a timeless present that halts change and growth, embodying the essence of *puer aeternus* archetype (Piaget, 1966: 67). Thanks to the power of rebirth and finding life-giving strength, this archetype allows for a new beginning apart from *Principium*, as it exceeds the finality of death.

It is worth returning to Jung's juxtaposition with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of being. Jung and Deleuze both explore beginnings, but each locates time differently. For Jung, the *puer aeternus* archetype connects with Aión as the core of a child's psychic energy, embodying creativity, renewal, and transformation – a perpetual cycle of beginning and end. It attains Heraclitean strength and divine prerogative but is also vulnerable, with an inconspicuous, questionable beginning (Jung, 1969: 177). Therefore, the "child" is *renatus in novam infantiam*. Thus, it is both a beginning and an end, signifying a perpetual cycle of renewal and transformation. However, Deleuze, in the treatise *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, states it is the very process of creating a beginning

<sup>5</sup> The *puer aeternus* archetype allowed Barrie to strip the child's immortality from the sacred, enabling children to choose between eternal youth (Aión) or the linear progression of life (Chronos). In aionic life, Barrie's childhood is not a static stage of life – as suggested by Badiou – but instead goes through it powerfully, as of intensity or duration. This literary child engages in "childing" – extending youth indefinitely but sacrificing adult maturity.

that entails both Aion and Chronos – instead of being submerged by the laws of Aion itself and then healed within it, as in Jung’s theory (Deleuze, 2001). A child being in aionic structures transcends to a new beginning to endure death. This juxtaposition suggests that childhood is considered the ground of time. Deleuze posits that creating a beginning involves Aion (eternal time) and Chronos (sequential time). This implies that the creation of something new, such as the emergence of a beginning, is not solely governed by linear time (Chronos) but also influenced by the eternal, transcendent aspects of Aion. This concept aligns with Deleuze’s ideas about becoming an immanence, where individuals transform and surpass limitations, including the finality of death. It challenges the conventional lens of growth with its teleological directionality and separation of children into age grades and life stages, embracing instead the concept of reliving childlike nature through a transformative beginning. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) reflects this, portraying life in flux beyond fixed identities, as in their notion of “becoming-child,” which defies rigid social categories or molar identities (e.g., class, gender, species) to embrace a transformative experience of life (Deleuze, Guattari, 2004).

The concept discussed here finds resonance in Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-baby* (1863), where the main protagonist undergoes multiple metamorphoses and ontological beginnings, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and the moral purification attained through rebirth. The hero’s death in a river and transformation into a water baby symbolize a “vitalist” manifestation of the soul and a continual process of becoming. The protagonist’s death ruptures the imaginary framework of existence, echoing Lacan’s concept of disrupted unconscious energy and Deleuze and Guattari’s “body-without-organs” (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987). This disruption unleashes new potential, illustrating an artistic transformation of “becoming” akin to the concept advocated by Badiou. The child transcends biological life stages to exist in a realm of pure immanence even after death, intertwining linear time with eternity. The recurring force of potentiality inherent in childhood persists beyond the boundaries of temporal existence, highlighting the transformative power of beginnings and the continuous process of becoming.

Nevertheless, it is essential to pay attention to how, in late 19th- and 20th-century writings, childhood is freed from a fixed stage in life and reimagined as a zone of *initium*, a psychic region, a way of being in time, a form of intentionality or attention, and a field of intensities and flows, affective and noetic. This state embodies power as the sense of “intensity” and “flow”, aligning with the energy that Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-child” (Deleuze, Guattari, 2004). It represents a line of flight, escaping the constraints of molar categories and historical subjectivity.

### PIER TEMPUS AND THE CONTEMPORARY BEGINNING(S)

As the *puer aeternus* archetype evolves, it emphasizes a child's quest for autonomous temporality, shifting reflection from finiteness toward a paedocentric philosophy of beginnings and a subjective sense of time. This new philosophy of the beginning explores the child's liberation from Chronos, emphasizing the modern struggle for an individual sense of time. Contemporary literature often engages with these themes, depicting children who experience alternative, non-linear forms of time. Emil Cioran's "the child's fall into time" concept highlights these temporal experiences, particularly in late 20th-century narratives (Cioran, 2008). These narratives inherit philosophical discussions surrounding secular and sacred childhood and engage with the dialectical tension between the beginning and the end of a child's life while seeking alternative temporal identities within this archetype.

A fall from eternity into time at birth signifies entry into consciousness and history, stripping the child of prior innocence. The new narrative figure *puer tempus* shifts this understanding, integrating two dimensions of temporality: the historical (linear and sequential time) and the eternal (a timeless or cyclical experience). Coming from similar premises but reaching different assumptions, children's literature theorist Clementine Beauvais considers calling this model of being as *puer existens* (Beauvais, 2015:20), capturing a child's journey of "becoming" within the linear temporality and progression of a child. The *puer tempus* archetype represents a child's experience of time, encompassing both the individual, historical and eternal aspects. This archetype still has a residual difference between immanence and transcendence but is intertwined with a child's presence. It causes children to fantasize about travelling through time or conquering it (both on circular and linear levels), which situates it in a "mighty" child status – using Beauvais vocabulary. This implies that archetypes are not just static ideas but have a psychological impact, shaping how children perceive and interact with concepts like time.<sup>6</sup>

While 19th-century thought linked becoming to eschatology, the 20th century aligns with an unconscious phase, allowing the child to traverse time and reach this phase of the child within. Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) embodies the *puer tempus* archetype, offering a vision of a child's evolving relationship with time and spiritual rebirth. The story delves into the child's psyche, capturing an inner journey toward a timeless self-awareness that unites past and future. It is situated on the side of regaining the eschatological order of reality, although it is unlike any other previous realizations. The novel explores the influence of time on a child's consciousness, creating an inner, reversible temporality that reflects the philosophy of the beginning: presence

<sup>6</sup> The issue of archetypes affecting a child is not analyzed here since it is a broad topic to explore.

(*praesentia*) and beginning (*initium*). L'Engle talks about the beginning when a bond between *initium* and the child's consciousness is established. She builds a materialistic spatiotemporal image in a child's mind, its time-space, which becomes a precious component of its inner world. This imagery represents a path where the past meets the future, creating new forms of sacred space for the child's consciousness and reflecting infinity, as described by Marja Nikolajeva in her exploration of the time nature of consciousness (Nikolajeva, 2000). Therefore, it is an ontological, Parmenidean time *par excellence*, always identical to itself.

L'Engle emphasizes the sacred time a child must reclaim through an eschatological battle of good versus evil, echoing biblical and mythical rebirth. This journey requires openness to vulnerability, as the child learns to see "with the heart," echoing a Pauline message of love's triumph over death. On the ruins of rationality, a new, soothing, private myth of love of the Other arises – the new beginning of a child. This spiritual rebirth is needed for a child hero who finds himself/herself in his "desert" in a state of internal desolation. Salvation arises from transcending modern rationalism, affirming life, and embracing love's transformative pain. The child must acknowledge loss and confront the fear of growing up to create bonds with others. Therefore, *Wrinkle's...* viewpoint can be described as the philosophy of the beginning toward the Other's face (which relates to Levinas' understanding of transcending death). This being-toward-other triggers falling into the world and, therefore, time.

The contemporary discussion about the temporality of childhood and the use of the *puer tempus* archetype in the philosophy of beginnings is notably impacted by experiences of war and trauma. This is particularly evident in the series by Ransom Riggs (from *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) to *The Desolations of Devil's Acre* (2021)). Riggs presents a haunting vision of children whose connection to eternity is fractured by historical violence, merging the past and present conflicts through Jacob Portman's journey. The child's temporality, marked by trauma, reflects a struggle to conquer the fear of death and cyclical repetition of conflict. This way of presenting a child and time shifts the question of "being after death" into being here and now, immersing the child in history and ephemerality, but does not give simplistic images of eternity.

Riggs examines how Chronos shapes new dynamics of eternity, offering two distinct perspectives (Riggs, 2011:235, transl. K.S.). The first highlights a cyclical eternal life of the loophole, where peculiars "are stuck in their youth, just like Peter Pan and his missing boys" (Riggs, 2011: 186). Contrary to Neverland these children are in perpetual youth without the ability to progress, emphasizing the limitations of eternal life amid traumas. Within the loops, peculiars relive previous experiences through endless beginnings. While it may appear to be eternal youth, suspending time comes with a cost: a renunciation of the

future and the fear of death. This type of eternity allows children to take control over their lives and extrapolate their trauma.

The second type of eternity refers to the mythical land called Abaton, also known as the Library of Souls, which is the equivalent of a peculiar paradise based on metempsychosis, where souls are endlessly reborn. This form of eternity denies traditional salvation, portraying an eschatological cycle of beginnings without a definitive return or resolution. Riggs' catastrophic image of paradise, which is not a *pleroma* to which one could return, overlaps the living dynamics of Levinas' metaphysical vision. Therefore, the desire for eternity becomes an eschatological mirage.

The experience of history and different levels of eternal time underscores the inherent ambiguity in a child's temporal experience, revealing that even eternity is subjected to time. Genuine eternity exists only within life, shaped by relationships beyond time's constraints – it neither conquers nor negates time. Recognition of this thought is a breakthrough in thinking about the child's time. It opens to a new metaphysics of the beginning and returns to integrity in the Hegelian sense. Ultimately, this perspective reshapes the understanding of child being with time. The child's psyche, motivated by a holistic vision of adolescence, claims the right to define and live its temporality on its own terms. Being a child is less about eternity and more about existing within time, rooted in experience. This literary conceptualization depicts that we can no longer refer to the child as "being", "becoming", or "being and becoming" since these etiquettes fail to capture the nuanced realities of different stages and aspects of childhood.

Modern debates about childhood and time often focus on how societal structures, such as education and socialization, impose linear and adult-oriented conceptions of time onto children (Qvortrup, 1991; James, A. James, 2004). The typology of temporal archetypes and the philosophy of beginning offer a counterpoint by highlighting the inherent differences in how literary children experience time. These frameworks challenge the adult-centric view of time by validating real children's unique, often non-linear or imaginative experiences of time, enriching the discourse on temporality. Contemporary children's literature illustrates a new model referring to time identity epitomized by *puer tempus*, which captures a new apparition of secular eternity, pondering similar issues found in philosophical discourse.

This conceptualization presents an alternative view of the timeless childhood of *puer tempus* found in reincarnation narratives. It challenges the traditional connection between growth and age in Western thought, suggesting that children's lives may start mid-cycle rather than at the beginning. In the insightful work *Reliving Childhood? The Temporality of Childhood and Narratives of Reincarnation*, Akhil Gupta delves into the intricate relationship between reincarnation and prevailing Western notions of childhood through Buddhist

perspectives (Gupta, 2002). He argues that cultures embracing reincarnation perceive development differently and defy traditional life stages. Gupta draws on Carolyn Steedman's idea of childhood's nostalgic structure to illustrate how developmental narratives reinforce modern views of childhood associated with loss (Steersman, 1995). The researcher compares the memories of reincarnated children to nostalgic adult recollections, as children remember events from a past life while undergoing current growth. He suggests that adults feeling nostalgic for their childhood experience loss differently than children inhabited by their previous lives since they maintain their essential self (Gupta, 2002:15). The researcher suggests that reincarnated children experience continuity across lifetimes, defying age-based growth norms. For them, becoming is determined by death, marking a new beginning in each cycle. Gupta's ideas resonate with Deleuze's notion of "becoming-child," emphasizing a non-linear life cycle of ongoing beginnings, which decouples childhood from age. Therefore, childhood stops being indexed to age – annihilates beginning, whereas it only shows the continuum cycle of beginnings without being able to address the first *initium* (using Arend's term).

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The typology proposed in the article does not exhaust the complex problem of the evolution of child's time archetypes. The archetypes *puer aevum*, *puer disputationi*, *puer aeternus*, and *puer tempus* are carriers of universal psychological meanings. They can also be treated as a heuristic matrix of a child's temporal identification. They empower children to navigate their time path, whether linear, cyclical, or timeless. Temporal archetypes also represent how childhood is perceived across different cultures and historical periods, shaping various modes of temporal experience.

The philosophy of beginning, linked to concepts of *initium* (beginning) and *praesentia* (presence), explores the idea that childhood represents a unique starting point in the human experience, where time is not yet fully structured by societal norms. This perspective repositions childhood as a zone where multiple temporalities coexist, untethered from adult-imposed structures like schedules and ageing. Building on the typology of temporal archetypes and the philosophy of beginning, childhood can be seen as a zone where different temporalities coexist and are explored. This idea connects with contemporary discussions on childhood as a period where the rigid boundaries of adult time (such as deadlines, schedules, and chronological ageing) are less relevant, allowing for a more fluid and experimental approach to time. In this sense, the child's time experience is not just about progressing toward adulthood. Still, it involves a deeper engagement with time as a multifaceted and dynamic concept where children can choose their temporality and live it on their terms. This counters the romanticized notion of childhood as a period outside of time,

characterized by innocence and unchanging essence. Instead, it positions the child as an active participant in temporal experiences, where time is lived and experienced dynamically.

Returning to the discussion of being and becoming, one must ask: what is the status of the continuously evolving child in the two temporal dimensions of Aion and Chronos? It is insufficient, since Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming distances itself from the essential connection between ontology and the social realm, rendering becoming-child disembodied and disconnected from the real child and its eschatological temporality. Becoming-a-child is not just a topological position that defines the temporal forms of a child's existence but a dynamic process of intensities, transitions, and beginnings that bypasses the empirical child, embedding it in history and society without addressing its eschatological being.

A state that is different from both "being" and "becoming" that captures the difference in a child's relation to temporality could be described as "emergence". It refers to the process by which new and complex patterns, properties, or states arise from interacting with more superficial elements. Unlike Uprichard's concept of "being and becoming a child," the child's emergence transcends the linear life stages, focusing instead on unpredictable, complex transformations that arise through experience and interaction (Uprichard, 2008). It implies that a child's identity isn't pre-determined but unfolds through various influences, creating a unique state that isn't limited to past, present, or future. This concept aligns with Deleuze's "molecular child", representing aspects of childhood that defy rigid social roles, allowing children to form identities independently of societal expectations.

An emerging child is polytemporal, meaning it has a complex internal time experience and can relate to different historical periods and time identities. Viewing a child's emerging existence as polytemporal allows us to challenge the idea of a single, coherent ontology of a child that can be contained within one unified storyline. This opens space for alternative age identities that subvert the nature of "being and becoming a child" and add contradictory strands to a once unified form of child time identity.

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## Review



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## Technologisation, Multimodality, Performativity and Agency – Challenges for Contemporary Humanities Education

Review of *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej* ed. by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2024, pp. 412.

**Abstract:** This article is a review of *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej*, a volume edited by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek (2024), which addresses the issue of technologisation of humanities education in a thoughtful and mature manner: it takes into account the interdisciplinarity of research within the humanities, exposes the combination of theory and practice, agency, proactivity and engagement, and draws attention to the improvement of new competence related to the technological challenges of the contemporary world and the broadly understood transformation in the process of reality perception (from linear narrative to – digital, hypertextual, practical, laboratory).

**Keywords:** education, technology, technologization of humanities

The book *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej* addresses the issue of technologization of humanities education in a thoughtful and mature manner: it takes into account the interdisciplinarity of research within the humanities, exposes the combination of theory and practice, agency, proactivity and engagement, and draws attention to the improvement of new competence related to the technological challenges of the contemporary world and the broadly understood transformation in the process of reality perception (from linear narrative to – digital, hypertextual, practical, laboratory). The edition, meticulously edited by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek at the substantive level is logical and consistent, and has been developed very reliably and conscientiously, as it is the result of many years of already interdisciplinary research by the team of the Centre for Multimodal Educational and Cultural Research of the Faculty of Polish Studies of the Jagiellonian University

(which is a continuation of the activities and work already carried out since 2015 in the Laboratory of Multimodal Educational Strategies).

The book takes up the contemporary discourse on the philosophy of new media, refers to their axiological context, takes into account the positive and negative consequences of the technologization of the reality surrounding man, as well as considers the issue of the previously unrecognized influence of cyber media on culture, Polish language didactics, humanities, and artistic practice. The work is related to the conviction that in contemporary reality, including the educational space, “technological knowledge unsupported by humanistic and critical reflection may lead to dependence on the simulation character of new media” (*Technopaideia*... 396) and foster a lowering of axiological (including ethical) reflection.

On the other hand, the enormous educational potential of cybermedia, as Joanna Hobot-Marcinek rightly points out, and “their performative character not only generates dangers, but also opens up a range of possibilities, related to the transition from passive reception to a participatory culture, in which the recipient of literature or art becomes at the same time the creator” (*Technopaideia*...397).

In the opinion of the authors of the publication, an important role in contemporary educational space and in educational and artistic practice is played by not only multimodality, inherent in all human communication, but also by polysensoriality and intersemioticity determining the use of a variety of sign systems that allow for a “wider” view of the reality explored and can help overcome barriers between technology and literature, education and art.

In the very introduction, Sebastian Borowicz highlights such notions, phenomena, trends and proposals for educational activities as the scientization of school, the absolutization of accuracy, teaching technologies, the fundamental role of design and production, and states

the solutions developed in the constructivist-connectivist model of teaching, such as media labs, model-based inquiry, game-based learning, exploration technologies, connected learning or bifocal modelling, among others, point at the same time to the need for a change in the empirically oriented operating model of so-called high-tech schools, especially with regard to the teaching of humanities subjects. (*Technopaideia*... 22)

The author also considers:

We propose to move away from their scientization, i.e. from the STEAM model to HUM education. Multimodal polonics education, based on the @gor system, engagement, combining performativity and theoretical reflection would profile and shape technotopic learning processes in accordance with the cognitive apparatus proper to the humanities based on criticality and interpretation. (*Technopaideia* . 22)

School reality is changing very rapidly, and the key competence of a modern twenty-first-century school should also change as a result, with an emphasis on practical and problem-solving skills. Since a student is currently facing many civilizational, social and technological challenges, the editors already emphasize in the introduction that the school should promote a practical form of teaching and a student representing:

The performative type of education is essentially an engaged young scientist and designer learning about the world by acting on objects, conducting their experiments in an automated laboratory-like technoscience environment, developing a cognitive model specific to the empirical and technical sciences, focused on operational knowledge ('how does something work?'). (*Technopaideia*...12)

The book is clearly divided into several parts with the following categories: multimodally, polonistically, instrumentally, and intermedially, and a dozen chapters that present the broad spectrum of the issues.

Anna Nacher in her chapter "To nie sztuczna inteligencja jest naszym największym zagrożeniem: rozległe performance technologii medialnych" convincingly reflects on the nature of cybermedia, referring to Marshall McLuhan's theory, and emphasizes the role of the discussion of media not only in the context of the technological revolution and the treatment of technologies as "tools." The author convincingly argues:

The emergence of extensive media performances is, therefore, a necessary prelude to a proper assessment of what media-conscious educational practices would look like. For they are never separated from the media, and media technologies do not require any particular 'inclusion,' nor are we dealing with the 'technologisation' of the humanities; we are dealing with a very complex world on edge, after many ends of the world, which requires care, responsibility, and sensitivity. (*Technopaideia*...55)

Maciej Krzykowski, on the other hand, in his article "Przysposobienie technologiczne," takes into account the issue of manipulation and ideologization of new media and recommends introducing a subject that will help to familiarize teachers and students with the dangers of new technologies and will provide tools to consciously evaluate them in a broader context, e.g., in the context of the media:

a way of realizing digital education that would take into account the complexity of the profound challenges that digital disorder (disruption) brings to us because it affects us on a biological, psychological, social, and existential level, and thus could lead to *technophilia*. (*Technopaideia*...58)

Sidey Myoo's article ("Po drugiej stronie interfejsu – życie awatarów") refers to reflections on the function, role and place of virtual reality (with particular

emphasis on avatar characters) in relation to the axiological dimension of human existence online, with the formation of moral and ethical attitudes and, more broadly, the discussion of the world of values. On the other hand, the text "Cyberswiat jako przestrzeń edukacyjna–perspektywy nowych form reprezentacji, interpretacji i komunikacji" by Edyta Sadowska and Miłosz Horodyski consistently proves that users of cyberspace should be not only aware, but also cautious in their perception of the virtual world:

The rapprochement between cyberspace and off-grid reality is one of the key phenomena of the modern era of cyberculture (...). For many, the boundary between the two worlds is becoming increasingly blurred (...) Cybermedia has undoubtedly opened up new areas of research into the psychology of reception. The essential catalyst for cybercultural phenomena is interactivity, understood as a dialogue between the viewer and the artifact in real-time with mutual interaction. At the same time, this should not be seen as a process of perception, but also as a process of communication. (*Technopaideia*... 85–86)

Joanna Hobot-Marcinek's article "Czaty, maupy, bramy. Tadeusz Różewicz jako teoretyk mediów," from a Polish philological point of view, deals exhaustively with the essence and mechanisms of the functioning of the media in Tadeusz Różewicz's poetry, which imitates media narratives by confronting his considerations with the philosophical thought of the French new media researcher Jean Baudrillard. Hobot-Marcinek convincingly demonstrates that Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is close to contemporary research into virtual reality and may be a process of replacing reality with its simulacra, leading to total control over human minds.

On the other hand, another author, Dariusz Szczukowski, poses questions about the meaning of teaching poetry in a culture dominated by algorithms. In his text "Nauczanie poezji w dobie cyfryzacji," referring to the "posthumanist" theory and the notion of the technologization of teaching, as well as to the philosophical works of Bernard Stiegler, the researcher, defending the sense of reading, tries to define school encounters with poetry as an experience of the intensification of existence, escaping "all economics and the power of countability," referring to the phenomenon of symbolic poverty and the rules of the digital world subordinated to the logic of profit.

Sebastian Borowicz, taking into account the peculiar links between the ancient world and contemporary reality, relates his reflections undertaken in the article "Homerus in schola czyli o pożytku z (nie) czytania w epoce ponowoczesnych techno środowisk." Referring to the theory of immersive reading, using the phenomenon of gamification, Borowicz shows a new perspective on the presence of Homer's works in school, using, among other things, digital tools and *connected learning* principles, demonstrating how Homer's reading can be

considered in the context of new multimodal technologies and combined with a post-modern participatory culture.

Another article by Małgorzata Gajak-Toczek, reveals a pragmatic approach – the text "Przyszli poloniści w cyfrowym świecie. Wybrane aspekty zjawiska" refers to the preparation of future Polish language teachers to work with the use of various information technologies. The author's in-depth reflections on the network society and the characteristics of generation C (*computerized, connected, always clicking*) lead to conclusions concerning the necessity of applying actions compliant with the principles of connective pedagogy, which prioritizes thinking and acting over the passive acquisition of knowledge. The author also brings up issues characteristic of convergence culture in her text, writes about the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and the possibilities of its use in the process of Polish language education (e.g., through the *My Heritage* application, contextual reading, principles of creating Facebook pages of literary characters or digital comics).

Marta Rusek, in her article "Polonista patrzy w przyszłość," shows futuristic visions of Polish language education and redefines the contemporary role, function and place of Polish language education in the context of civilizational and technological changes. In her text, the author, writing about anxieties and fears related to adapting the tools of new technologies to everyday reality, evokes the figure of the old *Odysseus* from Lion Feuchtwanger's short story *Odysseus and the Hogs, or the Troubles with Culture*, and proves that this figure becomes a figure of contemporary man,

whom the development of technology and the civilizational and cultural changes associated with it alienated, marginalized and enclosed in a shell of the past. This was in spite of the fact that all his life experience and heroic fame stemmed from an attitude of openness to the new, the different, the unknown. (*Technopaideia*...180)

Another article by Gościwit Malinowski, "Gromadzić wszystko–inwentaryzować wszystko–przeszukiwać wszystko" – w pogoni za ideałem metodologicznym filologii klasycznej" (since its crystallization as an academic discipline whose aim is to preserve the legacy of antiquity and to pass on to posterity all the source material and the tradition of its interpretation) touches upon a consideration of the methodological ideal of classical philology. Whilst taking into account the involvement of classical philologists in the application of new technologies to their research, the author writes about the clear consequence of the underlying effort of classical philology to create research tools that make it possible to reach the sources, organize and value them, as well as their reliable interpretation resulting from such documentary and source work.

Kamila Kłudkiewicz, the author of the article entitles "Narzędzia cyfrowe w warsztacie współczesnego historyka sztuki. Kilka uwag o bazach reprodukcji

dział sztuki” refers to the context of art history and the use of digital tools to make teaching more attractive, while Katarzyna Możejko’s reflections in the text “You Tube na lekcjach o literaturze–społeczne konteksty interpretacji. Wizurunek youtubera/ki a kreacje bohaterów Lalki” shows, among other things, Siegrfried J. Schmidt’s project of empirical literary studies and unveils a reflection on the role of new media in Polish language teaching and the reception of literature at school. Furthermore, the article’s author shows how websites as historically and aesthetically conditioned media shape how literary texts are received and force the audience to move towards a participatory culture.

The concept of the robot-exhibit and people’s cultural perceptions of the robot are used in the article by Ilona Iłowiecka-Tańska and Katarzyna Potęga vel Żbik, authors of the text “Czy Księżyc zrobiony jest z sera? Rozmowy zwiedzających Centrum Nauki z humanoidalnym robotem Mikołaj Kopernik”. The authors refer in their considerations to the research on the relations between a human and a humanoid robot, analyzing, among others, the transcription of the dialogues conducted between the audience of the Warsaw Copernicus Science Centre and the robot mentioned in the title of the article; they refer to the issues of social competence of the visitors, their value systems and, more broadly, visions of the visitors’ world.

In the article “Technologia intermediów. Nowe media sztuki w Krakowie 1970–2020”, Artur Tajber writes about crossing genre boundaries, combining various means of expression, the use of intermedia in various fields of art, the influence of intermedia on the creative process and the search for forms of expression, performance art and intermedia education practices. Not only does the author refer to many new terms in this field, e.g. interactive art, contextual art, performative art, cyber art, new media art, but he also cites the material and results of research carried out as part of an experimental artistic project (conducted on the borderline between art and science): *Action-Rotation*, taking the form of a multimedia show.

Artistic practice and multi-level visual projects are also referred to by Ewa Bloom-Kwiatkowska in her article “EKRAN vs OBRAZ. Techniki cyfrowe i multimedialne jako element strategii artystycznej i manifestacji oporu w sztuce.” Among other things, the author discusses the use of film, photographic, and computer techniques in her projects and draws attention to the processing of selected visual codes of the screen related to the themes of evil, violence, and trauma.

Anna Włodarczyk, on the other hand, in her article “Pokój Vincenta van Gogha–od obrazu malarskiego do metawersu. Multisensoryczne inspiracje” presents her thoughts on the polysensory perception of the world, referring to the relationship between the image and the visual arts. She draws attention primarily to the didactic dimension of multimedia painting exhibitions (on the example of the Vincent van Gogh Room project in Arles). The researcher

considers the issue of the perception of such multimedia exhibitions, discussing the attitude of the student-consumer who, in this case, benefits from the latest technological developments, so that the immersive immersion of the viewer in the painting, “participating (...) would become a multisensory experience, both visual and tactile, in order to be able to construct his own emotional experience of receiving the work” (*Technopaideia*...301).

At the end of these considerations, it is worth mentioning a summary of the work of the authors of the texts included in the volume *Techopaidea*..., considerations of the co-editor of the volume Joanna Hobot-Marcinek. The researcher writes convincingly about multimodal polonics in the age of technological overstimulation and draws attention to the need for a multifaceted and multi-level as well as interdisciplinary study of polonics education in progress, which is convincingly and consistently demonstrated by the authors of the individual articles included in this volume. Recalling the closing short story of the volume, “1967 – wytwarzanie czasu w kinie Kijów,” Hobot-Marcinek states that:

the protagonist of the experiment described (...) is the Wanderer, who is not so much a Benjaminian *flâneur* as an independent contemporary explorer and seeker who, donning VR goggles, enters a 1967 cinema and begins to explore it. As he wanders around, he not only gains knowledge of the place he is viewing, but also has the opportunity to experience its bygone atmosphere. (*Techopaideia*...390)

Experiencing the place while wandering and a color film from the future showing an image of the garden and cinema surroundings is realized through 30 selected images from the virtually reconstructed world of the cinema, its atmosphere, and sounds.

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The book *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej* edited by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek demonstrates the excellent substantive preparation of the editors of the volume and the authors of the articles. The work refers to the interdisciplinary and international literature on the subject, and is embedded in the rich methodology of research conducted on humanities education in the broad sense, as it takes into account both literary and cultural education, as well as media and communication education in the perspective of the discourse currently taking place on the technologization of education.

The authors' reflections in the individual texts address the issue of the constructivist-connectivism model of teaching and the modern understanding of humanistic education, combining theory with practice, agency, proactivity, and involvement, and take into account the improvement of new competence related to the technological challenges of the modern world and the broadly understood

transformation in the process of reality perception (“transformation” of the viewer from linear narrative to – digital, hypertext, practical, laboratory).

As the co-editor of the Hobot-Marcinek volume rightly points out, and it is hard to disagree with the following statement:

*Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej* [presents] a multimodal model of school and university polonics, contrasts the mechanical use of new technologies with their creative, innovative, ‘humanised’ use, and replaces the viewer’s uncontrolled immersion in the metaverse with a conscious exploration of virtual worlds. Thus, proficiency and familiarity with *techne* is part of the paideutic project of intellectual, cultural and ethical formation and self-formation of the human being. (*Technopaideia*...397)

According to the editors of the volume and the authors of the articles included in this edition, the humanistic education of a young person – a young scientist and constructor learning about the world, facing the challenges of contemporary reality – thus perfectly fits into the discussion on a new – performative – type of education, which assumes laboratory, creativity and innovation, as well as involvement and learning about the world by acting on objects. In spite of the issues of the technologization of society and media education that are addressed here with deep thought, the edition, which has been compiled with great care, also retains space for considerations of existential and ethical issues, discussions of axiology and humanist values in the broadest sense. And this aspect of consideration seems to be the most important.

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