

Blurred Boundaries in Contemporary Czech Children's and Young Adult Literature

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This paper focuses on the permeability of the boundary of age in Czech YA/children's literature. Some of the tendencies I am going to deal with have been discussed on a general level by various international scholars as well as in a whole set of inspiring studies from the German environment published earlier under the title *Kinderliteratur, Literatur für Erwachsene. Zum Verhältnis von Kinderliteratur und Erwachsenenliteratur*. The aim of this paper is to build on this work and discuss how the phenomenon of crosswriting is currently manifested in children's and young adult literature in the Czech environment.

Keywords: children's literature, young adult literature, all age books

Contemporary children's and young adult literature has a strong tendency to exempt itself from an affiliation to a certain fixed group of readers. While this exemption can be observed on several levels, the most radical is the disengagement from the genre. To explore some of the tendencies in this field, this paper will focus on the permeability of the boundary of age in Czech YA/children's literature. Though this phenomenon does not only concern Czech literature, there are certain specific manifestations that are illustrative of blurred boundaries.

Some of the tendencies I am going to deal with have been discussed on a general level by various international scholars (for example, Agnes Blümer of Heidelberg University, Sandra L. Beckett of Brock University in the US) as well as in a whole set of inspiring studies from the German environment published earlier under the title *Kinderliteratur, Literatur für Erwachsene. Zum Verhältnis von Kinderliteratur und Erwachsenenliteratur*. The aim of this paper is to build on this work and discuss how the phenomenon of crosswriting is currently manifested in children's and young adult literature in the Czech environment.

Children's and young adult literature has always included books that raise doubt as to their target group. Such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll or *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; the latter being popular primarily with adults. Although excerpts from the two books will continue to be included in elementary school reading books; and rightfully so; and their inclusion in the canon is indisputable, the debate concerning their closeness to children's perception of the world will probably not cease in the future.

Until the 1980s, the affiliation of children's books to a fixed age group has been considered almost a duty in Czechoslovakia. This was due to the state publishing house Albatros (formerly Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy) having almost had a monopoly on the publishing of children's books. Albatros books never lacked information regarding the suitable age group stated in the imprint. Books produced by Albatros still include the information today, although the publishing house has now been long private. On the contrary, publishing houses founded after 1989 mostly avoid including such information, or even allude to the practice ironically by notes saying "for readers from 9 to 99 years of age" (for example by books of Petr Nikl).

In the mid-1990s, Slovak scholar Marta Žilková explained the phenomenon of the "collapse of the age category", which was then relatively new to our environment, by a crisis of value norms and criteria in post-totalitarian countries. Žilková further rightly demanded that established aesthetic norms and conventions be overcome in the evaluation of children's literature (Žilková, 1996, pp. 31-33). A few years later, new publishing houses were founded in the Czech Republic; ones that are still active today and that have significantly contributed to overcoming these norms. It was them who has produced most of the books that have abandoned fixed age boundaries of the target group. It is good to realize that it is not always the very authors but often the publishers and their editorial plans that stand behind crossing the boundaries. Rather than authors, it appears that publishers and editors have control over the intended audience of a book.

Further, two of the most Czech publishers of children's books are well aware of the collapse of age categories of their readers, intentionally launching editions targeted at audiences without an age limit. Baobab publishing house started the Mi.Mo edition in 2008, characterizing it by the motto "about childhood for adults and children" (which is inaccurate with regard to its publications though). The original memoir book *Čáp nejní kondor* ("A storch ain't a condor") by singer Radůza was published in this edition. Meander publishing house, with its art edition *Modrý slon*, has characterized itself on its website as follows: "Unmistakable art books for children, children's books for adults and comics for everyone."

The phenomenon of the "collapse of the age category" has also been well described in secondary sources. In her study *Pohádkové příběhy pro děti a mládež (1990-2010), Fairy tale stories for children and young adults (1990-2010)*, Brno-based scholar Milena Šubrtová has characterized the collapse in a subchapter entitled *Současná literatura pro děti a mládež – literatura rozostřených hranic (Contemporary children's and young adult literature – literature of blurred boundaries)* (Šubrtová, 2011, p. 25). Dealing with Czech authorial fairy tale, she has aptly described the collapse as follows: "The convergence of adult and child recipients within the fairy tale genre is not merely a result of the faster maturing of the young generation; it is also caused by a certain infantilization of the world of adults, who are escaping to the fairy tale world from the grey reality of their lives" (Šubrtová, 2011, p. 29).

Urbanová also discusses the connection between blurred boundaries and the arrival of postmodernism (Urbanová, 2003, p. 56). Scholar Jana Čeňková points out the increasing popularity of titles for teenagers, shifting the age limit of young adult literature to the boundary of 18 years, and further the trend of all-age-books as books for all age categories mostly of the fantasy genre. It is symptomatic that these books tend to have different covers for adults and young adults (Čeňková, 2012, p. 8).

Rather than defining the tendency to blur the boundaries in contemporary Czech children's and young adult literature, this paper aims to introduce books with a significantly "vague age category" and to classify them within more general categories. These are books that target (likewise, if not primarily) adult readers; be it intentionally or unintentionally.

Children's Books as a Visual Artefact

Quality illustrations have always belonged in quality children's books; and it can be said that the Czech illustration tradition is highly regarded in the world. This is partly due to the fact that in the socialist era, some of the books were illustrated by visual artists who were otherwise not allowed to work freely. At present as well as in the recent past, several visually opulent works (for example of Jaroslav Šerých), have appeared both in the international context and in Czech children's fiction, transcending the framework of children's and young adult literature by far, rather becoming universal visual artefacts.

Books by versatile artist Petr Nikl have been published by Meander publishing house. Petr Nikl is the author of both the verbal and visual aspect, with the ratio of the two varying in various books. Readers as well as the professional public have appreciated Nikl's book *Pohádka o Rybitince (A Fairy Tale about a Wee Fish Named Rybitinka)* (2001), which has opened Meander's art edition *Modrý slon*. Petr Nikl has designed the logo of the edition as well. Just like the other books published in the edition, *Pohádka o Rybitince* has an original graphic design, and is revolutionary in many respects in the context of authorial children's books; with its combination of prose and verse, it anticipates Nikl's following books in many ways. However, it is primarily characterized by Nikl's highly static illustrations made by the mezzotint technique. Nikl also experiments with the traditional fairy tale genre in his book *Lingvistické pohádky (Linguistic stories)* from 2006. Rather than telling traditional fairy tales, the book represents an atlas of literary forms created by the author, set in the realm of "Linguisia". Besides winning several awards traditionally harvested by Nikl's books, his following book *Záhádky (Little mysteries)* from 2007 also won a most prestigious trophy; Book of the Year of the Magnesia Litera "television book show". It was for the first time that a children's book made a major breakthrough in the new millennium; symptomatically it is a book that will capture adult readers as well; if not primarily them. This; perhaps unintended; redirection of the target group has also been noticed by the Meander publishing house; the publisher's annotation at the back of the cover says: "Záhádky is yet another book for children and their parents." The genre diffusion and ungraspability of *Záhádky* may be disturbing to readers expecting a traditional children's book; nevertheless, in this book, Petr Nikl has definitely established a new form of Czech non-sense literature.

Petr Nikl's authorial books can serve as an example of the merging of target groups, with adults buying a "children's" books not only because of their interest as readers but also for collecting reasons. Nikl thus manages to use his unconventional linguistic and visual poetics to appeal to a wider audience. Reviewers of Nikl's books question how suitable they are for children. Their answers vary; for instance, in her review of *Lingvistické pohádky*, Jana Matějková observes that "the book may not place demands on children, who tend to play naturally, but rather (in an ideal case) on parents, who are forced to play with them" (Matějková, 2008, p. 16).

The author himself has proved in many interviews that he did not really intend his books for children and that they have only become children's books due to the edition policy of

Meander publishing house. On the other hand, he confirms that a children's approach to the world through play is crucial to him; for instance, in an interview for *Rozhlas* weekly, he said: "The principle (when the author's hand is controlled by the unconscious, note by R. M.) is typical for me; in drawing and writing as well as in theatre and music improvisations. I'm fascinated by the emergence of things from point zero, without a notion of a clear goal. I'm trying to revisit ways of expression I know from childhood" (Nikl, 2009, p. 12).

In the same interview, Nikl has defined the roots of his works: "Playing is not mere playing; absurd verse is not mere nonsense. (...) I see art as an act of self-exposure, as a therapy" (Nikl, 2009, p. 12). It seems that if Nikl's art books are approached by criteria and demands traditionally applied to children's and young adult books, communication misunderstandings will arise; they have not been intended as such by the author, who thus does not feel obliged to employ the principle of internal self-censorship and who has no regard of readers of any age. On the part of Petr Nikl, this is a pure game; it depends on the readers whether they will accept its rules. It is rather by coincidence that it is the very children, undaunted by the experience with a "classic" book intended primarily for them, that represent natural partners for Nikl's games.

Naturally, Petr Nikl is not the only artist among authors with a creative approach to children's books. The same edition that has published Nikl's books has also published a book by visual artist Jiří Černický *Dokument z pohádky O Sasance (Anemone. A documentary from a fairy tale)* which received the Most Beautiful Book of 2004 award; however, its verbal part is rather questionable. This category also definitely includes the photo comics *Skutečný příběh Cílka a Lídy (The true story of Cílek and Lída)* by visual artist František Skála; a "family book" in the best sense of the word. In the international context, this tendency is represented e.g. by Australian illustrator Shaun Tan whose books are designed for a broad spectrum of readers despite the fact that they employ the classic form of an illustrated children's book.

Encyclopaediality: Educational Picture Books

The dominance of the visual aspect over the verbal aspect as well as the tendency towards non-fiction is a significant trend in children's literature in general. Picture books have traditionally belonged to children's and young adult literature; however, in the past two decades, at least two authors have become established in the Czech environment whose works, often transcending to the field of non-fiction, meet much more demanding criteria. It can be said that the readers of the books by Petr Sís and Renáta Fučíková can be of universal age.

Petr Sís, holder of the Hans Christian Andersen Award, was originally an illustrator; he has only become a storyteller in the late 1980s. Since then, he has published a whole range of educational books for clearly defined age groups; for instance *Hrej, Mozarte, hrej (Play, Mozart, Play!)* (2006) for very young children. However, his books *Strom života (The Tree of Life)* (2004) about the life of Charles Darwin, his autobiographic work *Tibet: Tajemství červené krabičky (Tibet: Through the Red Box)* (2005) and primarily *Zed' aneb Jak jsem vyrůstal za železnou oponou (The Wall)* (2007) have a lot to offer to adult readers as well.¹

In this respect, Petr Sís went the furthest in his book *Ptačí sněm (The Conference of the Birds)* (2011). The symbolic story of the journey of a flock of birds in search for their king,

¹ For that matter, *Strom života* has stirred a huge debate with an ideological background among adult readers in the United States, while *Zed'* did in the Czech Republic.

whom they finally find in themselves, is an adaptation of a 12th century Persian epic; the very subject makes it apparent that the theme is not exactly accessible to children. The author has described the trouble with the age limit of the book's readers as follows: "As I have won renown as a children's book author, it was hard to find the right publisher in the United States. Everybody told me that it's too sad or too heavy for children." The Labyrinth publishing house, which has published the book in the Czech Republic in the "children's" edition Raketa, and announces it as a story for big and small readers; a book for parents and their children. It is not by chance that *Ptačí sněm* has not been nominated in any of the children's and young adult book competitions. The genre definition, too, leaves the readers in doubt. Mediating an ancient Persian epic poem, the book can be classified as non-fiction; however, it also provides its artistic treatment, primarily in the form of narrating by means of images.

Books by illustrator Renáta Fučíková may not have such philosophical depth, however, with their focus on European history and emphasis on factual accuracy, they can both serve as a teaching supplement at elementary schools and become part of the library in any household. Fučíková focuses on prominent Czech personalities (T. G. Masaryk, J. A. Komenský), however, justified acclaim was received primarily by her monumental work *Historie Evropy – Obrazové putování* (*History of Europe – a journey in images*) (2011).

This tendency, too, has many other representatives; let me mention e.g. Lucie Seifertová who employs humour in her treatment of historical subjects or the awarded book *Hlava v hlavě* (*The head in the head*) by Ondřej Buddeus and David Böhm which represents an encyclopaedia of the head and all things related to this term.

Children's Literature as Camouflage: Under the Mask of a Children's Book

The third trend, which is probably specific to the Czech environment, is represented by books intended almost unreservedly for adult audiences, using the genre of children's literature as a camouflage. Let me mention two examples from completely different fields:

The Prague-based Brio publishing house has become established as a publisher of spectacular children's books, primarily fairy tales from around the world. That is why their publishing of the book *Tři tatínci a maminka* (*Three dads and mum*) written by Martin Reiner, Michal Viewegh and Pavel Šrut and illustrated by Galina Miklínová in 2010 seemed like a revelation. Two renowned creative couples have joined forces in a children's book; Michal Viewegh with his publisher and Pavel Šrut with his illustrator, this time in the role of equal authors. Opening the book about the three dads, Reiner's fairy tale has an ambiguous title: *O mamince a kouzelné mušličce* (*Mum and her magic shell*). Ambiguity is one of the main characteristics of the book and Reiner spares no effort on it. He tells the humorous story of the childhood of the future mum Janička and of her eccentric uncle Antonín. His story has the following point: mum grows up, finds a dad thanks to her magic shell and gives birth to twins. In the first part, Reiner is psychologically very convincing in his empathy with a girl's soul; towards the end, he manages to be both sarcastically witty and sexually enlightening, which is an admirable performance; given the little space; for a debutant in the field of children's literature.

Michal Viewegh's part carries a title that will primarily appeal to adult readers: *Maminka se hledá* (*Mum is trying to find herself*). Children can only look for answers to various saucy allusions intended purely for parents; for instance, the father-writer is watching a naked lady on his

computer instead of writing. However, the author had the difficult task of describing a creeping marital crisis and the frustrations of a young active mother.

The finale belongs to an author practiced in writing for children. In his part entitled *Maminka a tři tajemné klíče* (*Mum and three magic keys*), Pavel Šrut proves to be an experienced author; the plot of his story is pacey, includes the ironized cliché of an old locked trunk and introduces the children's mother as a ten-year-old girl. Šrut continues in "winking at the adult reader" in his allusions to the father's presence on the pages of a tabloid newspaper or his new project called *Román pro děti* (*A children's novel*). For that matter, such overlaps to the "adult" world can be found in his famous novel *Lichožrouti* (*The odd-sock eaters*) as well. The book holds together primarily thanks to the creative illustrations by Galina Miklínová. The jacket flap reads: "The book can be perceived as a hilarious literary game or as a loose collection of short stories at the border between the worlds of adults and children." By that, and primarily by the renowned names of the authors, the book is targeting adult women rather than children. In case of the less successful follow up book *Tři maminky a tatínek* (*Three mums and dad*) by Natálie Kocábová, Alena Ježková and Barbara Nesvadbová, this targeting is already more than obvious.

The second book to be named as an example of an edition choice posing as children's literature is the title *Namažeme školu špekem* (*We shall grease the school with lard*) with the subtitle *Současná folklorní poezie dětí* (*Contemporary children's folk poetry*). Its editor, ethnographer Adam Votruba, has reaped the harvest of a many years' work; some 140 texts with multiple variants. Besides the very anthology, the book also includes an introduction, an essay on contemporary folk poetry, scores, notes, lists of informers, a list of sources and a bibliography as well as an English abstract; i.e. all parameters of a scholarly monograph. These, however, are strongly disrupted by the roughly stylized illustrations by David Böhm and by the original graphic design. It is apparent that the publication's author or rather editor has rightly guessed the market potential of contemporary children's folklore which has been researched for a long time but has not yet been offered to general audiences. The book is very successful both with adult and; perhaps unintended; young readers; a second volume called *Kecy v kleci* (*Bull pucky*) (2010) has already been published as well.

This tendency is not that apparent on the international scale. This is probably because of the character of the Czech book market which is relatively small and closed. In terms of the number of sold copies, children's literature has proved to be a progressive genre. Czech publishers are aware that it is not the children but actually the adults buying their books that represent their customers. That is why they rely on playing a certain "game" with the customers. These books will probably never become usual children's reading but rather a gift and they will naturally always remain on the periphery of publishing strategies; however, they can diversify these strategies in an interesting way.

Books with Separate Passages for Adults and Children

A peculiar experiment with the degree of acceptability for young readers is represented by books including passages with a different graphic design intended solely for adults. Though it might appear marginal, this type of a children's book may well be progressive in accordance with the tendencies mentioned above – at least in the Czech cultural environment.

The book *Krátké pohádky pro unavené rodiče* (*Short fairy tales for tired parents*) (2007) by bestselling Czech author Michal Viewegh falls into this category already due to its title. The text of the witty fairy tales for children is interspersed with notes of a different colour intended solely for parents; they include primarily passages from marital and family life written in a witty ironic style well known from other works by Viewegh. The book has met with success both on the part of young and adult readers; however, the chance to give the book to children to read it on their own is lost here, as it is naturally intended for reading aloud.

In her book *Životní příběh mimina s velkou hlavou* (*The life story of a baby with a big head*) (2012), author and visual artist Tereza Šedivá seems to have gone the furthest in this direction. The publication includes passages that are “rather rough” according to the author, who leaves it up to the parents to decide whether they should be included or not. The book tells the poetic yet tragic story of a handicapped child, heading towards an open ending which can be interpreted in two ways; we either accept the interpretation that the protagonist is circling the orbit or reconcile to the fact that this is merely a metaphor for his “heroic” death. The book uses a simple language and introduces various psychosocial aspects in a light tone which can be close to young readers. Tereza Šedivá’s book succeeded in the international context (White Raven Award 2013) and was even dramatized at the National Theatre Brno. However, the play is designed for adult audiences, which is typical.

The above mentioned tendency represents a really extreme example of the fact that a children’s book represents not only a clearly delimited target product but also a possibility of extending the target group as much as possible, or at least of trying to do so. Naturally, these will always be but single cases based on playing a game with the readers; as it is clear that a child that can read will disregard the recommendation to “leave out some passages”.

Children’s and young adult literature has always included books that were not primarily intended for young readers. However, it is evident that the number of books targeting as wide an audience as possible is growing. The question is why this tendency has affected the field of children’s and young adult literature to such a degree – and whether it is specific to the Czech environment.

I believe that this phenomenon may be related to the global crisis of the book market, with an ever larger number of individual titles being published in an ever smaller number of copies. The form of a classic, richly illustrated children’s book is one of the few that have a chance to succeed in the book market in the future as well, naturally becoming a space into which visual artists and authors of fiction for adult readers project their ambitions without primarily taking young readers into account. The target groups of the books are frequently defined not by the authors themselves but by the publishers pursuing their own, often economic, goals.

However, it would be misleading to explain the vigour of these tendencies only by economic pressure. It is obvious that more and more readers focus their attention on children’s and adult literature; sometimes this is even considered an “infantilization” of the society. What is remarkable, however, is the fact that in the Czech “medium-sized model market” (as the Czech market amounts to ca. 10 million potential readers), these tendencies have crystallized in several above mentioned ways which are beyond comparison in the international context in such a short time and at such a small space. It is certainly also due to the fact that during the two totalitarian systems of the 20th century, it has become usual in the Czech environment to place much higher artistic demands on children’s books than it is usual in free market conditions;

as children's books were made by leading visual artists, authors, illustrators and translators of literature for adults. It will definitely be interesting to follow these tendencies in the future and see whether they represent a temporary phenomenon or will find fulfilment outside the borders of the Czech Republic as well.

Translated by Tereza Chocholová

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