

Crossing Boundaries in Children's Literature

Gabriela Stoica
Gymnasium no. 99

Abstract

Crossing boundaries in culture and communication could be illustrated from a three-fold perspective: a historical map, a territorial map, and a mind map. What I specifically have in view, in the present paper, is the spectrum of the mind map in the case of cross-over fiction. The research design addresses the attempt of children's literature to transcend its own boundaries and acquire the status of cross-over fiction, equally enjoyed by children and adults. Firstly, it touches upon framing children's literature into the postmodern context that gives room for enlarging the mind map. Secondly, it dwells upon its distinctive traits. Finally, it evinces that, as a result of the emancipation of the mind map, children's literature is apt to provide a possibly different insight into its historical evolution and to more readily expand across continents through translations addressed to a dual audience.

Keywords

cross-over fiction, distinctive traits, mind map.

Most discussions of children's literature in the postmodern context revolve around two major tendencies. On the one hand, some scholars, Even-Zohar and Shavit included, consider children's literature a conservative genre, given the following assumptions: its peripheral position in the polysystem, as well as its traditionally moralizing and educational character [2,14]. Moreover, Nodelman, argues that, despite the fact that children's books may be open to modern or postmodern interpretations, they, nevertheless, resist modernity due to their simplicity and to their abiding by well-established formulas [11]. Nonetheless, I am definitely on the side of those scholars who, drawing on psychological studies, consider oversimplification an unsuitable way of addressing children, and choose a considerably different approach in speaking to them in terms of their emotional, rather than objective perception of the world [4]. In this sense, McDowell argues that 'children think quantitatively differently from adults', in terms of their 'emotional response' [8], a fact which raises a serious technical difficulty in writing and translating children's literature: that of rendering substantial statements in a comprehensive or transparent way, by means of resorting to 'emotional obliqueness, and indirectness of approach' [10].

Thus, in quite a conventional way, McDowell traces a number of noticeable differences between children's and adult literature but, all the same, she questions some of these very assumptions, which foretell, to a certain extent, the subsequent development of children's literature. In a nutshell, 'a good children's book makes complex experience available to its readers; a good adult book draws attention to the inescapable complexity of experience'[8].

Furthermore, McDowell draws a clear demarcation between adult and children's literature, along the following coordinates:

- children's books are commonly shorter than adult books;
- they tend to be dynamic, favouring dialogue and incident to description and introspection;
- child protagonists prevail;
- conventions are usually abided by;
- the story develops linearly, the plot is set in a distinctive order;
- the characters are either good or bad, following a pre-determined moral scheme;
- children's books are, more often than not, optimistic;
- language is child-oriented;
- the main ingredients of children's books are magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure [idem].

All the arguments in favour of treating children's literature as a conservative genre, brought in until now, could be demolished in one stroke by postmodern children's literature, that challenges all previous developments, in its attempt to transcend boundaries and acquire the status of cross-over fiction, equally enjoyed by children and adults [1]. Therefore, the traditional characteristics of children's literature are to be regarded as a frame of reference for the discussion of the evolution of the genre in postmodern times, and, in the long run, justice is to be done to each approach, seen as the two facets of a coin. Although the most evident changes are to be detected in picture books, however, postmodernism has come to permeate other genres of children's literature, too. In this sense, there are scholars who admit that children's literature seems to be tuned, at least partially, to the momentous changes humankind is going through. In support of these last claims, I will now bring under discussion the status of contemporary childhood and the

way it is reflected in children's literature. Reynolds [13] traces a number of changes in the very concept of childhood, which she labels as 'key areas of concern', namely:

- the loss of childhood;
- the victimization of children;
- the demonization of children and childhood;
- the commercialization of childhood.

As for myself, I would argue that the commercialization of childhood is, first and foremost, responsible for the other three adjustments listed above. As much as adults are inclined to linger on the idea of the innocent child, the image is not congruent any more. Children are maturing ever faster and seem to know more than adults are ready to admit [7], as they have unprecedented free access to information. Going further still, I think they have always been victimized and demonized, but not so overtly, as it is done today by the media, and acknowledged by postcolonial studies. While the former is feeding up the image of the victimized and demonized children, in terms of raising its audience, rather than solving the problem, the latter, at least in theory, is trying to confer due respect to children by listening to what they have to say for themselves [9]. In practice, however, there is a slim chance 'of making room for children's voices', as adults are not at all happy to change the one and only image of childhood they feel comfortable with, namely a site where they can exert their authority and control [9]. As to the commercialization of childhood, children's life is practically soaked in the media, with the television and the internet playing a major role in their intellectual, moral and psychological development.

To all these arguments, I have added what I think is of paramount importance for a writer and a translator well as: become aware of the children's effective needs as a means of extensive recognition of their newly-gained status, that is, a social category to be respected in its own, which enhances the status of children's literature into due recognition.

I agree that children have a strong personality that cannot cope any longer with the over-didactic and over-moralizing stories, with rigid, repetitive schemes, which now seem dated, but, still, there are classic books for children, which not only defy time, but also are worth reading, as part of the children's intellectual growth. As far as the so-called fashionable books (which are likely to break all

conventions and taboos, with overt references to sex, alcohol, drugs, violence and foul or abusive language), utterly disapproved by adults, the case seems to be straightforward: the more restrictions, the more temptations. But I have to admit that children's tastes have changed, whether adults like it or not.

The multi-media products have also brought about a change in the way children read, in the sense that they are ' [...] reading many other "texts" through television, video games, computers, film, and advertising. It is not that they have stopped reading, it is that their reading habits have changed, and their habits are based very much on their home life, immediate surroundings, and peer pressure' [17].

Children's literature is no longer set in comparison with adult literature, due to its tendency of blurring the boundaries between the two. Beckett [1] describes postmodern children's literature as 'a coming of age', open to innovation and experimentation, evincing the following traits:

- children's literature challenges or even breaks traditional conventions, codes, and norms;
- it is influenced by the dominant trends in adult literature;
- it sometimes even acts as an innovator;
- it eradicates taboos;
- it is apt to reveal complex narrative strategies (polyfocalization, hybrid genres, deviation from chronological or linear narrative, fragmentations and gaps, absence of closure, intertextuality, irony, parody, metafiction);
- sometimes, it is no less sophisticated or demanding than adults' literature;
- it tends to turn into cross-over fiction, enjoyed by both children and adults.

More and more writers, allegedly, do not write for children, addressing themselves to a large audience. The underlying statement is that they do not wish to undermine their status of writers of adult literature, as children's literature is not considered a major genre. The tradition goes back to Perrault, who did not publish the retellings of the well-known fairy tales, gathered under the title *Tales of Mother Goose* (1697) under his name, for fear of demeaning his status.

Publishers classify books either in the children or the adult category, solely on account of mercantile reasons. One of the many definitions of children's literature, given by Townsend, often cited by other scholars [5,6,8,11], goes as far as to claim that a book is labelled as such only if it finds its way into a publisher's list for marketing purposes. To refer to a fairly recent example of promoting cross-over fiction: the books in the Harry Potter series have been released by Bloomsbury Publishing House both as children's and adult books, with different covers, only.

It is also a matter of common knowledge that, more often than not, publishers do not necessarily promote genuine values, but what effectively sells well. According to some scholars, parents, rather than children, are the target consumers, since they are the ones who buy the books [idem]. Consequently, the design of the books is often meant to appeal mainly to adults as prospective buyers.

Moreover, in the particular case of children's literature, the writer, and subsequently, the translator, is addressing a dual audience: the adult, namely a parent, a grandparent, another member of the family, or even a teacher, as well as the children. The adult is the one who makes some allegedly pertinent choices in terms of children's books, which s/he usually reads aloud to children, and examines with a critical eye the plot, the depiction of characters, the style and, on top of all, the readability, i.e., 'the length and complexity of sentences and the length and familiarity of words' [12] and, speakability, i.e., 'the ease of reading aloud', conferred by sound effects such as 'rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, which make reading aloud fluent and pleasant' Far from being left out, the adult is taken into full consideration, being addressed 'playful ironic asides' [idem] from time to time.

Going further still, children's literature may be questioned, in terms of both purpose and directionality, in the context of the ambivalent status of its addressees (namely children and adults as well). Accordingly, Lathey wonders '[...] what counts as children's literature: texts intentionally written for children by adults, texts addressed to adults but read by children, texts read by both children and adults?' [7]

Any of these interactions may be considered legitimate.

It is interesting to note that crossing boundaries in children's literature is a two way movement – first and foremost from adults to children, as both writing and translating for children are activities overtly marked by intentionality, in that

books are written or translated for a special readership, with special requirements and expectations, different from those in the adult world [7,15].

And, the other way round, from children to adults as a result of children's emancipation, taking into account that the role of the children has evolved from the unquestioned obedience towards the divine law and the parental figures, through the gradual acknowledgement of more permissive standards of education, to the half-hearted recognition of their own culture and, finally, to the revolt against parental guidance.

By overtly extending the spectrum of the mind map, children's literature has acquired the status of cross-over fiction, being thus engaged in a productive dialogue with adult literature.

When it comes to shaping the historical map, children's literature crosses time boundaries through retranslations which tend to mirror the gradual move from domestication to foreignization manifested since the cultural turn of the 1980s [15]. Although children seem to be less tolerant to foreignness than adults, now, in the age of globalization, they are fully aware of the existence of other cultural settings and manifest interest towards foreign elements, as long as they come within their level of understanding.

Which brings us to the territorial map seen from a multifold perspective:

- children's literature crosses geographical boundaries by means of translation, which is, essentially, a communication between languages and cultures;
- globalization has made it possible to include translations of children's literature from lesser known countries and cultures;
- moreover, 'regional patterns, various kinds of group diaspora, and the migrating identities of readers would produce a multiply intersecting set of discourses, splendid and intriguing, empowering and puzzling' [16].

And last, but not least, the internet, the Agora of our age provides instant access to information, transcending all boundaries, be they historical, geographical, cultural or otherwise.

Bibliography

1. Beckett, Sandra L., ed. *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1999.
2. Even-Zohar, Itamar. "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem." Eds. James S. Holmes, José Lambert, and Raymond Van Den Broeck. *Literature and Translation: New Perspectives in Literary Studies*, Leuven: Acco, pp. 117-127, 1978.
3. Even-Zohar, Itamar. "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today: International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication*, Volume 11, Number 1, 1990.
4. Fenwick, Sara Innis, ed. *A Critical Approach to Children's Literature*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966.
5. Hunt, Peter, ed. *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*, London/New York: Routledge, 1990.
6. Knowles, Murray and Kirsten Malmkjær. *Language and Control in Children's Literature*, London/New York: Routledge, 1996/2003.
7. Lathey, Gillian. "Children's Literature." Eds. Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, pp. 31-34, 2009.
8. McDowell, Myles. "Fiction for Children and Adults." Eds. Geoff Fox, Graham Hammond, Terry Jones, Frederic Smith and Kenneth Sterck, *Writers, Critics, and Children*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, p. 140-156, 1978.
9. McGillis, Roderick, ed. *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*, New York/London: Routledge, 2000.
10. Meek, Margaret, Aidan Warlow and Griselda Barton. *The Cool Web: The Patterns of Children's Reading*. London/Sydney/Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1977.
11. Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008.
12. Puurtinen, Tiina. "Syntax, Readability and Ideology in Children's Literature". *Meta: Translators' Journal*, Volume 43, Number 4, pp. 524-533, 1998.
13. Reynolds, Kimberley, ed. *Children's Literature and Childhood in Performance*, Lichfield: Pied Piper Publishing, 2003.
14. Shavit, Zohar. *Poetics of Children's Literature*, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986.
15. Van Coillie, Jan and Walter P. Verschueren, eds. *Children's Literature in Translation: Challenges and Strategies*, Manchester, UK/Kinderhook, USA: St. Jerome Publishing, 2006.

16. Van der Walt, Thomas, ed. *Change and Renewal in Children's Literature*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004.
17. Zipes, Jack David. *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature From Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York/London: Routledge, 2002.