

DIGITAL ALL-AGE LITERATURE? ARTISTIC TRANSITS BETWEEN GENRES, MEDIA AND READERSHIPS

Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska
University of Gdańsk
filhdt@univ.gda.pl

Abstract

The purpose of the contribution is to discuss the creation of new, hybrid literary and artistic forms within the domain traditionally called literature for children and young adults. Using examples from Scandinavia, I reveal the transgression of literary genres, readerships and artistic modes generated by two global phenomena: digitalization and the ongoing disappearance of generation gaps. During recent decades, the boundaries between the implied reader, as well as between the visual and verbal, appear to have blurred if not disappeared. High-quality artistic picture books have taken on serious life and death issues and are now broadly discussed by academics. The clear-cut division of books for children and books for adults is being replaced by the popular term "literature for all ages". Even the exhibit book— a subgenre perceived customarily as simplistic and directed at the youngest children – is losing its seemingly obvious readership of one to two year olds in favour of adults, with one representative example of that modern trend being *Titta Max grav!* (1991) by Barbro Lindgren and Eva Eriksson. Furthermore, the digital age has provided us with technologies which sometimes make it difficult to decide whether we are still dealing with literature. For example, the growing popularity of "picture book apps" raises a number of questions, including whether these multimodal forms of art can be considered as new, updated versions of books or as autonomous media, similar to computer games. These observations raise the question of whether the future will belong to digital all-age literature – a hybrid of the two above-mentioned tendencies.

Keywords

Picturebooks, apps, digitalization, Scandinavian children's literature, implied reader

Writing for all

There have been many attempts to tackle the observation that children's literature, apart from the child, bears another, adult addressee in mind (e.g. Shavit 1986, Wall 1991, Nodelman 2008). The phenomenon is thus not new, but it is noteworthy that the adult was previously considered an implicit reader, while it was emphasised that the child was the primary one. In other words, writers did not express their intentions of addressing adults in children's books, whereas today they explicitly point out that the age category is unnecessary and that the literature itself should find its own public.

One example is the Norwegian prize-winning writer Gro Dahle (1962), who questions traditional, clear-cut divisions of readers within the literary domain. After putting forward a long list of arguments about why it is impossible today to draw the line between children's and adult literature, she states that it is more justified to perceive picturebooks as all-age books:

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Through a picturebook as an all-age book, there are accordingly advanced text-and-picture books for children, poetic language, expressive and minimalistic language with comparisons and metaphors, and allegories and allusions, word plays and ironies [...] So, it opens to a language play and language experiments in many dimensions, because everything is allowed, everything is possible, as long as it is good, as long as it is interesting, including for children.¹ (Dahle, 2013, 108)

This statement concerns picturebooks – a specific art form² that transgresses boundaries between different media. They represent not only two inseparable semiotic systems – visual and narrative – implying a synergy of iconotext, but also employ orality and performativity. Furthermore, they derive benefits from the expansion of digitalisation, stimulating a discussion about the definition of a book. Picturebook scholars agree that the complex nature of the genre necessitates a truly interdisciplinary approach, which is now crossing borders in at least two ways:

[...] firstly, by fusing the narrative and visual strategies of picturebooks with those of related genres, such as comics, manga, and graphic novels, which entails the creation of new hybrid genres (cf. Evans 2012, Hatfield and Svonkin 2012, Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013); and secondly, by means of multiple address and by resulting effects on the emergence of new book types, such as crossover picturebooks and picturebooks for adults [...]. (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014, 6)

Infantile adults?

Picturebooks, traditionally viewed as a typical children's literature genre, are not only all-age books but have also migrated to adult fiction. This interesting subgenre – picturebooks for adults – is regarded as a typical Nordic phenomenon (Ommundsen, 2014, 17), and its first representatives are thought to be the Swedish *Titta Max grav!* (Lindgren&Eriksson, 1991) and the Norwegian *Maria & José* (Loe&Hiorthøy, 1994).

The Max series (in English, the Sam books) comprises 10 titles created by Barbro Lindgren (1937) with her long-time collaborator, the well-known Swedish illustrator, Eva Eriksson (1949). The books, targeted at 1-2 year olds, are focused on one object from the child's everyday life, for example *Max boll* ("Max's Ball", 1982), and what is interesting is that they are written in baby talk. The stylised language, expressed in ungrammatical short sentences,³ is generally accompanied by a few props and sparse settings. The 400th anniversary of Swedish children's literature in 1991 was commemorated with a special, rather astonishing publication in the series: *Titta Max grav!* ("Look, Max's grave!").

The book created some confusion as while it preserved the aesthetics of the previous titles in large part, it spanned the period of the protagonist's entire life: his childhood, school, work,

¹ My translation.

² Today this term is often used to emphasise that picturebooks not only belong to the literary system.

³ The language was first criticised, but over time it has become a recognisable token of the series.

marriage, divorce, old age, illness and death. The verbal content was, as previously, situated on the verso and conveyed by grammatically incorrect sentences, but the colour scheme of the visual from the recto shifted from the bright and colourful to the dark and black-brownish. The book is both intertextual and self-parodying, and its original, head-scratching idea evoked speculations such as: "The book may be an ironic response to the publisher demanding more Max books; it may also address parents who are sick and tired of reading Max books to their children, as well as young parents who listened to Max books as children" (Nikolajeva&Scott, 2006, 229), and "Perhaps the author killed off her protagonist because she was tired of writing the popular Max books" (Beckett, 2012, 254). However, it can also be perceived as a play on genre– a postmodern challenge to accepted norms and constraints. Its hybridity means that a "childish form" serves an "adult theme", with a dose of black humour embodied in the motif of a dead dog (this time, Max's favourite pet, known from the preceding titles, is tied to a kind of wheeled platform and, according to his wife's suggestion, it has been dead for a while) and a reference to a famous Monty Python sketch about a dead parrot, accessible exclusively to experienced readers, commenting on Max death.

Even though *Titta Max grav!* seems to be an adult book, it does not express this explicitly, which is the case of the Norwegian *Maria & José*, written by Erlend Loe (1969) and illustrated by Kim Hiorthøy (1973).⁴ The story opens with a description of a modern woman: the beautiful Maria, who has an excellent, well-paid job in a multinational company, an elegant apartment and no need of male company despite a crowd of admirers. She lives a tranquil, though somewhat tedious and monotonous life, and has no idea that a tiny man, José, moved into her ear during a trip to Spain. José is continually busy, taking care of Maria's body and health: he cleans her, fights viruses armed with a special weapon and plays the cello in the evenings. When one day he sees one of Maria's ova, he cannot control himself, which leads to her pregnancy. Subsequently, José becomes even more protective, not only looking after his beloved but also the baby girl Rebecca – both before and after the delivery.

The text carries the main elements of the story, and Hiorthøy's illustrations are to a large extent engaged in an expanding text-picture relationship, which means that the verbal narrative is supported by the visual one. They add some details, show scenes which present the implications of the verbal message or concentrate on background information. The visual content – predominantly on the recto – draws on different modes of representation: collage, photographs, paintings and black-and-white pictures. According to the Norwegian picturebook scholar, Marie Ommundsen, this absurd fairytale-like story, with a biblical intertext, bears a clear ideology:

The successful, independent young woman with a good education and income becomes a parody. The anti-feminist message is that it is the man who makes the woman happy. When Maria has become a mother, she can conclude in a message in English to her friend abroad: 'I am a happy woman', completely unaware that she owes her happiness to José. (Ommundsen, 2014, 25)

⁴ The information is provided within the paratext and says that *Maria & José* is a book for adults.

The original juxtaposition of form and content which contributed to the creation of an intriguing, though somewhat bewildering, sub-genre – picturebooks for adults – was not a one-off phenomenon. The two examples from the 1990s, presented above, laid the foundation for the broader trend, which can be confirmed by later books from Norway. One of the artists representing this hybrid stream is Øyvind Torseter (1972), whose international popularity was sealed in 2008, when he won the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award for *Avstikkere* ("Detours"), with the jury's verdict:

Avstikkere by Øyvind Torseter is a brilliant compendium of the visual traditions that best sum up graphic art and illustration of recent years. The author's keen eye for the most refined forms of Comic Art, his brilliant synthesis of painting in the third millennium, and in-depth understanding of developments in the visual art world have created a book full of allusions, echoes and quotations. But *Avstikkere* is also a book for the very young. The light-hearted manner in which visual art traditions unfold is the fruit of innovative courage and dignity born of knowledge.⁵

This practically wordless picturebook consists of 60 illustrations, which portray different figures and different episodes, both realistic and surrealistic. They do not constitute a homogeneous story and are a real challenge to readers. We encounter references to films, computer games and comics, but their mosaic construction is bewildering. The intervisual references mentioned by the jury are difficult for an average adult to recognise, which puts the statement that "*Avstikkere* is also a book for the very young" in doubt. It seems to be a highly complex picturebook for adults, with the aesthetics accessible to adults, while the children's award in Bologna creates great confusion in the literary world with regard to its readership.⁶

Transgressions continued

Another interesting example is *Megzilla* (2015) by Gro Dahle and Kaia Dahle Nyhus (1990);⁷ however, this time we do not encounter a transgression between adult and children's literature but a blurring of the borders between a book for young adults and young children. *Megzilla*, being a hybrid of a youth novel and a picturebook, represents a challenge in terms of genre affiliation. Its original, rather bewildering form, meant that it was also labelled a graphic novel.⁸

Its protagonist, Ingeborg, is a girl going through a teenage stage who narrates her first-person story in a very suggestive way: her body changes, she cannot recognise herself and no one

⁵ Information from: <http://www.egmont.com/Press/news-and-press-releases/Bologna-Ragazzi-Award-to-Cappelen-Damm-Author/#.VztRERWLSCU> (accessed 05.02.17).

⁶ For example, Åse-Marie Ommundsen considered the book to be 'obviously intended for adults' (Ommundsen, 2014, 21).

⁷ In 2015, the book was nominated for the Ministry of Culture's prize for children's and young adult literature in Norway.

⁸ This term seems adequate considering that the story contains elements of both a graphic book and a novel, but it is misleading in the light of attempts to define a graphic novel juxtaposed to comic books (Baetens&Frey, 2015).

understands her. She feels like an alien in her new shape and consequently in her life. She hates the metamorphoses that she cannot reject or stop, and this is depicted very straightforwardly, both verbally and visually. *Megzilla* is a representative example of a multilevel transgression: it is a mix of prose and poetry, novel and picturebook (with elements of cartoon stylistics), and fiction and non-fiction. It is a sign of modern times and difficult to classify, which symbolically goes with its theme – the difficulties in classifying a maturing young person.

Another noteworthy example of genre and age transgression is *Mulegutten*⁹ ("The Mule Boy") from 2015 – again by Øyvind Torseter. The story is a retelling of the well-known Norwegian fairytale, "The troll with no heart in his body", by Asbjørnsen and Moe, and is an example of typically intertextual postmodern play, narrated graphically. The artist presented his version of the classic text predominantly in the visual form, supplementing the pictures with some sparse text in speech bubbles. The character of Mulegutten, known from Torseter's previous picturebooks, here embodies Askeladden (Ash lad) – an inferior figure who surprisingly succeeds where others, seemingly much stronger, fail. The traditional narrative undergoes several minor metamorphoses, but the visual representation gives the story an absolutely new and different dimension.

Mulegutten is a mix of picturebook and graphic novel, which can be enjoyed by different readerships. On the one hand, the book has the structure of doublespreads characteristic of a picturebook, and it has a protagonist from a children's book.¹⁰ On the other hand, this original work has many features of a graphic novel: formally craving for an individual style; in terms of content, it is a hypertext of a popular folktale; and its format resembles graphic novels in cover, paper, size and length.¹¹ Moreover, it includes recurrent panels (often four grids per side) and consistently uses dialogue balloons filled with hand-written text.

Expanding digitalisation

The mixes of genres and tendency to employ patterns from children's literature in fiction aimed at older readerships, as described above, can be explained both socio-psychologically – by the disappearance of the generation gap, contributing to the expanding "Peter Pan" market – and culturally – as a transformation towards visual and iconic expression. It is noteworthy that these phenomena have been supported for about two decades by an expanding digitalisation process.

Around 2010,¹² picturebooks in Scandinavia entered the digital age, and their expansion created a need for – as Ghada Al-Yaqout and Maria Nikolajeva (2015) put it – a re-conceptualisation of picturebook theory. However, there is still no academic consensus on either the terminology or methodology of digitalised picturebooks. Al-Yaqout and Nikolajeva

⁹ The book was also, like *Megzilla*, nominated for the Ministry of Culture's prize for children's and young adult literature in Norway in 2015.

¹⁰ Mulegutten was the main character in previous books by Torseter.

¹¹ I refer to features of graphic novels, juxtaposed with comic books, by Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey (2015).

¹² According to Yunko Yokota, the first generation of digital stories in the form of scanned pdf versions appeared in the 1990s (Yokota, 2015, 76).

employ the term "apps", for example, to designate all electronic picturebooks.¹³ This genre/art form¹⁴ is also simply referred to as "e-books", "digital (picture) books", "electronic picturebooks" or "picturebook apps". The impediment to solving this terminology problem lies primarily in the heterogeneity of the group represented by various embodiments: (1) scanned books in "fixed" formats, whose extreme form is a pdf resembling a printed book; (2) performed versions with a different degree of interactivity; and (3) forms which are more similar to animated films or computer games than books.

Association with one of the categories does not imply any evaluation, although the latter evokes doubts about whether we are still dealing with books. They can utilise movement and activate many levels of interactivity, apparently leading not only to creative play but also to amplified aesthetic experience. The analysis will be illustrated below with a selection of Swedish representative titles but has no ambition of being exhaustive.

As an example of the first category, we can take *Mamma Mu städar – Uppläst bilderbok* (2012), by Jujja Wieslander (1944) and Sven Nordqvist (1946), published by Rabén&Sjögren. The book is the first of three digital titles about Mamma Mu, and it differs from its paper version only by being read aloud by Wieslander herself. You cannot interact with the book, and the only available choice is to click the options "Read to Me" or "Read Myself". In addition to swiping rather than traditional page turning, the user can also browse and choose any page. Since 2012, Rabén&Sjögren's app production has expanded, and presently it comprises many titles in four different series: Point and Listen; Look and Listen; Memo; and Little Films.

A good example of Scandinavian digital picturebooks that are performed is *Känner du Pippi Långstrump? – Interaktiv bilderbok med spel och berättarröst* (2011), by Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002) and Ingrid Vang Nyman (1916-1959), which can be used as a traditional digital picturebook if the tablet is held vertically. In this form, as in other non-performed e-books, the options of "Read Myself" or "Read to Me" are available. When the device is turned to the horizontal position, the interactive mode is automatically switched on and some additional features are at the user's disposal: painting books, games and a choice of some elements in the picture composition.

The third category, the furthest from printed picturebooks, is exemplified by another Swedish classic – the Pettson and Findus series by Sven Nordqvist. The famous character, Pettson, and his extraordinary cat have been employed in a few educational apps, many given the common title "Uppfinningar (inventions) från 2012-2013". The games consist of searching for hidden parts of an invention which will solve the problem initially presented by Pettson. These productions do not refer to any narrative from the Pettson and Findus series, but take advantage of the popular characters.

¹³ The Polish picturebook researcher Małgorzata Cackowska uses the term 'app' in a narrower sense. She calls all-scanned, 'fixed-layout' picturebooks 'e-books', whereas 'apps' designate multi-media interactive applications retaining some references to traditional, printed picturebooks (Cackowska, 2013). Yunko Yokota holds a similar opinion, using the term 'apps' when discussing digital storytelling after the arrival of tablets (Yokota, 2015, 77).

¹⁴ Some of these productions are so distant from literature that the employment of the term 'genre', associated with literature, seems inadequate.

Although I share Maria Nikolajeva's opinion that "picturebooks are rapidly entering the digital age" (2013), I must admit that this belief rests more on pure observation than on statistics. Unfortunately, the Swedish Institute for Children's Books' (Sbi) annual report, *Bokprovning* ("The Book Tasting"), has not included digital books thus far. In the 2015 edition, the authors referred to other sources when discussing e-books:

In Bokrondellen's database there are 339 e-books for children and young adults launched in Sweden in 2014. This is a rise of 21% compared with 2013. [...] There is another type of digital publication, for example apps, which are often regarded as picturebooks. In *Bokprovning 2011*, Sbi observed that the first apps for iPhones and iPads arrived in 2010, but there is not any data available about this area.¹⁵

In Sbi's report in 2016, there are references to the same source (Bokinfo, or Bokrondellen, as above), quoting the number of 418 registered books for children and young adults released in Sweden in 2015. This number probably represents 75% of the overall production, which would mean that the estimated but more accurate number would be about 550 titles.¹⁶

Digital all-age literature?

We are *de facto* living in times of transformation, with the blending and blurring of conventional borders presumably changing how we think about books and readerships. Based on the examples sketched above, which reflect broader tendencies, we can observe interesting transgressions of genres, readerships and media. The authors explicitly distance themselves from implying the age of the reader, employing forms applied thus far in dialogues with children, in order to tell adult stories. However, the abolishment of the age category in the domain of literature is not sufficiently sanctioned to abandon traditional divisions of readerships for children's books, which leads to misunderstandings and confusion. Progressive digitalisation gives rise to other challenges, again evoking discussion about the definition of the book. However, digitalisation is a fact, and whether or not academia keeps up with appropriate terminology or methodology, it will continually grow and develop. If the tendencies observed continue, the future will belong to all-age digital books or, at the very least, they will become a significant part of the book market.

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¹⁶ Retrieved from http://www.sbi.kb.se/Bilder/bokprovning%202016/Bokprovning_Argang_2015.pdf (p. 28).

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Biographical note

Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska – Associate Professor at the Department of Scandinavian Studies of the University of Gdańsk, Poland. The focal points of her studies are: reading therapy, translation and theory of translation, Scandinavian literature for children including picturebooks, and Finnish literature. Apart from books on Swedish grammar (*Troll 1*, 2007, *Troll 2*, 2008), translation theory (*Children's Literature Translation Studies. Analysis of Polish Translations of Astrid Lindgren's Works*, 2013) and reading therapy (*In Search of a "Bit of Solace". The Potential of Works by Astrid Lindgren in Reading Therapy*, 2014) she has published articles about Scandinavian picturebooks and co-edited *The Picturebook. A Mirror of Social Changes* (2016) and *The Picturebook: Introduction* (2017).