



AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

This special issue of *Literatura Ludowa* is a contribution to the sustained effort in children's literature studies to explore cultural representations of childhood as a construct resulting from a nexus of "politics, rhetoric, and human institutions" (Flynn 1997: 144). To give a recent example of such work, the contributions to the latest issue of *International Research in Children's Literature*, titled " 'Possible' and 'Impossible' Children", propose new approaches to investigating transcultural experiences of actual children and images of fictional childhoods in Canada, India, Poland, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As Cheryl Cowdy and Alison Halsall emphasize in the editorial to the issue, scholars in our field inevitably talk about children and childhoods regardless of how anxious they have felt about such ventures since Jacqueline Rose's claim about the "'impossibility' of literature to represent or to speak to or for 'the child'" (Cowdy and Halsall 2018: v-vi).

Another most recent instance of such research is Vanessa Joosen's *Adulthood in Children's Literature* (2018). Joosen proposes a radical approach to representations of childhood by focusing on real and fictional adulthoods in children's literature as closely related to constructions of childhood. Joosen points out that "[f]or a field of research that is so preoccupied with age, the narrative construction of adulthood is surprisingly little explored in children's literature studies" (5). However, as she shows in her monograph, it is indeed worthwhile to search for answers to the following questions:

What about the adults who are not *hidden* [as suggested by Perry Nodelman (2008)] in children's books, but who are staged in plain sight, as characters rather than creators and mediators? How do authors and illustrators construct their phase in life in children's books, and what do they withhold from their juvenile audience? Do they present adulthoods as being distinct from childhood, and if so, how? Or do they rather stress what adults and children have in common? [...] And what does the construction of adulthood in children's books imply for its dual audience? (7)

Addressing these questions, Joosen shows how adulthood is performed by adult characters and analyses metareflections about this phase of life conveyed in children's texts. Joosen's study successfully proves that children's literature is a powerful source of messages promoting age norms and potentially affecting how we act our own age and how we see others' performance of their age (12).

Although Joosen does not refer to this concept, her study is an example of the decentering of childhood, a notion developed by Spyros Spyrou in the field of childhood studies as helpful in examining relational processes which shape both childhood and adulthood as entangled with one another and with the world at large (Spyrou 2017: 433-434): As Spyrou accounts for this connectivity, "[c]hildren's lives like those of adults are highly mediated and in that sense neither unique nor authentic if by this we mean different and apart" (435). Moreover, as Leena Alanen argues, childhood and adulthood are continually reproduced by intergenerational practices between children and adults (Alanen 2009: 161), which involves a complex power dynamics. It also means that

children's and adults' agencies are "assembled, distributed and networked" (Spyrou 2018: 117). In view of aetionormativity (Nikolajeva 2009) as the key force defining children's texts, a focus on intergenerational relationality as a framework for children's literature studies promises the emergence of new exciting and productive approaches to literary texts and children's culture more broadly. I agree with Joosen that "concepts of the child and the adult that stress their otherness [...] risk obscuring the fact that adulthood [just as childhood, for that matter] itself is a segmented phase of the life course [...]" and that "the otherness between childhood and adulthood is temporary [...]" (10). As I argue elsewhere, readings centered on cross-age bonds show that children's texts present a continuum of child-adult relations, including connections between age-others who share common values, interests, mutual care and responsibility. Consequently, "[c]hildren's literature could [...] serve as a cultural practice addressing the need for the intensification of effective intergenerational affiliations, which are increasingly urgent in the face of the global aging of populations, changes in family structure, transnational family separation, the emergence of a new precariat class, and political trends pitting younger and older generations against each other" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2018)¹.

Recognizing both the value of thinking intergenerationally and the need to reconceptualize children and adults as "interdependent beings in intergenerational relations that matter" (Spyrou 2018: 176), the essays in this special issue focus on children's literature vis-à-vis the complexities of inter-age bonds between children and adults. The opening essay, by Katarzyna Smyczyńska, examines Peter Sis' *Tibet Through the Red Box* (1998) and the Polish edition of Uri Orlev's *Granny Knits* (2009) as artistic forms of intergenerational and personal remembering. As Smyczyńska argues, while in the latter narrative childhood and adulthood merge, the former exemplifies a nostalgic return to one's past without forming a stable connection with it. The challenge of preserving the memory of childhood is also addressed in Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams's reflective essay on her "abandoned", or maybe still open, project aimed at translating *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972), a collection of short stories for children by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Australian Aboriginal writer also known as Kath Walker. As Kwapisz Williams recounts problems she encountered when trying to obtain the permission to carry out the project from Walker's relatives, she also ponders on her growing understanding of the Aboriginal author's intensive efforts to share her stories about Indigenous childhoods to educate all children, including those living in later times and other cultures. As she concludes, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* itself constitutes an act of intergenerational solidarity across cultures.

The two other essays, by Maciej Wróblewski and Anna Bugajska, provide a counterpoint to approaches proposed by Smyczyńska and Kwapisz Williams. Wróblewski points to a symbolic "betrayal of childhood", that is, the instrumental use of representations of children and childhood in critiques of various disturbing phenomena around us. Wróblewski's readings of selected contemporary Polish children's books about war, the Holocaust and the Martial Law in Poland show that these texts do not do justice to children's experiences but give priority to adults' predicaments. Wróblewski sees this betrayal of childhood as a result of psychological, pedagogical and sociological discourses. Bugajska's essay introduces the issue of intergenerational relations with the youth of the future. Bugajska discusses representations of intergenerational relations in selected YA dystopias depicting posthuman and transhuman worlds. As she argues, most

¹ For a broader discussion of these issues, see also Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques (forthcoming, 2019).

of these texts express serious doubts about the possibility of a harmonious coexistence between younger and older generations in immortal societies.

This special issue also includes three reviews of scholarly publications on childhood and literature: Mateusz Świetlicki provides a critical overview of Roni Natov's *The Courage to Imagine: The Child Hero in Children's Literature* (2018). Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg comments on Świetlicki's 2016 study of the masculinist discourse in the works of Serhiy Viktorovych Zhadan, *Kiedy chłopcy zostają mężczyznami? Męskość jako projekt w prozie Serhija Żadana*. Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb discusses *Dwugłos o prozie fantastycznej dla młodych odbiorców* (2017), edited by Weronika Kostecka and Maciej Skowera.

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