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## Contemporary Popular Science Books for Children and Youth in France – An Example of Model Development Strategies on the Publishing Market

Review of Agnieszka Wandel's *Przemiany współczesnej książki popularnonaukowej dla dzieci i młodzieży (na przykładzie francuskiej oferty wydawniczej)*, Universitas, Kraków 2019, 352 pp.

**Abstract:** This article is a review of Agnieszka Wandel's book monograph titled *Przemiany współczesnej książki popularnonaukowej dla dzieci i młodzieży (na przykładzie francuskiej oferty wydawniczej)*. The author argues that the book has been written in a clear, flowing style. Wandel easily conveys knowledge in an explicit and concise manner, but when necessary, also descriptively. She is not afraid of formulating her own opinions and drawing conclusions as well as observing what processes and tendencies have come about, even when she is aware that her judgements may not be universal and complete. This makes for the usefulness of the book for researchers who can become inspired to a further scientific debate.

**Keywords:** children's literature, French literature, Poland, popular science book

The subject of Agnieszka Wandel's *Przemiany współczesnej książki popularnonaukowej dla dzieci i młodzieży (na przykładzie francuskiej oferty wydawniczej)* [*The Transformation of the Contemporary Popular Science Book for Children and Youth (Exemplified by French Publishing Offer)*] is contemporary popular science books directed at young readers and published in France in the years 1983–2012. Although the title of the book relates to the research plan, the author (e.g., 16) often includes introductory chapters in the main study scope, e.g., when she writes : “[c]hronologically, the work covers the period from the eighteenth century, which is the epoch when popular science book for young readers was born, until the modern day” (16 – trans. B.S.). This may have been caused by the fact that Wandel had to analyze how the popular science book offer directed at children and youth was developing in its beginnings, and then prepare the data for the sake of her work. On the other hand – to present

current tendencies on the French book market thoroughly – in the section “Struktura i rozmiary rynku książki dziecięco-młodzieżowej we Francji” [“The Structure and Size of the Book Market with Regard to Children and Youth in France”] she reaches beyond the adopted chronological scope, up to the year 2016, and includes it also in the tables shown in the chapters as well as in the chronological table at the end of the book.

It is worth emphasizing how important the subject which Wandel undertook is. The author analyzed issues which were not accessible to most Polish researchers and which had not been studied by Polish scholars. These are extremely significant, interesting and desired themes, as the activity of the French publishers in this field has a long tradition and is highly acknowledged. The work illustrates how the popular science book has been developing undisturbedly over the years (unlike in Poland and other countries of the so-called “people’s democracy”), without any social and political transformations. The said growth has come about naturally, adapting to the market demands, new technologies and tendencies in the literature for children and educational trends, etc. The author acquired the material carrying out her research in France<sup>1</sup> and resorting to specialized bibliographic databases. This phase of study was conducted with diligence and accuracy. Wandel was right to exclude from her analysis some specific publications, such as amusement books and activity books (though, in some cases the boundary line was not clear indeed) as well as the books intended for school education (however, one cannot claim that they could not have been used at homes for the purpose of pursuing individual hobbies). It is difficult to classify the material in such circumstances. As a result, the author came up with the database covering titles published for the first time by five leading publishers of popular science literature in France: Hachette, Byard, Gallimard Jeunesse, Nathan and Larousse. The database comprises almost 5400 titles, which were analyzed by Wandel in detail and from various perspectives. It should be emphasized that it constitutes a really comprehensive representation of the research material, enabling to conduct various studies and comparisons.

Another aspect of the analysis is terminology. As all researchers of books for children and youth, Wandel had to make certain choices and determine specific classification criteria in case of such a broadly defined group of readers. This task was completed successfully. What appeared more troublesome concerned the very definition of the popular science literature, which may be interpreted quite freely and differently. On the Polish publishing market and in the librarianship and bookselling nomenclature there is quite a big confusion as far as this issue is concerned. What is more, the French publishing

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I intend to evaluate the correctness of the conducted research, its completeness, theses and analyses, but I am not going to assess the way in which the material was classified and whether its editing evaluation was accurate because of the lack of access to these publications in Poland.

convention suggests slightly different terms and boundaries. Comparing the entries from the bibliological encyclopedias does not bring a definitive answer either. However, the author managed to solve the problem providing a considerable description of the said issues and accounting for the decisions she took. Thus, the stress in the work is put on publications popularizing knowledge in a straightforward way, neither connected with school education directly, nor created for educational reasons, but intended for expanding knowledge individually and freely, outside classroom. Wandel did not choose the term “educational book,” although she practically equated the term “popular science book” with the term “educational book,” considering the latter an alternative for the more recent publications (e.g., 171). However, this seems questionable – if such was the case, this term would be much more appropriate for the subject of book, and the analysis covers titles published in the years 1983–2012. In the Polish bibliological nomenclature the term “educational book” (or even “a little educational book”) is employed in case of a newer popular science offer, which is more frequently directed at younger children to draw teachers’ and care-takers’ attention to its functional and useful character. Although in *Encyklopedia książki* (2017), the entry *Książka edukacyjna* confirms the relationship between the said two terms, and the semantic scopes of the two notions are alike to a considerable extent<sup>2</sup>, I realize this definition is still disputable. Wandel uses the term “educational” in this sense in several places in the book, e.g., when she says: “[p]opular science books for level A readers, in Poland called frequently educational ones...” (173), this quotation comes from the subsection titled “Od książki popularnonaukowej do książki edukacyjnej” [“From Popular Science Book to Educational Book”], where problems of all groups of readers, not only of the youngest ones, are discussed. Likewise, in the ending, when presenting contemporary publishing tendencies in Poland, the author mentions that it is becoming more and more popular to use the notion “educational book” instead of “popular science book.” Wandel introduces one more term: “cognitive book,” which, she says, is employed in the librarianship field when defining books directed at the youngest readers. It might have been of help to reach for other, at least European, information sources (e.g., English, German and Scandinavian-language ones), to verify both approaches (the French and the Polish one). Concluding, the constatation concerning the main contemporary offer of educational books for the youngest readers “extends” at times over terminology issues, suggesting that modern popular science books for young readers are in fact educational books.

Another problem concerning terminology is the author’s use of “nonreaders” in the chapter covering the content of educational books for younger children from level A reading. In the modern readership this term relates to all

<sup>2</sup> In the said encyclopedia, the entry *Popular science book* does not cover the books for children and youth, either in the historical or contemporary aspect (the said entries have different authors).

the people (regardless of age), who can read, but decide not to engage in this activity, and instead, prefer to gain knowledge and satisfy their need of entertainment by other means (e.g., in the research on popularity of reading among teenagers carried out by Zofia Zasacka 2016). In the sense meant by Wandel in the said section, there should rather be used a term “pre-readers,” not appearing in the Polish readership nomenclature, but referring to the youngest group who cannot read yet by themselves. Thus, the use of the term “nonreaders” was inadequate, especially when one can find more appropriate notions with regard to this sense in other sections of the book, the ones which are commonly understood, such as: “books for little children” (113), “the first educational books for toddlers” (174), “books to be read to children<sup>3</sup> or addressed to children [addressed? – B.S.] approximately to the youngest group of children between 0 and 4 years of age (level A)” (171). It must be borne in mind, however, that such a classification is not clear-cut, as nowadays, more and more pre-school children are able to read simple texts, which is in great measure the effect of kindergarten and home education.

Thus, the author faced a difficult task – she had to establish correspondence between the Polish imprecise terminology and the French publishing market reality, and, at the same time, the reception of texts by Polish readers, which she accounts for in detail in an extensive introductory part. There Wandel explains her research goals and objectives and describes the process of collecting source material as well as difficulties connected with its classification. She also provides information about the methods employed in her study. Definitely, this section will be quoted in the future by other scholars, since the inferences she manages to reach there are unique in the Polish scientific literature. They do cover the theme thoroughly and comprehensively.

The layout of the book raises no objections. It is logical and comprises two parts: the first one discusses the history of the French popular science literature till the present day, covering the time up to the turn of the nineteenth century and the subsequent period; the second part presents the modern publishing market. The good side of the book is that it depicts social and cultural circumstances of publishing activities, the organization and size of the French market of literature for children and youth, functioning of institutions dealing with such issues, and finally the criticism and popularization of popular science books. The subsequent chapter of part two covers the strategies used by French publishers determining the structure of their book offer. The author shows the results of the quantitative analysis: presents the size of the publishing offer, the largest publishing series and collections (including editorial

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<sup>3</sup> In this case, too, one may notice a kind of discrepancy, as little books directed at this age group can be suitable for unaided “reading” and playing with, e.g., when they contain no text, when their main part is illustrations or when they are books and toys at the same time (the borderlines of picture and educational books are discussed by the author in the subsection “Good fun”).

descriptions), reprint and republication strategies. In the sixth section Wandel provides a formal and thematic analysis of publications, carried out on several levels: with regard to the age of readers, genres and themes. It is worth mentioning that besides the Universal Decimal Classification allocations, the author provides the titles with thematic predeterminers, which enable accurate depiction of their contents. The final chapter shows the most important trends in the editing of the modern popular science books for children and youth in France. The heading of this section is a little inexact, because of the subsection on authorities which the French companies cooperated with while publishing popular science literature (e.g., experts on specific fields of knowledge, scientific and cultural institutes and the media), conception of book as a “total product,” a type of amusement, the use of humor in the said types of publications and the relationship between this type of literature and new technologies. These phenomena are not directly connected with editing (understood as the process of preparing publications for printing). Thus, it would be better if this part of the work had been titled “The Most Important Directions in the Development of...,” especially when the subheading of the section is: “Innovations – Inspirations – Interactions.” The book finishes with the summary containing numerous interesting constations on the metamorphosis of the popular science book offer directed at children and youth, which has been taking place over the last decades in respect of quantity, themes and genres as well as the readership profile and expectations of a demanding reader. Wandel managed to portray the immense diversity and originality of this offer and its hybrid character making it resemble media communications, as well as combining various registers and methods of presenting knowledge, plentiful editing facilities, and first of all, the richness of illustrative materials. The settings of some editions constitute a coherent combination of content and form, where inventiveness and visual attractiveness play a vital role. Although the mass media and the electronic media, including mobile ones, are taking over the task of popularizing knowledge, popular science books are still being published and sold successfully, which may mean – as the author explicitly proves – that this is communication of a different sort, unique and irreplaceable by any other medium. A monograph with such a framework provides insight into both the history of the French popular science book (and educational one), and its transformations at a broader level, supranational, European one. That is why, perhaps, the author seems not to hold fast to the upper date adopted in the research, but “leads” readers, at several places, into very up-to-date situations, particularly in these parts of the book which are of a synthesizing and concluding character. What is really interesting and inspiring for Polish researchers specializing in this field is the presentation of the viewpoint of French scholars and experts on this type of publishing offer for the youngest and young readers. Especially the last section of the work, titled “The Most Important Directions in the Editing of Contemporary Popular Science Book

for Children and Youth. Innovations – Inspirations – Interactions,” can be considered the one which depicts modern tendencies in the development of popular science book for children and youth in general. However, it must be noted that Wandel does not formulate any statements which she could not validate. In her study, she concentrates on the French publishing offer and actual state of publishing and readership market, sometimes comparing them with the Polish reality in this field. Readers may feel a little unsatisfied because of the lack of reference to a larger perspective, at least the European one, as the International Book Fairs in Bologna and the popular science publications granted there with awards allow keeping track of the latest trends. Maybe it would be a good idea for a further search and study of this subject.

The book is abundant in tables and charts, but most of all, in colorful illustrations from sixty-eight books, precious not only because they perfectly illustrate the said content, but because they are appealing to Polish readers, who do not know works not translated into Polish. Other supplementary devices facilitating reading are: a glossary of more important proper names and series titles, chronological tables presenting main facts from the history of the French popular science book for children and youth, numerical orders, reference list of surnames and series titles. All of them make the comprehension of the book easier, but they will also be of great importance to future scholars exploring the history of the popular science book for young readers in Poland and in the whole world.

The book has been written in a clear, flowing style. Wandel easily conveys knowledge in an explicit and concise manner, but when necessary, also descriptively. She is not afraid of formulating her own opinions and drawing conclusions as well as observing what processes and tendencies have come about, even when she is aware that her judgements may not be universal and complete. This makes for the usefulness of the book for researchers who can become inspired to a further scientific debate. The ability to describe and systematize observed issues in such a broad and diversified research material must be deemed very significant and valuable with regard to the growth of the study of children's book. The book constitutes a notable analysis of the modern market of books for children in France and is the first monograph of this type of children's book accomplished in a scientific fashion.

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