

Variety in Genres and Styles Trends in Modern German-language Children's Literature

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Children's literature reached a high point in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s with the novels of Erich Kästner and Lisa Tetzner, and again in the 1960s with the renewal of modern fantasy by Michael Ende, James Krüss and Otfried Preußler, and many of these authors have achieved international recognition (Wild 2002). Authors and illustrators from Austria and Switzerland have also been highly influential in the development of international children's literature, with the emergence of new illustrative styles in Swiss picturebooks by Alois Carigiet, Hans Fischer and Felix Hoffmann after World War II, and the popular children's books by the Austrian Christine Nöstlinger, the first winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2003. International interest in German-language children's literature declined after 1970, even though very promising authors such as Peter Hacks, Peter Härtling, Paul Maar, Gudrun Mebs and Benno Pludra, to name but a few, published prize-winning novels and stories for children.

However, international interest in children's literature from Austria, Germany and Switzerland has been increasing again since the beginning of the 1990s. The number of German-language children's books translated into other languages is increasing. International success has been achieved by the children's novels of Cornelia Funke, especially her self-illustrated fantasy stories *Herr der Diebe* (*The Thief Lord*) (2001) and *Tintenherz* (*Inkheart*) (2004), with its sequels *Tintenblut* (*Inkspell*) (2005) and *Tintentod* (*Inkdeath*) (2007), which have had unexpectedly high print runs in England and the United States.

One important reason for this new international interest in German-language books has been the awarding of the renowned Hans Christian Andersen Medal to four German-speaking illustrators: the Austrian Lisbeth Zwerger was awarded the medal in 1990, the Swiss Jörg Müller was honoured in 1994, the German Klaus Ensikat received the medal in 1996, and the German Wolf Erlbruch was honoured in 2006. Their outstanding picturebooks are distinguished by a

sensitive relationship between pictures and text. Of particular note are *Jules Ratte* [Jule's rat] (1981) illustrated by Klaus Ensikat with verse by Peter Hacks; Erlbruch's *Die Werkstatt der Schmetterlinge (The Butterfly Workshop)* (1994), with a text by Gioconda Belli; *Der Aufstand der Tiere oder die neuen Stadtmusikanten (The Animals' Rebellion)* (1989), illustrated by Jörg Müller with a story by Jörg Steiner; and Lisbeth Zwerger's captivating interpretations of texts written by Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll, ETA Hoffmann and Christian Morgenstern.

Perhaps more than any other genre, the picturebook has redrawn boundaries and expanded literary horizons in recent years. Contemporary illustrators are continually breaking new ground and challenging accepted forms and conventions. Innovative graphics and the creative, often complex dialogue between text and pictures provide multiple levels of meaning. Apart from the HCA medallists who have already been mentioned, illustrators like Jutta Bauer, Rotraut Susanne Berner, Quint Buchholz, Nikolaus Heidelbach and Binette Schroeder, to name but a few, have made a major contribution to the revival of modern picturebook illustration. Good examples of the wide range of German picturebooks are the extraordinary works of Dieter Wiesmüller, such as *Komm mit, Moritz (Maury and the Night Pirates)* (1988) and *Pernix. Abenteuer eines kleinen Sauriers im Urzeitwald Pernix (The Adventures of a Small Dinosaur)* (1992). The brilliant colouring and the plasticity of the landscape evoke an atmosphere of magic realism, thus stimulating the child's imagination. Also impressive are the illustrations of Binette Schroeder, who received international acclaim for her first picturebook *Lupinchen*. With *Der Froschkönig (The Frog Prince)* (1989), which many critics consider Schroeder's masterpiece, and *Laura* (1999), a tribute to Lewis Carroll's dreamlike world, Schroeder strongly influenced subsequent illustrators like Henriette Sauvant, who created astonishing pictures for the fairy tales *Allerlei rauh [All sorts]* (1997) and *Die sieben Raben (The Seven Ravens)* (1995). By contrast, the photo-realistic illustrations of Quint Buchholz, for example in *Die Sara, die zum Zirkus will [Sarah who wants to go to the circus]* (1990) or *Der Sammler der Augenblicke (The Collector of Moments)* (1997), build a charming contrast to the cartoon-like style of Jutta Bauer, Rotraut Susanne Berner and FK Waechter, all of them contributing to increasing public interest in modern picturebook art. One striking characteristic, besides the variety in thematic topics and artistic styles, is the tendency to use different materials and combine

illustrative techniques in order to create something new. In summary, contemporary picturebooks have become a field of innovation and experimentation, challenging the conventions and norms that have traditionally governed the genre (Raecke 1999).

New developments are also obvious in the German children's novel. In my view, three trends can be discerned in recent German children's literature: variety in genres and styles, crosswriting and literary works based on autobiographical memories. A glance at the books of Kirsten Boie, Jutta Richter, Burkhard Spinnen and Andreas Steinhöfel reveals the multifaceted nature of modern children's literature and the variety of ways in which writers attempt to appeal to their intended readership.

One of the most intriguing children's books of the 1990s is Kirsten Boie's *Ich ganz cool* [Cool me] (1992), runner-up for the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (German youth literature prize). This first-person narrative deals with the everyday problems of a fatherless boy aged 13. In his quest for a friend who might share his interests, he spends the whole day watching TV and indulging in daydreams of an alternative and adventurous life. This novel is outstanding for its demanding style. In order to authentically reproduce the language of young people, Boie integrates slang, neologisms and the language of comics, thus producing a linguistically creative work that attempts to imitate the oral language of today's youth. *Ich ganz cool* challenges the reader by its ambiguity, the presentation of a childhood shaped by media like TV, video and the computer, the transition between daydream and matter-of-fact narration, and the open ending. For these reasons, *Ich ganz cool* might be regarded as an extraordinary example of the subgenre psychological children's novel.

Burkhard Spinnen's *Belgische Riesen* [Belgian giants] (2000) is a rather complex children's novel that is worthy of note. It tells the story of a new friendship between a shy boy, recently moved to a modern estate, and an imaginative girl, who is torn between worry about her depressive mother and hatred for her father who has left the family. The mysterious Belgian giants, which turn out to be a race of very big rabbits, gradually move into the centre of this eventful and surprising story.

Alternating between humorous and tragic scenes, these tragicomic novels are distinguished by a feeling that things exist in a precarious state of equilibrium.

For this reason I characterise these works as ‘broken idylls’. Whereas Richter’s and Spinnen’s works are aimed at children from ten years upwards, Andreas Steinhöfel’s award-winning adolescent novel *Die Mitte der Welt* (*The Center of the World*) (1998) is directed at young adults. By addressing taboo subjects and integrating complex narrative strategies - changing points of view, first-person narrative, intertextuality, irony, open ending - Steinhöfel adopts features that are typical of adult literature. Structured like a modern *Bildungsroman*, this novel focuses on the development of the male protagonist, an outsider who undergoes a difficult process of gaining self-knowledge. A symbol for his permanent quest is the big library in his home, called the middle of the world. Only in this room does he find allies in the books he so voraciously devours; outside the library, he is excluded by others of his age because of his homosexuality. This is an effective representation of a figure characterised by conflicting emotions and thoughts (Steinz/Weinmann 2002).

The development of the psychological children’s novel goes hand in hand with a new perspective on childhood. Accordingly, more and more authors rely on their own childhood memories when writing children’s novels (Ewers 1997). However, their works are not autobiographies in a traditional sense; most often these novels are autobiographies in disguise. Neither the book’s title nor a preface explicitly point out that the respective work is based on the author’s childhood memories. However, this knowledge can be gleaned from information on the book’s origin and the author’s biography. Kirsten Boie, Mirjam Pressler and Rafik Schami all integrate autobiographical references into their children’s books. Examples are Kirsten Boie’s *Mit Jakob wurde alles anders* [Everything changed with Jakob] (1986) and *Monis Jahr* [Moni’s year] (2003); Pressler’s *Wenn das Glück kommt, muß man ihm einen Stuhl hinstellen* [When happiness comes, you should pull up a chair] (1994); Schami’s *Eine Hand voller Sterne* [A handful of stars] (1987) and *Die Sehnsucht der Schwalbe* [The swallow’s yearning] (2000). To distinguish these novels from autobiographies or autobiographical novels, I suggest classifying them as ‘retrospective children’s novels’ (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2004). Boie, Pressler and Schami have integrated events and fragments from their own childhood in their fiction, but they arranged these materials in multiple ways by inserting fictitious plots, by constructing a third-person-narrative and by changing the main characters names. By means of these alienation effects, the novels reveal a complexity that arises from the confrontation of the child’s spontaneous perspective by the adult

narrator's reflecting perspective. With its focus on the representation of psychological processes, the concentration on the inner perspective of the characters, and the attempt to address taboo subjects, the psychological children's novel, and especially the retrospective novel, has paved the way for the growing interest of adult readers in contemporary children's literature (Ewers 2005).

If children's literature does succeed in briefly arousing the attention of scholars and critics of mainstream literature, this is largely due to well-known authors for adults who have crossed over into writing books for children, such as Irene Dische, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Peter Härtling and Christoph Hein. These authors not only manage to establish themselves in both adult literature and children's literature, but also succeed in winning wide acclaim in both. Enzensberger, for example, who is highly esteemed for his novels, essays and travelogues for adults, now and then turns towards a child audience. In the fantasy novel *Wo warst du, Robert? (Where Were You, Robert?)* (1998), the protagonist accidentally goes on a journey through time, being transported backwards into seven different periods of time, beginning with a short stay in Russia in 1956, and ending in the Thirty Years War in the 17th century. How Robert manages to escape these time shifts is told in a well structured narrative full of suspense and philosophical insight.

Shifting boundaries between children's and adult literature constitute a significant trend in contemporary literature internationally. The term 'crosswriting' (or 'crossover writing') has been widely adopted in recent years to refer to the phenomenon of authors who write for both children and adults (separately) and also the phenomenon of children's books that are directed at an implied audience comprising both children and adults. Children's literature now reflects dominant trends in adult literature, and a wide range of previously taboo subjects and complex narrative strategies - including composite genres, deviations from chronological, linear order, fragmentation and gaps, absence of closure, irony, intertextuality - transgress the traditional demarcations separating children's from adult literature (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2003).

Peter Härtling alternately writes for children and adults. In 1999 he published an acclaimed biography of the Romantic author ETA Hoffmann, and his next children's novel, *Reise gegen den Wind [Journey against the wind]* (2000), is strongly influenced by his occupation with Hoffmann. Regarded as an historical

novel dealing with the end of World War II, *Reise gegen den Wind* is thematically determined by Romantic images, which is most obvious in the character of a mysterious elderly man who often intervenes in events.

The largest group of crosswriters are those authors who address children and adults in separate works, and many of them continue to maintain a clear distinction between their two audiences. However, many authors now aspire to a form of crosswriting that consists of addressing the same texts to children and adults. In fact, new terms to describe the cross-audience phenomenon have been coined in some languages to refer to this literature for all ages, as for example the term *allålderslitteratur* (all age literature) in Swedish or *Literatur für Leser von 8 bis 80* (literature for readers aged 8 to 80) in German. Most of the children's books I have already mentioned appeal to children and adults alike.

Another aspect of contemporary German children's literature is the recalling of literary traditions. In the first place, some authors refer in their recent works to the Romantic fairy tale tradition, as seen in Peter Härtling's *Reise gegen den Wind*. In his five-volume series about the fantastic character Sams (1973-2002), Paul Maar relates his main character to the motif of the strange child, introduced by ETA Hoffmann's fairy tale *Das fremde Kind* [The strange child] (1816). This relationship is veiled in the first three volumes, but the fourth volume *Ein Sams für Martin Taschenbier* [A Sams for Martin Taschenbier] (1996) explicitly compares Sams to Hoffmann's strange child by stressing his peculiar outlook and his outstanding abilities. In addition, especially in this novel Sams is often referred to as 'das fremde Kind' (the strange child), and other characters are called after the siblings Christlieb and Felix in Hoffmann's tale.

The Romantic motif of the strange child also occurs in Andreas Steinhöfel's *Der mechanische Prinz* [The mechanical prince] (2003). Both the figure of the mechanical prince and also the story's narrator [two different people!] are characterised by typical properties of the strange child. These properties include agelessness, immortality and magic abilities, among others. Because of these characteristic features, the characters that belong to this type are mainly distinguished by their loneliness, on the one hand, and by remaining in a state of eternal childhood on the other. These novels by Maar and Steinhöfel are just two examples of the obvious tendency to refer to national or international tradition in the realm of children's literature, a tendency that has not been thoroughly

investigated so far, but which is a very promising subject for future children's literature research.

Secondly, the recalling of literary traditions is expressed in the endeavour to publish complete editions of the works of renowned German children's book authors, especially of children's classics (Kümmerling-Meibauer 1999). To commemorate Erich Kästner's centenary, a nine-volume edition was published in 1999, which includes both his works written for children and those for adults. In addition, this edition is a successful venture in satisfying not only the needs of an average readership by presenting a complete and readable edition, but also the demands of scholars by including footnotes and critical remarks. In addition, the death of the prolific author James Krüss in 1997 prompted the publishing house Carlsen to start a complete edition of Krüss's extensive works for children, which were partially out of print. The volumes printed up to now arouse the readers' curiosity by introducing them to unpublished works like 'Im Krug zum Grünen Walfisch' (In the tankard at the Green Whale) (1997) on the one hand, and calling their attention to very demanding works such as *Timm Thaler oder das verkaufte Lachen* [Timm Thaler or the sold laughter (1962) or *Mein Urgroßvater und ich* [My great-grandfather and I] (1959) on the other.

In addition, many children's books from the former GDR (East Germany), which suddenly vanished from the backlist after 1990, have had a revival in the last few years. Books like *Tinko* (1954) by Erwin Strittmatter, *Insel der Schwäne* [Island of the swans] (1980) by Benno Pludra and the many picturebooks illustrated by Werner Klemke and Elisabeth Shaw, which are regarded as modern children's classics, are available again, thus acknowledging their relevant contribution to the history of German children's literature and their long-lasting appeal to the child audience.

An outstanding novel has recently been rediscovered. It is by the German-Jewish author Anna Maria Jokl who fled the Nazis in 1937, emigrating first to Prague and then to London. In 1937 Jokl wrote a school story with the title *Die Perlmutterfarbe* [The mother-of-pearl colour], first published in 1948 to immediate success. Nevertheless, this novel fell into oblivion for decades, until it was re-issued in 1993. Jokl, a member of the so-called Kästner generation, created with *Die Perlmutterfarbe* a children's novel that is distinguished by its innovative literary qualities. The author reveals a clairvoyance concerning future

developments in Nazi Germany that captivates contemporary readers as well. Since 1993 Jokl's novel appeared in three different editions (two hardcover editions, one paperback) and had never been out of print. A film version is in preparation. The significance of *Die Perlmutterfarbe* was acknowledged by a committee that decided to include this novel, along with Erich Kästner's school novel *Das fliegende Klassenzimmer* (The flying classroom) (1933) into the list 'ZEIT-Schülerbibliothek' (ZEIT School Library), initiated by the renowned journal *Die Zeit*. One hundred books were selected for this list, aimed at students aged 10-18.

Other books by German-Jewish authors before 1938 include the popular series about *Nesthäkchen* [Pet of the family] (1918ff) by Else Ury, killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz, and *Bambi* (1923) by Felix Salten, who emigrated to Switzerland just in time. Since 1938, just a few children's books have been published by Jewish authors in Germany.

The publication of *Prinz William, Maximilian Minsky und ich* (*Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and Me*) (2002) was a turning point. Written by Holly-Jane Rahlens, an American-Jewish author of German descent, who lives in Berlin, this novel, which was awarded the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis in 2003, Rahlens authentically describes the clash between two cultures and religions, namely the life of three generations of American Jews in contemporary Germany. The female protagonist, who falls in love with the British Prince William from a distance, gradually learns to give up her childish daydreams by turning her interest towards her new friend, Maximilian Minsky. At the same time she begins to accept her Jewish roots, symbolically expressed by her serious preparation for bat mitzvah. These events are told in a lively, occasionally ironical tone by the protagonist, which has certainly contributed to the book's success.

The recent trends identified here - variety, crosswriting and 'retrospective' novels - cover all of contemporary children's literature, but the development of the modern picturebook and the emergence of the psychological children's novel are especially important. Both the 'broken idyll' and 'retrospective' literature are characterised by the focus on the representation of psychological processes, concentration on the characters' inner perspectives, and an attempt to address taboo topics, thus paving the way for the growing interest of adult readers in modern children's books.

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