

Literary Forum & Dialogue – Tbilissi May 2014

Don't take it for granted – Quality in Children's Literature

Dear publishers, writers and translators, dear readers,

It is my honour to speak to you today. And it is my pleasure to speak about children's literature today.

Children's literature is, in the literary world, often seen as secondary scene and stands outside of the public discourse on literature. There are some differences between literature for children and adults, but just a few. We all depend on the structure of the book trade, we use the same knowledge on bookmaking – and, even more important, we share the readers. If we do not read in childhood, we will most likely not enter a bookstore or a library later in life. We will not find fulfillment in novels, poetry, crime fiction later on.

How does one become a lifelong reader? A reader keen on exploring new literary worlds? Through literature that has meaning to us. Through books, which are relevant to us and meet our needs. The earlier in life we have such an experience the better. The conclusions of many academic studies are not surprising: If a child does not have access to books from early on, if a child is not read to and does not see adults reading, chances he or she will become a reader in adult life are little, even less a versatile and competent reader.

If we assume a child or a teenager has access to books, we would still have to define quality in children's literature. Since such a discussion could take a whole day, I take a short cut here. Any book which has meaning to a young reader is a book of quality. That leads us to the question: which book is a book of meaning?

Let me ask you first: Do you remember your first book ever? Did you have a favourite book as a child? As a teenager? Did someone read to you? Do these memories come along with emotions?

Was reading an adventure for you? Did you escape reality? Have you been on the lookout for your identity at the time? Watching out for heroes you could identify with?

On the other hand: Today, do you read to your own children? How do you choose a book for a child?

Now take a moment to imagine, you hadn't have had literature in your childhood at all. Or there were no books for your own children. What would be missing?

A lot, I dare say. All the knowledge that is spread through books, all the insight and wisdom, the nonsense which make us laugh. Imagine all these children going to bed at night without a story being read to them. All these questions children have, who would have time to answer them? And, as mentioned already, the foundation stone of literary production and readership would be missing.

I assume we all agree children's literature is important. The problem is: Its existence is generally taken for granted. And not enough is done for its quality. I would like to raise three problematic points, which hinder quality and development in children's literature:

All over the world you hear successful authors saying they do not wish to write for children or young readers. They fear their intellectual reputation is going to suffer, and their market value will lose. Others say they are simply not interested. Fair enough, it's just that this seems like sawing off the branch one is sitting on.

Publishers, on the other hand, often regard children's literature solely as an economic factor. They know that all children are supposed learn how to read and write. The book is still the most perfect tool for this task. In some countries publishers for children's literature can count on the government for subsidies, guarantees and distribution schemes. They can calculate relatively free of risk. Then there are the parents, grandparents, librarians and other persons promoting reading skills privately or professionally.

Especially parents seem to have strange ideas on children's literature and quality in children's books. The child should either read just the same books as they did a few decades ago. Some think a book should have as many words as

possible, because the child should learn to read. Quality, however, has often to do with rather less than more words. Further, many adults have subjects they do not like to talk about and they think that these subjects should not appear in books for children. It's just: More often than not that exactly these subjects are what children want to know about ...

It is important to understand: Children's literature is much more than a writer's reputation, a mere figure of words or a publisher's calculation. It is more than an educational tool and it is too important to take it for granted.

As little as is done for its quality on the one hand, almost everybody on the other hand has an opinion what children's literature should be, and which purpose it should serve. Books for children and young readers should:

- Promote moral values
- enhance reading skills (as a base for higher education)
- educate
- teach about the past
- prepare for the future
- ...

If you ask children though, they will most probably say something different.

They want

- entertainment
- fun
- knowledge
- to learn
- suspense
- ...
- and: Identification!

Certainly, all these goals and needs can't be met in one single book alone. It can not be done by one publisher alone. It is the Identification I would like to pick here in regard of the question of quality. Children's literature of quality must show diversity, so that children have a choice with whom or what they want to identify. Our societies are all diverse.

We need different styles, genres, formats. Social backgrounds, skin colour, abilities and disabilities, stories for dreamy children, stories for adventurous children – we need good books for early readers, and good for advanced readers. Some children like philosophical questions, others prefer fantasy. We need books for children who grow up bilingual. We need them all for the children of our societies.

If children shall become readers, then they need a positive experience of reading, an experience of finding the world they live in represented, of finding answers to their questions in the books they read. They need books as multifaceted as the world round them.

Translated books may play a crucial role here. To see that we are all equal as humans, despite cultural differences seems to be a more important message than or at least as ever. Whether belong to a cultural majority or minority.

For such a diversity in children's literature a multitude of factors must play together. I would like to mention a few:

1. We need writers and illustrators who are willing to take on one of the most difficult tasks: To create literature which meets the child or the young reader at eye-level. We need people who are willing to take on this task for – most possibly – little pay.
2. We need trained and dedicated professionals: publishers, book sellers, librarians, teachers. We need an educational system who brings out trained professionals in all these fields. We need a society which brings out people who find fulfillment in one of these professions.
3. Therefore a government must provide structures in which the needed institutions have accurate financial means, and private companies can develop and find market structures which make economic survival possible.
4. We need a socio-economic environment which sees the book (in all its forms) as a valuable cultural achievement.
4. More generally, we need a society that is open to diversity and pluralism – not only in literature but also. A society which absorbs an open minded literature and allows a critical discussion about it.

5. Literature for children must grow along with the development of the society, therefore we need a public discourse about it. (Such as reviews, academic studies, forums, readings, networks and so on.)

6. If we go even deeper, we can see that the collective understanding of childhood itself is the ground children's literature stands on. Which rights do children have in our society? Do we see children as an acting subject or rather an object of parental power? Such basic questions do shape our literature for children essentially.

If we want to offer books of quality to our children, because we think that they will help them to understand the world we live in, because we think that books will support them on their way out into their lives and into a world which seems to become more and more complex.

Then, that will need not only you and me, but a whole society. It needs our enthusiasm, our courage and our daring.

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