

**VARIETY IN GENRES AND STYLES: TENDENCIES  
IN MODERN GERMAN-SPEAKING  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

**Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer**

*Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen*

In this essay some essential aspects of modern children's literature in the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) will be discussed. Since the 1990s four tendencies determine contemporary children's literature: variety in genres and styles, crosswriting, the increasing number of children's novels based on autobiographical memories, and recalling of literary traditions. These tendencies concern the entire spectrum of children's literature, but a special focus was given to the development of the modern picturebook and the emergence of the psychological children's novel. Concerning the latter, two types are distinguished: the description of a broken idyll and retrospective literature. Both are characterized by the focus on the representation of psychological processes, concentration on inner perspectives of figures, an attempt to address taboo topics, thus paving the way for the growing interest of adult readers in modern children's books.

*Key words:* the tendencies in modern children's literature, psychological novel, German literature.

Most of us certainly know Bambi, Heidi, and Struwwelpeter, the famous figures of international children's classics written by the Austrian Felix Salten, the Swiss Johanna Spyri and the German Heinrich Hoffmann. But what about the boy Tschipo, whose dreams come true every night, the Jewish girl Malka Mai, on the run from the Nazis, the piglet Rudi Rüssel, who started a remarkable career as a racing pig, or Dieda, a young girl who lost her mother in World War II and refuses to answer to her real name of Ursel? I have chosen such figures that occur in the much-admired children's novels written by Franz Hohler (*Tschipo*, 1978), Mirjam Pressler (*Malka Mai*, 2001), Uwe Timm (*Rennschwein Rudi Rüssel*, 1989) and Renate Welsh (*Dieda oder das fremde Kind*, 2002) as typical examples of the emergence of a challenging children's literature that is characterized by aesthetic qualities without losing touch with a child's interest in entertainment and exciting stories. However, this tendency is not at all new.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more German-speaking authors and illustrators started contributing to the development of modern children's literature that culminated in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s with the now famous children's novels by Erich Kästner and Lisa Tetzner and the renewal of modern fantasy in the 1960s, which was mainly the achievement of Michael Ende, James Krüss, and Otfried Preußler. In addition, authors and illustrators from Austria and Switzerland were highly influential in the development of international children's literature, especially the emergence of new illustrative styles in Swiss picturebooks by Alois Carigiet, Hans Fischer and Felix Hoffmann after World War II as well as the popular children's books by the Austrian Christine Nöstlinger, the first winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2003. Despite these tendencies, international interest in German-speaking 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 just a few, published prize-winning novels and stories for children. Nevertheless, international interest in children's literature from Austria, Germany and Switzerland has been increasing again since the beginning of the 1990s. The important reason for this new interest was the awarding of the renowned Hans Christian Andersen Medal to four German-speaking illustrators. The international jury was impressed by the astonishing illustrative works of the Austrian Lisbeth Zwerger, who was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1990, the Swiss Jörg Müller, honoured in 1994, the German Klaus Ensikat, who received the medal in 1996, and the German Wolf Erlbruch, honoured in 2006. These illustrators have illustrated fairy tales, for example by Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Wilhelm Hauff and Charles Perrault, or – as in the case of Erlbruch – texts by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Karl Philipp Moritz, and they have illustrated outstanding picturebooks that are distinguished by a sensitive relationship between pictures and text. This is due to their high-standard and creative pictorial art, on the one hand, and the close cooperation with renowned authors, on the other. In this regard, I would just like to mention *Jules Ratte* (Jule's Rat, 1981) by Klaus Ensikat with verse by Peter Hacks, *Die Werkstatt der Schmetterlinge* (The Butterfly Workshop, 1994) with a text by Gioconda Belli, *Der Aufstand der Tiere oder die neuen Stadtmusikanten* (The Animal's Rebellion or the New Town Musicians, 1989) by Jörg Müller with a story by Jörg Steiner, and Lisbeth Zwerger's captivating interpretations of texts written by Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Christian Morgenstern.

The number of German-language children's books translated into other languages is increasing as well. International success has been achieved, for example by the children's novels written by Cornelia Funke, especially her self-illustrated fantasy stories *Herr der Diebe* (The Thief Lord, 2001) and *Tintenherz* (Inkheart, 2004) with its sequel *Tintenblut* (Inkspell, 2005), which – despite or maybe precisely because of Joanne K. Rowling's best-selling *Harry Potter*-series – have had unexpectedly high print runs in England and the United States.

In the following sections I will attempt to emphasize some of the essential aspects of modern children's literature, with a focus on the development of German children's literature since 1990. In my view, four tendencies can be discerned: variety in genres and styles, crosswriting, i. e. overstepping the boundaries between children's literature and literature for adults, the increasing influence of literary works based on autobiographical memories, and recalling literary traditions in the realm of children's literature.

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. Besides the already mentioned prize-winning Klaus Ensikat, Jörg Müller and Lisbeth Zwerger, who have drawn international attention to the emergence of a new generation of illustrators in Austria, Switzerland and Germany, illustrators like Jutta Bauer, Rotraut Susanne Berner, Quint Buchholz, Nikolaus Heidelbach and Binette Schroeder, to name just a few, have made a major contribution to the revival of modern picturebook illustration. Good examples of the wide range within the realm 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 landscape's plasticity evoke an atmosphere of magic realism, thus stimulating the child's imagination. Also impressive are the illustrations by 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 *Allerleirauh* (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 the Moments, 1997), build a charming contrast to the cartoon-like style of Jutta Bauer, Rotraut Susanne Berner and F. K. 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.

However, these noticeable features are not restricted to picturebooks: they also determine the entire spectrum of contemporary German children's literature. This is most evident with regard to the development of the children's novel. 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* (I am very cool, 1992), the runner-up for the "Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis". 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. However, 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* therefore challenges the reader by its ambiguity, the presentation of a childhood shaped by the media such as 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.

Another important representative of this new direction within the realm of children's literature is Jutta Richter, whose novels, such as *Der Hund mit dem gelben Herzen* (The Dog with the Yellow Heart, 1998), *Der Tag als ich lernte, die Spinnen zu zähmen* (The Day I Learned to Tame the Spiders, 2000), or *Hechtsommer* (Summer of the Pike, 2004), are characterized by deep insight into the child's psychology. Although these small books seemingly tell a simple and straightforward story, Richter succeeds in creating a poetic atmosphere that is reinforced by a lyrical style. In contrast, Burkhard Spinnen, with *Belgische Riesen* (Belgian Giants, 2000), wrote a rather complex children's novel that is worthy of note. This novel tells the story of a beginning 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 special race of very big rabbits, gradually move into the centre as they are the cause for the eventful and surprising story.

Alternating between humorous and tragic scenes, these tragicomic novels are distinguished by the feeling that things exist in a precarious state of equilibrium. For this reason, I would like to characterize these works as a broken idyll. Whereas Richter's and Spinnen's works are aimed at children of ten and upwards, Andreas Steinhöfel's award-winning adolescent novel *In der Mitte der Welt* (In the Middle 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. In conclusion, *In der Mitte der Welt* is an effective representation of a figure characterized by conflicting emotions and thoughts.

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. However, their works are not autobiographies in a traditional sense; most often these novels are autobiographies in disguise. Neither a book's title nor a preface explicitly points out that the respective work is based on the author's childhood memories. However, this knowledge can be obtained from information on the book's origin and the author's biography. In this regard, Kirsten Boie, Mirjam Pressler and Rafik Schami are very productive, insofar they integrate autobiographical references into their children's books as, for instance, in Kirsten Boie's *Mit Jakob wurde alles anders* (Everything Changes with Jacob, 1986) or *Monis Jahr* (Moni's Year, 2003), in Pressler's *Wenn das Glück kommt, muß man ihm einen Stuhl hinstellen* (When Happiness Is Coming, One Has to Offer a Chair, 1994) and in Schami's *Eine Hand voller Sterne* (A Handful of Stars, 1987) or *Die Sehnsucht der Schwalbe* (The Swallow's Yearning, 2000). In order to distinguish these novels from autobiographies or autobiographical novels, I suggest classifying them as retrospective children's novels. Retrospective novels, although set in the same time as the author's childhood, cannot be subsumed under the autobiographical novel label for several reasons. Boie, Pressler and Schami certainly integrated events and fragments from their own childhood, but they arranged these materials in multiple ways by inserting fictitious plots, by constructing a third-person-narrative and by changing the main figures' names. By means of such alienation effects, the novels reveal the complexity that arises from the confrontation of the child's spontaneous perspective with the adult narrator's reflecting perspective. With its focus on the representation of psychological processes, the concentration on the inner perspective of the figures, 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.

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 by writing books for children, such as Irene Dische, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Peter Härtling or 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. To illustrate this aspect, let us have a look at Enzensberger who is highly esteemed for his novels, essays and travelogues for adults. However, now and then he turns towards the children's audience, for example with the fantasy novel *Wo warst du, Robert?* (Where were you, Robert? 1998). In this work 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 17<sup>th</sup> century. How Robert manages to escape these time shifts is told in a thoroughly structured narrative full of suspense and philosophical insight.

However, shifting boundaries between children's and adult literature constitutes a significant (international) trend in contemporary literature. The term "crosswriting" has been widely adopted in recent years to refer to this phenomenon. In general, crosswriting refers to

the phenomenon when authors write both for children and adults. Additionally, crosswriting also points out that many children's books are directed at an implied audience comprised of children and adults. As has been shown, children's literature now reflects dominant trends in adult literature. 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.

For instance, crosswriting is a characteristic feature of Peter Härtling's work, who alternately writes for children and adults. On closer examination, one will realize that many of his works are characterized by reciprocal relationships. In 1999 he published an acclaimed biography of the Romantic author E.T.A. Hoffmann. However, his subsequent children's novel *Reise gegen den Wind* (Travel against the Wind, 2000), is strongly influenced by Härtling's extensive occupation with Hoffmann. Regarded as 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, of course, the 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, the cross-audience phenomenon has been coined in some languages to refer to this literature for all ages, as for example the term "allålderslitteratur" in Swedish or "Literatur für Leser von 8 bis 80" (Literature for Readers aged 8 to 80) in German. In this regard, I would like to claim that most of the children's books I have already mentioned appeal to both children and adults alike.

Another astonishing 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 figure Sams (1973-2002), Paul Maar relates his main figure to the motif of a strange child, introduced by E.T.A. Hoffmann's fairy tale *Das fremde Kind* (1816). Whereas this relationship is veiled in the first three volumes, 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. The Romantic motif of a strange child also occurs in Andreas Steinhöfel's *Der mechanische Prinz* (The Mechanical Prince, 2003). Not only the figure of the mechanical prince but also the story's narrator are characterized by typical properties of a strange child. These properties include agelessness, immortality and magic abilities, among others. Because of these characteristic features, the figures that belong to this type, are mainly distinguished by their loneliness, on the one hand, and by remaining at a stage of eternal childhood, on the other. The 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 authors. To commemorate Erich Kästner's centenary, a nine-volume edition was published in 1999, which includes his works written both for children and for adults. In addition, this edition is a successful venture to satisfy 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* (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, 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* (The Island of the Swans, 1980) by Benno Pludra and many picturebooks illustrated by Werner Klemke and Elisabeth Shaw, who 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 children's audience. Last but not least, I would like to point out the rediscovery of an outstanding novel 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 be immediately successful. Nevertheless, this novel fell into oblivion for decades until it was reissued 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 clairvoyance concerning future developments in Nazi Germany, which also captivates contemporary readers. In addition, Jokl's novel reminds us of the considerable number of children's books written by German-Jewish authors until 1938, for example the popular series about *Nesthäkchen* (Pet of the Family, 1918) by Else Ury, killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz, or *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. However, a turning point seems to be the publication of *Prinz William, Maximilian Minsky und ich* (Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and I, 2002) written by Holly-Jane Rahlens, an American-Jewish author of German descent, who lives in Berlin. In 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 Mitzwa. These events are told in a lively, occasionally ironical tone by the protagonist, which has certainly contributed to the book's success.

Looking back, one will realize that these authors and illustrators seem to be very different at first sight; however, on closer examination one will acknowledge that all of them share the endeavour to transcend the boundaries of existing genres in order to create something new. Thus they encourage the reader to discover further levels of meaning in their multifaceted works, opening up new horizons.

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## РОЗМАЇТТЯ ЖАНРІВ І СТИЛІВ: ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ СУЧАСНОЇ НІМЕЦЬКОМОВНОЇ ДИТЯЧОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ

**Бетгіна Кюммерлінг-Майбауер**

У статті розглянуто основні аспекти сучасної дитячої літератури в німецькомовних країнах (Австрія, Німеччина, Швейцарія). З 1990-х років сучасну дитячу літературу визначають чотири тенденції: розмаїття жанрів і стилів, зростаюча кількість дитячих романів, у основу яких покладені автобіографічні спогади, повернення до літературних традицій. Ці тенденції характерні для всієї дитячої літератури, але в дослідженні вони розглянуті в контексті розвитку сучасної книжки з малюнками та дитячого психологічного роману. Щодо останнього, виділяють два його типи: зображення втрачених ідеалів та ретроспективна література. Вони характеризуються підвищеною увагою до психологічних процесів, внутрішнього світу персонажів, спробою звернутись до заборонених тем, обумовлюючи так зростаюче зацікавлення дорослого читача до дитячої літератури.

*Ключові слова:* тенденції дитячої літератури, дитячий психологічний роман, німецькомовна література.