

**WHY MY SON LOVES TO READ FRANKLIN'S STORIES: VISUALISING
'A MODEST HERO' IN CHILDREN'S FICTION BY PAULETTE BOURGEOIS
AND BRENDA CLARK**

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The following article concerns a series of stories by Paulette Bourgeois and Brendy Clark about the adventures of a charming turtle called Franklin. The authors of this highly popular series drew, probably intentionally, on the convention of the fable as one of the oldest and most popular genres of didactic literature. The interest is paid to the history of fable in through the world literature and its impact upon the children's literature on the example of the before said series of stories.

Key words: fable; Paulette Bourgeois; Brendy Clark; animal protagonists; didacticism.

1. Fable as a didactic genre

One of my nine-year old son's favourite reads is a series of stories by Paulette Bourgeois and Brendy Clark about the adventures of a charming turtle called Franklin. First, when Michał was three and four years old, we used to watch the series on television. When he grew up a little we turned to the books available in Polish thanks to Patrycja Zarawska's excellent translations¹.

The authors of this highly popular series drew, probably intentionally, on the convention of the fable as one of the oldest and most popular genres of didactic literature. The animal fable, the precursor of which was the semi-legendary Aesop of Phrygia who lived in the 4th century BC, reached the height of popularity in the 17th century as a result of Jean de La Fontaine's – the major poet of French classicism – writing. The genre was also known in the Poland of the 18th century, mainly because of Ignacy Krasicki, but also due to the many translations from the French by other Polish poets of the Stanisław August Poniatowski era. The fable, which combines the elements of both narrative literature and poetry, depicts selected problems of the real world making use of the allegoric mask of literary fiction. In these short narratives, animals are the main protagonists. They usually symbolise specific human faults or virtues such as: arrogance, stupidity, cunning, courage, or nobleness. The fable usually ends with a moralising punchline and its overall message is didactic in nature: the reader, who reads the story and gets to know its protagonists, is to discover a specific truth about the world and the traits of human nature.

In the bulky collection of narrative fables by Jean de La Fontaine that I have in my home library I have found two texts where the main protagonist is a tortoise². In the first of them, titled *The Hare and the Tortoise*, the tortoise has been depicted as a moral winner of a sprint race, even though she was, from the very beginning, bound to lose. How come a slow turtle should defeat a swift hare rushing and leaping to the finishing line? But she did! The arrogance and stupidity of the hare, who dozed off halfway on the way to the destination, were punished while the tortoise's solidity and stoic calmness brought him unexpected success.

¹ Polish version: Wydawnictwo "Debit" w Bielsku-Białej, translated by Patrycja Zarawska.

² Jean de la Fontaine, *Bajki*, Warszawa 1971.

In the other, titled *The Tortoise and Two Ducks*, the eponymous protagonist, dropped down by birds during an air journey, dies getting smashed against rocks. Here, the narrator presents the tortoise as worthy of condemnation for he committed a sin of “imprudence, vanity and babble, and idle curiosity.”

In the twentieth-century series of fables by the Canadian authors a charming turtle Franklin is the main protagonist. He is a character with which every growing-up boy can identify. All narratives begin with the sentence: “Franklin is a big boy now.” It is followed by a positively marked justification. The following are two examples:

Franklin was a big boy now. He knew how to lace up his shoes and he also knew how to count – one by one and by two. He knew how to slide down a steep riverbank and was not scared at all.

Franklin is a big boy now. He knows how to count forwards and backwards and even how to count by two. And this is no small achievement. He can zip zippers and button buttons and lace up his shoes.

We learn from other stories that the growing-up Franklin has loving parents and a younger sister, that he goes to school and builds various relationships with his peers. He experiences numerous adventures, each of which teaches him something new.

2. Themes and didacticism in selected stories about Franklin

Let us take a look at the subject matter in three selected stories and analyse, on their example, their didactic qualities.

The first story: *Franklin Goes to the Hospital*

The story is about the consequences of an injury the turtle sustains on the pitch during a football match. Though the injury is minor (his shell gets cracked a little after he catches the ball), it needs an immediate surgical intervention. Franklin must go to hospital for an operation which leads to a twofold success: **outside**, the shell gets “fixed;” **inside**, the turtle overcomes the fear of the unknown, which earns him the name of a “brave patient.”

This short story contains many invaluable didactic qualities which influence and educate the mentality of a young reader. First, the doctor explains to the little patient all the rules which need to be observed during surgery. The effect is that the child-reader, who identifies with Franklin’s problems, tames and gets used to the image of hospital; he or she can learn a little bit more about this unpleasant, though socially needed, institution. Second, going to hospital, Franklin feels and can draw on the support of his family. He can rely on his parents’ love and spiritual help but also on his friends’ kindness and remembering, friends who will not leave him alone in need. Here, the effect is that the child-reader learns empathy; he or she understands that difficult situations can be solved more easily with the support of others. Third, the fear, to which Franklin succumbs (and which he openly admits!), is balanced by a reasonable enhancement of assertive attitude and by boosting the young protagonist’s self-esteem: he hears from others that he “is brave,” that he “will do fine” and that he “is a brave patient.”

It is interesting to notice the realistic illustrations which appear on each page and which accompany the narrator’s stories. They are an integral element of each story. They not only capture the attention of the young reader with their aesthetic qualities, but they also perform a didactic function: they introduce the reader into the elements of the world which the child, together with the protagonist, comes to experience and learn. In the story discussed above, the young reader familiarises, as it were, the X-ray laboratory, hospital halls and the operating room in which he or she can see doctors wearing white aseptic masks on their mouth.

The second story: *Franklin Is Messy*

The story has been built on a serious fault of Franklin's, which is, his tendency to untidiness. It needs to be noticed that this fault can be observed among all small children, especially boys, whom it is difficult to convince that after playing they should tidy their room. Likewise, Franklin is far from being perfect in this respect. His parents, and in particular his father who is depicted in the story as a demanding yet just authority full of manly firmness, bemoan this fault. The narrator, who knows that the behaviour of the untidy Franklin is reprehensible, carries out the narrative in a way that makes it clear that the aim of the story is not to condemn or criticise him openly. The didactic aspect of the story comes to be achieved by foregrounding the fatal effects of Franklin's reprehensible behaviour. So here we have Franklin, frantically looking for his wooden sword which "disappeared" somewhere under the pile of other toys. He will first come late for a meeting with a bunch of his favourite friends, and a little bit later, in the heat of the futile search for a borrowed jigsaw puzzle which his friend comes to collect (the goose), he will accidentally step on the sword and break it. Having no sword any more, Franklin will not be able to play knights again. In other words, the nice turtle learns from his own mistakes that untidiness does not pay. The didactic aspect is obvious: the punishment does not come from outside but is an effect of the young protagonist's wrong behaviour. When Franklin comes to realise this, he will, together with his parents, get down to tidying his small cluttered room. And his efforts will be immediately and generously rewarded:

It took a long time to tidy the room but it was not in vain because Franklin found a number of things which he thought were lost forever.

The story ends with Franklin having his self-esteem bolstered. It comes from the person he loves most. His mum herself will write on the shield of the little knight – beside "brave" and "loyal" – yet another, most important, word: "**tidy.**"

The third story: *Franklin Plays the Game*

The problem shown in the story is very serious. Yet it is presented by the authors in a humorous way. Little Franklin, though he is a big boy now and likes playing football - does not know how to kick the ball straight:

Because of this he could never pass the ball or score a goal. One must admit it is terrible especially because Franklin wanted to be the best player in his team while the team wanted, at least once, just one single time, to score a goal.

It has to be said that it is not only Franklin but also other players in the team who have similar problems. The goose too often makes use of her wings; the beaver moves on the pitch too slowly and clumsily. As can be seen, our protagonist does not have to grapple with his problems alone. Again, he is shown in a small community: this time amid amiable butterfingers who really want to achieve at least a modest success. What is more, their wish is supported by an experienced and wise coach (mister porcupine), who, before each game, teaches his little charges to maintain a healthy distance from the game: "What counts, is good fun!" Franklin and his friends are also supported by his parents who are happy with each of their son's good passes: "You are doing fine!" – they shout whenever their son has the ball.

After a considerable amount of training, a day finally comes when Franklin's team scores the first, long-awaited goal! The joy is so great that the little players are not saddened even by the fact of losing another game to the Bear's team, and the ice-cream bought by Franklin's parents tastes as it never tasted before.

The didacticism of this story is multifaceted. First, Franklin learns that one should not get discouraged with failure and that hard work and effort put into training come to be rewarded with the taste of success. Second, Franklin appreciates again the value of collective effort (the success is shared because the goal is scored after a team attack!). Third,

the little turtle learns that sport is not a life and death fight but, above all, great fun where even the defeated ones can leave the pitch with head held high.

2. Visualising the “modest hero”

Let us look now at the way of visualising the eponymous protagonist. What seems most important is the realistic nature of the stories. Although the authors use the literary mask known from the tradition of the fable genre (where animals function as an allegory of human character), they depict the protagonist in an environment every child knows from experience. Things familiar to a child-reader, such as family home, a child's room, a classroom in the school, playground and football pitch are the elements of the narrative. One can say that Franklin moves in a world which is familiar and friendly. His adventures always take place among those he knows: parents, siblings, or friends from the playground or school.

The convention of realist representation of the main protagonist is another important element. Franklin is neither a comic strip hero nor a galactic idol. He is simply an ordinary little “boy” who has his own faults, weaknesses, and complexes. This modest visualisation of the protagonist has its own, great merits. It allows young readers to fully identify with Franklin's experiences. It teaches them to accept the values forgotten in contemporary world in which violence, infoglut, sheer stupidity and “virtual evil” reign supreme, available on a large scale, for example, in the ever more popular computer games and computer visualisations:

It is an evil, which, unlike the evil of the real world, does not carry with it any serious consequences: those who get killed will be brought back to life again; a hand cut off will grow back again; a raped woman will not suffer from trauma. Virtual evil does not have any negative consequences for the other because the other does not exist – he or she is an artificially generated image or voice. This is why virtual evil can be done without limits and with impunity. Approval for evil, even virtual evil, will certainly exert its effects on the person who does it, especially, if this person is still immature³.

After reading a number of stories about Franklin's adventures, the young reader learns what paternal and brotherly love is. He or she learns the taste of success for which one has to work hard. He or she comes to know it is important to fight one's own weaknesses and faults, and appreciates activities undertaken in group. The child also assimilates the values forgotten in present-day world: honour, justice, responsibility, healthy competition, friendship and dignity.

It is thanks to these values, that the stories by the Canadian writers provide, in our postmodern times dominated by global cyberspace saturated with multimedia and virtual hypertexts, an invaluable guide to the real world with all its problems important to each young person.

I came to like the cathartic stories about the modest Franklin so much that I can safely recommend them not only to all young boys but also to their parents advising them to sacrifice a little bit of their time for what is, after all, the most important for their children.

ЧОМУ МІЙ СИН ЛЮБИТЬ ЧИТАТИ ОПОВІДАННЯ ПРО ЧЕРЕПАХУ: ВІЗУАЛІЗАЦІЯ СКРОМНОГО ГЕРОЯ У ТВОРАХ ДЛЯ ДІТЕЙ ПАВЛЕТТИ БОРЖУА ТА БРЕНДИ КЛАРК

Марек Бернацький

³ Wojciech Celary, Krzysztof Walczak, *Następny krok. Wirtualna rzeczywistość i wirtualna prawda*, in: “Cyber Tygodnik” dodatek “Tygodnika Powszechnego” z dn. 12 lutego 2006 r., s. 10.

У статті досліджено низку оповідань для дітей про пригоди чарівної черепашки на ім'я Франклін, авторами якої є канадські письменниці Павлетта Боржуа та Бренда Кларк. Вони користувалися, можливо й підсвідомо, одним із найстаріших і найвідоміших жанрів дидактичної літератури – байкою. На прикладі цих творів зосереджено увагу на історії розвитку жанру байки у світовій літературі та її впливові на дитячу літературу.

Ключові слова: байка; Павлетта Боржуа; Бренда Кларк; тварини протагоністи; повчальність.