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Pet or food: Animals and alimentary taboos in contemporary children's literature

JUSTYNA SAWICKA

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Abstract

In books for pre-school and early school-age children (4-9 years of age) published in Poland between 2008 and 2014 it is possible to observe a new alimentary taboo. Though statistics show that we consume more meat than ever, we seem to be hiding this fact from the children. The animal is disconnected from the meat, which becomes just a thing we eat so that there is no need to consider animal suffering or to apply moral judgement to this aspect. The analysed books, written by Scandinavian, Spanish and American and Polish authors, do not belong to the mainstream of children's literature, but, by obscuring the connection between the animal and the food we consume, they seem to testify to the problem with this aspect of our world that the adults – authors, educators and parents.

Key words

alimentary taboo, children's literature, pre-school children, animal story, Scandinavian children's literature

Uroczy przyjaciel czy składnik diety: Tabu pokarmowe we współczesnych książkach dla dzieci

Abstrakt

Książki dla dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym (4-9 lat) wydane w Polsce w latach 2008-2014 są świadectwem istnienia nowego tabu pokarmowego. Chociaż statystyki wskazują, że obecnie jemy więcej mięsa niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej, coraz częściej ukrywamy przed dziećmi fakt zjadania zwierząt. Odzwierzęcamy mięso i czynimy je przedmiotem, wtedy bowiem nie musimy zastanawiać się nad cierpieniem zwierząt i nad moralnym osądem tego faktu. Analizowane książki, pisane przez autorów skandynawskich, hiszpańskich, amerykańskich i polskich, nie należą do głównego nurtu literatury dziecięcej i nie są wydawane w wysokich nakładach. Zacierany w nich związek między jedzeniem a zwierzęciem świadczy jednak, że dorośli autorzy, wychowawcy i rodzice mają problem z tym aspektem naszego świata.

Słowa kluczowe

tabu pokarmowe, literatura dla dzieci, dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym, bajka zwierzęca, skandynawska literatura dla dzieci

Animals are often featured in children's literature. Writers and illustrators use animal characters to explain the world to their young recipients. Anthropomorphic animal characters embody types of human behaviour, demonstrate emotions, teach about good and evil, and introduce children to complex issues such as: love, death, hatred, fear, violence, human rights, illness, otherness, addiction and old age. In children's literature animals are like humans: sometimes kind and sometimes nasty, good and bad, wise and silly. On the other hand, they may also be portrayed realistically, as pets of the human characters, or

working animals serving human masters in various capacities, thus becoming elements of the human environment.

Animal characters serve to facilitate children's entry into the world of values.[1] They introduce children into the adult reality delicately, demonstrating various methods of dealing with increasingly serious problems arising as the children grow. Apart from this animal figures also demonstrate how to deal with failures in learning new skills, such as, for example, riding a bicycle (as in Eriksson's *Malla cyklar* from 2003[2]). Most animals in children's literature are nice and friendly, and are treated as family members (for instance, in Appelgren and Savolainen's *Vesta-Linnéa och gosnosen* from 2005[3]), especially when they live in the human world (like in Alexander Steffensmeier's *Lieselotte Lauert* from 2006[4]) rather than in the wild. They offer help in unexpected situations, for example, when new children are born into the family or when a child does not have any siblings as in Lindenbaum's *Gittan och älgbrorsorna*.[5] The Moose Brothers from Lindenbaum's story manage to convince the heroine that having siblings may also have drawbacks. Fictional animals allow children to see situations from different standpoints, thus broadening their horizons. Mama Moo, a cow, encourages children to pursue their dreams, both small and grand ones. A cow that wishes to be where the birds are, learns to climb trees (in Jujja Wieslander and Sven Nordqvist's *Mamma Mu klättrar i träd* from 2005[6]). Nothing is impossible – she seems to be saying. This is what

[1] Compare Irena Koźmińska and Elżbieta Olszewska, *Z dzieckiem w świat wartości*.

[2] The Polish translation by Agnieszka Stróżyk was published in 2009 under the title *Mela na rowerze* [*Mela on the bike*].

[3] Translated by Elżbieta Frątczak-Nowotny as *Wilhelmina i aksamitny nosek* (2008) [*Josefine and the Velvet Nose*].

[4] The Polish translation by Emilia Kledzik was published in 2012 under the title *Krowa Matylda na czatach* [*The cow Mathilda on a farm*].

[5] Translated by Katarzyna Skalska as *Nusia i bracia łosie* (2008) [*Bridget and the Moose Brothers*].

[6] The Polish translation by Michał Wronek-Piotrowski *as Mama Mu na drzewie i inne historie* (2013) [*Mama Moo on the tree and other stories*].

animals in children's literature are for. Mama Moo is friends with Mr Crow, thus allowing the book to become a commentary on difficult friendships. The nice elephant Pomelo,[7] in turn, prepares children for their first encounters with fear. He worries that rain will flush away all colours and that one day everything will turn upside down. He is afraid that he might swallow a fruit pip and have a cherry tree growing in his belly. After all, who has never been worried by the possibility of a tree growing in our stomach? Accidentally swallowed pips live their own life in children's imagination. Pomelo is afraid of various things just like the youngest readers. Moreover, they are often scared of ultimate things, and here again animal characters become helpful. Mr Muffin in Ulf Nilsson and Anna-Clara Tidholm's *Adjö, herr Muffin*[8] (2002) – a guinea pig – is very old. He has to pass away but before this happens we follow his beautiful memories which prove he has had a wonderful life. The reader learns that death does not hurt. What comes after death, remains a mystery – known only to Mr Muffin.

Animals are also used to portray the life of an ordinary kindergartener. Wesoły Ryjek[9] ["Merry Snouty"] from a Polish book by Wojciech Widłak and Agnieszka Żelewska has a family, a beloved toy turtle, sometimes encounters problems but usually he is a happy piglet. Gradually, he discovers that everyone is unique and learns about the workings of time. He lives the life of an ordinary child in an affluent family: he has a room full with toys, he goes on trips which gradually extend his sense of space. His first person narrative helps activate the mechanism of identification in children.

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[7] The Polish translation by Katarzyna Skalska was published in 2012 under the title *Pomelo ma się dobrze pod swoim dmuchawcem* [*Pomelo is well under his dandelion*].

[8] The Polish translation by Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska was published in 2008 under the *title Żegnaj Panie Muffinie!* [*Goodbye, Mr Muffin*].

[9] Wojciech Widłak, Agnieszka Żelewska, *Wesoły Ryjek*, Poznań, Wydawnictwo Media Rodzina, 2010.

The problem I intend to highlight here in connection with children's animal stories concerns the fact that animals are also the staple of human diet. This matter is usually absent from contemporary children's literature. Interestingly, this mystification turns out to be a relatively new trend. It seems that eating animals became a taboo in the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, it is possible to find some examples of books for children revealing the secret connection between meat and animals. I intend to discuss these books in the following pages in order to present the problems their authors' highlight through their narrative choices. My selection of texts – including both fictional and non-fictional ones – is certainly subjective and by no means exhaustive since my major aim is to signal the existence of this phenomenon rather than to present its comprehensive analysis, which would exceed the limits of a short article. I am going to focus on books dealing with the subject of eating meat that are available on the Polish publishing market.

Our avoidance of discussing the problem of animals as a source of food seems to result from various premises. Adults wish to uphold children's belief in a safe and generally kind world and to protect children from becoming aware of cruelty. Moreover, adults may want to avoid the discomfort of having to deal with a difficult subject. Hence we have developed a metalanguage that allows us to evade the discussion. This language is present in contemporary children's literature. In their vast majority, people are carnivorous, but books for children generally omit this fact. Often they go as far as to conceal the existence of the food chain entirely. We eat beef, pork, and poultry, while we read about Mama Moo (a cow) or little Snouty and Florka (pigs). Consequently, children tend to discover quite late that animals are also what they eat.

All cultures destine some animals for consumption and protect others. The fact that cows, pigs, turkeys, and ducks are

regularly eaten in Poland, while horses, dogs and guinea pigs are not, is reflected in children's literature.

> In the world of domesticated animals, there is a radical division between animals perceived as food or workforce on the one hand, and pets on the other. De Mello emphasises that what puts the animals in their particular condition is not an integral part of themselves, but rather a result of applying human categories and practices. Pets, contrary to "livestock", are not regarded as a source of food: they are under an alimentary taboo so that pragmatic approach is replaced by an emotional one. As noted by James Serpell, "from the economic point of view most pets are completely useless". For many people, eating their animal companion would be an act of cannibalism. In contrast to animals raised for slaughter, providing eggs or milk, pets are individualised which is emphasised by giving them names. In a way, naming them can be seen as an initiation ritual bringing pets into the human community. Our memories about an animal, the way we treat it, and even communicate with it are all possible on condition that the animal has a name that plucks it out of an anonymous mass and makes it something more than just a representative of its species. (Żółkoś 2013: 80-81; trans. M. Wojdyło)

The importance of names that transform animals into something more than food can be found, for instance, in Janosch's (alias Horst Eckert) *Oh, wie schön ist Panama* (1978).[10] The book tells the story of Bear and Tiger's (written with capital letters) journey to Panama. The characters are friends and live in a valley by the river. They have their own boat and are doing really well: Bear catches fish (small letter!) while Tiger picks mushrooms. One day they find a wooden box floating in the river. It smells of bananas and the markings on the box reveal that it originates from Panama. The friends begin to dream

[10] The Polish translation by Emilia Bielicka was published in 2009 under the title *Ach, jak cudowna jest Panama. Opowieść o tym, jak Miś z Tygryskiem wędrowali do Panamy* [*The trip to Panama: The story of how little Tiger and little Bear travel to Panama*].

about visiting Panama and then set out on a journey. On their way, they meet other animals: Mouse, Fox, Cow, Hare, Hedgehog, and Crow. The story mentions an old Fox roasting a goose for his birthday dinner. The goose is considered as food, and therefore its name is treated as a common noun spelled with a lowercase letter, in contrast to the previously listed animals. The scene is accompanied by an expressive illustration: Fox is holding the goose in his lap, and next to them a pot, a knife and a fork are visible. The image, even though it does not show any blood, stirs the child's imagination, and is uncomfortable for the adult readers, as the children-listeners tend to asks lots of questions about the captured goose. Children seem not to be able to grasp why the goose is treated differently than the other animals. The group of edible animals in Janosch's story includes fish or geese which are designated by ordinary common nouns and are not individualised. Common nouns are also used for the individualized animals in *The Trip to Panama* but the appearance of capital letters changes these nouns into equivalents of proper names.

In *Benny's Had Enough!* by Barbro Lindgren and Olof Landström (1998)[11] the main character, a small piglet, is individualised by being given a human name: Benny. In the plot of the story he is not confronted with common animals. Instead, running away from home with his toy Little Piggy, he finds a sausage stand. Is it black humour? Or is it only a transposition of human reality into an animal story that invites rather macabre associations by linking a piglet in an obvious relationship with the sausages? The illustrations are charming and nullify the tension present in the scene. I have never met[12]

[11] The Polish translation by Katarzyna Skalska was published in 2014 under the title *Ależ, Bolusiu!* [*Benny's Had Enough!*].

[12] My observations are based on experience gained while conducting reading workshops for pre-school and early school children at schools, nursery schools and in the bookshop Bookafka as well as during children's book festivals (such as Literacki Sopot, Festiwal LiterObrazki in Bydgoszcz) between 2013 and 2017 on behalf of publishing houses I worked for at that time. The workshops were conducted on the basis of scripts prepared for

a child that would be surprised by the fact that there were sausage stands in a town inhabited by pigs. Nursery school children, the intended readers of the book series about Benny,[13] do not associate sausages with the charming little pig. Nevertheless, the connection must be entirely clear to the adult readers.

However, an entirely different reception experience applies to young readers who read the story of Benny with vegetarian or vegan adults: such children treat the scene with sausages as a joke and respond with laughter – just like the adults do. Together children and adults form the community created by laughter where, according to Grzegorz Leszczyński:

> [...] there is no hierarchy of knowledge, age, social position; the rules of carnival impose democratisation. Nobody – whether an adult or a child – is automatically wiser or right, because in the distorting mirror of satire all positions are undermined and mocked. Participating in a community of laughter produces a particular kind of pleasure and satisfaction connected with social or collective, rather than individual, reception. (Leszczyński 2015: 107)

Even adult readers may not always react with surprise to a piglet contemplating sausages because the association of the animal with the food we consume is weak or entirely absent. Billboards with images of meat are an element of our everyday reality. Actually, what is advertised are pieces of killed animals, but somehow we fail to notice this. We have been successfully desensitised through centuries of de-animalisation of the meet we eat, for instance by removing slaughterhouses and butcheries farther and farther away from the consumers.

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particular book titles and involved reading to children and observing their reactions.

[13] In Poland, three books about Benny have been published so far (*Ależ, Bolusiu!, Ładnie, Bolusiu!, Chrum, chrum, Bolusiu!*).

Éric Baratay points out that the process began in the nineteenth century:

> With the arrival of a new era of prosperity since the 1840s, whole carcasses of animals and recognisable body parts, from heads to limbs, were displayed in the butchers' windows a sign of victory over famine. Then they were hidden away in refrigerators at the back of the stores. Since the 1960s and 1970s, certain parts (organs) started to be entirely discarded, while other parts were openly presented but became more and more difficult to link with the actual animal: neat, geometric pieces obliterated any association with living beings so as not to arouse any discomfort in consumers. Recently, in response to the growing uneasiness associated with blood, more and more restaurants have introduced in their menus a selection of meat and fish that – their dictionary definitions aside – seem not to involve gore. (Baratay 2014: 300)

Apart from subtly introducing the question of the link between animals and meat, children's stories may also consider fish. These animals remain on the margins of the animal kingdom, while their meat is often listed under vegetarian dishes. A gigantic fish is the mute heroine of a slightly surrealistic book *Fisken* written by Erlend Loe and illustrated by Kim Hiørthoy (1994)[14] Kurt, a forklift operator, has an extraordinary family comprised of his wife Anne-Lise, who is an architect; the eleven-year-old Thin Helena; ten-year-old Bubble Kurt and little Bud. The story begins with Kurt unexpectedly finding a big dead fish. The whole family is delighted by the discovery: they will have plenty of food in the months to come so they start planning a distant journey. The fish and luggage are loaded onto a forklift and off they go. They visit America. When they have to cross the ocean, Kurt loads all their belongings on the dead fish and uses it to transport the family to the other side. The illustrations invariably show the dead fish smiling, though

[14] The book was translated by Helena Garczyńska and published in Poland as *Kurt i ryba* [*Kurt and the fish*] in 2012.

more and more of its skeleton becomes visible as it is gradually consumed. As the journey continues, the fish gradually disappears. The peculiar family share their dinner with characters they meet on their way, for instance in India, where the fish feeds their 400 new friends. They go to Brasil, Antarctica, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Africa, Spain and France. The fish is getting smaller and smaller, until what is left of it is a smiling skeleton. As they reach Germany, the only thing left of the fish are fishbones that are packed onto a ferry. The following day all the travelers are back in Norway, at the family's house. Kurt puts up the fish's skeleton in his backyard, like a monument. They have had enough of the fish and promise each other they will not eat fish for another year. A risky topic for a book? Maybe, from the animal studies perspective. The book clearly links the animal – a fish – with eating of its meat. Vegetarians and vegans object to the smiling skeleton of a fish since they consider using animals for food or as a source of materials for clothes or medical substances as equivalent to a new holocaust.

Animals as food also appear in non-fiction books, such as cookbooks intended for children, but usually as beef, pork, and poultry. One of the very few exceptions is *Eat for Goals!* (2012)[15] created in cooperation with UEFA and the World Heart Federation for Euro 2012. The book contains football stars' favourite recipes. Fernando Torres's choice is chicken stir-fry with rice and vegetables. There are photographs of a live chicken and a chicken breast featured next to instructions telling the readers to cut the chicken breast into cubes. When Lukas Podolski shares his recipe for pepper, ham and turkey farfalle, the animal origins of poultry and ham are revealed as well – we can see that they come from living animals (turkey and pig) presented in the photos next to the pictures of

[15] The book was published in Poland in 2012 under the title *Jem zdrowo i strzelam gole*. There is no information in the book about the Polish translator. The English version is edited by Russel Stevens.

meat. The recipes are presented together with pictures of football players, comments on the dishes' calorie content and on the best times of day to prepare them. Robert Lewandowski's favourite dish is beef steak served with potatoes – illustrated with a picture of a cow's head. What is particularly interesting in connection with this book, is the indignation of parents (not children!). I have repeatedly[16] seen parents browse through the book and react with outrage. They maintained that children should not be shown such explicit association of meals with living animals. Such parents find the illustrations too straightforward as they reveal the real origins of meat. I have heard similar opinions expressed about *Fisken*. Obviously, such negative opinions are not voiced by vegetarians and vegans.

Adults are less disturbed by lexicon-like publications, such as *Farm Anatomy: The Curious Parts & Pieces of Country Life* by Julia Rothman (2011).[17] Even though the book is a mine of information on animals farmed for their meat and fleece, it is not considered controversial as the previously discussed titles. The reason might be that we expect this kind of information from an encyclopaedia. Animals are not personified here, which facilitates showing them as food. While analysing poultry, Rothman explains which breeds are raised for meat and which for egg production. For instance, the book provides a description of Orpington, a chicken described as meaty, with a mild temper. Chicken breeds raised for meat are often showed next to breeds that are not treated as food even though they are quite similar to each other. Rabbits are described in a similar way. While Mini Rex has a calm character and is re-

[16] I refer to personal experiences as an owner of a bookshop and participant of bookfairs representing various publishing houses. On many occasions I have talked to parents of pre-school and early school children who made it clear they did not wish their children to know that particular kind of meat comes from a particular animal; they preferred the books to use such terms as beef, pork and poultry without suggesting the link to the cow, pig or chicken – as it happens in *Eat for Goals!*

[17] The Polish translation of the book by Barbara Burger was published in 2014 under the title *Anatomia farmy: Ciekawostki z życia na wsi*.

garded as a friendly pet, New Zealand breed has the most exquisite meat. In Julia Rothman's illustrations showing both breeds, the rabbits look almost the same.

The encyclopedia also includes practical information on how to cut up a chicken, with illustrations. Children get detailed directions how to pull away wings from the body or how to separate the thighs by cutting the skin and snapping the joins. Diminutives often used in Polish children's literature to describe body parts give way to neutral expressions that are no longer emotionally charged. The descriptions are technical. It is interesting to note that in relation to our pets we do not usually talk about hip joints, knee joints or drumsticks. This is why cutting and bone-breaking can be easily performed when we are no longer dealing with an animal, but a thing or a dish.

The book also discusses the most delicious parts of beef, pork, and mutton. Similarly to Marc Augé's non-places,[18] cows, pigs and sheep may be called non-animals. They are meals, dietary ingredients. On our plates, animals lack subjectivity. The way Julia Rothman describes the world of animals in an encyclopaedic and informative mode, resembles books written before the present era of alimentary taboo, when children had more contact with nature and farming. Out of necessity, they were often present when animals were hunted and butchered, and eating animals was natural to them. Parts of animals were not yet neatly packaged products of unknown origin, filling store shelves. Such a world was described by Astrid Lindgren not a long time ago. In her 1966 *Emil med paltsmeten*,[19] we read about blood noodles, a regional dish which, being unknown in the Polish cuisine, must be ex-

[18] Marc Augé, *Nie-miejsca: Wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności,* Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, series Pogranicza, Warszawa 2010.

[19] The Polish translation *Emil i ciasto na kluski* by Anna Węgleńska first appeared in 2005; the edition quoted here is from 2008.

plained in the book's Polish translation (Lindgren 2008: 10).[20] The explanation refers to a Polish dish called *czernina*, that is, blood soup, though it has to be added that it is no longer popular and the child-addressee may not know it. Not only are all the ingredients of blood noodles, well-liked by Emil and his family, explicitly named but the same humorous episode mentions the activity of washing pig intestines and involves Emil upsetting the bowl of dough over his father who is bloodied all over. Blood soup, blood noodles, and pigs' intestines are not scary to children. Nor do they outrage parents reading to children. This may be the result of the humor emphasized in the episode and of the fact that the book depicts a world already gone: a rural world from before the time of mobile phones, computers, fast cars, and planes. Thus, parents can explain to their kids that this is just the way people used to eat back then, and drop the subject. It would be much more difficult to do while reading Paulina Wierzba's *Co jedzą ludzie?* [*What People Eat?*], considered a highly controversial work.

What People Eat? is a short *savoir vivre* for globetrotters. In the author's Introduction we read that the book contains information about bizarre dishes that may arouse indignation, fear and disbelief, chosen by the author to show the children some of the cultural determinants behind eating various animals (Wierzba 2010: 6). She tries not to judge. The book contains information about Michel Lotito, the man who ate everything, as well as descriptions of many dishes from African, American, Australian, Asian and European cuisines, molecular dishes, and even cannibalism. Thus the Africans eat grubs, ants, and tarantulas; the Americans – alligator cheesecake; the

[20] Compare Dymel-Trzebiatowska's discussion of this translation problem in her *Translatoryka literatury dziecięcej: Analiza przekładu utworów Astrid Lindgren na język polski* (2013) where she emphasises the lack of consistency in the Polish translation of the dish called Paltsmet (as well as other dishes in Polish editions of Lindgren's books). In a traditional Småland recipe, Paltsmet is a mixture of water, pig's blood, salt, flour and lard, from which small rolls are formed and boiled in hot water (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2013: 195), and is not equivalent to the soup denoted by the Polish word *czernina*.

Inuit favour squirrels, while the Hindus drink tea made of living fish. The inhabitants of Peru eat guinea pigs served on sticks, the Australians – dumplings stuffed with kangaroo tail, and the Asians choose camel buttocks (also eaten raw). Finally, there are also the Chinese who eat cats, dogs, and living monkeys' brains. This is how Wierzba describes a Philippine dish:

> Buro is an extraordinary dish, widely popular in the Philippines. The way it is prepared is quite interesting as well. To begin with, it is necessary to stop feeding a dog for a few days. Next, we give the animal a vegetable mix briefly stewed in brine, and allow it to enjoy a full tummy for a while. During this time the dog digests the food a little bit. After a while, a buro specialist hits the dog in the ribs with a single fine blow dealt with the hand's edge, which makes the dog vomit. Vegetables regurgitated by the dog are collected into a pot, seasoned, simmered... and a delicious meal is ready! Of course, the dog gets another meal which it enjoys in peace. (Wierzba 2010: 40)

In making buro the dog survives but in most cases animals appear in the role of ingredients. The author informs her readers that the Filipinos also eat living, jumping shrimps, while the Indonesians drink cobra's blood and coffee extracted from civets' excrements. The Japanese delight in a lethally poisonous fish called fugu, while the Cambodians prepare a bat soup; the Koreans, in turn, drink wine made from mice, while the Thai eat aquarium soup. As Wierzba explains, the soup is

> [...] a cooked aquarium, with various vegetables and spices, such as green and hot peppers, floating inside instead of water plants. In the beginning, the fish in the aquarium are still alive. The aquarium soup is heated up very slowly: cold water where the fish feel very well is gradually brought to the boil. Before the fish are cooked, they try to hide in the chopped vegetables. (Wierzba 2010: 51)

This description sounds like a horror story.

Wierzba's book also informs that the Vietnamese drink snake liquor while the French eat frogs and live mussels. Also snails are part of the French cuisine; as the author explains, snails are "very nutritious and easily digested. Their flesh is lean, rich in calcium and magnesium, and contains a considerable amount of vitamin C. Snails are almost fat-free and contain plenty of protein, as well as mineral salts" (Wierzba 2010: 59). The inhabitants of Iceland eat rotting sharks, "an unusual dish called hakarl":

> Right after the animal is captured, it is buried in the ground for a long time ranging from two to six months! However, before the shark is covered up with soil, it has to be... peed on, so that ammonium present in the urine could react with the acid in the meat. It is said to be done in order to release all the toxic substances the meat might contain. Of course, the buried shark starts to decompose, but this is precisely the effect the Icelanders desire. After a few months the rotten shark is dug out and dried in the sun. Next, it is cut into tiny pieces and served. (Wierzba 2010: 60)

As we continue reading, we learn that the Icelanders also eat sheep heads, the Norwegians – *lutefisk*, a dish made of dried fish soaked in lye, and the Poles have their blood soup (*czernina*) and tripe soup (*flaki*) (which – incidentally – won the title of the world's most disgusting dish in a competition organised by the American *The Times*). In the majority of described dishes, animals are treated as an ordinary ingredient, often a primary one. The book is intended for children from 9 years of age. Still, few people decide to buy it[21] as it is too controversial for most parents.

The last type of books crucial for the discussion of animals treated as food is a small group of works engaged in promoting ecological perspectives, which begin to appear on the Polish publishing market. One example is *That's Why We Don't Eat*

[21] This was stated by the publisher in a private conversation.

Animals. A Book About Vegans, Vegetarians, and All Living Things (2009) by Ruby Roth, an ideologically committed text intended for vegetarians and vegans.[22] Roth observes that while some animals are born in loving families, the lives of others are spent in pain. This is true about thousands of animals kept for meat or dairy products. They also have their feelings and they suffer. Roth does not individualise animals by giving them proper names but she humanizes them by mentioning their feelings and families. The same humanizing terms are applied to the discussion of ducks and geese, that contrasts the wild birds which fly all over the world and the ones kept in cages on industrial farms and force-fed. Prevented from flying and feeding naturally, they become frightened and sick and lose their plumage. Though the author does not particularly focus on cruelty, her arguments on animals' feelings are hard to argue against. Still not many parents decide to buy Roth's book. One reason may be that it blurs the boundary between human and animal species and forces us to admit that we are animals, too, who eat smaller and weaker beings similar to ourselves. This is a problematic perspective for many parents since we continue to guard our minds against thinking that we are fundamentally the same as the beings we consume.

Descriptions in *That's Why We Don't Eat Meat* consistently emphasise the contrast between the life of free-ranging wild animals and those on farms, and always highlight parallels between animals and humans. Cows, for instance, are presented as displaying various emotions and personality features; they show off, play, get angry, make friends, or help others when they are free in a herd. But on industrial farms they are constrained by tight spaces and unable to chew on fresh grass. Instead they are fed on corn which makes them fat

[22] The Polish translation by Marta Mikita was published in 2013 under the title *Dlatego nie jemy zwierząt: Książka o weganach, wegetarianach i wszystkich żywych istotach*.

and causes stomach discomfort. Roth also stresses that cattle farming is detrimental to the environment as it wastes water and cases much pollution. She advocates replacing animal farming with plant food production as beneficial for the environment and more economical for feeding the human population. The author's intentions are clear: she encourages her readers to give up eating meat and appeals to their sensitivity to animal suffering, especially on farms.

In spite of still present tensions and conflicts (such as terrorism, wars in Ukraine and Syria), the present safety of the Western world seems greater than ever in history. This state of affairs is mirrored in children's literature. For example, the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales have been transformed in myriads of ways, as they were considered too brutal. We no longer have to induce fear of wild animals in children since they rarely face this kind of danger nowadays. This could be one of the reasons behind the tendency to present animals as charming friends and pets. Nowadays, books for children feature amiable lions, hyenas or wolves. Sometimes they do act nastily but this only serves to illustrate various types of human character.

However, in spite of many roles animals play in stories for children, we cannot escape the issue of animals being also a source of food. Moreover, people increasingly begin to feel the need to explain to their children what we eat and what suffering our food producing methods impose on our "lesser brothers". Numerous adults desperately cling to the vision of cute animals living happily on a farm. After all, we do not want to reveal to our children the ordeal animals go through before they end up on our plates. Obviously, we understand it is much too brutal. Pieces of meat displayed on billboards as products of graphic design, do not make children aware that what they see is actually parts of animals. Additionally, some parents simply refuse to acknowledge where meat originates from. That is the reason why they avoid children's books that reveal the deception. Some authors try to show the truth about

animals as food in the contemporary world, but such books are definitely marginal: apart from Astrid Lindgren's story from the previous century, none of the considered publications can be seen part of the children's literature mainstream.

The observations I have been conducting for the last few years prove that parents are confused when it comes to eating animals and explaining this phenomenon to children, which results in their avoidance of books discussing the subject. What about children? The moment when they learn that the food they eat includes animals very much alike the pets they keep at home occurs later and later in their development. Still this this issue needs to be faced. Maybe it would be beneficial to begin an honest discussion on the subject? Maybe it would be better to allow children access to books openly considering this issue? Maybe such books could advise parents how to deal with this paradox? Silence deepens our schizophrenic approach to animals and creates another division among people: those who do and those who do not eat animals. Studies show that in 2013 about 3.2 percent of Polish adults did not eat meat.[23] In comparison, in 2000, vegetarians and vegans made up only 1 percent of the society. The upward trend is indisputable, and this fact alone signals that, whether we like it or not, this issue will have to be dealt with in children's literature. The key is to find a proper formula for this kind of subject – without mystification, panic, pompousness, exaggeration, too overt displays of cruelty and moralising.

Two commentaries featured on the cover of the Polish edition of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009) are worth bringing up to conclude our discussion.[24] The blurb quotes a review from *Los Angeles Times*:

[23] According to the article "W Polsce jest już milion wegetarian" published by Focus.pl on 1.10.2013; the article relies on researches by Homo Homini commissioned by LightBox.

[24] The Polish translation by Dominika Dymińska was published in 2013 under the title *Zjadanie zwierząt*.

> Some of our finest journalists (Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser) and animal rights activists (Peter Singer, Temple Grandin) – not to mention Gandhi, Jesus, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke and Immanuel Kant (and so many others) – have hurled themselves against the question of eating meat and the moral issues inherent in killing animals for food. Foer, 32, in this, his first work of nonfiction, intrepidly joins their ranks […]. (Reynolds 2009)

Further, the blurb claims that the book will make us wonder if we are hypocrites every time we are faced with meat on the plate, which is Foer's great success. The author calls for including animals into the public debate.

In my opinion, the problem of animals as food should also be present in books for children, who should be granted a chance to confront it in their own way. When we remove this issue from public discourse, children lose the opportunity to make informed decisions, and often become desensitised. Later in life, they may turn into guardians of the rules they have absorbed. The argument frequently used in discussions concerning the exploitation of animals is that it has always been this way: we have always eaten animals. The opportunity to face this problem will allow children to fulfil their natural need of organising and ordering the world they face. However, the reluctance to confront children with the challenging issue of animals as food seems to be a part of a much broader tendency to prevent children from facing problems of old age, death, or sickness. This is visible in the already mentioned tendency to rewrite fairy tales, which are currently considered too brutal and jarring with the vision of the world we want to pass down to our children. Paradoxically, this does not stop us from watching the daily news filled with crime and gore – in front of the kids.

The topic of eating animals is certainly not new but animal studies have already brought about significant changes and developed new tools. Éric Baratay notes that animals observe

certain moral rules (Baratay 2014: 329) while for Frans de Waal "human morality is an emanation of social skills rooted in biology, whose beginnings that can be traced back to other mammals, especially the primates" as it is succinctly summarized in the afterword to the Polish edition of his *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (Posłowie 2014: 364). Thus, there is no sense in treating animals as the Other. It is time to leave the winners' camp behind, move to the other side and discover a new perspective (Baratay 2014: 40). Frans de Waal describes an experience which he calls transcendent:

> […] it is impossible to look an ape in the eyes and not to see oneself. There are other animals with frontally oriented eyes, but none that give you the shock of recognition of the ape's. Looking back at you is not so much an animal but a personality, as solid and willful as yourself. (de Waal 2014: 110)

Books for children will certainly tackle this subject more and more often. Yet the question that remains is whether they will find readers: books which are not read are merely paper filling warehouse storage space.

It seems a big mistake to remain silent about what happens in the interval between an animal's life on a farm and its appearance on our plate. This silence obscures animal suffering that we are afraid to confront. Even though the role of science is neither to explain the sense behind all this nor to tell us how to act (de Waal 2014: 21), books (also for children) not only provide information but also introduce values. Teaching values is, after all, one of the functions of literature, especially addressed to children.

> The crucial element of teaching values is supporting children in the process of building their own strong systems of values, as well as making them apply these values in their daily lives not because of pressure or fear of punishment but because of their personal convictions and needs. Our task is to teach children how to derive

happiness and pride from their own honesty and other moral values. (Koźmińska, Olszewska 2007: 79-80)

How do alimentary taboos appear? Just like any other forbidden topic. Taboos arise when some topics become uncomfortable to deal with, when there is a discrepancy between what we believe in and what we do, what we pass down to children. Parents generally wish to bring up their children well and probably who do not wish them to harm animals. But this is precisely what the adults do: they harm animals. Perhaps that is why it is easier to remain silent about animal suffering. We justify the silence by claiming that children are incapable of dealing with this problem, that it is too horrifying and would give them nightmares. To an extent, it is difficult not to agree with this view. However, the silence we keep results in the world created for children by adults being completely artificial: is an animal in the pen entirely different from the one on the plate? To put it bluntly, it is a hoax or utter dishonesty. Is it really impossible to address children in an honest way while keeping to all the rules of good taste, and taking into account their sensitivity? Perhaps Ruby Roth can be seen as a possible model.

By robbing the children of the possibility to acquaint themselves with various facets of eating animals, we enter the discourse of childhood considered a pre-human state. By closing our eyes and ears to children's questions, we actually prepare them for a world that no longer exists (compare Cackowska 2012: 66-67). Thus the question we face while discussing animals as food actually concerns the kind of discourse we are going to apply in the process of upbringing. It concerns the vision of the child and childhood.

Of course, it is easier to read about a bear who saves butterflies from danger in a pretty book filled with beautiful illustrations in pastel colours, which talks about friendship, coopera-

tion, and selfless help,[25] that is, the attitudes we would like our children to learn. Such books do not force us to face questions and taboos.

Translated by Maja Wojdyło

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[25] I refer here to Susanna Isern and Marjore Pourchet's book *Oso Cazamariposas* (2012) published in Poland in 2013 translation by Weronika Perez Borjas as *Niedźwiedź, łowca motyli*.

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Justyna Sawicka
Filologiczne Studia Doktoranckie
Uniwersytet Gdański
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
sawicka.justyna@gmail.com