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Picturebooks and politics: Israeli children's picturebooks during the shift from pre-state to statehood

Summary

Cultures vary according to the level of political potency they attribute to their young readers. Some ascribe to their children the ability to experience political solidarity and are eager to offer them literature accordingly. Other cultures try to exempt children from taking any public interest and shield them within the home and family, distant from what is regarded as the aggressive public arena. In rare cultural and social conditions shifts from one attitude to another regarding children's political potency can be quite extreme. This article points to a dramatic change in the nature of politicization of Hebrew children's picturebooks, which took place in the decade following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This period saw a rapid transition from the former overt politicization of children's literature to a striking and active avoidance of political content. During the first decade of Israeli statehood children's picturebooks decisively disencumbered the children of their former active political tasks, thus implementing a new politics of a civic society in a sovereign state.

Key words: Israeli picturebooks, Hebrew nation-building, political acts in children's literature, Fania Bergstein

Słowa kluczowe: izraelskie książki obrazkowe, budowa hebrajskiej tożsamości narodowej, polityka w literaturze dla dzieci, Fania Bergstein

The premise of this paper is that all modern children's literature has a political dimension, in its role as a mediator between the ever-tumultuous public sphere in which it is created and what is regarded as the "sheltered" private sphere in which it is consumed. This mediation between the public and the private is never trivial, even when the literature targets the youngest members of a given population. Children's books, as elementary as they may be, are therefore essentially political in the Bourdieusian sense, as they inherently represent larger cultural battles for recognition and power in various cultural fields. This political inter-generational discourse is regarded legitimate and even desirable, as it is an essential step in the child's cultural upbringing, instilling a cultural habitus which will later serve as a cultural compass.¹

¹ The terms 'cultural field' and 'habitus' refer to Pierre Bourdieu's work on sociological theory, specifically to his *Questions de sociologie* [*Sociology in Question*] which was published in France in 1984. For discussion of the terms see "Some Properties of Fields" (Bourdieu 1993: 72–7). For more on the innate

When they grow up these children are destined to prove the justness of their parents' path, or force the former generation to recognize its mistakes. Therefore, even before joining the formal national education system, toddlers are recruited into "proper politics" in order to secure for adult society a certain cultural grasp of the future. To this end, various political acts are incorporated in the literature offered to young children: A "proper" worldview is dictated to the child reader along with a certain understanding of "normality" and "oddness." Moreover, a national "us" and a national "otherness" are designated, different and sometimes competing understandings of space are mapped, a sense of a national past is dictated, and national traditions and symbols are instilled. Thus, the given power relations within society, the generational and gender roles embedded in it and its structural blind spots are all marked.

These political actions take on different shapes and content depending on the genre in which they are set. In the case of picturebooks written for pre-school children, for example, the political action is in fact extremely complex. It does not only reside in the sum of the visual and verbal messages, but also in the various interactions between the two that usually act in accumulative and linear cooperation. But not exclusively: The readability of the picturebooks, the fact that the young reader does not always need an adult as a mediator to "read" them, enables repetitive and nonlinear reading as well. This adds a special potential to the political acts that may be practiced in picturebooks.² The nature of the politics in children's literature and its impact on young readers do not merely depend on the literary genre. It is first and foremost a matter of ever changing social-cultural norms. These norms change throughout history within a certain culture (diachronic), and are radically diverse in different cultures during one point in time (synchronic).

Different cultures apply different political approaches to children's literature: Some employ an overtly political message, whereas others apply more subtle tactics. What may be considered "proper education" in some cultures may be considered "gross indoctrination" in others. Some cultures attribute the greatest significance to "involving children in burning national issues," whereas others consider it "psychologically irresponsible," or simply bad taste.

Cultures thus also vary according to the level of political potency that they attribute to their young readers. Some ascribe to their children the ability to experience political solidarity and are eager to offer them literature accordingly. Other cultures try to exempt children from taking any public interest and shield them within the realms of home and family, distant from what is regarded as the aggressive (political) public arena.

In rare cultural and social conditions, shifts from one attitude to another regarding children's political potency can be quite extreme. I would like to discuss in this article precisely such a case – the dramatic turning point in the nature of politicization of Hebrew

power relations in any kind of discourse between adults and children see "power" (Robinson and Kellett 2004).

² For more about the unique poetic potential of picturebooks and their various possible emotional impacts on young children see Kumerling-Meibauer 2014.

children's literature, which took place in the decade following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The period following the birth of the State saw a rapid transition from overt politicization of children's literature to a striking and active avoidance of formal political content. It is my contention that although the young protagonists and young readers were therefore dismantled of their former active political tasks, they were in fact recruited, albeit passively, to promoting a new sense of a civil society in a sovereign state. This new national sentiment was based on a strict dichotomy between the public and the private. For the first time in the history of Hebrew children's literature, children were to represent the latter. I will explain this phenomenon as it is encountered in some canonical picturebooks for pre-school children, focusing on what I regard as the two opposing arenas that symbolically uncover this dichotomy between the private and the public: the "home" and the "outdoors".

Blunt Politicization in Pre-State Israel

The period of Israeli nation-building refers primarily to the first four decades of the twentieth century. From its onset, the Zionist nation-building project attached cardinal importance to children, especially as language pioneers: Children were the first to use Hebrew, the language of the Bible, as a vernacular, a secular language of everyday life. The Hebrew language they acquired in kindergartens and schools was the new 'mother tongue' they were to bring home and teach their immigrant parents (Shavit 2010).

Children were perceived as effective cultural agents in public as well as in the home. Because they had no previous cultural 'habits', children were expected to precede adults (who were mostly immigrants) in the adoption of new national practices and acquisition of new cultural assets. These fresh carriers of the new culture were to subsequently function as effective cultural agents. They were also expected to continue to do so in the future, as adult members of society. It therefore comes as no surprise that prominent Zionist nation-builders were deeply involved in creating a new national children's culture (Even-Zohar 1990). A crucial part of this effort involved the formation of a Hebrew children's literature

During the 1930s and 40s, child culture in Jewish Palestine became overtly political – in the modern sense, as political movements and parties fought over power and control, e.g. through various "legitimate" textual means, and as a part of the political field's laws of the game. These were the years in which the Zionist Labor Movement, *Mapai*, gained momentum as a leading political force and cultural elite. As part of the attempt to secure its cultural hegemony, *Mapai* set out to create "suitable" Zionist-socialist children's books (Darr 2013). The plots of these children's books usually took place outdoors, in the socialist formats of the Zionist settlement, those of the *kibbutz* and the *moshav* (a collective agricultural settlement), and addressed collectivist and Zionist dilemmas involving children.

The young readers of this literature were viewed as a collective of eager pupils, who required guidance by authority figures outside the home, namely educators, political functionaries or professional writers – all of whom were openly identified with the Labor movement.

Parental authority, on the other hand, was regarded as ideologically “weak,” because it bore “diasporic” characteristics (foreign languages and cultures), which were deemed unsuitable for molding the first native generation in Jewish Palestine. It was hoped that through an alternative source of authority, children would become indigenous to a new cultural world. Therefore, the creation, selection, reading and evaluation of children's literature were all left in the hands of adult authorities external to the home. In other words: children's books were viewed as utterly political, within the fictional world and without – through the reading experience.

Come to Me, Sweet Butterfly: Outside the Fictional Home

The child-protagonist's act of turning away from the home, facing exciting open expanses – the public sphere – is manifested in one of the first canonical picturebooks for toddlers: Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad [Come to Me, Sweet Butterfly] (Bergstein 1945). Hakibbutz Hameuchad, one of the two kibbutz-movement publishers that were very influential during the *Yishuv* period (pre-state Israel) published this book.

Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad was structured in accordance with the familiar pastoral model of poems for toddlers, still popular to this day, that is formally a collection of images from village life, usually focusing on farm animals, portrayed in pleasant, catchy rhymes that are easily pronounced and remembered. This literary model was enlisted to glorify the kibbutz communal upbringing, which during the 1930s and 1940s had been adopted in all the kibbutz movements (Dar 1999).

The book introduces the kibbutz surroundings by following a group of kibbutz children wandering around the kibbutz on their own, visiting emblematic kibbutz spaces: the chicken coop, cowshed, etc. The children are therefore portrayed as living a free-spirited childhood, meandering at will through the kibbutz's outdoors.

Here is the hatching mother chicken, / Going around the coop and peckin', / And after her with little striding ticks, / Come all the little chicks (8).

The red mother cow has a little brown heifer / She licked her head with bliss / And gave her a kiss (12).³

The majority of pictures are family-oriented scenes of barnyard animals. Elsa Kantor, the illustrator, added a fence to each of these scenes, to mark the boundaries of the home of each of the families: cowshed, pigsty, chicken coop, etc. On the other hand, the human “cubs,” the kibbutz children, are left outside twice: once outside the animals' homes and once as they roam through the open spaces of the kibbutz without any adult supervision. The children, who look at the family scenes “from without”, represent the collectivist political eye. In fact, their independent meandering through the kibbutz is a political act that flaunts to the young readers the pleasures and success of the Zionist collective village.

³ All translations from Hebrew are the author's.

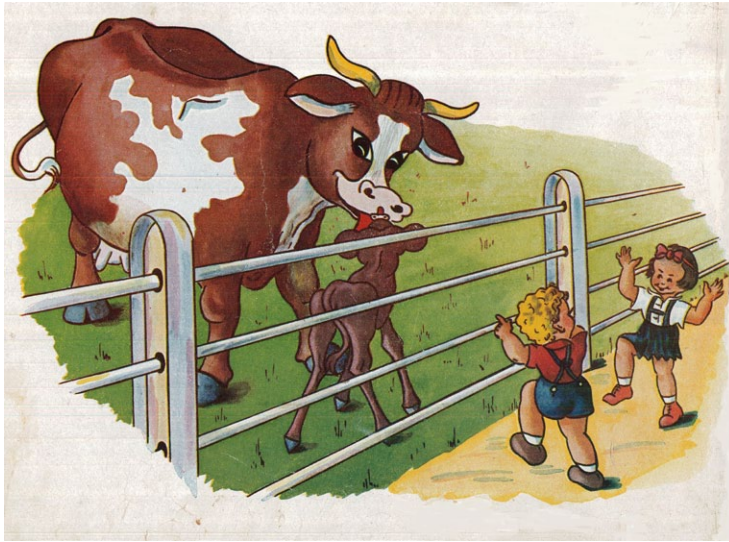


Fig. 1. Illustration by Elsa Kantor from Fania Bergstein's *Come to Me, Sweet Butterfly*. Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1945, 13

The book's final scene is the only one that takes place indoors. It shows the child's peer group – the *kvutsa* – retiring to bed together, in the kibbutz' *beityeladim* (the "children's home"), again – with no adult in sight. Instead, the children are bidden good night by "our watchful dog,"(18) who is seen peering through the screened window.



Fig. 2. Illustration by Elsa Kantor from Fania Bergstein's *Come to Me, Sweet Butterfly*. Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1945, 19

But even here, on the inside, the children do not lose their political role. As opposed to the Western literary version of this bedtime scene, which would involve a loving parent caring for his or her child, Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad reflects the opposite – the children's collective power and generational independence.

With One's Back Turned to the Non-Fictional Home

Like all books printed by kibbutz publishers, Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad primarily served the internal objectives of the kibbutz movement's communal educational/political dictates. As such, these books were mostly read by the *metapelet* (the kibbutz nanny) in the kindergarten or before the children were put to bed, collectively, in the children's house.

Where did this leave the parents? At the time, prominent kibbutz educators believed that literature not only served to teach and recruit children, but also to protect children from their parents' educational mistakes. The "parental instinct" was perceived as a threat to collective education, and parents were requested to curb their parental sentiments and cooperate with the principles of the system (Berman 1988).

For example, Bertha Hazan, a leading communal-education figure, believed that the two hours of parent-child time in the afternoon could "undo everything achieved by the kibbutz during the day and be a source of many educational mistakes" (Hazan 1947, 37). She argued that the child should be left to his or her own devices during the given parent-child time, but should he require special attention, a book could shield him from parental over-indulgence. In other words, books could serve as a protective barrier between parent and child.

The involvement of professional educators in the official parent-child time was further extended to the choice of books. The educators' preference was usually a local version of social realism manifested as short realistic texts focusing on the daily routines of kibbutz children:

The child will only understand the contents of the stories and be affected by them if they draw from his nearest surroundings. There should not be a wide selection of stories. A single story should be repeated many times, without fear that the child would grow tired of it [...] Suitable material should be distributed to the kibbutz members (Hazan 1947, 37).

Hazan's and other kibbutz educators' preference for stories representing the child's immediate surroundings, such as Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad, was explained by the need to heed the child's mental and cognitive needs. These stories, however, also served a clear political goal: they consistently hailed and touted the benefits of the kibbutz enterprise, and presented young children as active political agents.

And Evening Ascended: A Hesitant Legitimacy for the Home and the Family

Three years later, following the success of Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad, Bergstein and Kantor produced another children's picturebook: *Vayehi Erev* [And Evening Ascended]. This time, Bergstein imported non-Zionist material and converted it to Zionist-socialist politics.

She offered a local version of one of the short scenes from Hans Christian Andersen's *What the Moon Saw* (1840). In these scenes, all of which take place outdoors, the moon tells a poor artist, who lives in a dark attic, about the sites of the town, as seen from above, evening after evening. The "second evening" story – a romantic Christian tale about a little girl who unintentionally startles a hen and her eleven chicks when attempting to kiss them and beg their forgiveness for frightening them the day before. Her father is first very angry with her, but when hearing her innocent explanation kisses her with great love and forgiveness. This little tale was turned by Bergstein into a story that takes place in a Zionist-socialist village and celebrates its children.

Bergstein and Kantor completed the book by the end of 1948. Here too, Kantor visually magnified Zionist socialist politics: The book's cover, for example, depicts a girl with a red head scarf and puffy (Soviet-style) sleeves.

Like its predecessor, *Bo Elai Parpar Nechmad*, this book too begins with a visual of the child's back to the home. Nevertheless, the verbal introduction insinuates otherwise:

In the navy blue evening sky,/In the clear night sky,/Floats a moon, bright and high./Silently he wandered/And silently he pondered/On a forest, an orchard and a meadow.//And there, down below, between vineyard and garden, he saw a nice little house.

Seemingly, the moon coming closer in the first two pages invites the readers to enter the house. But, the following double spread reveals that the plot unfolds outdoors, in the public domain: "In the yard, without a sibling or friend,/A lovely girl was taking a stroll./And little chicks and their mom/Were walking around, pecking and chirping cheerfully." The moon's gaze officially directs that of the reader, who is called to identify with this external, political, public gaze. That is, at the beginning of the story a distinction is drawn between the political interpretation, as directed by the gaze of the moon, and the non-political, innocent actions of the protagonist.

As in *Parpar Nechmad*, in this story too the "family" is represented by barnyard animals, in this case the chicks. When the girl encounters the chicks and tries to play with them, the frightened mother hen warns her chicks: "Quickly return to the coops, my dears,/The yard is dangerous now, it appears."

Thus, there is a reversal of roles: Whereas the traditional family gathers its offspring in the evening, here, in the rural Zionist setting, the child walks outside alone, threatening the mother hen's family and driving them home. Indeed, in the following double spread, she further disrupts the family gathering, as an invader: "The whole chicken coop is awakened,/The whole chicken coop is shaken//This child does not give us rest!/The chicks are jumping /The chicks are running and flying/chirping frightened".

Only now are the conditions ripe for a human family scene. When the girl's father hears the commotion, he runs to the coop, fearing that a fox or a jackal is attacking the chickens. When he finds his daughter there, he scolds her. Her explanation expresses her tender care for the farm animals: "I wanted to kiss/The chicken/Because I scared her in the yard/To say I was sorry/And to bid her good night/But her fear grew even worse."

The final scene depicts traditional family roles and warm familial emotions so rare in earlier Zionist writings for children. Unlike Parpar Nechmad, this book concludes with a dual parental point of view – of a private father and of a public, political one: "Then father showed grace/With a loving embrace/Lifting up his good little girl./In the navy blue sky/In the clear evening sky/The moon happily smiled./And when father kissed her, loving and forgiving,/ The moon kissed her too."



Fig. 3. Illustration by Elsa Kantor from Fania Bergstein's *And Evening Ascended*. Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 2011. Unpaged

This double kiss represents the twofold parental perspective: domestic (father) and public (moon) – both recognize the child's vulnerability and need for loving parental guidance.

The Publisher Enhances the "Home"

Bergstein and Kantor's work reflects a hesitant step toward the de-politicization of the nation's young subjects, at least in the fictional world. However, the book that was eventually published in 1949 marks a far more radical shift from the blatant politics of the pre-state era.

The manuscript with Kantor's illustrations was in fact shelved by the publisher and published only in 2011, in a limited edition, to mark a decade since the illustrator's passing and in celebration of the kibbutz movement's centennial. The 1949 version appeared with illustrations by Haim Hausman (1921–2006), an unknown illustrator at the time. Significantly, Hausman's illustrations produced a completely different politics.

Unlike Kantor, Hausman did not praise the local collectivist ethos. On the contrary, his drawings preserved a marked Western slant: The child is blond; the red Soviet head scarf is replaced with red ribbons; the father is dressed like a city dweller (see the fold in his trousers). Moreover, Hausman's personified stars and moon project an American, Disney-like "cuteness," so distant from Kantor's local realism.



Fig. 4. Illustration by Haim Hausman from Fania Bergstein's *And Evening Ascended*. Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1949. Unpaged

Unfortunately, there are no records of the publisher's arguments for preferring Hausman's illustrations over Kantor's. However, it is clear, in hindsight, that the publisher's decision was in line with the nation's new inclination to define the realms of the private civic sphere, i.e. the home and family. The home, in which books were read and evaluated, embraced the book, and within several years it became one of the publisher's biggest successes.

ShmulikPorcupine: Non-Political Politics in the 1950s

The changing perception of nationality received public expression in the 1950s, in public discourse in general and in the arts in particular: Literature, theater, cinema and the fine

arts – all gradually strove to undo the rule of pre-state collective idealism. Civic individualism was defined by different artistic means, as the language and contents of writers shaped themselves in relation to the previous generation. In the field of literature, two different generations asserted themselves in the 1950s: *Dor Ba'aretz* that viewed itself as veteran and traced its roots back to the Jewish settlement in Palestine, and *Dor Hamedina*, that had different biographical and ideological characteristics and called for new poetic beginnings with the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state (Holtzman 1997).⁴

The evolving Israeli civic discourse, which adopted the language of individual and family, quickly showed itself in the literary texts presented to children, the youngest subjects of the young country. By the end of the 1950s, the home and the family had become a central theme in Israel's canonical children's books. These subjects, therefore, and their four walls, were now not only considered welcome guests, but became major foci of interest.

Moreover, the very act of reading a book to a child was now delegated to parents, as a daily ritual that assured the centrality of the home and the family. In other words, the private sphere became the main arena in which books were read and in which their quality and importance were determined.

The speed and depth of this transformation are seen in a canonic picturebook, *Shmulikipod* [*ShmulikPorcupine*], published by the kibbutz publisher, *Sifriyat Poalim*, in 1956. Not only is the private home the sphere of action in this book, but it is also the space that gives birth to the actual story.

The book's authors adopted the penname "Kush," combining the initials of two well-known artists, then married to each another: Poet T. Karmi (Tsherni Karmi, 1926–1994) and sculptor/painter Shoshana Heiman (1923–2009). The combined initials identified the couple as the book's joint "parents." The name of the protagonist, Gadi, was, for insiders, another clue to its real-life parents, as it was also the name of the couple's child. The presence of the real Gadi was intentionally emphasized in the book's subtitle: "Happened to: Shmulik/ Seen by: Gadi /Written and Illustrated by: Kush /Published by: Sifriyat Poalim". In other words, the pseudonym disguised Karmi's and Heiman's identity as artists and replaced them with a parental title. This poetic device, which framed the story as a loving gift from a parent to a child, was a defiant innovation in Israeli children's literature.

The "home," on a thematic level, is introduced as "force majeure." Following the rules of the realistic kibbutz model, the story implies that Gadi lives in a kibbutz, or is at least used to the presence of many other children – and is now involuntarily isolated due to an illness: "I'm sick – I'm lying alone in bed. I don't have any friends, only the donkeys on my pajamas. But I can't talk to them. I'm so sad."

⁴ Recent research has identified processes of individualization, the shedding of collectivist adherence, and resistance to the hegemonic official national ethos in the private sphere as well. Researchers of daily life and popular culture have pointed to gradual changes in the manner in which people worked, dressed, formed friendships, spent their leisure time, designed their homes and raised their children (Rozin 2011, Helman 2014).

In fact, Gadi's forced isolation allows the authors to elaborate on the wonders of the home. Thus, in absolute opposition to the kibbutz's collectivist perspective, the home is presented as a place in which a rewarding intimate adventure can take place.

The story draws a visual and verbal parallel between two porcupines, i.e., between two "unfriendly," prickly creatures, and binds them together in a wonderful friendship. It is a new kind friendship, that emerges from choice and from recognition of the privacy that each of them deserves. According to this model, after having played together, each friend returns to his home, his family: Goodbye Shmulik Porcupine – said Gadi. Say hi to your mother and father and come back to play with me." Shmulik's parents are even illustrated on the left inner cover at the end of the book, waiting for their young son to return.

The Politics behind the "Non-Political" – Conclusion

During the Israeli nation-building period, Hebrew children's picturebooks were overtly political. The young readers were included in the public domain in relation to the contents to which they were exposed, and by the active missions to which they were assigned as competent participants within the public sphere. After the establishment of the Israeli state, this blatant political position of the canonical children's picturebooks was swiftly set aside in favor of much more subtle, civic and domestic politics.

As a result, the politically-potent child, who participated in the public discourse, became a citizen to be. Enclosed in his or her own private space, the Israeli child no longer engaged in politics, neither on the fictional level nor as a reader. Moreover, the very act of reading a picturebook to one's child had now generated a civic consciousness within the home. In every reading, this young audience represented the shared interests of all Israeli citizens, regardless of political, ethnic or class division.

This new national child was perceived as a vulnerable and naïve reader, who required books that would expand his aesthetic horizons, develop his cognitive skills, and strengthen him mentally and emotionally. This new understanding of the "national child" took the key for determining literary politics from the political field and handed it over to the institution of the family. As a result, highly artistic, psychologically-oriented and "universal" picturebooks, stressing family roles and the child subject, have flourished in Israel since the 1960s. The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the occupied territories, and the growing socio-economic gaps are all virtually absent from them. These acute social and political dilemmas have in fact become acceptable cultural blind spots. Israeli children's literature prefers to be global, translatable, psychologically responsible and politically passive.

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