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Producing a popular image of the Amazon rainforest and indigenous peoples in picturebooks in English-speaking societies

Summary

For many years the media have presented the rainforest as a fascinating and exotic place, abundant in various species of plants and animals, the home of people decorated with feathers or holding spears. Picturebooks are no exception. This article presents the ways a popular image of the Amazon forest is produced in picturebooks for young readers in English-speaking industrialised societies. The analysis shows that shaping knowledge about the tropical forest is based on stereotypes about the “untouched pristine forest” populated by “wild indigenous people” – a notion that is spurious. Some of these books undertake the subject of indigenous knowledge or the loss of cultural identity. However the presentation of these issues often lacks deeper dimensions. The exoticisation of rainforest inhabitants as well as the forest itself may have a negative impact on young readers’ understanding of the cultural diversity of the Amazon, as well as their understanding of the complexity of indigenous peoples’ lives.

Key words: indigenous cultures, picturebooks, children’s literature, Amazon Basin

Słowa kluczowe: kultury tubylcze, książka obrazkowa, literatura dla dzieci, Amazonia

Introduction

The role of picturebooks in educating young readers about the world is undeniable. Children learn about various peoples and places and the books familiarise them with things that would be otherwise strange or maybe even frightening. Although the role of books in the socialisation process is currently discussed, it has not been denied for a long time now (e.g. Betzner, Moore 1940; Weitzman et al. 1972).

The policies on multiculturalism as well as political correctness very often have to oppose popular stereotypic assumptions on “us” and “others”. Taking into account recent events in Europe and other continents, the division into “the West and the Rest” (Hall 1992: 275–330) is maybe even more pronounced now than it was in previous years. The notion of differences between cultures and ways of life often veils elements that we all share, that are simply human. Notions of others being strange or even dangerous seem to grow stronger with distance and this could explain why the indigenous people of South

America are regarded as unfamiliar and eccentric. To some extent it seems that in a popular view they are also still understood in terms of a “noble savage” – a notion that has been long overturned in anthropology and other sciences. In this context the image of the indigenous peoples living in the Amazon Basin region that is created in picturebooks for children presents an interesting issue. Children are presented with an image that might influence their views on the indigenous peoples’ lives and problems. What they learn from the books might also influence their understanding of cultural diversity, as reading the book allows the children, to some extent, to experience other ways of living that differ significantly from their own.

The influence of an image of “exotic” cultures produced by various media in the mainstream culture on the understanding of other people’s ways of life has been discussed in anthropology several times (Shepard 2011, Conklin 1997; Sponsel 2010, Wierucka 2013: 129–135 and others). The popular image that is created can be crucial for the successful implementation of important health, environmental, or educational projects in indigenous communities as well as for politics and law. This was especially visible during the United Nation climate summit in Paris at the end of 2015: despite the demand to put indigenous rights back into the Climate Change Agreement, the agreement was signed without them (Collins 2016). To some extent this may be owing to the popular image of the indigenous people being “savages” living in “harmony with nature” in the forest despite the industrialisation process that the Amazonian countries are pursuing.

I will explore how the Amazon rainforest and people inhabiting it are presented in most popular picturebooks in English and what image in turn is created. The books that I chose for this study are considered the most popular ones about the rainforest. The selection of the books for this analysis was based on the bestselling children’s books on the Amazon.com on-line store. The algorithm used in the search option in on-line store is based on the popularity of the book – the number of books sold is a key factor in this mechanism. Consequently, the most popular books, reaching a wider audience have the biggest influence in shaping children’s image of the rainforest in English-speaking societies.

I limited my analysis to the four best-selling books on the Amazon.com on-line store (as of September 2015). Even the very first glance at these publications gives us significant insight into the way of creating an image of the rainforest and people living in it: these four books’ covers, similarly to many other books on the topic, are coloured deep green. Colourful birds and flowers appear on three out of four covers. The image takes the viewer to a peaceful and beautiful place. The plants are almost growing out of the covers onto the hands of the reader. They give the feeling that it might be possible to hold them, bring them even closer and follow them into the wonderful world they promise to be present in the book. Nevertheless, despite their similar cover design the books differ significantly.

The forest

“The Forest Grew All Around” (Mitchell, MacLennan 2007) bears the form of a children’s rhyme.

On the ground,
there fell a seed...
the fluffiest seed
that you ever did see.

The reader follows the rhyme and encounters different plants and animals, each one higher on the tree, surrounded by leaves, flowers, and vines. This travel up the tree leads to a pod with seeds, and the fluffy seed falls on the ground to complete the book’s loop. The rhyme accumulates consecutive objects and becomes longer with every page (the reader goes back to the fluffy seed on every page as well as at the end of the book).

The book includes more than just the rhyme: on every page there is an explanation of plants or animals that are present on that page. Also, at the end of the book there are activities that can be done at home or during the class and they include quizzes and even a recipe for “rainforest cookies” – the name comes from the fact that some of the ingredients come from the rainforest.

The forest in the book is full of animals and a little mysterious. It focuses on nature and, while the interdependencies between the animals and plants are not stressed here, the forest is presented as a self-reliant, beautiful place.

The book won several prizes and is widely used in elementary schools in the United States of America.

The most widely known picturebook about the rainforest is the “The Great Kapok Tree” by Lynne Cherry (2000, first edition 1990). The story is about a man who goes to the forest to cut down a kapok tree, one of the most magnificent trees of the tropics. He falls asleep and animals come to him and whisper to him how important the tree is and how they need it to survive. The last one to come to the man is an indigenous boy who asks him to look at the animals and people of the forest in the new way. The man wakes up, looks around and walks out of the forest leaving the tree standing. Although the book tells the story of one tree, it has the power to change the minds of many people. With more people perceiving the importance of forests and the interdependencies between species within it, more rainforest could be spared from deforestation.

The books has no additions except for the author’s note at the end.

Kapok trees (*Ceiba pentandra*) are one of the most remarkable trees in the Amazon rainforest. They grow up to 60 meters in height and 3 meters in diameter. Apart from the fact that it is the tallest tree in the rainforest and one of the first to colonise open areas in the forest (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016) it is also home to numerous animals and plants. Indigenous groups living in the rainforest used the tree’s seeds, leaves and resin to cure dysentery, fever, and asthma (Institute Icaria 2016) but also regarded it as the home

of a harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), the largest bird of prey of the rainforest. What is more, the kapok tree was often spoken of in indigenous mythology as the dwelling of forest spirits (e.g. Ortiz 2007) so it played (and to some extent still plays) an important role in the spiritual life of the people of the rainforest.

As mentioned before “The Great kapok Tree” is one of the most popular books about the rainforest in the United States of America. It was incorporated into the elementary school curriculum and had great impact on the perception of the rainforest and deforestation. It allows young readers to understand the effects of deforestation as well as the need of the trees for survival of the rainforest peoples and animals. This book takes on only one topic and it does not explain all the intricacies of the growing industries, which may be the main reason for this book being one of the most popular. It conveys an important message and presents it in a simple manner, making it understandable for a wide audience of young readers.

It is also worth mentioning that the tree in the previously discussed book, “The Forest Grew All Around” also is a kapok tree (the characteristic pod with “fluffy” seeds is the kapok tree pod).

The people and the forest

“The Vanishing Rainforest” (Platt, van Wyck 2003) is an interesting book presenting the forest and the people living in it. Here, the forest becomes merely the background for the events that take place in an Indian group called the Yanomamo. Although the ethnonym does not appear in the text, many cultural traits leave no doubt that the group presented in the book is the Yanomamo: the characteristic common dwelling, the word “nabë” used for strangers, the hairdresses and the ornaments used by the people, and so on. At the end of the book there also are additional materials: a note about the importance of the forest and a glossary.

The Yanomamo culture was well researched in the last fifty years (Ramos 1995; Davis 1977; Chagnon 1968, Albert 1975; Sponsel 1997; Good 1991 and others). Yanomamo Indians live in Brazil and Venezuela. They are characterised as foraging horticulturalists: apart from hunting and gathering they cultivated crops such as bananas, manioc, or plantains. Internal trade was well developed and based mostly on a surplus of resources. It was also used for creating alliances between settlements. Like most indigenous groups, the Yanomamo were self-sufficient until they came into full contact with Western culture – since the seventies they have become dependent on goods delivered to them by outsiders – such as cooking pots, axes, and so on (Hames 1994: 375). Since that time the lives of the Yanomamo people have undergone many changes and, while today many of them still live in traditional dwellings, many have moved closer to the cities in search of work. Also, industrial development has influenced their lives as their land is rich in gold, cassiterite, and oil.

“The Vanishing Rainforest” presents a story about the forest that the Yanomamo live in and the destruction that it faces. The text covers many different topics, such as modern

tourism, deforestation, shamanism, the traditional way of life, epidemics, and scientists working in the area, but there is not much logic to the presented story. All of these very important matters are packed together into a relatively short text and leave the reader with the feeling of being lost. The topics are important, but all of them are very complicated issues that cannot be explained in a book of this sort.

This leads us to the educational aspects of the book. Despite the lack of consistency of the plot, the presented local people are acting as every one of us would in the given circumstances, and I think this is the right way to talk about people of different cultures to children. Young readers should be shown that people all over the world face the same problems, feel the same way, make mistakes, or succeed in their endeavours.

What is interesting is that the Yanomamo people are very well recognised in anthropology and the history of the group, as well as research conducted in their settlements since 1960, are a matter of much discussion and even controversy. Until the sixties of the twentieth century the group was one of the least known indigenous groups of the Amazon region. Today, the Yanomamo culture is the most researched one, the best known as well as the most misunderstood. The so called “Yanomamo controversy” is being taught at universities and discussed as a base for changes introduced to the anthropological code of ethics (Borofsky 2005; Albert, Ramos 1989; Turner 1991; Tierney 2000; Skurski 2011 and others). The first researchers described the Yanomamo as ‘fierce people’ (see Chagnon 1968) and soon this became a widespread stereotype. The events that took place while researching the Yanomamo culture initiated a debate not only about the manner of describing and presenting indigenous cultures, but also about research ethics as well as the consequences research might have on studied cultures (Walczak 2007: 3). One of the long-lasting outcomes of the conducted research was the label of “the most fierce indigenous group of the world” and it became a problem, not only because of the popular image of the Yanomamo people, but also because of the official interpretation of this image that led to withholding educational help for the group (Martins 2001). The changes that the Yanomamo culture has undergone in the last fifty years are the outcome of many misunderstandings as well as the complex issues of development, economic growth, and politics of both Venezuela and Brazil. Yanomamo Indians are also often an example of the destructive influence of progress on indigenous groups as it often introduces epidemics, starvation, addiction, raises suicide rates, and shortens life expectancy (Survival International 2015: 10–21).

In light of the above, some solutions to the Indians’ problems that the “Vanishing rainforest” book gives are too simple to be practical or true. Tourism is presented as the remedy to all troubles. Research into tourism in the Amazon showed how differently it can influence local cultures, having both positive and negative effects (Wallace 1990, deRios 1994, Stronza 2005, Stocker 2007, Hutchins 2007 and others). It is known that mass tourism, even in the form of so-called “cultural tourism” or “ecotourism” can disrupt cultural practices, loosen family ties, and undermine economic sustainability (Drumm 1991: 22). Tourism is not the answer to the indigenous people’s problems, yet the message conveyed in the picturebook brings the reader to a different conclusion. It seems that according to

the authors, tourists coming to the settlement will bring the solution to deforestation, the loss of traditional ways of life, as well as economic problems.

One statement made in the book conveys an important message – “There doesn’t have to be a fight between tradition and progress” but there is no explanation how this ideal should be achieved. In the final scene of the story a young girl observes her uncle who goes to build a lodge for tourists. As a proof that this is the best solution, the peccaries that were gone from the area are back and the Yanomamo can go hunting again.

The last book I want to analyse, “The Shaman’s Apprentice” (Cherry, Plotkin 1998), tells the story of a young Tirio boy, who became the shaman’s apprentice. The approach of the topic in this book is different and it may be a result of the story being a real one. It was first told in the book by Mark Plotkin under the same title “The Shaman’s Apprentice” (Plotkin 1994) in which he describes his research as an ethnobotanist.

Tirio Indians number around 1200 people. It is believed that the modern Tirio are descendants of mixed groups that came to the area of the Brazil and Suriname border around the seventeenth century (Riviere 1994: 334). They are hunters and gatherers as well as slash-and-burn cultivators, manioc being their staple cultivation plant (Plotkin 1994: 106–107).

The Tirio Indians have extensive knowledge about the healing substances of various plants, and shamans can cure most physical discomforts. They also practiced more complex knowledge about the supernatural world and spirits that lived there. Similarly to other people of the region, Tirio Indians believed in the powers of shamans who could communicate with the supernatural beings in order to help their community. The shamans’ help was required in the case of most serious illnesses that were believed to be caused by malevolent spirits that could harm or even steal peoples’ souls. To mediate between the real and supernatural worlds the shamans went into a trance state and thus were able to fight or negotiate with the spirits (traditionally the spirits were ambivalent, but missionaries that came to the area convinced the Tirio people that all spirits were bad – Riviere 1994: 336). The power of the shamans came also from the belief that with the help of spirits they could not only cure people, but also harm them. These practices have been abandoned and today Tirio shamans use mostly herbal remedies to cure people in their communities (Riviere 1994: 336).

The Indians in the picturebook are portrayed as living in balance with the forest. They have extensive knowledge about it and, despite the efforts of the missionaries, they keep their traditions alive. The book focuses on shamanism and the knowledge of healing people using plants from the rainforest. The book however does not explore all the aspects of local shamanism. It may be so because the author is an ethnobotanist, therefore he focuses mostly on herbal medicine. Nevertheless the book stands apart from the others – it tells a true story as witnessed by the author, giving the story an additional dimension.

The story teaches the value of traditional medicine and the importance of forest herbs. The authors also mention the arrival of missionaries, the loss of faith in traditional healing and later the discovery that some Western medicine comes from indigenous knowledge about the forest. The main character is a young Tirio boy, who admires the old village

shaman. The old shaman, who still had traditional knowledge, had lost his position in the group – the missionaries were teaching the Indians that his skills are no longer needed. To prove this, they gave the Indians Western medicine that could cure disease like malaria. The indigenous people had not encountered these illnesses before, so the shamans did not have a remedy for them. The story takes a turn with the arrival of a female scientist (the figure representing the author himself), who wants to gather information about traditional shamanistic herbal remedies. The Tirio do not trust the woman at first, but she knows their language and persuades them to teach her. One of the surprising pieces of information which she gave them was that the remedy for malaria was a result of indigenous peoples' knowledge of the rainforest (meaning that it did not come from Western medicinal practices, as the Indians were taught by the missionaries). For the next five years, with the shamans' help, the scientist gathers information that enables her to prepare a book of medicinal plants used in Tirio medicinal practices. She points out: "Now you have two books in your language – the Bible and this, the wisdom of [the shaman] Nahtahlah. Now your people will never forget the shaman's wisdom" (Cherry, Plotkin 1998: 29). Of course, the role of the scientist might be discussed in various aspects. Anthropology knows many cases of interacting with indigenous peoples and the outsiders' abusing their power over the studied groups (see for example Borofsky 2005, Ramos, Albert 1989 and others), but in the case of this book the scientist's work resulted in restoring the shaman's power within the local group, finding him a new apprentice, and saving his knowledge from perishing. It is worth stressing that the story, as I mentioned before, is based on true events and the author indeed collected information about medicinal herbal practices of the Tirio and along with local shamans created the Tirio Plant Medicine Book (Plotkin 1994: 287).

The book takes up the discussion of the destructive role of the missionaries' work, the existence of honest and skillful scientists' practices as well as the influence of globalisation on the indigenous peoples.

Discussion

Nature as presented in the discussed books is abundant, full of plants and animals – and this to some degree reflects the truth, as the rainforest is the most biodiverse place on our planet. Nevertheless the books present a vision of the rainforest as a beautiful, peaceful place, where everything and everybody lives in harmony. It is also shown as a mysterious place, where amazing animals live and wonderful things happen. This is true only to some extent. Scientists and environmentalists envision the Amazon as a place for sustainable development – it includes the indigenous way of life and ecotourism as the only global disturbance of the area (Goulding et al. 2003: 11). This vision is impossible to accomplish as the Amazonian nations are pursuing industrial development and the need for resources that are present in the Amazon rainforest is constantly growing.

The books also present the notion that the rainforest is the "Earth's lungs". For quite some time we have known that this is not actually true: the forest produces oxygen, but

the decomposition of the leaf litter that occurs in the forest use the same or an even bigger amount of oxygen (Goulding et al. 2003: 19). Rainforests play a key role in regulating the Earth's climate, so the deforestation that takes place in the Amazon Basin impacts climate processes everywhere (Shukla et al. 1990; Werth, Avisar 2002, and others). These complex dependencies are not stressed in the discussed books – however it would be unreasonable to expect these topics to be included in children's books. The topics of forest destruction, missionaries' work or tourism appear in the analysed literature, however their causes are not explained.

It seems that people living in the rainforests are of much less interest than nature itself. Indians appear in the discussed books either as a part of the forest ("The Great Kapok Tree") or as people who see tourism as the solution to all their problems when faced with industrialisation ("The Vanishing Rainforest"). "The Shaman's Apprentice" represents a different approach to the topic, although it also is not free of flaws: the pictures in the book show Indians in loincloths made out of red fabric, and the same artifacts are present in "The Vanishing Rainforest". The Yanomamo Indians did not traditionally wear red loin-cloths, but in order to not appear naked to the Western people visiting the settlements they put on the cloths. This image created for tourists has found its way into children's books and this is how the Indians are now presented. What is interesting is that the Indians in the books do not wear modern clothes – the t-shirts or shorts that they use every day now ("The Shaman's Apprentice" being the exception) – and are drawn naked (except for the loincloth). This mirrors the Western stereotype of an "Indian", the "noble savage", that is close to nature, and lives peacefully somewhere "far away". Additionally, in "The Vanishing Rainforest" only the main antagonist wears a red t-shirt. He collaborates with Western people so his t-shirt along with the new machete symbolise the betrayal of traditional values. The antagonist is told by his family members that collaboration is not accepted, but he does not take the t-shirt off. It may be a sign of changing times and modern challenges that the Indians face.

The analysed books do not avoid either the exoticisation of the indigenous people of the rainforest or of the rainforest itself. The presented image builds on the common notion that Amazonian Indians still lead fully traditional lives and are, to some extent, "wild". What is more, the authors usually do not emphasise the cultural diversity of the Amazon Basin – the stories about one indigenous group are therefore considered representative for all others. The knowledge that children acquire from these stories is not very precise. Nevertheless the books might raise consciousness about problems connected with deforestation and the environmental interdependence of people and nature. The rainforest has a chance of survival as long as we understand its importance – creating and reading picturebooks about it is one of the measures contributing to this process.

The image of the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest presented in the discussed picturebooks does not differ significantly from the images produced by the mass media. As an outcome, the children are presented with information that is not entirely true. It might be expected that literature as a medium more destined to reflect on the deeper

nature of cultural aspects of human life would present an image closer to reality. Instead, it feeds off the popular vision of Indians and what is more, with only few exceptions it strengthens it, leaving the young readers with a false representation of the indigenous contemporary way of life and worldview.

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