

Klaudyna Mikulewicz

University of Gdansk (Poland)
klaudyna.mikulewicz@interia.eu

Piotr Prósiniowski

University of Gdansk (Poland)
norse.bard@interia.pl

Picturebook, Democracy and Social Change – a report.
Among books and science

The conference *Picturebook, Democracy and Social Change*, took place at Gdańsk University, Faculty of Social Sciences and lasted three days (16th–18th September 2015) was organised by Małgorzata Cackowska. The participants not only gave lectures, discussed session topics and exchanged opinions but also saw an exhibition of Polish picturebooks in the Baltic Sea Culture Centre and visited an exhibition in the European Solidarity Centre.

The first day was devoted to PhD Students, their research and ideas. The meeting was held in the form of workshops and was divided into two parts. Evelyn Arizpe chaired the first session and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer was chairwoman of the second part. Young, talented researchers from many countries presented their research projects, shared their ideas, thoughts struggles and doubts about their research. Other participants asked questions, shared their own thoughts, and gave feedback. All the presented topics, meanwhile, focused on the potential of picturebooks and their contribution to social change.

Each topic showed how picturebooks could influence culture and education. Among the topics we could find: an overview of the 21st century's children's literature published in Spain; the interplay of word and image in picturebooks, illustrated books and applications; decolonization of images in contemporary Brazilian picturebooks; the issue of constructing meaning by preschoolers reading picturebook apps; exploration of children's approaches to translating the picturebook. Other presentations touched on the picturebook's potential for developing creativity and social awareness, as well as the topic of "meta" reading in Emily Gravett's selected picturebooks. Obviously many more topics were mentioned, many new questions were asked and thoughts were given voice, which made the workshop even more fruitful.

The workshop not only let the participants share their thoughts, but was also a unique chance to hear academic feedback, discuss important matters and think how to make one's research even richer and more coherent. This was a significant opportunity as many young scientists conduct their research in quite a closed environment. In the meantime, happenings like the workshop gave them the possibility of enhancing their work and – in some situations – uncover new, previously unasked questions of no lesser significance.

On September 17th the main part of the conference started. It was opened by prof. Tomasz Szkudlarek and his speech *Social Change as Semiotic Change*. All the other presentations were divided into four sessions:

- *Political and Ideological Issues in Picturebooks*;
- *Transformational Consequences of Picturebooks about Social and Political Issues*;
- *The Representation of War in Military Picturebooks*;
- *Visual Discourses and their Work in Picturebooks*.

The first session (moderator: Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer) started with Yael Darr's (Tel Aviv University, Israel) presentation titled *Politicizing and De-Politicizing Childhood: Israeli Children's Picturebooks During the Shift from Pre-State to Statehood*. Yael talked about the changes in concept of the "national child", during the transition from the Yishuv¹ to a sovereign state, as depicted in picturebooks, published in Palestine and in Israel, during the 1940's and 1950's. This presentation was followed by one concerning a political / ideological issue – *Children as Consumers: Modernity, Consumerism and Picturebooks* by a researcher from Stockholm University: Elina Druker. In her speech she discussed the matter of modernity and the "modern child". Ana Margarida Ramos (University of Aveiro, Portugal) – the third speaker of the first session – presented material about *Contemporary East Timorese History in Portuguese Picturebooks* and talked about its occupation and independence in the context of selected picturebooks. All the speakers, therefore, dealt with difficult material of great importance: the political and ideological aspects of picturebooks.

The second session – The Transformational Consequences of Picturebooks about Social and Political Issues (moderator: Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska) included four presentations, given by five researchers. The first one was Fanuel Diaz (Independent Scholar, Colombia), who talked about *The Construction of Symbolic Spaces Through Visual Discourse in Latin American Realistic Picturebooks*. The second one – Evelyn Arizpe (University of Glasgow, Scotland), chairwoman of one of the PhD workshops – gave her presentation titled *A Fine Balance between Dreams and Reality: How Picturebooks Can Invite Awareness and Transformation of Precarious Contexts*. The third presentation was given by a pair of researchers – Małgorzata Cackowska (University of Gdańsk, Poland) and Michał Zając (University of Warsaw, Poland). The topic of their analysis was *Social and Political Issues in Digital Picturebooks and its Social Reception*. Last but not least was Kelly Hübben (Stockholm University, Sweden) and her submission *Good To Love Or Good To Eat? Ethical and Ideological Implications of the Construction of Species Difference in a Selection of Little Golden Books*.

Even though Kelly Hübben's presentation was that day's last presentation, it was not the end of conference's second day. All the participants moved to Baltic Sea Culture Centre to partake in the *Look! Polish Picturebook!* presentation and discussion. The meeting concerned how Polish picturebooks have changed and the problems they have touched upon, and showed the impact of Polish history and culture on this important medium.

¹ Jewish settlement in Palestine.

The last day of the conference started with the third session – The Representation of War in Military Picturebooks, moderated by Elina Druker. That session's first presentation was given by another chairwoman of the PhD workshops Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (University of Tübingen, Germany), as well as Jörg Meibauer (Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany), who spoke of *Cuteness and Rudeness in Military Picturebooks*. The next presentation – *The Metaphor of War as a Culture-bound Phenomenon: a Comparison of Polish and Scandinavian Picturebooks* by Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska (University of Gdańsk, Poland) – focused on how symbols of war may be used in books. The other two presentations in this section were: Janet Evans' (Independent Scholar, Liverpool United Kingdom) presentation titled *Who's Challenging Who? The Challenge of Peace in Picturebooks Dealing with War, Conflict and Peace*; and Magdalena Howorus-Czajka's (University of Gdańsk, Poland) "*The True Fiction*" – *The Memory and the Post-Memory of the War's Trauma in the Picturebook*.

The closing session – Visual Discourses and their Work in Picturebooks (moderator: Evelyn Arizpe) – included five presentations: Katarzyna Smyczyńska's (Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland) – *Welcome, Stranger: Embracing Difference in and Between Picturebooks*; Junko Yokota's (National Louis University Chicago, US) *Intentionality in Picturebooks. Conveying Sociopolitical Goals*; Aleksandra Wierucka's (University of Gdańsk, Poland) *Producing a Popular Image of the Amazon Rainforest in Picturebooks*; Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna's (Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Poland) *Attractive Lives on Attractive Pages. Polish Illustrated Biography Books for Young Readers*; and last but – again – not least, Ase Marie Ommundsen's and Gunnar Haaland's (Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway) *The depiction of Heaven in Stian Hole's Picturebooks*.

The last session included time for discussion and the future plans of the researches. This was an important moment for the conference, as it allowed thoughts concerning the whole conference to be voiced: new ideas, opinions, initiatives and – what is also more than significant – new questions that are yet to be answered. The day closed with a visit to the exhibition 'Roads to Freedom' in the European Solidarity Centre.

Conferences such as the *Picturebook, Democracy and Social Change* have become an important event for picturebook researchers from many different parts of the world. It gives them a chance to share ideas and enhance thinking about picturebooks, reading, visual culture and art, which are becoming ever more important in the social sciences, including sociology, philosophy, cultural and library studies, as well as pedagogy. This is because children's literature is not just dynamic in its development, but of great importance in terms of the symbols it uses and its potential in contact with recipients (both young readers and adults).