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Literature Planting Dreams in Children

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어린이에게 꿈을 심어 주는 문학



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German children's literature planting a hope

Emer O'Sullivan *Germany*

I would like to thank the organisers of the 12th Asia Children's Literature Convention for inviting me to contribute on "German children's literature planting a hope". I don't think I would have suggested this topic myself; in fact, more frequently discussed in German children's literature at the moment are the currently very widespread dystopias, or anti-utopias. These show the very antithesis of hope: communities or societies which have developed in a negative or frightening way, totalitarian governments, dehumanisation, environmental disasters and so on. But I found out while working on this paper, which addresses the opposite of dystopias, that a lot of interesting things can be said about different kinds of hope in German children's literature. Before I talk about hope, I would like to briefly mention that "German children's literature" encompasses books written in the German language in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany as well as books translated into German, which I will say a little more about later. "Hope" is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as "to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true". In the space of this relatively short presentation I

will focus on some very diverse manifestations of hope on different levels in and around German children's literature. I will start with Germany in 1945, finish with an example of a children's book in German from 2013, and do a whistle-stop tour of what happened in between, from the perspective of hope.

Children and children's literature symbolising hope in Germany after the destruction of the Second World War

In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, Germany lay in ruins both literally and figuratively. That year an energetic woman who, as a Jew, fled Nazi Germany for London in 1936, returned to her homeland as "Advisor for Women's and Youth Affairs" to the US. Army: Jella Lepman. She was convinced that the children of post-war Germany, traumatised by war and indoctrinated with racist ideology, needed books almost as much as they needed homes, food, and clothing, and set about organising an international exhibition of children's literature in Munich, for which she had no funding. She appealed to several nations in 1946 to donate books to Germany - the majority of these nations had still been at war with that country just one year previously. Her rallying cry to them was: "Let us start with the children to bring this thoroughly deranged world gradually back into kilter. The children will show the adults the way"¹). With this, she expressed how children embodied the hope for a better future in Germany at that time, and that the best way of fostering and spiritually nurturing

1) The German original: 'Lassen Sie uns bei den Kindern anfangen, um diese gänzlich verwirte Welt langsam wieder ins Lot zu bringen. Die Kinder werden den Erwachsenen den Weg zeigen' (Lepman 1964: 51). The English translation is mine.

them so that they could realise this potential was through children's literature. There can surely be no stronger statement encapsulating this vision than Lepman's appeal in 1946. It resulted in 4,000 donated children's books from twenty nations for the international exhibition. An account of all this can be found in Lepman's autobiographical *Bridge of Children's Books*.

Lepman was an idealist dedicated to the practical realisation of what she believed in; she was convinced that the only hope for world peace lay in children learning about and understanding other cultures and nations. Her passionate belief in the importance of translations is expressed in the image that each book shared in translation across languages and cultures builds "a bridge of peace" for future generations. Her vision and legacy of hope lives on today in IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, founded by Lepman and others in Zürich, Switzerland, in 1953 whose first mission statement is 'To promote international understanding through children's books', and in the International Youth Library (IYL) in Munich, Germany, which she founded in 1949. This largest library in the world for international children's and youth literature (it houses around 600,000 volumes of children's books in more than 130 languages) continues Lepman's "cultural bridge building work" by actively trying to increase the number of translations and foreign editions of excellent children's books, for instance with *The White Ravens*, an annual selection of recent international children's books recommended for translation. It sees its mission today as "the preservation of cultural diversity as it

is manifested in the world's literature."²⁾, which is a strong pledge of hope for children's literature of the world from Munich in Germany.

Sanctuaries, problems and damaged childhoods with sparks of hope: German children's literature from the 1950s to the 2010s
Children's literature in West Germany of the 1950s and 1960s is characterised by two tendencies: the first is a withdrawal into the private domain. After children's books had served as propaganda during the Nazi era, authors did not want to write in the socio-critical tradition or to write about recent history. The other tendency is the increased openness towards children's literature of other countries. Astrid Lindgren author of, among other books, *Pippi Longstocking*, was and still is phenomenally popular in Germany and is one of many translated writers who influenced subsequent generations of German writers.

German authors of fantastic stories for children in the 1950s and 1960s tend to portray childhood as an alternative, autonomous world. Major authors are Ottfried Preußler with his *kleine Wassermann* (*The little Waterman*) (1956), *Die Kleine Hexe* (*The little Witch*) (1957) and Michael Ende (who would in the 1980s become internationally famous for his crossover novel *The Neverending Story*), with his *Jim Knopf* (*Jim Button*) books (1960 and 1962). In these books a sanctuary is created for children in which they can play and in which the difficult conditions of living in the modern world are suspended.

2) <http://www.ijb.de/en/about-us.html>

This protected space is challenged in the early 1970s by the generation of the student protest movement. They questioned the basis upon which post-war German democracy was created and put a lot of emphasis on children's rights. Children were now to be placed firmly in the real world, rather than a sanctuary, and their literature should show them as being a part of that real world. The literature of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which arose from the so-called anti-authoritarian movement, shows children sharing the adults' world and exposed to exactly the same problems, such as marital breakdown, alcoholism, unemployment, sickness and death. These became, from the 1970s on, dominant topics of modern German children's literature. They can be dealt with in different ways: so-called "problem books" focus on an issue such as drug abuse, child sexual abuse, right wing extremism etc., and are led by the theme rather than the story, while other kinds of books are written by authors who focus on the story, and on ways of telling it, giving it a literary quality. Such authors from the 1970s on include Peter Härtling, Paul Maar and the internationally famous Austrian Christine Nöstlinger, winner of both of the Hans Christian Andersen award and Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. She is and seen as "a staunch supporter of children and those living on the margin of society"³⁾ for instance, is – according to the ALMA committee – "characterized by disrespectful humour, clear-sighted solemnity and inconspicuous

3) By the committee of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award committee, see <http://www.astridlindgren.se/en/more-facts/prizes-astrids-name/alma>

warmth". One of her most popular books, *Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig* (The Cucumber King) (1972) is a hilariously funny allegorical fantasy, with a serious theme: an autocratic, cucumber-like self-declared king, who was deposed by his subjects, moves in with a family in Vienna, Austria. The father, himself a tyrant like the king, takes his side, but the rest of the family is against him, and a conflict of authority within the family escalates. The abuse of power is a serious matter, but Nöstlinger manages to present it in such a way - with lots of language jokes, for instance - that we have to laugh at these ridiculous power figures and those who are foolish enough to follow them. The issue is important, but so is the way it is presented in literature.

Recent narrative children's literature has adopted techniques developed by the modern psychological novel, such as inner monologue, to portray the psychological stress involved in the increasing responsibility that children have for themselves and the kinds of broken childhoods caused by this stress, social factors and parental neglect. An example of a contemporary children's novel, which combines the developments I have been speaking about: the older, comic tradition, the psychological novel and broken childhood is Andreas Steinhöfel's *Rico, Oskar und die Tieferschatten* (Rico, Oskar and the Deeper Shadows) (2008). It is the story of friendship between opposites - the hyperintelligent Oskar, and Rico, who calls himself 'tiefbegabt' ('lowly gifted'), a neologism or invented word in analogy to 'hochbegabt', ('highly gifted'). He can't remember instructions, mixes up left and right,

finds spelling a challenge and takes metaphors, and a lot of other things, literally. The novel is written in the first-person perspective (it is a diary project for Rico's school teacher) and we are presented with a sympathetic but unreliable narrator who struggles with his mental processes and is regarded as an idiot by many in his environment. The subject matter of mixed ability children of single, working parents from the lower social classes could make a perfect "problem novel", but Steinhöfel presents a heartwarming story of two opposites who are drawn together in an unlikely friendship, the story of an intellectually challenged boy who, with his dogged tenacity, realizes that he has the stuff to make a detective and to rescue his kidnapped friend. It is a funny story which celebrates difference and invites the reader to empathise with, and to laugh at and with Rico. With the material of a problem book (social problems, developmental and learning difficulties, children left on their own for much of the day), a technique from the psychological novel (an unreliable narrator in whose hands we are left) plus the humorous take as well as a large portion of empathy, Steinhöfel presents us with a funny, optimistic and positive book but one which is far away from a sanctuary of childhood. The book is hugely popular in Germany, has just been released as a movie, and two further novels about Rico and Oskar have followed.

Double hope: a contemporary story from Iran in German

I started my presentation with Jella Lepman in post-war Germany and her vision of children embodying hope for a peaceful future with the help of books which build cultural bridges between the

nations, and I would like to return to this topic in the final section of my paper. If books are to build bridges, they have to be translated and, as well known, there is a major imbalance in the situation regarding the translation of children's literature. The proportion of translations in children's literatures varies greatly, with countries that 'give' (export) the most also 'receiving' (importing) the least: they are the Great Britain (approx. 3%) and the USA (approx. 1%). Over 25% of German children's literature every year consists of translations, and it counts as one of the more internationally oriented literatures⁴). With an annual production of just under 8,000 books, it means that more than 2,000 titles for children are translated into German every year. About two-thirds of these are translations from English, one-third from other languages, mainly West-European. Few books are translated from Latin America, Africa or Asia. However, in the German-speaking countries, some publishers and organisations do work to distribute books from distant countries, amongst them the Swiss organisation "Baobab Books". They are "committed to activities that will both promote respect for people of other backgrounds or beliefs and equal opportunities throughout the global community", and they see the book, an educational and cultural medium, as a particularly well-suited vehicle for this purpose. This mission statement is one of hope for a better world created by children's books. Baobab translates into German and publishes texts exclusively by authors from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Here is

4) Cf. O'Sullivan 2005, 70ff for more details.

an example of one of their recent publications *Bené, schneller als das schnellste Huhn* (*Bené, quicker than the quickest chicken*), a picturebook from Brazil by Eymard Toledo, about a young boy who has to work hard sewing footballs but he also gets to test them, which he enjoys, because he is crazy about the game. Whether or not his dream will come true to become a professional footballer is left open; but it is a hopeful, affirmative book. It has won a number of awards, including one as for the most artistic German children's book of the year 2014 (by the German Foundation 'Buchkunst' or book art) for its attractive collages using a blend of different materials.

Baobab has also published four books from Korea, which I would briefly like to mention. The novel *Vogelauge* (*Birds Eye*) by Kim Yong Ik published in 1989, Lee Uk-bae's *Sori feiert Tschusok* (*Sori celebrates Tschusok. A picturebook about the Korean moon and harvest festival*) in 2005; the picturebook by Moon Seung-Yeoun (text) and Lee Suzy (pictures), *Kunterbunt von Kopf bis Fuss* (*Multicoloured from Head to Toe*) in 2012 and, most popular of all by Lee Tae-Jun (text) and Kim Dong-Seong (pictures), *Wann kommt Mama?* (*When is Mummy coming?*), which is presented as a bilingual book in Korean and German, published in 2007. It was nominated for the prestigious German state children's book prize (*Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis*) in 2008.⁵⁾

The Baobab book I would like to focus on, because of its

5) It also includes some explanations about the Korean Hangeul alphabet for German readers in an afterword.

connection to the theme of hope, is a prizewinning⁶⁾ picturebook from Iran: *Der große Schneemann* (*The big snowman*) by Seyyed Ali Shodjaie (text) and Elahe Taherian (pictures). A bilingual Persian-German edition of the book was published by Baobab in 2013 in Switzerland which questions usual German reading habits, as it is written from right to left, the same as the Persian original.

It tells the tale in pictures and words of a snowman built by village children from the very first snow of the winter. They happily create the biggest snowman they can imagine and dress him with a hat and scarf. But no sooner has the snowman been completed than he changes his tune. It soon becomes apparent that he is a tyrant who orders the village inhabitants around, and even gets rid of the seasons as he does not want to melt. He orders the sun to disappear and take the spring with it. Even the sun is impressed by the bossy snowman and leaves the village and the villagers – who voluntarily subjected themselves to the snowman – to freeze. However, a year later the sun returns and refuses to accept the snowman's command. She bestows her warmth onto the people, puts an end to the cold, and the snowman melts. The last paragraph of the story reads (in my translation): "Happily, this all happened a long time ago. Now, when it snows in the winter, the children build snowmen and let them melt again in the spring".

6) It won the Children's Book Award (2011) in Iran and was selected as book of the month by the Academy of Children's and Youth Literature in Germany in 2013

The final image on the doublespread shows a young girl flying a kite. The image of the kite symbolises hope: it soars free in the sky, exploring new horizons while, the same time, being anchored in the reality of the girl's hands. Along the string of the kite is written, in German, this message of hope: "Thank goodness a story like this will never happen again".

This political parable addresses the issue of power and its abuse and presents it in a way that children can understand, with quiet and soft illustrations in matt tones (they have a quality of almost being muffled by the snow). It is an intelligent and critical examination of the relationship between power and powerlessness but, also, in the end, of liberation, light, warmth and hope.

I called this an example of double hope. Why double? You remember we defined hope at the outset as being "to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true". This book wants and thinks that tyranny and oppression in the world can be overcome. That is the first layer of hope. The second is that the book itself is an embodiment of the Swiss organisation Baobab's hope to nurture cultural diversity and to promote respect and equality for all cultures through the medium of books such as these. It wants and sets about enabling intercultural communication on equal footing. I started my paper with Jella Lepman and her idea of building cultural bridges as a symbol of hope for a peaceful future. Her vision of hope for German children's literature is still alive today.

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