

Christiane Maria Binder

Enjoying, Studying and Using English Picturebooks

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For my parents, Elfriede and Eberhard Binder,
whose pictures triggered a lifelong interest in books and reading,
stories and pictures, colours and shapes in me.

For my brother, Thomas Binder,
who continues the professional tradition in his own unique way.

All this results in the intriguing paradox that the picture-book, which appears to be the coziest and most gentle of genres, actually produces the greatest social and aesthetic tensions in the whole field of children's literature. Add yet another paradox: the genre which seems to be the simplest actually is the most complex, deploying two art forms, the pictorial and the literary, to engage the interest of two audiences (child and adult). Combine these attributes and it is undeniably arguable that the picture book represents the most diverse, the most didactic, and the most debated of all forms of present-day children's literature.

(Sheila Egoff)

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1. Introduction

Picturebooks at university have come a long way – as has children’s literature at large. But it took picturebooks even longer to enter academia (cf. ch. 2). This also explains the longer past history of the present study. In my “Introduction” to *Childhood, Food and Fantasy* (2018) I commented on how I started to engage in children’s literature studies and contributed to making it an academic discipline within English studies in Germany.¹ So my personal life reflects the changes in academia. Or, the other way round, the emergence of this discipline is mirrored in my own scholarly development. But what motivated me for dealing with picturebooks at all? My interest actually stems from the formative years of childhood. So let me start with an autobiographical approach to demonstrate the impact of reading socialization on the reading of texts and pictures.

In retrospect I can just muse why, how and when I became so fascinated with pictures, colours and shapes, illustrations and picturebooks. Yet I suspect: It must have something to do with my childhood. Children and childhood at large intrigued me since I set out on a career at school, becoming a student of English, Russian, pedagogy and psychology in 1973 and taking my diploma degree in 1977. From then on the exploration of these phenomena – first in Russian children’s literature and then in English literature for adults and children across history to the present – developed into a life-long intense scholarly commitment. It permeates both my research and my teaching of British Literature (from the medieval period to postcolonial studies/New English Literatures) at the tertiary level. The early origins of all this can be located in my own childhood and my reading socialization. They are an exemplary case of a child’s growth and maturation through initiation into the process of decoding two media, words and pictures.

My parents started out as graphic designers and illustrators in the GDR in the mid-1950s. They were freelancers. And in spite of the existential struggles that such a profession at that time and in this country involved, they spent a lot of time with us children, drawing and painting, doing handicrafts and modelling with me and my brother. I liked this very much, but took it rather for granted. I assumed this was something all parents did with their children – nothing extraordinary at all. How amazed was I when I found out – when entering school and meeting more of my friends in their family homes – that drawing and painting with one’s parents did not take place everywhere. Why not? Did the other children’s parents not illustrate books? No! As I learned from my peers: their parents were coal-dealers, bakers, engineers, seamstresses, cooks, working in plants and factories or in agriculture. So this was the point

1 Cf. Christiane Maria Binder (2018), *Childhood, Food and Fantasy*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1-3 and (2016a), “A Special Case of Intermediality: Interanimation of Text and Pictures in English-Speaking Picture Books”, *Praktiki i interpretacii: zhurnal filologicheskich, obrazovatel'nych i kul'turnykh issledovaniy* 1.4, 45.

in time when I started to grasp that my parents worked in a special field and that we children grew up somewhat differently from the others.

My primary school career began a fortnight after the Berlin wall had begun to be built on 13 August 1961. In retrospect, it occurs to me that, on the one hand, our family structure, the gender roles and parental contributions to our family life and me and my brother's upbringing, were quite representative of life at that time in a socialist country: *both* parents worked. Yet on the other hand, these practices were also special because, being freelance artists, my parents worked at home. They were not members of a 'collective' in a factory, plant or agricultural cooperative. This artistic individualism always looked slightly suspicious to the state. Even as children we felt this all too clearly in various situations.

But our family life was certainly highly enjoyable for us children. My mother always got up early with my brother and me. She woke us up, helped us to get dressed, prepared breakfast and allowed us to listen to our favourite children's programme on the radio over breakfast. At times she would also keep us amused with stories of her own that she made up on the spur of the moment. These were highlights, of course. On top of all this she managed, by the by, to rehearse school tasks for the day with us: reciting, re-telling, vocabulary or counting. A mother of today would perhaps already be exhausted after such a 'breakfast' that appeared quite natural to us, but was in fact rich in many little educational and artistic inspirations. Today, especially storytelling is seen as an excellent prerequisite for developing literacy in children.

Well, the state of the art today, more than half a century later, is symptomatic of the current *zeitgeist*: this kind of special communication practiced in the family between parents and children over mealtimes back in those days, would perhaps not necessarily be appreciated today any more (certainly not by everybody) – neither by school children nor by young parents. The notions of the educational roles of school and home/family (ideally a close cooperation) have changed several times over the last few decades alone. At present, they can be very vague in some areas, with the consequence that there are white spots left, gaps in upbringing and education, where commitment is evaded by both sides – to the disadvantage of the children. Besides, today's young ones want to be as autonomous as only possible at the earliest point in time. They often feel rather awkward or embarrassed about parental interference, do not even want their parents to be too well informed about certain goings-on in their 'other' lives – at school or in their spare time outside the home, with their peers. And young parents today are at times indecisive about which roles to adopt in upbringing and home education, wanting to avoid to be drawn into potential areas of conflict that they, perhaps, would rather like to hand over to school. Yet as we all know it is difficult to have the cake and eat it. It's popular and easy and more fun to be your children's best friend. But there are situations in life that demand a different role from parents – one that involves authority, responsibility, efforts, decisions, consistency. Young parents, however, often do not know what's what. Not so long ago they enjoyed their own rebellions against their parents. And now they 'suddenly' find themselves confronted