

## **Sticks and stones. The troublesome success of children's literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter**

By Jack Zipes

New York and London: Routledge, 2001, 213 pp., ISBN 0-415-92811-7, \$24.95 Hb

Reviewed by Norbert Pachler

The title of this excellent book about children's literature by Jack Zipes, the American Germanist (University of Minnesota) and translator of the Grimm tales, makes reference to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century proverb 'Sticks and stones may brake my bones, but words will never hurt me' and is indicative of its main argument: the perceived tendency of much of children's literature to acculturate children into homogeneity and consumerism and to curtail their freedom and creativity.

The book is a compilation of seven previously unpublished and carefully revised talks given since 1997. It is characterised by an easy-to-read, informal yet scholarly style. In addition, it contains one published essay, a final chapter on the Harry Potter phenomenon, which was especially written for this book, and a preface.

The various chapters engage with a number of taxing questions in the field of children's literature and its broader cultural context such as: What constitutes children's literature? How does it differ from literature for adults? Indeed, is there such a thing as 'children's literature'? How can children's literature be made relevant and engaging for all children and less dominated by the 'corporate culture industry' and by material culture? The book also problematises modern adaptations of fairy tales and offers a critical examination of the role of storytelling. The publication is of particular interest to Germanists because of its engagement with some important books and stories from the German cultural tradition, namely Grimms' Fairy Tales and Hoffmann's *Struwelpeter*. The final chapter offers a refreshingly critical discussion of the Harry Potter novels against the market conditions of the culture industry that govern their popularity and economic success.

Whilst Zipes' deliberations are located in the debates about children's literature and culture of the United States, what he has to say is also very much of relevance to readers in other parts of the world.

Zipes deplores the growing regulation and standardisation of children's lives and posits that much of what people do to, with and for children is influenced by capitalist market conditions and the hegemonic interests of ruling corporate elites.

The totalitarian nature of the former states in Eastern Europe and the Far East were vapid in comparison with the capitalist conglomerates that penetrate our lives constantly in the name of globalization. Today we operate on ourselves to improve our bodies and minds in keeping with totally new images of ideal societies based on degenerate utopias. We seek to improve our children's lives by getting rid of moral sewers and by constructing purification systems that confine them. We do not realize how much our purification systems actually produce the waste and turpitude that we complain about. (pp. xi-xii)

Zipes advances the view that children's literature aims to homogenise children and that active participation tends to be in processes and games that are rarely of their own making. It is adults, Zipes argues, who shape and determine children's private and public spheres and who circumscribe their choices in life with children's literature being a cultural practice which potentially undermines children's capacity to develop a sense of morality and ethics as well as to recognise that their autonomy is governed by prescribed market interests.

We are free to consume and become part of a variety package of the same products, and children are predisposed to this homogenization through the toys, clothes, games and literature, and movies they receive from infancy through their teenage years (p. 4).

In the chapter on the Americanisation of Grimms' Fairy Tales by Wanda Gág, Zipes provides an interesting history of the reception of the tales in America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in print as well as on film. One of Zipes' main contentions is what he terms the 'contamination' of (German) cultural heritage by the American culture industry. Wanda Gág's effort to translate the tales into American English is portrayed as a deliberate attempt to preserve their spirit and value system from the growing tendencies to commercialise, bowdlerise and sanitise them. In the following chapter Zipes offers an interesting account

of how Grimms' fairy tales have been used as reference point for experimentation, contemporary revisions and adaptations and how they have been 'contaminated' in much more innovative ways, performing transformations and exploring neglected issues and dimensions of the tales thereby providing modern readings and new understandings in contemporary society.

A further chapter examines the phenomenal success of *Struwwelpeter* – a book written by Heinrich Hoffmann in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century telling children, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, in graphic, sadomasochistic detail what will happen if they don't do as they are told – with particular reference to the recent stage adaptation for adults by the Tiger Lillies called *Shockheaded Peter: A Junk Opera* (see <http://www.shockheadedpeter.com/>).

(A) book that was intended to mollify adults' bad consciences and produce guilt in children is transformed into a bitter, if not cynical, attack on complacent adults who believe that we have grown more civilized in our attitudes towards children (p. 158).

The final chapter of Zipes' book on the Harry Potter phenomenon once again illustrates how the conditions under which children's literature is being produced have changed and have been transformed, most recently by the growing influence of global corporate conglomerates, the mass media and market demands.

Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste. Today the experience for the young is mediated through the mass media and marketing so that the pleasure and meaning of a book will often be prescribed or dictated by convention. (p. 172)

Overall Zipes offers an insightful and thought-provoking book which engages critically and analytically with 'children's books' old and new. He confronts his readers with some uncomfortable notions and forces them to think, for example, about the danger of a 'literature' for children which aims to control natural desires and induces artificial ones.