

To India and Lithuania through Soviet Picture Books

Jankevičiūtė, G., & Geetha, V. (2017). *Another history of the children's picture book: From Soviet Lithuania to India*. Chennai: Tara Books.

Abstract:

The review article discusses a book by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and V. Geetha, *Another History of the Children's Picture Book: From Soviet Lithuania to India* (2017). It describes the content of the monograph in the context of studies on picture books, especially those of Russia, Lithuania, and the Soviet Union, on the history of childhood and Russian literature. The main merit of the volume, in the opinion of the reviewer, is the choice of Indian and Lithuanian book art for comparison, which is made from the perspectives of the history of literature, art, societies, and understanding of childhood.

Key words:

book art, childhood, children's literature, Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, India, Lithuania, Lithuanian literature, picture book, Russian literature, Soviet literature, Soviet Union, V. Geetha

Do Indii i Litwy przez radzieckie książki obrazkowe

Jankevičiūtė, G., & Geetha, V. (2017). *Another history of the children's picture book: From Soviet Lithuania to India*. Chennai: Tara Books.

Abstrakt:

W artykule recenzyjnym omówiono książkę autorstwa Giedrė Jankevičiūtė i V. Geethy pt. *Another History of the Children's Picture Book: From Soviet Lithuania to*

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India [Jeszcze jedna historia dziecięcej książki obrazkowej. Z radzieckiej Litwy do Indii] (2017). Opisuje on treść rozprawy w kontekście badań nad książką obrazkową (zwłaszcza rosyjską, litewską i radziecką), historią dzieciństwa i literatury rosyjskiej. Główną zaletą tomu, zdaniem recenzentki, jest wybór Indii i Litwy do porównania, które jest dokonane z perspektywy historii literatury, sztuki, społeczeństw i rozumienia dzieciństwa.

Słowa kluczowe:

sztuka drukarska, dzieciństwo, literatura dziecięca, Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, Indie, Litwa, literatura litewska, książka obrazkowa, literatura rosyjska, literatura radziecka, Związek Radziecki, V. Geetha

How to better write a history of picture books than to create another picture book? *Another History of the Children's Picture Book: From Soviet Lithuania to India* by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and V. Geetha (2017) is a wonderfully imaginative work rich in illustrations. Irrespective of the written text, you may also follow the visual message, learning different artistic styles and themes of children's books in Soviet Russia, Soviet Lithuania, and India, appreciating the variety of pictures and fonts. The reader is asked to study the images and to read them. The book itself teaches how to read a picture book.

As stated in the introduction, the volume was created as a result of an exhibition of Lithuanian children's book illustration, organised by Tara Books and the Lithuanian Culture Institute in Chennai in 2015. The exhibition proved to be so exciting that it resulted in the idea of the present volume about the global impact of Soviet children's picture books (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 4). Although the definition of a picture book is not provided, the authors pay great attention to the visual aspect of the books and we may presume that they understand it as an inseparable whole of a picture and a text (Bader, 1976; Lewis, 2001; Nodelman, 1988, 1999/2005; Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2012; Schwarcz, 1982; Serafini, 2010; Unsworth and Wheeler, 2002). *Another History...* enchants with a very personal way of writing, including childhood memories and the authors' own experience of reading. Although the authorship of the parts is not stated, you may at times feel the difference in styles of Jankevičiūtė and Geetha, as well as in their individual attitudes towards the Soviet Union and the Soviet past.

The authors have developed the topic of Soviet picture books explored earlier by Evgeny Steiner (1999), Sara Pankenier Weld (2015), or Julian Rothenstein and Olga Budashevskaya (2013/2015), who mostly analysed early Soviet printing of books for children, especially the avant-garde. Jankevičiūtė

and Geetha (2017) are extending their analysis to a later history of Soviet children's books. History of Lithuanian book illustration was in the limelight of the initiative of the International Cultural Programme Centre in Vilnius in 2011, which resulted in quite a few works, one of them by Jankevičiūtė (2011; also: Kišūnaitė, Mozūraitė, Žvironaitė-Udrienė, & Kęstutis, 2011; Kišūnaitė & Sruoginis, 2011; Klepontynė-Šemeškienė, 2011; Liškevičienė, 2011). We should also mention Olga Maeots (2017), who discussed the problem of the possible influence of Soviet picture books on other countries in an article dealing with Western Europe and the USA.

A comparison of Indian and Lithuanian picture books may not seem an obvious choice for research. For many readers, the monograph might appear to address distant or peripheral cultures and historical contexts. Of course, this is one of the book's main merits, as it draws unknown facts into focus and presents new ways of seeing (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 41). The Lithuanian and Indian perspectives not only enrich the topic, providing information about the processes which happened far from Moscow and London, but also naturally insert postcolonial discourse, which is also present in the Lithuanian case. Importantly, the authors describe the experience of childhood in the USSR, Europe and India (pp. 27–33), raising difficult questions about the ideological conditioning of children (Giroux, 2000; Salnikova, 2013), social inequity and illiteracy (Ball, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2002). The authors have taken into consideration the changes in these issues over time and organised the material accordingly.

The monograph starts with a "Publisher's Preface" by V. Geetha and Gita Wolf from Tara Books publishing house (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 4–5). The volume has two parts: "Children's Picture Books from the Soviet Union: The View from India" (pp. 7–53) and "Children's Book Illustrations from Soviet Lithuania" (pp. 55–173), and it ends with the acknowledgments (p. 174). The Indian and the Lithuanian parts include five chapters each, dealing with issues of childhood, education, book printing and its aesthetics, presenting them in a historical perspective. As the monograph provides ample historical and cultural context, even readers with little knowledge of Soviet past can easily move through the changing history of the 20th century. For non-specialist readers, however, a little more space could have been dedicated to the history of India. The volume also crucially provides the global context of picture books for children (p. 37).

The first part, "Children's Picture Books from the Soviet Union: The View from India," contains information about cooperation between India and the USSR. It pays particular attention to the energetic translation from the original Russian language into vernacular languages, and the publication of a great

variety of children picture books for Indian readers (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 17–18). The logistics of the process of translation and publishing are roughly presented by Geetha, including memories of T. Dharmarajan, a translator of adult and children's books into Tamil, who spent eight years living and working in Moscow (p. 18). The author also notes that the issue of selecting books for translation has not yet been resolved and illustrates the chapter with a variety of books, such as *Tales for Alyonushka* by Dmitri Mamin-Sibiryak, translated into Tamil as *Arumai Magallukku Sonna Kathaigal* [Tales Told to Dear Daughter] (1897/1982; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 16, 19–20); writings of Vladimir Lenin (1925/1947; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 18); Nikolai Nosov's tales of Dunno, a well-liked hero of Russian children literature (p. 21); Olexander Dovzhenko's famous film story *Zacharovana Desna* [The Enchanted Desna] (1956), published in India in the 1970s (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 22); popular scientific books for children (pp. 23–24); and a book on ships by Sergei Ivanov (1982; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 25). Of course, many of these books were ideologically dense and aimed at educating 'little comrades' (Steiner, 1999, p. 6), but the books also went beyond the traditional narrative and included new perspectives on the formation of active citizens (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 24, 41).

One of the main values of Soviet books in India, in the opinion of the authors, was their broad availability due to a cheap price (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 18), which was especially important for an Indian society divided by both class and caste (p. 49). Picture books accessible to the poor illiterate masses appealed to Indian traditions of visual communication (p. 49), and fostered love for the image (p. 18). This aspect of availability of books to children from poor and illiterate families was one of the prerogatives of the early Soviet state. As a result, children's literature included plenty of illustrations, becoming first of all visual (Nikolajeva, 1995, p. 42). Although in the Soviet Union, there was a shift from a visual to a predominantly verbal character of the picture books since the 1930s, it seems that books published for the Indian society continued to follow the path established in the 1920s, being addressed to the prewritten type of culture (p. 43).

Cooperation with the USSR was also important for the young Indian state as it was a possible model for dealing with a multilingual, multiethnic people that were just forming their common identity (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 24). This was a complicated issue of Soviet history (Hirsch, 2005; Kelly, 2014), and the authors show their understanding of this ambiguity. What is more, the Soviet books introduced personal exempla and fed dreams about urban life and communism's joyful optimistic future. An example of this are the memories

of Pankaj Mishra quoted in *Another History...*: “On hellishly hot days, I imagined myself walking along snowbound Nevsky Prospect in an overcoat” (after Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 23). Such citations of an individual voice make the publication attractive and serve to explain some of the reasons of the broad migration of Indian youth to the USSR to study. A rose-tinted nostalgia of this kind is balanced in *Another History...* by information about the darker side of the Soviet past. The authors do not shy away from openly addressing difficult questions. This complex presentation of the issues should also appeal to specialists and more informed readers. It is worth noting that the publisher’s perspective on the issues of book printing is also included. Stimulating thoughts on what it means today for publishers to participate in non-commercial programs aimed at educating the masses enrich the discussion (p. 50).

The second part, “Children’s Book Illustrations from Soviet Lithuania,” shifts focus to the Baltic state. It contains more poignant memories than the first part, due to the fact that Lithuanian cooperation with the USSR was much less a choice of its citizens, which is emphasised by Jankevičiūtė (& Geetha, 2017, pp. 56–57, 66). The cooperation with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Western Europe is highly emphasised (pp. 78–87, 145–147) as well as the preservation of the Lithuanian tradition of modern and folk art. It is stressed that Lithuanians put effort to continue their own traditions and to stay in touch with Western culture, which is understood as a common heritage. It is fascinating how baroque Christian culture could enter the children’s book in the anti-religious Soviet state unnoticed (e.g. Algirdas Steponavičius’s illustration for Kazys Boruta’s fairy tale *Kaip aš patekau į dangų ir iš ten grįžau atgal* [How I Went to Heaven and Got Back from There] in children’s magazine *Genys* [The Woodpecker] (1957; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 78, 148). Jankevičiūtė claims that the Lithuanian censoring body lacked sufficient knowledge about a variety of ‘dangerous’ subjects, which were to be eliminated from children’s books (pp. 75, 78).

The author puts great emphasis on the history of book art, detailing changes of style. Short artistic analysis usually accompanies the pictures, elucidating the omnipresence of socialist realism and attempts to withstand it and create in an alternative way, choosing styles of abstract, traditional and primitive art (esp. the chapter “Children’s Literature in Soviet Lithuania: Responses to Socialist Realism,” Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 66–123). A vast gallery of artists and styles appears before the reader’s eyes, providing examples of the best of Lithuanian book illustration, e.g. Vaclovas Kosciuška’s illustrations for a Lithuanian folk song *Du gaideliai* [Two Little Cocks] (n.a., 1949; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 68–69) and Filomena Ušinskaitė’s cover for Salomėja Nėris’s

(1947) *Našlaitė* [The Orphan] (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 67), both in the Art Deco style; Taida Balčiūnienė's (1973) pictures for a book *ABC* (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 72–73) or for Vida Krakauskaitė's (1959) *Jaunasis pianistas* [The Young Pianist], presenting a warm and cosy image of childhood “completely at odds with everyday Soviet life of the time,” as Jankevičiūtė (& Geetha, 2017, p. 74) emphasises; fascinating pictures by Adrienne Ségur for a translation of E. T. A. Hoffman's (1816/1958) *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* [Spragtukas ir pelių karalius] (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 80–81).

Two further chapters present the history of Lithuanian illustrations of 1960s and 1970s (“The Dynamic 1960s: New Directions in Children's Book Illustrations,” Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, pp. 124–163; “Children's Book Illustration in an Era of Stagnation: 1970s and after,” pp. 164–171). They place special emphasis on turning to national traditional art and reappearance of ‘Primitive Modern’ in book illustration and techniques of wood print (pp. 147–162). This allowed the promotion of national history and culture of Lithuania, continuing traditions of Renaissance and Baroque art – e.g. Petras Repšys's illustrations for a fairy tale *Našlaitė Elenytė ir Joniukas aviniukas* [Elenytė the Orphan and Joniukas the Little Lamb] (n.a, 1971; Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, p. 157); Algirdas Steponavičius's art for Petras Cvirka's (1988) *Nemuno šalies pasakos* [Tales of the Land of the River Nemunas] (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 158–161). Not all of these pictures seem to be children-friendly and “tended actually to scare children”, emphasising the “impulsive, straightforward and crude didactics of a folk tale” (p. 150). Nevertheless, they had a great impact on the development of Lithuanian book art.

It would have been excellent if this analysis and description of the history of Lithuanian book printing could have been placed in the context of Russian publishing processes and those of other Soviet republics. For instance, Western children's classics were printed throughout the whole country at least since the 1950s (Simonova, 2017). It would be good to know if Lithuania and the other Baltic states differed in this respect from other regions. It would also be great to see the processes of the reappearance of abstract art in books in the context of the whole Soviet Union (Kizevalter, 2018), seeing that book illustration, and children's books especially, were often a unique sphere where undesirable artists could find work. Ilya Kabakov may be a prominent example whose pictures are attached in the first part of the book (Jankevičiūtė & Geetha, 2017, pp. 26, 29).

Besides the history of Lithuanian publishing, Jankevičiūtė (& Geetha, 2017, pp. 106–108) also describes children's culture in Soviet Lithuania and the possibilities offered by the state, such as cultural institutions or summer camps. Despite the Soviet ideologisation, the author confirms the positive effects of

the programs aimed at children. These descriptions effectively conjure Lithuanian childhood during the Soviet era and give the essential context to reading culture. It is also worth mentioning that the author analyses not only book printing, but also children's newspaper and magazines, which has important implications on our views on children's reading culture.

Another History... has no footnotes but contains a thorough bibliography in the first part and provides references to archival documents in the second part. The 'Lithuanian' part benefits in particular from the inclusion of recollections of artists, publishers, and readers (pp. 120, 163) and providing their stories (artists Domicelė Tarabildienė, p. 72; Birutė Žilytė, pp. 148–163; Algirdas Steponavičius, pp. 150–163; publisher Aldona Liobytė, pp. 109–120) as well as quotations from archival documents (pp. 75, 78). *Another History...*, therefore, reveals also the context and circumstance of publication of the books. The monograph serves as an important source for the study of Soviet children's reading culture, especially, of course, in (but not limited to) Lithuania and India. It is also simply a very beautiful and absorbing book, which could show today's children the times in which their parents grew up.

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