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Nostalgia, the Distorted Mirror, and the Problem of Translations. Review of Małgorzata Chrobak's *Bohater literatury dziecięcej i młodzieżowej z okresu PRL-u. Między kreacją a recepcją*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, Kraków 2019, 278 pp.

Abstract: This article is a review of Małgorzata Chrobak's recent book monograph titled *Bohater literatury dziecięcej i młodzieżowej z okresu PRL-u. Między kreacją a recepcją*. The author argues that *Bohater literatury...* is an absorbing and well-researched book which may inspire other scholars to study different aspects of children's and young adult literature written during the period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as more recent works about life in socialist Poland.

Keywords: hero, children's literature, nostalgia, Poland

The cover of Małgorzata Chrobak's 2019 book monograph titled *Bohater literatury dziecięcej i młodzieżowej z okresu PRL-u. Między kreacją a recepcją* (*The Hero of Children's and Young Adult Literature From the Period of PRL. Between Creation and Reception*) shows a mirror image of a girl blowing a bubble with chewing gum. On the right she is in black and white, and on the left partially in color. This picture reminds me of the metaphor for understanding literature as the mirror introduced by M. H. Abrams in 1953 and the two possible ways of reading the legacy of children's and young adult literature produced during the Polish People's Republic. For some critics, such texts are ideological, artistically worthless, and have limited relevance for the contemporary reader (the black and white reflection). Others see books from this period as imperfect yet valuable works which can show young readers a different side of the life of children in The Polish People's Republic (the reflection in color). Writing about Abrams' mirror metaphor, Karen Coats notes that mirrors do not always reflect "an accurate imitation of the real world" (1), as they "have edges or frames that limit, focus, and contain the field of what they reflect" and "only show surface features" (1). As Coats contends, "[w]hen we look in the mirror, we can't help but interact with what we find there: we almost always judge what we see against what we expected to see" (1).

Chrobak attempts to investigate both sides of the mirror. She analyzes dozens of novels written during the period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as contemporary narratives devoted to the period, mostly autobiographies written by authors who grew up reading works by writers popular before 1989 (e.g., Adam Bahdaj, Edmund Niziurski, Irena Jurgielewiczowa). After all, "the literature we read as children has an enormous impact on the adults we become" (Coats 2017: 3). Despite the high number of primary texts she decided to examine, Chrobak's selection of books seems reasonable, mainly because she writes about texts from various periods. Importantly, in her analysis, she pays attention to reader response and the role of children's literature in the process of creating cultural memory.

Bohater literatury... consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the well-researched introduction, Chrobak familiarizes readers with contemporary Polish research on children's and young adult literature from the period of the Polish People's Republic by listing and briefly commenting on numerous publications. She also highlights the various approaches towards the legacy of the PRL found not only in literary studies, but also in *belles lettres* – mostly retrospective narratives written by famous Poles.

In the first chapter, Chrobak elaborates on the depictions of childhood in the Polish People's Republic in contemporary autobiographical narratives by Aneta Górnicka-Boratyńska, Anna Onichimowska, Grzegorz Kasdepke, Joanna Papuzińska, Joanna Olech, Michał Rusinek and Grażka Lange. Here Chrobak writes about the way the aforementioned authors include in their narratives certain everyday objects, such as oranges and Western toys, as symbols of social belonging. In the second part of the chapter, Chrobak shows two trends found in books reconstructing the PRL reality: sentimental aestheticization and incomplete portrayal of only selected aspects of the era. She argues that some authors focus on the difficulties (food cards, queues), while others depict a nostalgic image of their childhood. Hence in their works for contemporary readers authors like Magdalena Zarębska, Paweł Beręsewicz, Katarzyna Ryrych, and Marcin Prokop represent PRL as an absurd and exotic place.

The following chapters familiarize the readers with various aspects of children's and young adult literature published before 1989. Chrobak introduces many theoretical approaches towards the sociological definition of the categories of "youth" and "young adult," as well as the problem of distinguishing between children's literature and young adult literature. This chapter also contains an in-depth analysis of Polish youth culture before 1989. According to the data quoted by Chrobak, reading books was the most important pastime activity for young people before the popularization of the radio. Unfortunately, despite its undeniable value, the chapter's theoretical background seems unsatisfactory, as Chrobak does not mention the seminal research of

non-Polish scholars, such as Maria Nikolajeva, Perry Nodelman, and Kimberley Reynolds, or more recent works about the agency of young people (e.g., Vanessa Joosen, Clementine Beauvais).

In the third chapter Chrobak elaborates on selected aspects of various literary characters, especially the appearance and certain behaviors as markers of social class, and shows their place in the wider literary tradition of children's and young adult literature. Paying particular attention to the motif of Telemachus in selected *coming-of-age* novels, as well as the importance of homosocial bonds and rites of passage, Chrobak manages to show how certain writers managed to challenge the communist ideology by creating rebellious adolescent characters. While in her analysis Chrobak mentions Erik H. Erikson's seminal research on identity, she does not dwell on the links between this notion and teenage rebellion and delinquency (Robert M. Lindner, Leerom Medovoi). By reading a detailed analysis of numerous texts found in this chapter, we may learn about the tendencies and general trends in Polish literature before 1989 and compare them with the ones found in other national literatures. I find it particularly worth noting that Chrobak mentions the misogyny found in many texts written by men and women.

Bohater literatury... is an absorbing and well-researched book which may inspire other scholars to study different aspects of children's and young adult literature written during the period of the Polish People's Republic, as well as more recent works about life in socialist Poland. While Chrobak quotes numerous eminent Polish scholars, such as Jolanta Ługowska, Ryszard Waksmund, Krystyna Koziółek, and Joanna Papuzińska, the limited number of non-Polish theoretical sources seems surprising. The book would benefit significantly with the addition of works by Western children's studies scholars, a more detailed analysis of gender dynamics in the PRL novels, as well as the role of generational nostalgia (Svetlana Boym, Anastasia Ulanowicz), both in the retrospective reader-response of PRL books and in the contemporary narratives about the period. This lack can be connected to the problematic absence of Polish translations of many important works from the field of children's literature studies. Yet similarly problematic is the absence of Polish research in Western academia. *Bohater literatury...* is definitely worth recommending (and translating into English), especially considering the popularity of nostalgic TV shows and films, fashion, and books. After all, to quote Svetlana Boym, nostalgia, "an intermediary between collective and individual memory" (54) is a "double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (xiv). Hence it is very similar to the mirror.

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