

# Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur

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"The Story Begun. Polish Children's Literature after 1989 and Contemporary Culture", Krystyna Zabawa, Kraków 2013 : [recenzja]

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**Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur** (reviewer)

## **Review of the publication: Krystyna Zabawa, *The Story Begun. Polish Children's Literature after 1989 and Contemporary Culture***

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Last year, WAM Publishing House issued an interesting monograph by Krystyna Zabawa entitled, *The Story Begun. Polish Children's Literature after 1989 and Contemporary Culture*, which is a compendium of knowledge about children's literature written in the two decades from 1989 to 2009, analysed in the context of our rapidly changing modern culture with special emphasis on contemporary literature. The primary sources bibliography illustrates the abundance of poetry and prose literary texts aimed at readers aged between 3 and 10 years which were published in Poland during that period. In the bibliography, the author lists more than 150 titles by over 50 writers of texts for children, and she points out that she selected only some items to be included. K. Zabawa analyses children's literature by well-known authors such as P. Beręsewicz, B. Gawryluk, D. Gellner, R. Jędrzejewska-Wróbel, G. Kasdepke, A. Onichimowska and many others.

In Part I, the author discusses the contemporary children's book from the point of view of its integrity. It is an integral work comprising both text and picture, and sometimes also sound. K. Zabawa states that, "enriching a literary text with a picture and sound, and even adding a video to it, results in greater autonomy of child recipients. They are no longer totally dependent on adult intermediaries of literature" (p. 43). The monograph extensively describes illustrations in children's books. The images include forms such as collage, cut and paste picture, torn paper collage, linocut, contour drawing, and reproduction. K. Zabawa observes, "By analysing illustrations, readers have the opportunity to discover the plastic alpha-

bet, learn about a line and a point, a contour, a spot and chiaroscuro, a texture, primary colours, derivatives, broken, hot and cold colours...” (p. 62). An extensive description of the famous Polish illustration school definitely captures the reader’s attention in the reviewed monograph.

The monograph also examines the issue of dual *address* in literature referred to as children’s literature, which is also a subject of interest for grown-ups. Seeking the reasons for this phenomenon, K. Zabawa observes, “Perhaps more and more people are trying to write, as declared by some, for an ‘inner child in themselves,’ or, like C.S. Lewis, they put their ‘adult’ problems in a ‘child’ form, which they consider to be the only right form (pp. 100–101).

Part II of the monograph is an analysis of children’s poetry in the context of contemporary poetic themes and phenomena. K. Zabawa discusses poetry by J. Kulmowa, M. Brykczyński, T. Ross, Z. Ożóg-Winiarska, J. Winiarska and many other poets. The monograph includes, among others, an analysis of poems targeted at children that explore existential issues such as suffering, evil in the world, transience, death, visions of the afterlife, and premonitions of “the other side.” It is worth quoting one of the many poems targeted at children which are cited in the work:

*a shiny window in heaven  
what it opens to – ideas million and seven  
to the world on the other side?  
all silver and green dyed  
in this strange world maybe  
there are children and a baby  
to ask it’s not a blunder  
and what is on the other side to wonder*

Z. Beszczyńska (p. 124)

In her work, the author discusses word play in children’s poetic texts, stating that so-called linguistic poems test language and speech possibilities, as unexpected word juxtaposition provokes a recipient to search for different meanings.

In Part III, the author describes recent children's prose, taking into account contemporary trends in literature. She presents the works of an older generation of writers (e.g. W. Chotomska, H. Krall, J. Papuzińska) and literary texts by such renowned authors as P. Boręsewicz, R. Jędrzejewska-Wróbel, B. Gawryluk, G. Kasdepke, M. Strzałkowska and many, many others. Prose for the youngest of readers is mainly represented by fables, fairy tales, as well as realistic and fantastic stories, and stories from contemporary children's lives. K. Zabawa also describes educational children's books which, thanks to their literary form, make child readers more familiar with history, nature, geography, language, and mathematics. The most popular contemporary writer who attempts to educate through literature is G. Kasdepke.

A new phenomenon in Polish children's literature is the examination of matters related to sex education, death, suffering, physical or mental disability, as well as separation and divorce. This trend is represented by authors such as A. Onichimowska, M. Brykczyński, R. Jędrzejewska-Wróbel and others. The author of the monograph draws attention to the semantics and presentation of the contents, writing:

"The paradox of children's literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it 'censors' adaptations of traditional tales, depriving them of motifs and themes that arouse fear and sometimes merely sadness, while on the other hand, it actually introduces more and more such items to the original children's books, especially in the stream of realism" (p. 219). The narrator of today's prose for children is often a first-person narrator, who may be identified with the author of the text. The author observes that children's book writers often undertake challenges similar to those faced by the creators of literature meant for adult readers. They want to maintain contact with readers, and "unclear" and "non-obvious" endings in these texts fulfil the postulate of "open" work. In this way, "a child is being initiated step-by-step into the art of word and obtains the keys to the literary realm of imagination" (p. 244). In addition to a first-person narrator, narration in children's literature is often performed by the main character. In her interesting work, K. Zabawa also looks at the recently popular subject of gender roles in children's literature, in-

cluding the issue of gender's presence in the narration. She shows that male authors eagerly emphasise their gender role, in particular pointing to the experience of fatherhood. K. Zabawa also observes that contemporary female writers of children's stories and novels often use a boy as a character-narrator (cf. books by J. Olech, R. Piątkowska, D. Suwalska and others).

The reviewed monograph will certainly be praised by literary scholars, including children's literature researchers, Polish teachers, early childhood and preschool education teachers, educational programme creators, students, and pupils. Literary scholars will undoubtedly appreciate the subtle analyses of recent children's works, promoters of students' theses will find inspiration to create their proposals for study projects, while teachers, students, pupils, and everyone else will discover a valuable teaching aid that they have been lacking in this area for a long time. Last but not least, I hope the author continues *The Story Begun*, and presents further subtle analyses of constantly developing literature for the youngest of readers.

**Reviewed publication:**

Krystyna Zabawa,

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