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WHEN WHAT WE SEE IS NOT WHAT WE SEE (DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES)

(Picture books by Katarína Macurová)

Tamara Smith (2013), the American author of children books and author of the study *The Vibrant Triangle: The Relationship between the Picture Book, the Adult Reader and the Child Listener* [The Vibrant¹ Triangle: The relationship between the picture book, the adult reader and the child listener] highlights an important interaction between a picture book (as an aesthetic object and a communication stimuli) and its participants: an adult reader, who is reading, and a child, who is listening. The focus of the study is on the picture books for children in, so-called, pre-reading period (age 3-6/7). During this period, the child undergoes many key, *operational* changes in their psychological development. The study is aimed also at their quality reading, through which not only the essential foundations for reading are built, but also appropriate behavioural models, interpersonal relationships, and communication.

The developmental period of 3-6 years is identified by Piaget (1997) as a *pre-operational*. It is described as a transition stage from sensomotor to symbolic (syncretic) mindset, using language to name objects and images. The thinking of children at this age is egocentric (they evaluate the world from their own perspective, their own position in it), and focus more on specific objects and phenomena. *Pre-operative causality*, as Piaget defines it (pg. 99), is most often associated with the child's "why" questions.

M. Vágnerová, who follows in Piaget's psychological theories, talks about *stabilising one's position in the world and differentiating the attitude to the world*. According to Vágnerová (2012, pg. 177), a child gets to know the world through imagination, information processing based on fantasy, and intuitive thinking that is not yet limited by the logic. The child adapts their imagination to their own possibilities of knowledge and current needs. At first, when the child communicates with the outer world, the communication is naturally egocentric. However, Vágnerová highlights, that it is an important developmental stage, during which the child gradually develops prosocial behaviour and empathy.

The psychosocial development of the child aged 3-6 (7) may be characterised by this brief selection of attributes, which also corresponds to the reflections focused on the nature of picture books intended for this age category. The picture books for children (pre-readers) of high quality fulfil various perception requirements: besides the aesthetic experience

¹ Slovenský ekvivalent *pulzujúci trojuholník* pre spojenie *vibrant triangle* sa nám v súvislosti so štúdiou T. Smithovej a jej obsahom zdá najvýstižnejší, preto ho budeme v našej štúdiu používať v tejto podobe.

(associated with a syncretic sound perception / word and image perception), they provide their recipients with the necessary information about the world and important behavioural models, interaction, relationships.

Katarína Macurová, the graphic artist and illustrator, has recently become very successful among the young generation of Slovak authors of picture books for pre-readers. She graduated from the Studio of Free Printmaking and Illustration of Professor Dušan Kállay at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Katarína Macurová illustrates books written by other authors (the books written mostly by Czech author Petra Bartíková), and is herself the author of five picture books, which have been also translated into many languages². Currently she works at the Department of Printmaking and Other Media at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. She debuted in 2015 with a book in Czech called *Bunny's Journey*. She created the illustrations using 3D software and so-called low polygraphics³, which, among other things, allowed her to depict light and shadow play in an interesting way⁴. It is this light and shadow game that has become the leitmotif of the story of a (white) bunny, who is looking for his relatives in the world, and after many unsuccessful encounters with different (white) animals, he finds another bunny (brown) in the meadow, but with the same shadow, like his.

After this illustrative experiment, Macurová moved on to a traditional illustrative technique dominated by detailed colour drawing. In 2016 she published the book *Why Won't You Flower?* followed by books *Which Is the Right Ball?* (2017) and *Teaching Eddie to Fly*, (2017). In all these three stories, which are simple and witty, the bear Teddy is determined to find the answer to the problem raised in book titles. In 2017 she published a book called *Lily and Momo*. The main character is a girl, who is looking for a friend to play together with. In 2018 she published a book *Theo the Flea*, and she put in the centre of the story a small flea with big plans.

The author has deep knowledge of the concept of picture books, which may be clearly seen already from her debut and many interviews with her. In the interview with Jana Korčeková (2019) she mentions her long-term stay in Edinburgh, where she acquainted herself in detail with the rich book market focused on picture books for the youngest. Her

²All books by Katarína Macurová are at the same time also published in Czech: *Proč nekveteš?; Kde je ten pravý balon?; Lily a Momo; Jak naučit Eda létat?; Blcha Teo*. Many of her books have been translated into several languages. For example, the book *Prečo nekvitneš?* has been translated into English (*Why Won't You Flower?*), Swedish, Italian, and even Mandarin Chinese. All her other books have also been translated into English (*Which Is the Right Ball?; Lily and Momo; Teaching Eddie to Fly; Theo the Flea*). Vydávanie kníh Kataríny Macurovej, rovnako ako preklady do cudzích jazykov, (s výnimkou *Zajíčkovvejcesty*) zabezpečuje vydavateľstvo Albatros.

³Low poly alebo lowpolygon je (počítačová) grafika využívajúca nízky počet polygónov (mnohouholníkov) na zobrazenie 3D tvarov (postáv, objektov, prírodných scenérií). Svoje korene má v počiatkoch 3D animácie.

Porov. HannahShaffer, 2015: <https://www.sessions.edu/notes-on-design/whats-the-deal-with-low-poly-art/>

⁴Ako to približuje aj v rozhovore s Janou Korčekovou (2019). <https://kultura.sme.sk/c/22065872/rozhovor-s-autorkou-katarinou-macurovou.html>

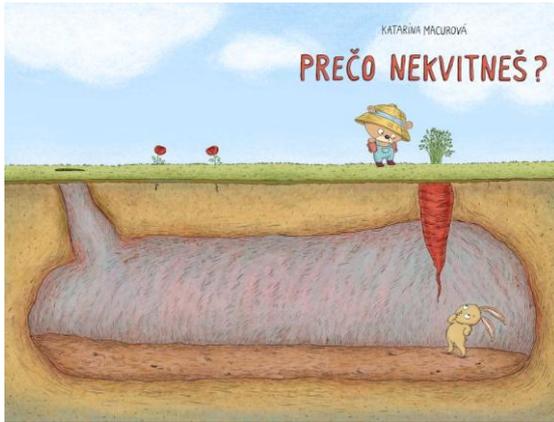
production consistently meets the requirements for picture book, as formulated by T. Smith (2013, pg. 66) in the mentioned study *Vibrant Triangle*:

1. The language is the connecting element of a story (word repetition, rhythm, rhymes, questions, and answers).
2. The text is short (which allows the reader to break down the reading into shorter parts).
3. The story goes beyond the page (double page), which encourages the child to learn more.
4. The story inspires to reflect on the world (thanks to valuable and meaningful narration).
5. Reading a picture book provides the experience of “taking the reader out” at a specific time and space (the child gets into the story and forgets the surrounding time and space).
6. There is a complex symbiosis between the text and the illustration (both parts form one unit).

The books on the teddy bear written by Macurová follow very precisely the simple storyline, which develops since addressing the issue in the title: *Why Won't You Flower?* *Which Is the Right Ball?* and *Teaching Eddie to Fly*. The author uses various solution proposals up to a humorous dénouement. The stories are obviously based on great knowledge of child's recipient and their reflection on the world: once the bear Teddy wonders why one flower doesn't bloom in the garden (because he doesn't know it is a carrot), another time he looks tirelessly for the right ball (which should be neither too small nor too big, neither too heavy nor too easy), or he is teaching an ostrich to fly. Two aspects may be observed: on the one hand, the principles of simple child logic and causality, and on the other hand, an original solution that is always present, which largely corresponds to children's enthusiasm, curiosity, and intuitive knowledge of the world.

In this context, let us focus in more detail on the very successful book of the Teddy Bear series *Why Won't You Flower?*⁵

⁵The pictures have been used by courtesy of the author Katarína Macurová, who provided them for the study.



Picture 1 Katarína Macurová: Why Won't You Flower? (cover)

On the unfolded book cover (Picture 1.) we see the cause of Teddy's problem. He stands helplessly nearby the leaves of a plant that he believes should bloom, like all the other flowers (roses) he has in the garden. Teddy's thinking is based on the principle of analogy, which largely corresponds to child's thinking: If all the plants with green stems and petals in our garden bloom, why doesn't this one bloom? Macurová divides the drawings horizontally in the whole book, except for the inner endpapers. The child becomes easily her close ally, because the child, unlike Teddy, immediately sees that the plant has a different root under the ground (it is a carrot). Thus, the child is one step ahead of Teddy: they have a cognitive advantage, which is an important condition for the understanding of comic elements in artistic texts for children. One of many comic scenes that build up a witty character of the story, is the scene, where a bunny sees this underground root and considers it to be an excellent opportunity to eat abundantly.

In consequence, there are suddenly two parallel stories. Together with the adult reader, the child can decide which one to focus on. After reading the book repeatedly, they will eventually compare parallel stories and understand humorous situations.

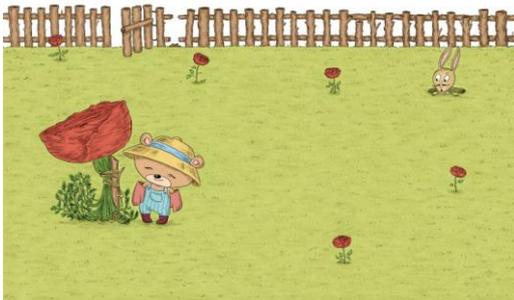


Picture 2 Teddy says goodnight to his flower.

Out of many humorous situations we will point out at a scene, when Teddy, as a narrator on the surface, says: *“I will never forget to say goodnight to my flower. If I forgot, the flower would not be able to fall asleep.”* In the picture, we can see that Teddy puts a plush bunny right next to the plant every evening, (even children are usually given similar toys in their beds so that they are not afraid), while there is a carrot feast underground. Apart from this humorous feature resulting from a comparison of two different parallel plotlines, there are many other humorous details in the picture. We will mention, for example, the scene, where a bunny, wearing cook cap and a moustache, is covering his ears and closing his eyes in despair, as he has lost control in this situation. He is apparently the oldest and most experienced one, (and it was he who discovered the carrot and called the other bunnies).



Picture 3 Teddy is looking for the cause.



Picture 4 Solution to the problem.

As is typical for the author Katarína Macurová, the story has an unexpected ending, and a witty point that is highlighted, again, by both the text and picture. In the Picture 3, Teddy says: *All right! Now I know why it won't flower. How could I have been so mistaken...* and the last comment: *...and let it grow upside down!* The last remark closes the story in an unconventional humorous ending, as the teddy bear should have noticed, that the plant he was so diligently taking care of the whole time, was not a blooming flower, but a growing carrot. The humorous conclusion is visually portrayed in the picture: the teddy bear having a

happy expression, standing by almost eaten up carrot, that resembles other roses in the garden, and a completely dismayed bunny peeping out of the nearby underground hole.

Whether we take into consideration cognitive or emotional perspective of the child's development, Macurová applies in her books with Teddy several psychosocial characteristics for the child aged 3-6. In the character of the teddy bear, a child with their egocentric perception of the world may be seen: evaluating situations according to their own judgement, and looking for analogies in concepts that they are familiar with. There are also obvious elements of role play and imitation to a large extent: the teddy bear behaves as a child, who is imitating the customs of an adult caring parent, e.g. giving a flower some tea, wishing the flower a goodnight in the evening, etc. A distinctive feature of Teddy's behaviour is his creativity and originality, which also resembles child's creativity, that has not been limited by conventional view on the world.

The book *Lily and Momo* (2017)⁶ has same previously mentioned features, however, the content is enriched with other important aspects. Again, the story is simple, built on the principles of direct causality. The complementarity of the text and the picture is precisely maintained.

The narration begins with addressing the problem: *"Lily wished to have a friend, with whom she could play."* In the introductory picture (5), there is a little red-haired girl in blue track suit and mismatched socks, having an expression which indicates dissatisfaction, perhaps sadness. The simple drawing arouses the reader's interest and curiosity. The drawing is on the right side of the double page and it contains only the figure of the girl, whose gestures and posture are emphasised (shoulders drooped, dragging a little bucket on the ground).

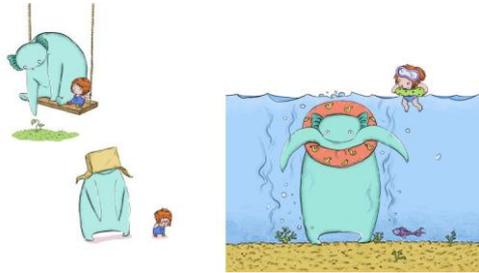


Picture 5 Lily and Momo, introductory scene

On the next double page, the curiosity is multiplied, because Lily *"One day got a big package."* When she unpacks the box, she finds a strange creature that looks like a huge pale blue candy. They look at each other in wonder. Since Lily is curious and creative from the beginning, it doesn't take her long time to give the creature the name Momo. Then she takes his hand and they go playing. Lily wants to play with Momo the way children of her age usually play: she wants to swing with him, build sand castles or dice towers, play hide-and-

⁶The book has been awarded: Wall Street Journal Bestseller, 2017, The Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia 2017

seek, throw a ball, or swim with a swimming wheel in a lake. However, Momo does not know any of these games, which Lily desires him to play (Picture 6). He even drowns with a swimming wheel on his neck.



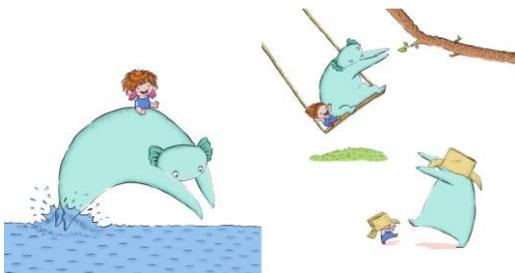
Picture 6 Lily wants to play with Momo

This story of looking for a friend to play comes to an important turning point, when Lily and Momo sit together on the bench after all the unsuccessful attempts (Picture 7). There is a simple question written at the top of the picture above their heads: “*How could they play together?*” This question, visually underlined by similar expressions of thought that both characters have, connects them. In this moment Lily retreats from her (egocentric) desires, gradually starting to see Momo's real potential. His potential is fully manifested already on the following double page, where he is protecting Lily from the incoming rain.



Picture 7 Lily and Momo sitting on a bench/The rain is coming

In the moment, when Lily allows Momo to express himself freely, she finds out what a great friend to play with he is. He knows far more than Lily could have imagined.



Picture 8 Momo can play amazingly!

Through this simple story, which is textually and visually consistently composed to keep the child's attention in every moment, Macurová brings an important message to address harmonious interpersonal relationships. It implicitly brings the child an important lesson on prosocial behaviour, cooperation, and empathy. The child, like Lily, is learning step-by-step to understand what good interpersonal relationships and friendships are, and that in communication it is necessary to provide the other person with enough of space to manifest. She can play with Momo only when she accepts his playing rules in an empathetic retreat of her own ideas about the game. It is a challenging journey not only for children.

Symbolically, Lily and Momo's mutual harmonic connection is shown on the final double page (Picture 9). Momo is suddenly portrayed wearing the mismatched socks as Lily, holding her hand, and in the other hand having a light chain that shines without putting it in the electricity. Momo narrows one eye (as if in a conspiratorial way) and they create together on the ground a monolithic shadow, which indicates what might be the source of light.



Picture 9 Final scene in the story

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