



Conference: **READING WITHIN THE LIFE CONTEXT**

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BEATA PANAKOVA, Slovakia

TO BE IN THE PICTURE

Is the children's world enriched by including the difficult and heavy issues of human existence in their literature? A number of examples of the countless literary works with today's topical theme of escape and migration will put more light into this issue.

Nobody doubts that the purpose of children's art is to enrich the child's world, i.e. the children's presentation of the world. The purpose is to contribute to the development of intellectual and emotional skills, the formation of a well-balanced personality, and the improvement of spirit and soul. Is the children's world enriched by including the difficult and heavy issues of human existence into their literature?

The difficult and profound problems of human existence are not suitable for the idyllic children's world and for the themes of children's literature. However, does it make sense to displace them from literature when they come to children through other media or directly through life situations? If art is to help in this world full of contradictions, in which joyful and bright pages exist along with dark and tragic pages, the literature should be complex as well. Complexity is a strong point of art. It represents its essence. The art of words has a unique and irreplaceable power to name things and phenomena. Properly chosen and spoken words in the right time help to recognize the world, to adapt to reality, and many times even to deal with reality. Words are a tool of cognition. They also help to create visions and to find nearly ideal solutions. In short, the art of words gives us knowledge. It puts us into the picture, which is the first step toward correct vision, evaluation, authentic survival, and mental and emotional development.

In communication, especially with a child's reception, the concept of being "in the picture" means to communicate by providing information through pictures. The language of the pictures teaches us to read both in the world and our own mind.

Many years ago, I read one joke:

A father asks his son who has returned from school: "What did you learn?"

The son responds, "It was great. The Rabbi told us how Moses and his people left Egypt. When they came to the sea, the soldiers used explosives to push the water into craters, and they walked on the seabed as if it was an earthwork. And they laid mines all the way, so when the enemy's armed wagon cars came along, everything exploded and the whole Egyptian army was flooded by the sea."

"Did the Rabbi teach you in that way?" the father asks.

His son replies, "Well, he said it in a slightly different way, but if I told you it in his words, you wouldn't believe me."

This is a small example of narrative art and the method of how to present and create pictures.

It is an example of shifts in time and space, and of the narrative's update.

And it is an example of the founding story of emigration: in this case, from the Old Testament.

Migration and emigration, as well as fleeing and escaping, are part of human nature. They are part of the collective and individual experience of people from time immemorial. Naturally, there are themes of great stories of humanity throughout all history. These great stories of great people have nowadays been included in the education of our children.

Another great story about the exodus and the overtaking of the promised land is the Aeneid. It is a narration about a group of people who survived after Troy was destroyed. They were led by the Prince Aeneas and travelled by several boats through the Mediterranean Sea. They stopped in many places, including Crete, Carthage, and Sicily. They did not settle anywhere because of various reasons, until they arrived in the Apennine Peninsula. Similarly, as the Israelites came to the promised land after 40 years of wandering and met the native population of the Canaanites, the Trojans came to a land inhabited by the Latins, the Rutuli and the Etruscans. We know what happened. (In both cases, these narrative stories survived, which means that these were the narratives of the winners: Israeli and Roman.)

The third example, that I would like to mention, is another story based on a founding myth: how the Greek god Zeus, transformed into a bull, kidnapped the Phoenician Princess Europa. They settled together in Crete and had three sons, who were the founders of Minoan civilisation. Our entire continent is named after the lady that comes from the territory of today's Lebanon and Syria. Though Lebanon is smaller than Slovakia, it is the country most flooded by multitudes of refugees. And Syria, the territory of war conflict, turmoil, and poverty, is from where the people, driven off by fear and hunger, come to Europe as to the land of abundance and security: the promised land.

The so called "refugee crisis" is the most burning problem of today's Europe. The problem that concerns literally the entire population. And it will be affecting all of us gradually in a more urgent way. We have not come to an optimal solution yet. Step by step, governments, politicians, researchers, artists, and social elites, but also every single citizen, gradually shape and formulate their views and attitudes of the issue. Opinions and attitudes that are worthy of European cultural traditions, European democracy, European humanism, and their ethos. If we imagine that we are to explain this issue to children, in a way comprehensible for them, can we adults be helped in the effort? If we did it in such a way that we could give them the possibilities and tools to make their own judgement so that they could choose their own moral and practical attitudes, would it work?

In the 1960s, the famous American journalist and writer Art Buchwald recorded one of his dialogues with his son in the form of a humorous and witty column.

... "Do you remember the war movie we saw together a few weeks ago? How the Germans in the camp beat the children and the other poor people?"

"Yes," I answered.

"The Germans are evil, aren't they?"

"No," I responded. "They were bad, but they're good."

"What, nowadays there are some other Germans?" The son said, asking for an explanation.

"No, no, they're still the same. Or at least most of them. Look, when you fight against someone in a war, you don't have to remain angry with him after the war. You have to forget what the bad guys did during the war, because otherwise a new war can break out again."

"But they're still bad in the movies," he recalled.

"Yes, we just remind ourselves that they were evil, but that we should forgive them."

He gave me an uncomprehending look.

"Did you kill any Russians during the war?" He wanted to know, after a while.

"No. Because they were good during the war and fought against the Germans, as well as the British and Americans."

"But when they were good during the war and killed the wicked, why are they now evil?"

"They're not evil. Most Russians are good. We just disagree with what they say and what their leaders are up to. And then they disagree with us. That is why we also have problems with Germany."

"With the bad Germans?"

"No, with good ones. The evil Germans want to drive the good Germans from Berlin."

"So, the Germans are still evil?"

"Yes, but there are good Germans as well. You know, after the war, their land was split. One half was occupied by the Russians, and the other half we occupied."

"Why don't the Russians kill those evil Germans, if they are evil?"

"Because the Russians don't think that their Germans are evil. They think that their Germans are good. They think the bad ones are our Germans. We think that their Germans, or at least their leaders, are evil, and our Germans are good. Do you understand that?"

"No."

"Well, I don't care whether you understand it or not," I said, getting angry. "Everybody else understands it. I haven't seen a child who asks so many stupid questions."

Do you understand it, dear ladies and gentlemen? (I assume that you also thought of current facts as the dialogue developed.) So, back to the subject:

Is migration good or bad?

Are immigrants good or bad?

Are we, Europeans, good or bad?

There is an endless series of "What's Good and What's Bad" questions:

Take or give?

Collect or share?

Fight or retreat?

Punish or help?

Accept or cast away?

Have compassion or ignore?

Cry or keep silent?

Etc.

And suddenly, another million questions starting with "what is it" arise in a procession:

What is heroism? What is cowardice? What is justice? What is wickedness? What is honesty?

What is generosity? What is niggardness? What is humility? What is arrogance? What is compassion?

What is powerlessness? What is patience? What is betrayal? What is revenge?

What is forgiveness? What is trust? What is trustworthiness? What is stupidity? What is wisdom?

What is good? What is evil?

And we start at the beginning: Do we see it in a right way? Are we in the picture? Can we recognise what is good and what is evil? Are we able to teach others what is good and what is wrong? Is what's good for us good also for others? Can we convincingly show what is good and what is evil? What a reliable and effective tool imagery is; i.e. the language of pictures?

Talking with children also means clarifying various themes.

“Stupid” and “childish” questions deserve respect. In answering stupid questions, we feel stupid, especially in our own eyes. The stupid questions make us annoyed by their urgency. We are irritated by their complexity. They uncomfortably reveal our helplessness. The stupid questions (of this kind) blind us like lightning by their clarity and amaze us with their severity and complexity.

Talking with children also means investing a possible solution to problems. E.g., in a few years, our children and grandchildren will be those who will oversee making decisions regarding the migration.

A diligent effort to find answers to such “stupid” questions, even with the risks of making mistakes, is a way of becoming wiser.

The two books that I want to talk about are intended for children. However, they go beyond the boundaries of intentional children literature. They speak in clear and figurative language. In 2016, a book was published with the title of Útek (The Escape). It was written by an important Slovak author of the middle generation, Marek Vadas. The author spent a lot of time in Africa, in various African regions. In his books he constantly returns to the same themes, whether it is in a collection of Folk stories from Black Africa or in collections of short stories for adults: Healer and Black on Black. The Escape is his second book for children. “He narrates it in the language that Black Africa taught him, and he keeps returning there, both physically and in his thoughts,” as one review says. The concept of simplicity is associated with European speculation. The story takes place in short episodes. The hero is an African boy. He’s on the move. In fact, he keeps escaping through several unidentified countries. His inner monologue is expressed in plain, even harsh language that sharply depicts the contours of the world in which he lives in but does not belong to, at the same time. A European reader learns more about themselves than they realise and more than they admit, mainly from the short statements of the child on the run. “My heroes experience help and rejection. Through them I expressed the attributes that lead to prejudices against any stranger and against any human being who has lost everything,” says Marek Vadas. He does not primarily highlight the African setting of his story, but, as he says, he was inspired by events around Lake Chad, where militants from Boko Haram drove more than two million people out of their homes. In a similar way, he depicts the European environment: he just sums up the prevailing mindset which is created and expressed by the local people. Marek Vadas does not consider the fairy tale genre as designed originally and exclusively for children. However, he sensitively pays attention to the narrator. He says, “The most difficult thing for me, with these kinds of books, is to find an appropriate language that is both clear and acceptable enough at the same time, even though it describes most brutal events. It was important for me, as well, to avoid moralising and evoking pity.”

The hero of Vadas’s book is constantly confronted with danger. His father gave him advice, which is very useful to him: every child must be able to run. Running, and later escaping, becomes the boy’s life destiny. After insane greediness breaks out in the village, the boy and his father must escape. They go through countries which allegorically represent human attributes, as well as the current social or political situations. As we all assume, insane greediness and gluttony, which is also a reckless desire for profits, causes migratory movements in the third world countries. The village of fishermen, where nobody speaks, represents a non-communicative society. The city of people with lots of hands is a picture of greediness and selfishness. They go through the City of Excuses, the City of People who Fear Foreigners, the City of Ear-less People, the Country where Nobody is Concerned with

Anything, and finally a refugee camp. The boy is alone. During the journey, his father got lost. The boy is helpless. He does not know what to do, and whether he should go and seek his father or wait for him. The camp is a place of hopelessness. This is how Vadas's hero sees this place: "I've never seen so many people before. They were from different corners of the country and they experienced similar journeys as I did. They lived in large tents arranged in endless streets. Their one and only job was to wait. To wait for peace, for relatives, for good news." Finally, in a feverish dream, the boy stops running on the ground, and flies in the air instead, like a bird. From above, he watches what is happening on the ground, and when he gets down, he meets his father. The fantasy conclusion of the story has an open end. The most remarkable interpretation is one that evokes tragedy, which resembles a dreamlike image of Andersen's The Little Match Girl.

Text in the book seems to be written in a simple style and has a linear story development. However, the narrative style is built on allegories requiring decoding of various plans, and on metaphorical images, e.g. escape from prison through a rat's hole. The rat gives friendly advice: if you feel like he does, you will fit into his corridors. It is a simple explanation, clear to both children and adults. What does it mean to be able to put ourselves in the place of another living being?

The refugee theme has entered the literature for children in Slovakia with Vadas's *The Escape*. This topic has already resonated in the world of children's literature for a long time. In 1984, the first edition of the short novel, *The Eye of the Wolf*, was published by the French writer Daniel Pennac, who is now a well-known author. The novel was translated into several languages. It has a theatrical adaptation, it has been cinematized, and it has even been set to music. Its radio adaptation premiered in Slovakia already in 2004. The Slovak translation of this book was published in 2015.

Daniel Pennac, who is one generation older than Marek Vadas, writes both for adults and children as well. He also spent his years of youth in Africa and then in the south-eastern Asia. As an adult, he spent two more years in Brazil. His novel for children, *The Eye of the Wolf*, is now regarded as a classical work. French pedagogues use it abundantly, because of its literary qualities and strong message.

The composition is sophisticated, utilising framing and retrospectives, without complicating the plot of the story. Everything in the text flows smoothly and naturally.

There are two lonely beings in the zoo: a one-eyed wolf from the Far North, Canadian Alaska, and a black boy from Africa. They stand opposite each other, separated by the cage bars which are between them. This is the introductory picture of the book. And as I later read in an interview, Daniel Pennac really saw this picture in reality somewhere. This scene inspired his imagination. The picture is very suggestive, a message which has been, of course, mirrored in the literary text. „... The wolf walked to and fro.. The boy comes back day after day. Patiently. Silently. Finally, the wolf that has decided to ignore the world of the man forever, starts thinking about the boy. "What does it mean? What does he want from me? Isn't he doing anything during the day? Doesn't he work? Doesn't he go to school? Has he got no friends? No parents? What is it? More and more questions are slowing down his pace. His paws are getting heavier... The wolf feels very exhausted. As if the boy's gaze had a weight of one ton. Fine, the wolf thinks, you asked for it. Suddenly, he stops, sits directly opposite the boy, and stares at him, too. It is not a gaze, that goes beyond the man and vanishes into thin air. This gaze is with a fixed look. And a few lines further: "The boy's eyes don't move nor blink. The wolf feels very uneasy. Now he can't turn away. Nor could he start

walking again. Suddenly, his eye gets crazy. And a tear breaks through from the scar of his blind eye. It is not because of pain. It is because of helplessness and anger. In that moment, the boy does something strange. Something, that gives the wolf peace and security. The boy closes one eye. So these two are gazing at each other in this way in the unpeopled silent ZOO, eye to eye, having a lot of time for each other.

The first of the four chapters of Pennac's book concludes with these words.

From now on, everything reflects from the eye's view. In the wolf's eye, his whole life is mirrored: the safety of a happy family, the free life of a wolf pack, escape before a man, fight, capture... And in the boy's eye, his own story is mirrored. Instead of snow, it is full of white, burning sand. Fire and rattling arms, war, slave labour for a merchant, who does not even name him, and who sells him like he was an object, wandering through the Africa, the yellow, green, black Africa; and finally forced leave to another world. Pennac's text is a special kind of initiating novel. It is a sequence of stunning images full of colours and symbols. Its dynamic plot and dialogues are embroidered with key phrases, such as these wolf-wisdom sayings about humans: "People eat everything: grass as reindeers, and reindeers, and if they can't find anything, they eat even the wolves! Or: People have two types of skin: the first one is smooth without a hair, and the second one is similar to ours. Or: Humans are collectors."

In the next chapter, there is the know-how of a smart shephard of a flock: "The boy had no secret. He was a good shepherd, that's all. He understood one principle: the flocks have no enemies. If a lion or a cheetah eats a goat from time to time, it is only because they are hungry. He explained to the Goat King: You have to feed the lions yourself, King, if you want to prevent them from attacking your flocks..."

One cannot miss a celebration of narrative art in this rich, novel composition. It is a distinctive theme for Daniel Pennac, who is, with all his heart and soul, a devoted teacher of loving for literature. This theme refers to a line beginning with Oriental Shéhérazade, who saved her life thanks to the narration.

"Hey, Toa, how do you call that boy?"

"I am working. I haven't had time to name him."

The Nomads did not like the merchant.

"Toa, you do not deserve that boy."

They sat the boy down to the heater, gave him a hot tea, soured milk, (they thought, he was too skinny), and said:

"Tell us a story."

And so the boy was narrating the stories, which he was making up in his mind, there on the top of a camel's hump. Or he was telling them about the dreams, that the camel had during the night, and which sometimes even continued during the pale day. All the stories were about the Yellow Africa, the Sahara desert, sandy country, sun, loneliness, scorpions, silence. And when the caravans set out to march, having the scorching hot sky above their heads, those, who were listening to the boy's stories, took a view from the camels' humps on a totally different Africa. The sand was silky, the sun was a spring flowing out as of a white fountain, and they were not alone any more. The boy's voice accompanied them in the whole desert.

"Africa!"

"We will call this boy Africa!"

The two strong stories are once again connected amazingly at the end of the novel, through their message. The attentive look created a friendly bond, as it brought together beings from the two ends of the world. The final scene is dreamlike, seemingly as a cheerful fairy tale in which the characters from both stories meet. But it is a fairy tale behind the fence of the zoo, which means that it does not represent a joyful vision of our world. A false happy end would not be typical for Pennac. Although, we must emphasize that the quality of his texts is highlighted by the sense of humour that puts in balances the sadness, cruelty, and pain, as well as the optimism, that always prevails over the pessimism.

Daniel Pennac is a narrator of outstanding qualities. His narration is based on the attractiveness of the story, the beauty of the pictures, and the impressive portraits of his heroes. He has in his blood the essence of narrative storytelling, based on his own archetypal story, which has affected the consciousness and subconscious of listeners and readers so intensely for ages.

The author communicates with readers not through abstract concepts or postulated truths, but through living images that give children (and adults) the chance to survive, to feel the hero's destiny, and to sense and to know what is good and meaningful.

The old-fashioned fairy-tales correspond to human psyche in such a way. For hundreds of centuries or even thousands of years, they have been narrated in conversations until they have achieved the ability to express both revealed and hidden meanings. Thus, they are able to address all the layers of human personality at the same time. It is precisely for this attribute that child psychologists work with them as well.

The American psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim is convinced of the need that children have to experience classical fairy tales. It is based on the premise that "classical fairy tales make it possible to materialise the contents of a child's consciousness in conscious fantasies, through which a child learns to cope with the difficulties of their life and learns to gradually make sense of it."

Each and even the most complex story is just a mosaic stone, a star in the universe of consciousness. But what would a mosaic be without pebbles, and a universe without stars? It is all about how we can find and connect meanings.

As the genius Albert Einstein advised: "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be very intelligent, read them more fairy tales."