

ÅSE MARIE OMMUNDSEN (ED.)
LOOKING OUT AND LOOKING IN
National Identity in Picturebooks of the New Millennium

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While we may feel persuaded that we live within a world defined by globalisation, migration and movement; the nation state and concepts of citizenship still present themselves as the foundational basis for organising our society legally and politically. It is within this contradiction that it has been possible to create a dehumanised sense of “The Other” in order to distance individual selves from the consequences of the neoliberal political turn, war, famine and environmental disaster. In this ably edited volume, Ommundsen provides the reader with an international range of perspectives that tease out some of the theoretical ideas surrounding this contradiction and poses a fundamental question within the Introduction: “Why does the understanding of nation and nationality still guide people’s thinking, despite the assertion that we are living in a globalized world?” (7).

The book should appeal to a wide range of readers who are interested in pursuing the connections between self and other; using children’s literature to provide readers with spaces for exploring ideas related to ourselves, whilst imagining the possibilities of difference across a range of social and cultural settings. Ommundsen has organised the volume into three sections that question the ways in which picturebooks:

- make use of environmental and landscape representations to make connections to local, national and regional identity;
- can be used as markers of national identity to build, rebuild or strengthen national identity;
- represent changing identities, whilst challenging post-modern notions of self and identity.

Readers could select a geographical approach to reading, dipping in and out of regions of the world where they may wish to develop their understanding of picturebooks. However the volume is best read in its entirety so that readers can intertextually apply theoretical frameworks uncovered in one chapter to the rich variety of picturebooks discussed across the volume whilst uncovering an understanding of identity in the plural form.

Both Margot Hillel and Erin Spring examine the way in which a nation's sheer physical size pushes at the boundaries of the concept of a national identity, taking examples from Australian and Canadian literature. Picturebooks can draw on physical landscapes to provide visual narratives that reinforce commonly held ideologies and stereotypes of identity (Hillel 20); either reinforcing the sense of being the outsider or welcoming readers to step away from the sidelines and imagine what it means to belong (Spring 56). This is achieved through careful visual and verbal narration of the landscapes, creating an "iconography of nationhood" (Hillel 15) and invites questions regarding the connection between place and identity. This is worth considering while reading Sabah Aisawi's chapter on Arabic picturebooks, Fengxia Tan's chapter on Chinese picturebooks or Petros Panaou and Tasoula Tsilimeni's chapter on picturebooks that convey a European identity, as they all make it explicit that there is no one identity on display and that the sheer breadth of literature available can only be explained by a more postmodern definition of identity as "a shifting slithering concept" (Meek in Spring 46). If there is one flaw with this collection, it is precisely that given there is so much more to say about identity for each of the contexts described, some of the contributors have tried to pack too much information into their chapters.

Jaana Pesonen's chapter on Finnish literature tackles the issue that all children's literature contains ideology, thus it will represent the changing nature of the social, political and cultural climate surrounding the text at its moment of production (119). Her chapter looks at the way identity is portrayed in picturebooks mirroring Finnish society's changing stance and attitude towards ethnic and cultural diversity over time. This chronotopic interchange between the represented world of the book and the real historical events of a nation (Ommundsen 101) are played out in several chapters as their authors analyse the chronotopes of war (Tzina Kalogirou and Vasso Economopoulou), revolution in France (Clementine Beauvais) and Norway's decision in 1905 to create a monarchy (Åse Marie Ommundsen). Kalogirou and Economopoulou examine books where

contemporary authors and illustrators have raised serious questions about the brutal nature of war and immerse the readers in their bewilderment about the social, political, economical and cultural disharmonies that surround us (161), in the hope that we may begin to understand the forces behind such uncertainty and their impact on identity. Beauvais' deconstruction of revolution in France is intriguing, as it juxtaposes through fiction, the French tradition of political disobedience and rebellion against acceptance of a very real coercive surveillant authority with a teleological attitude towards French citizenship. Ommundsen picks up on this chronotopic interchange between the real and the imagined reminding us that all texts are artistic constructions and that they can maintain illusions of reality or present disruptions in reality to remind the reader of the fictional nature of the text (102).

Ommundsen's initial question produces more questions than can be answered, but this volume suggests that children are active constructors of knowledge and that the affordances of picturebooks can promote dialogue about their responsibilities as citizens. The issue of children's voice is considered as well as the transformation of knowledge towards action on issues such as environmental uncertainty (Ramos and Ramos 71) or the development of empathy and understanding of diversity (Pesonen 128). Contemporary picturebooks have moved beyond nation building (Skarðhamar) and have turned their attention towards pedagogical and teleological intentions (Rui Ramos and Ramos 71) which can empower children to act locally and globally as active citizens who know more about their nations historically, politically, geographically and culturally.

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