

## Introduction

“Radical Children’s Literature,” one of this year’s themes in *Barnboken*, investigates children’s literature that in some way – in content, message or form – challenges norms and conventions both within children’s literature and outside it. As Julia L. Mickenberg states: “radical children’s literature challenges dominant norms and expectations about childhood (and, by extension, adulthood), society, socialization in general, and children’s reading in particular” (Mickenberg 3). Radical ideas about children’s literature can reflect a general desire to break free from prevailing norms, artistic boundaries and labels in books for children, but also from traditional constructions of childhood depicted in them.

At the same time, the notion of radical children’s literature itself has by some scholars been pointed out as a paradox, an “impossibility” (Zipes 20). While children’s literature has functioned as a tool for “embourgeoisement,” it also has the potential to promote opposing ideas, that challenge social values and norms (Mickenberg and Nel 445). In fact, Kimberley Reynolds notes that children’s literature can be described as a “paradoxical cultural space” that is “simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive” (Reynolds 3). What, then, does it mean to identify something as being “radical”? If we accept that the concept of “radical” within children’s literature is possible, are there, then, specific qualities in literature for children that we can identify as being radical or having radical potential?

Radical ideas and aesthetics in children’s literature was the topic of an international conference at Stockholm University in November 2018. Six contributions from this conference are now gathered within this theme. As these articles demonstrate, characteristics or definitions of radical children’s literature are historically ever-changing and difficult to pinpoint. In some cases the question of norm-breaking or subversive positions can be connected to ideas of the avant-garde. But even here, a set of aesthetic principles is impossible to outline and any definitions with focus on the artistic expression alone become inadequate and ineffective when dealing with children’s literature, created within complex artistic, ideological, pedagogical and social circumstances (Druker and Kümmerling-Meibauer 5).

Radical children's literature has often been produced in connection to different political or social movements. The first two articles within this theme investigate radical children's literature published during dramatic historical and political turning points in Europe during the first decades of the 20th century. In her article "Visual and Verbal Self-Referentiality in Russian Avant-Garde Picturebooks," Sara Pankenier Weld examines early Soviet picturebooks by focusing on the use of visual and verbal self-referentiality, discussed within a broader avant-garde context. By studying works published during the 1920s by ground-breaking writers and artists like Vladimir Mayakovsky, Daniil Kharmis, Samuil Marshak and Ilya Ionov, she considers the variety of rhetorical aims at play in early Soviet picturebooks and points to how peculiarities of picturebook self-referentiality in these works illustrate the establishment of the picturebook as a new branch of culture in the Soviet society.

In their article "Bertolt Brecht's Radical Contribution to Pacifist Children's Lyrics in Interwar Germany: 'Die drei Soldaten' (The three soldiers) and 'Kinderkreuzzug 1939' (Children's crusade 1939)," Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer examine German poetry for children, published in the Weimar Republic during the interwar period and written by left-wing authors, such as Ernst Friedrich, Edwin Hoernle and Bertolt Brecht, with particular focus on two of Brecht's poems. The article demonstrates how poetry for children could propagate socialist and communist ideals, but also anti-fascist and anti-imperialist views. Many of the studied poems invite children to join a class struggle, but these positions are often combined with pacifist and anti-fascist ideas. The authors show that this kind of publications for children are important examples of radical publishing in the interwar period, since they, both in their content and through their aesthetics, express critique of the destructive power of war and its effect on afterwar society.

The interaction between modernist art and children as well as children as producers of texts and images form the focus of Nina Christensen's article "The Child-Artist Loop in Avant-Garde Art and Picture Book Creation: Ileana Holmboe's *Urskov-Æventyr* (1944)." Here, Christensen discusses the picturebook *Urskov-Æventyr* (Jungle adventure), written and illustrated by a seven-year-old Danish girl in 1944. The agency of child narrator and child reader, as well as the co-production between the child author and adults are described by Christensen in terms of a "loop," where avant-garde artists' interest in children's drawings (with their "spontaneous" and "natural" modes of expression) was conveyed through an interest in children's

literature, but also through the child as an active agent participating in the production of culture.

The notion of an ideal child, an imaginative and competent individual, is also studied in my article "Play Sculptures and Picture-books: Utopian Visions of Modern Existence," which deals with progressive ideas about play, art and children in Europe during the post-war years. The article discusses notions surrounding radical modernist art for children and how these ideas are closely linked to the ideological position that children have in the rebuilding of European post-war society. Focusing on Egon Møller-Nielsen's modernist play sculptures (which I suggest were aimed at both children and adults), I argue that the image of children as the future citizens of post-war society, also included ideas of equipping children with knowledge of art, thereby creating more competent adult consumers of art and culture. This notion not only identifies children as an integral part of the utopian vision of modern existence, but also as future consumers.

Julia L. Mickenberg's article "Radical Children's Literature for Adults and *The Inner City Mother Goose*" also points to a slippage between child and adult audiences by examining children's literature published for adults. Mickenberg discusses the radical possibilities of children's literature for adults by using Eve Merriam and Lawrence Ratzkin's *The Inner City Mother Goose* (1969) as a case study. This book of poetry – a children's book not intended for children – was one of the most frequently banned books of the 1970s and according to Mickenberg, aimed to expose "the impossibility of an idealized childhood." The article discusses how parody, satire, and formal conventions of genres typically associated with children's literature and reading, function as aesthetic and formal cues that call the boundaries of adulthood and childhood into question.

How to identify, define or characterize radical literature for children – or whether this is even possible – is discussed by Philip Nel in his contribution "A Manifesto for Radical Children's Literature (and an Argument Against Radical Aesthetics)." Here, Nel starts his manifesto by questioning if there is such a thing as a useful definition of radical aesthetics for children's literature, while at the same time arguing that refusing to codify its aesthetics is a way to embrace its complexity and potential. His manifesto in 40 points focuses primarily on picturebooks, ranging from books using experimental aesthetics, to stories calling for environmental responsibility or criticizing different forms of bigotry, inequality or unjust use of power. The multiple messages, attitudes and artistic choices expressed in these

books, are used as a starting point to discuss expressions for radical ideas and aesthetics in children's literature.

The articles within this theme investigate a heterogeneous material that includes a variety of ambitions, expressions and aesthetics. And while the very concept of radical children's literature could be described as a paradox – evading clear definitions and characterizations – the examples discussed in these articles point to a creative and imaginative potential in radical children's literature, which resists definition and categorisation but at the same time challenges norms and assumptions about children's literature, children and childhood.

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## Works Cited

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