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Non-fiction as a part of children's literature

Children's literature is often defined by academics as fiction for children (e.g. Nikolajeva M. 1998; Weinreich T., 2000), but recent surveys of children's reading habits have shown that many children prefer to read both fiction and non-fiction. A recent survey of reading habits of the 9- to 12 year old Danish children demonstrated that boys in particular prefer to read books about animals, football and volcanoes in their spare time (Hansen R., 2012, p. 14). The publishing industry has an eye on this market. In Denmark 25% of all books for children are categorized as non-fiction. More than 400 non-fiction books for children are published in Denmark every year, but unfortunately most of them are of poor quality. Of course there are also exceptions and some of these books have been awarded, and they've been translated into several languages (for example books about animal life by Bent Joergensen and Birde Poulsen). Children's literature researchers, teachers and librarians all have an interest in this field – and we need an open discussion of both the quality of reading and the quality of books.

In this paper, a working definition of children's literature that includes non-fiction is presented. In this definition, literature means something written' ('littera' means letter in Latin). The aims are, on the one hand to discuss different definitions and characteristics of non-fiction for children, and on the other hand to identify ways to analyze these books as literature for children. If we want to know more about children's reading preferences, it is important to examine non-fiction

for children and develop analytical tools to analyze these books. Two recent books are briefly discussed and some conclusions about non-fiction for children in general are made.

From a historical perspective non-fiction is also a part of children's literature. Johann Amos Comenius' wide spread and very famous *Orbis sensualium Pictus* from 1658 is often described as one of the first picture books, as the first modern teaching material and as the first non-fiction book for children. Comenius' book made a whole new genre in children's books, the so-called orbis pictus-genre, which is used even today.

DEFINITION

Non-fiction is often defined as "that which is not fiction". *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (Hendrickson L., 2006, p. 161) characterizes fiction by its narrative techniques and its reference to a constructed reality, while non-fiction is characterized by a less elaborate language, a simple form and a more committed relation to empiric reality. This is not a satisfying definition, because it ignores the fact that non-fiction has a lot in common with fiction. Although non-fiction mainly involves factual information, non-fiction, like fiction, depends on language, and therefore non-fiction is also a construction. A British researcher in non-fiction for children, Helen Arnold, says very clearly that non-fiction is also someone's interpretation of a field (Arnold H., 1992, p. 127). Linnea Hendrickson, author of the article about non-fiction in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* also notes that a lot of new non-fiction books for children use narrative techniques, which blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction (Hendrickson L., 2006, p. 160).

To describe the relation between fiction and non-fiction as a simple dichotomy is to risk a very stereotypical interpretation of the two categories, and to risk ignoring experimental non-fiction books, because variation in language and diversity, variety and artistic expression in language and pictures are somehow reserved to fiction. Author's studies

show that non-fiction contains all these elements, and contemporary non-fiction books for children often include fictive characters, different narrative perspectives, fictive 'documentary' letters from ancient times, diaries, elaborated language and so on. It can be very difficult to see, whether a given book is fiction or non-fiction, and whether it has to be placed in the Dewey-system or in the section for children's fiction. Genre categories are not fixed, and therefore it is only natural that literary mixtures of fiction and non-fiction occur.

Non-fiction for children comprises a very broad range of different books about historical subjects, technology, theoretical concepts, natural sciences, music, art and so on. Different kinds of encyclopedias and orbis pictus-books are also categorized as non-fiction. We could include different kinds of teaching materials in the body of non-fiction for children, but that is beyond the scope of this project. Many of described here examples can be used in the classroom, but they are not produced to be used in teaching at any specific level.

Non-fiction for children is aimed at all children from the youngest to the oldest child readers. For the youngest ones there are, for instance, non-fiction books in the orbis-pictus genre, and for the young adult readers there are books about philosophy, sexuality and history. A non-fiction book for children is usually aimed at a certain age. The complexity of the subject is often reduced. One very common type of book is non-fiction picture books for child readers between approximately five and nine of age. Since the 1950's the photographic non-fiction picture book has been very common, but non-fiction can include all kinds of illustration techniques.

It is necessary to adopt a very broad and inclusive understanding of non-fiction for children. The books are very different in terms of subjects, structure, illustrations and target groups. We only talk about non-fiction books, but of course there are non-fiction texts for children in other media, both newspapers, periodicals and the internet. Non-fiction texts have an informative or a didactic purpose, but of course non-fiction is also aimed to entertain or enjoy the reader. Non-fiction texts are never written and made without editorial choices; both the author, the illustrator and the editor have all made their choices. They

have chosen the point of view and the tone and illustrations, and they have made decisions of the relative importance of various elements of the subject. When we analyze and evaluate non-fiction for children we have to examine all the different elements of the books.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF NON-FICTION FOR CHILDREN

There is no significant tradition for analysis of non-fiction books for children. In the school system, at least in the Nordic countries, we have a great tradition for analyzing fiction for children. Non-fiction is only included in the lessons for its content, but is not recognizable as a matter of analysis in school. The same goes for the professional work with children's books. Non-fiction books are rarely reviewed in newspapers or periodicals, and when they are, there are almost never any comments on the use of language, the structure of the book or the artistic level of the illustrations. When there are comments about the use of language, it is often connected to the difficulty of reading. Author has never seen a review on a Danish non-fiction picture book with comments like "this book has an exciting use of poetic language, and the use of colors in the illustrations has a highly dramatic effect", which would be relevant for the books of Bent Joergensen and Birde Poulsen, for instance

Because we have no text-analytical tradition and no evaluative norms for evaluation of the non-fiction books, it could appear that all books are equally communicative and artistic, and the publishing houses do not have to choose their best authors and illustrators to make the non-fiction books. It is too easy to sell a poorly produced book about animals or cars, because no one has a 'serious' interest in this field.

Professionals in the field of children's literature must recognize non-fiction as children's literature and the good reasons to read non-fiction. It can contribute to the education or 'bildung' of the young readers. 'Bildung' occurs when the reader learns about himself/herself

and his/her place in the world. When academics take this field seriously, we will also automatically demand some qualities of the books – both in terms of content, verbal and visual expression.

When we evaluate and review non-fiction books for children, we can learn a lot from close reading of fiction for children. We can also borrow tools from a discourse-analytical perspective and from the reader response theory. It is neither necessary nor productive to adopt one analytical scheme which can be used for every non-fiction book. We need a pragmatic form with respect for the individual book, context, purpose and the reading situation in general. Comparative studies of different books about the same subject will be relevant, and it might be relevant to compare fiction and non-fiction books that share a subject or a particular perspective.

In general, the analyzes of non-fiction must encompass the purpose of the text, the use of genres and subgenres, the narrative perspective, the content and the use, as well as organization of language and pictures. All the questions that we normally ask of fiction should also be asked at non-fiction, such as:

- How is the child reader addressed?
- Who is the narrator?
- How is the language used?
- Are there any metaphors?
- How are the illustrations made?
- Does this book have the any intertextual references to other books, films or different media?
- Is the book a conventional non-fiction book, or does it break any (unwritten) norms?
- How can this book be used?

SHORT PRESENTATION OF SOME DANISH EXAMPLES

The two different Danish examples of non-fiction for children will be presented: Bent Joergensen and Birde Poulsen's *In the Night* (2005)

and Lars-Henrik Olsen and Niels Bach's *Polar bear against walrus. Who wins?* (2009). In Denmark and internationally as well non-fiction picture books about animals are very common.

In the Night is an interesting book, because it adopts an interdisciplinary perspective. There are astronomical, psychological, folklore, medical, botanic and zoological perspectives on nocturnal animal life. The emphasis is on animals and their life at night, but the book has also a broad contextualization of the subject. There are passages about the moon, the stars, sleeping habits, dreams, plants and nocturnal animals, cat, mouse, owl and other birds, hedgehog, bat and glow worm.

This book is unconventional in the way the subject is presented. The animals are not chosen by their species, but by their life at the night. There is little information about behavior, weight, food and lifespan of the animals. Instead, there is a lot of information about different sounds, hunting, seeing and hearing at night. There is also a table of information included. Instead, the illustrations are very varied. The use of language is also slightly unusual, since the narrator has a very personal voice. The narrator is fascinated by the night, and very enthusiastically tries to engage the reader by using personal pronouns such as 'we' and 'us'. He also uses dramatic verbs, and the dramatization is underscored by the illustrations. An example of dramatization in both text and illustration is the passage of the owl on the hunt:

The ear is very important for an owl. The two ears are completely identical for most animals, but there is a great difference between the owl and the rest of us. The owl is able to distinguish what it hears with the right ear from what it hears with the left ear, and the owl is able to find out quickly whether a sound comes from the right, the left or the middle. [...] It is estimated that an owl listens 1000 times better than us. So even if it is dark, a mouse cannot hide from a hungry owl (Joergensen B., 2005, p. 24. Translation by AKS).

Joergensen and Poulsen's book is very beautiful, and it will certainly stimulate the young reader's desire to learn more about the life at night. It is not a traditional non-fiction book and it may be just a little

bit superficial, because the subject is very broad. But the quoted passage shows that it has a very interesting approach to the individuality of the animals.

In Lars Henrik Olsen and Niels Bach's *Polar bear against walrus* the dichotomy of fiction and non-fiction is deconstructed. The book is presented as non-fiction, and it includes boxes and tables with standard information about the life of the polar bear and the walrus, but there is also a narrative about two individual animals and their fight for survival in Arctic. The polar bear and the walrus are given different human characteristics and they represent different personalities. The dramatic struggle of the two animals is contrasted by a poetic description of nature:

*In a belt along the banks of the fjord, the sun has melted the ice away.
Here is peace and quiet. The only sound is from a few geese in the sky.
Their hoarse cries break the silence* (Olsen L., 2009, p. 3. Translation by AKS).

Of course it can be discussed whether it is reasonable to anthropomorphize wild animals and to underscore the poetry of nature in a non-fiction book. But when the purpose is to create interest in zoology and wild life, the author and the illustrator succeed in their ambition with these fictional strategies. Also, in author's opinion books like *Polar bear against walrus* create reading experience and maybe the book even captures new readers, especially among boys.

CONCLUSION

The above shows that the areas of academic priority and depth, communication strategy and popularity are generally worth looking at in relation to non-fiction. That non-fiction for children is a neglected genre and is unfortunate for several reasons. First, a greater awareness of the topic could give both researchers and providers of children's literature several tools to analyze and evaluate non-fiction for children.

Secondly, a critical preoccupation with books for children would give authors and publishers an increased awareness of non-fiction. Thirdly, the recognition of non-fiction as part of children's literature would give children the same opportunities for reflection and realization as the adult readers have.

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