Transnational Literary Studies, National Child Subjects
Book review of Åse Marie Ommundsen, ed. Looking out and looking in: national identity in picturebooks of the new millennium

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The collection of essays under review here arose from an international The Child and the Book conference on Picturebooks of the New Millennium that took place at the University of Oslo in 2011. In introducing the volume, editor Åse Marie Ommundsen notes that 48 researchers from 22 different countries made presentations at that event. The 12 chapters of the present volume, comprising perspectives from 11 different countries, represent, then, only a small portion of what was undoubtedly a rich exchange of scholarly information and insights. One of the particular pleasures of such international exchanges in the study of young people's texts, in my experience, is being made aware of books and authors well known in their own regions and countries but relatively unknown outside of them. This is certainly among the pleasures of the volume Ommundsen has assembled.

Like many groups of essays first brought together through an open call for a conference and linked only by a general topic or theme, Looking Out and Looking In is somewhat arbitrary in what it does and does not take up. Although Ommundsen suggests that the question the volume seeks to address is whether the same trends are “discernible worldwide” in picture books published in the new millennium and in the research on them (7), there is no discussion of picture books from the United States, Germany, or the United Kingdom, although each of these countries has a robust industry in children’s books and many scholars devoted to studying them. Not surprisingly, given the location of the conference from which the essays emerged, there are several essays on Nordic picture books from Finland, The Faroe Islands, Norway, and Denmark, but, surprisingly, there is no essay that considers books from Sweden. Asia is represented by only one essay, by Fengxia Tan from Nanjing Normal University in China. There are no essays by scholars from the Indian subcontinent or the African continent.

In her introduction, Ommundsen points to a silence that she finds more significant, and more perplexing. She notes that most of the participants at the conference chose “to focus on national identity in 21st-century picture books” rather than on transnational or global identities, despite the fact that it is a commonplace to assert that...
we are now living in a “globalized world” (13). The essays collected in this volume confirm that focus, as the subtitle of the book makes clear. Like much scholarship on children’s literature as a national literature, many of the essays here consider questions of landscape and geography, history and tradition, and categories of identity. Although Ommundsen sorts the essays into these groupings, she does not comment on the connection of these topics to the three “institutions of power” through which, Benedict Anderson (1994) proposes, the “imagined community” of the nation is built: the map, the museum, and the census (163). The coincidence of her categories and Anderson’s, however, suggests the salience of these essays.

The first group of essays addresses questions of landscape, including an essay by Margot Hillel about the representation of iconic places in an Australian picture book; an essay by Erin Spring on various narrative techniques for situating readers as insiders or outsiders in relation to regions in Canadian picture books; and two essays on representations of the natural world: one an essay by Sabah Aisawi on the idea of nature in Arabic picture books and the other an essay by Rui Ramos and Ana Margarida Ramos on the extent to which recent Portuguese picture books move away from anthropocentric views of the natural world. The second group of essays addresses questions of history and tradition. In her essay on Norwegian picture books about the arrival of the king in 1905, Ommundsen considers how these books work to legitimate a traditional narrative about the birth of the nation. In an essay about three picture books set during times of revolt in French history, Clémantine Beauvais argues that these books address (and, therefore, seek to construct) the child as a contradictory subject who adheres to traditional values by rejecting political authority. Fengxia Tan focuses on the subjects and styles of contemporary Chinese picture books in her essay, noting the tensions between tradition and modernity that inform the books.

In the third group of essays, authors address questions of the identity categories represented and promulgated to young readers, with the possibility of affiliations beyond the nation explicitly raised in several of them. Jaana Pesonen traces the increasing complexity of the representations of cultural diversity in Finnish children’s literature. Petros Panou and Tasoula Tsilimeni consider the extent to which recent European picture books imagine a collective identity for European children and conclude that, despite making a range of choices visible to readers, all seem finally to agree that the child needs “to embrace her/his biologically and socially predetermined self/identity” (145). Tzina Kalogirou and Vasso Economopoulou consider European picture books set during recent wars to document the fragility of national identities in the face of a hostile “other,” so that the transnational identity shared by children in the books might be said to be that of victim. Anne-Kari Skarðhamar demonstrates that Faroese picture books have begun to move beyond the project of nation building as they also reference texts of a shared European literary heritage. The volume closes with Nina Christensen’s thoughtful discussion of “whether it is meaningful to talk about a specifically Nordic idea of what childhood is and how it can be represented” (183), a discussion that proceeds by way of a case study of a popular Norwegian trilogy that has been translated into Swedish, Danish, and Faroese. Christensen’s conclusion, that the answer a researcher will find depends on the question she or he is posing, provides an intriguingly open ending to the volume as a whole.

Christensen’s challenge to scholars is to pay attention to the ways in which they frame their descriptive and analytical terms: “national,” “regional,” “transnational,” “universal,” and also “children” and “children’s literature” (193). Asking such questions of this collection makes some of its gaps and absences appear. One gap has to do with the scope of the material selected for analysis. With a few exceptions—such as, for example, the essays by Pesonen and by Ramos and Ramos—the scholars in this volume say little about how they chose the books they are examining or what limits they imposed on their corpus. As a consequence, the essays often appear somewhat impressionistic: despite the careful readings of fascinating books in these pieces, the status of the observations and conclusions often is not clear. I wondered, for example, whether many Australian authors incorporate journeys across the country into picture books from that nation, so that Hillel’s example, Alison Lester’s *Are We There Yet?,* should be read as typical of Australian picture books. Or has Hillel chosen this example as noteworthy because it is an unusual book?

More generally, there is little analysis of the material conditions that make possible the production of children’s books. Can the fact that so many children’s picture books instantiate the narratives of nation be read as a revelation of conditions of possibility that often attend these books, such
conditions as national systems of public education, national grants and subventions to publishing houses, national prizes, and national review and distribution networks? Essays such as those by Aisawi and Tan, which use prize-winning picture books as their examples, seem to be reaching toward materialist analysis of this kind.

Asking questions about the use of the terms “children” and “children’s literature” in the collection makes obvious the relative disinterest of these essays in the reception of the books by young readers. Implied readers, constructed readers, and generalized readers appear in many essays, but there is little consideration of the contexts within which actual young readers approach these picture books. If, as seems likely, readers read, or are read, a locally or regionally produced picture book beside a picture book produced elsewhere in the world, what signals to them that the first is the book with designs on their subjective formation? Or are young readers, in fact, being shaped and shaping themselves as transnational or global subjects by wide reading across the picture books scholars choose to discuss in national groupings?

Indeed, in the digital age, readers are unlikely to read picture book texts in isolation from other kinds of verbal and visual texts. As Christensen reminds us, sociologists and theorists of childhood now generally speak of children as defining their own identity “in interaction with other people, both children and adults” (188) and, I might add, in interaction with texts of many kinds. The question, then, is not only who the reader addressed by picture books is, but also which actual readers accept the invitations of these texts. In Louis Althusser’s famous formulation, interpellation requires an addressee to answer the call of ideology and to recognize himself or herself as being addressed. In other words, a broader reflection on what questions can, in fact, be answered by a consideration of contemporary literary texts in print format would be a useful framework for a collection such as this.

It might also be useful to consider the theoretical positions underpinning the arguments about identity formations in children’s picture books. Although there is, indeed, relatively little attention given by the scholars in this volume to transnational, global, or universal identities that are being built in the picture books under discussion, as Ommundsen notes in her introduction, these scholars from 11 different nations share many theoretical intertexts and assumptions. In essay after essay, the same critics are quoted: Margaret Meek, Tony Watkins, Perry Nodelman, Maria Nikolajeva, and Ron Jobes. Notably, many of these critics write and publish primarily in English, which is also the language common to the scholars writing in this volume. Is it possible, then, that the transnational or global child subject who does not, apparently, emerge in the picture books is, in fact, under construction elsewhere, in the critical discourses surrounding the books, such as, for example, the discourses of *Looking Out and Looking In*?

**WORKS CITED**
