

**MODERNIST AND AVANT-GARDE CHILDREN'S BOOKS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR VICTORIA DE RIJKE
LIVROS ILUSTRADOS MODERNISTAS E DE VANGUARDA:
UMA ENTREVISTA COM A PROFESSORA VICTORIA DE RIJKE**

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Dr. Victoria de Rijke is an Associate Professor in Arts & Education at Middlesex University, London, where she teaches since 1990 and is currently the Centre for Education Research and Scholarship's director. Among the activities conducted at CERS are researches about Childhood and Society; Higher Education; Professional Education and Partnerships; and Work & Learning. She gained her MA in Literature and the Visual Arts and then a PhD in Literature & the Visual Arts in 2001, worked in Primary Teacher Training for over 25 years, and is a published children's book author herself: *A-Z of Dangerous Food* (2012) is a picturebook that delights readers with "some of the most terrifying and gruesome things to ever pass our lips" (AMAZON, 2020). It was published by Tate in 2012 and consolidates a partnership between her and Rebecca Sinker, Curator of Digital Learning at Tate. The book is published under the pseudonym Rebvic.

The professor is also Co-Chief Editor of the international research journal "Children's Literature in Education" and has a rich production that covers research topics such as Arts Education, Literacy, Children's Literature, Performing Arts and Play. Her latest publication is *Art and Soul: Rudolph Steiner, Interdisciplinary Art and Education* (2019), a book dedicated to Rudolph Steiner's work, edited by her, and intended for scholars interested in his influence on policy and educational thought, aimed to reflect on the role of cultural contributions in education.

This interview covers topics such as readers' formation, literacy, arts and education, always having modernist and avant-garde children's books as a starting point. We've met the professor thanks to the International Research Society for Children's Literature mentoring programme, and this interview not only attests the

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importance of this initiative, but also the relevance of an association such as IRSCL in promoting worldwide discussions about children's literature among researchers with different contexts and backgrounds.

1. You have a very solid production on avant-garde and children's picturebooks, which include published articles such as "The values of savagery: pathologies of child and pet play in avant-garde visual culture" (2017) and "A juxtaposition of signifiers: radical collage in children's literature" (2018). What is the origin of your interest in this specific theme? What's the importance of discussing the interrelation between literature for children and avant-garde art?

Many thanks for the kind words and these really excellent questions!

So, to begin. I became interested in the avant-garde by training to be a primary school teacher and working with young children many years ago. So much of what children do in relation to the arts (drawing, painting, making, music, movement, writing, and so on) struck me as "avant-garde" – "ahead of its time" – and so many of children's acts are also genuinely "new", experimental, often challenging what more typically counts as art in culture or society. I'll give an example which I also describe in my book *Art and Soul* (2019). As a teacher of 4-7 year old children, we went once a week to the school hall move freely to music. I did not teach dance in this session: we all just moved in whatever way we felt. The children themselves developed this into a game they called "pattern". When we first conceived of the game I would call rather obvious shape instructions such as "square", "circle", "spiral", "figure of 8", and the class would respond accordingly. They quickly became expert in changing speed, direction, and overall spatial awareness. Soon the children asked if they could choose the calls and from that moment it became more elemental, with calls such as "sky", "water", "dragon"; more abstract: "toy", "friends", "sleep"; and more metaphoric: "not yet", "full", "green". I began to notice that children would choose new sounds and words we had been learning for the call, as if they had been perculating them, carrying them over the week to try them out in the game, and the movements they made suggested extraordinarily rich and varied understandings. It became one of our favourite times of the week. I observed children's dancing as a kind of unthought, unforced creative thinking, given, as Rudolf Steiner pointed out in his lectures on Eurythmy, "the

moment you begin to think, artistic activity ceases” (STEINER, 1924). He says “[...] an idea may frequently recur in a train of thought, just as a musical motif may recur, for then the musical element is effective in the train of thought. This is certainly possible. But you must not be thinking!” (STEINER, 1924).

For me as the ‘unthinking’ dancing children’s class teacher, it was moving and humbling: seeing the range of their inferential, somatic skill, expressive of something intuitive and instinctual that I would later think of in relation to what the British psychotherapist Christopher Bollas called the “unthought known” (2017). The pattern game revealed not just preverbal, unschematised knowledge barred from conscious thought (in Bollas’ interpretations, internalised perhaps by trauma or unconscious early experience), but, more positively, linked to D.W. Winnicott’s idea of the “true self” or Steiner’s “inner life”; children “simply being” spontaneous, authentic, alive in the moment. So the moment/movement was a kind of bodily expressionist scribble, generated into immediacy by abstract concepts such as “not yet”. How much more avant-garde could you get?!

I took these memories from teaching children into my further studies: first an MA in Literature and the Visual Arts and then a PhD in visual and verbal metaphor. I deliberately wanted to study literature and the visual arts as interdisciplinary practices; examining, for example, how “green” works as a word and colour to infer what is fresh, young, child-like, yet also snake-in-the-grass dangerous, poisonous and envious. Both the study of metaphor and so many radical artistic and literary movements (Modernism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism, Pop Art, Fluxus, Actionism, Conceptual art) spoke directly through the children for me, as they had trained me - opened my eyes- to the deeply felt immediacy of the avant-garde. As a European living in England, I became particularly fascinated with specialised avant-garde European collectives such as COBRA’s child-like paintings or OULIPO’s experiments with the boundaries of form, and with the development of children’s literature as its own form of avant-garde. I began to question why was work published as adult or children’s books? I read Russell Hoban’s first existential novel *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) and saw it was neither necessarily written *for* children, nor was it *about* them. Hoban said:

I wrote a book called *The Mouse and His Child* in which I made a world-picture that was an attempt to see the thingness of things in a narrow

compass, a microcosm. It was published as a children's book, and for the most part, reviewed as such (1971, p. 13).

I then read Andrei Platonov's *Soul [Dzhan]* (1934), a deeply serious book censored by the Soviet regime, and I realised how much like *The Mouse and His Child* it was. A tale of searching among nomads -who only have their souls to call their own- for utopian ideals like eternal life and an infinite universe, in the face of terrible odds against it. I searched further for radical models in children's literature (Antonio Frascati's picturebook imagining a polylingual future in four languages '*See and Say/Guarda e Parla/Regarde et Parle/Mira y Habla* 1955), Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies, After the Outing, or an A-Z of Children's Deaths* (1963), frightening untranslated reworkings of Dutch masterpieces (Geert de Kockere and Carll Cneut's *Dulle Griet* 2005), or controversial topics (Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk's *Børnenes Bedeman –The Children's Undertaker* 2008). I slowly began to realise the greatest form of the avant-garde might be the picturebook (of which more later!).

2. Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul et al. (2005) state that “picture books are probably the most innovative, experimental, and exciting area of children's literature – but also one of the most difficult to understand. We can define them as books in which pictures dominate the verbal text, or which have no verbal text, or which interact with verbal text in a fundamental way” (p. 1051). In your research with picturebooks, you're interested in a specific adjective: “avant-garde”. How would you define the avant-garde picturebook? What characteristics does it have? Given your background in Primary Teacher Training, collaborations with schoolchildren and artists, would you say that it (the avant-garde picturebook) can influence the formation of the reader and increase her/his literacy?

I would define the avant-garde picturebook as one with experiment and change at its core. This experiment of course may take many forms: a book's shape, cover, endsheets, blurb, narrative text, illustrations, and so on. The change asked for is “re-forming” in some way: raising questions, consciousness, or radical social reform. For me, the main three characteristics are that the form should function as metaphor, that somehow the reader of the picturebook is surprised, and that there is some immediacy of effect and affect.

I am a big fan of metaphor, and the way good metaphors carry surprises for us to work out, like the little detectives brains are. Take, for example, Bruno Munari's *Libri Illeggibili*, illegible or unreadable books' that he first produced himself as handmade single copies in 1949. *Libri Illeggibili* democratise and reduce everything to book-as-idea; stripping it of author, illustrator, title, words, pictures. Anyone can use these little books, regardless of language, age or literacy. It is the paper that speaks: its shapes, cuts, tears, colours, weights. Children delight in this kind of joke/game/avant-garde picturebook, because they immediately appreciate its democratic, unhierarchical accessibility, they enjoy its sensory and materialist delights, and can freely begin an open hunt for meanings. For me as an ex-teacher and now teacher-trainer, *Libri Illeggibili* also carry the important message that reading is absolutely not just decoding print or passing tests, but engaging with books as ideas and experience, uncovering what the Anglo-Saxons called "concealing kennings": hidden wit or knowledge.

In other words, book-as-metaphor. If a book gives up the pretence of textual or figurative communication, we are then alerted to its aesthetics: its material (innovative graphic and typographic mechanisms, materials such as paper, card, transparent or semi-transparent sheets of film, wood, plastic, string) and visual forms (cuts, holes, tears), rhythms and impressions. These books are important metaphors for reading as negotiation and co-construction of meaning; how material speaks; how for the avant-garde, the form often *is* the message.

The avant-garde generally leads an "advance"- suggesting something new, often by implying the status quo requires shaking up and reforming. Hence, there may well be implied criticism (of what came before or what is happening now) in much avant-garde work. I am also a huge fan of satire, from Rabelais to Stern, Gogol to Carroll, Grass to Orwell. Children's literature is rich in dark satire, from the cheerful satire of Dr Seuss or Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, to the more unforgiving work of Raymond Briggs or Edward Gorey. Even the charming picturebook *Farmer Duck* (1991), described by the author Martin Waddell as "Animal Farm for 5-year-olds", carries an Orwellian biting satire beneath his text and Helen Oxenbury's beautiful, seemingly innocent English watercolours. So, for me, the avant-garde should intend and create both personal affect and social effect, just as satire aims to do. It "poses a distinct otherness", as Alex Houen

puts in in *Affect and Literature* (2019), alerting the reader/viewer to the new/other practices of experiment, as much as the final product.

Finally, like the revolutionary posters of constructivist Russia, picturebooks aim to make the viewer *active* in the process of looking. Children are not passive in knowledge acquisition, but active agents in making or co-constructing meaning, testing out theories, trying to make sense out of the world and themselves, ideally through active play. The fact that stylistic features such as bold lettering, stark planes and diagonal lines were considered ideological: operating as a paradigm or model for the “anti-developmental, the anti-narrative” (KRAUSS, 1985) also offers a challenge to the assumption that children’s literature need necessarily be developmental or narrative-based, or that it needs to be a separate category of literature at all!

3. Lawrence Sipe (2020) writes that young people’s knowledge of references to the universe of art, the designer’s work, and the illustrator’s craft leads to a higher appreciation of picturebooks as aesthetic objects. How to mediate the book in dialogue with plastic arts in the classroom, considering that it requires a cultural repertoire from the reader, which ensures him/her the recognition of an intertextual dialogue with pictures of famous painters and/or styles, art movements, and artistic trends?

How right Lawrence was. A lovely man, and a former editor of the journal I work on, *Children’s Literature in Education*. Sadly, despite the truth of this and given how visual our lives have become, many aspects of formal education remain pretty much visually illiterate. Curricula simply don’t develop vocabularies or in-depth thinking about the visual. We need to realise that we could read the visual, rhythmic, textural in every bit as complex a way as we read print, if we only had the means to do so.

I and others have written about the way that avant-garde design such as collage achieves a metalanguage of the visual. As part of the Modernist radical re-examination of the relationship between painting and sculpture, collage explored the collision of disparate ideas and 2 and 3 dimensions together. For one of my go-to Dada artists Hannah Höch, the chopping and juxtaposition of images in surprising collision also formed a new feminist critique, liberating the domestic from the safe confines of the feminine: bold, questioning images ‘cut with the kitchen knife’ as she put it. Seeing the

cut is part of the point: carrying the speed and dynamism of the machine age, odd rhythms, cut-out moments (the past pasted onto/under/over/beside the present) play of planes (flatness, surface, space, dimension) and sensations (tactile, hands-on, crafted, kinaesthetic).

I don't think people need an enormous repertoire of aesthetic and cultural reference to explore picturebook illustration, but they do need some! I personally think learning two key things have been most useful for me: thinking globally about picturebook design and artistry, and thinking about paratext.

I think it's hugely helpful to have a sense of the historical development of the picturebook with as wide a worldview as possible. Not just picturebooks in our own countries, or our own languages! I have a large collection of versions of Little Red Riding Hood, which illustrates different northern and southern European traditions, post-Soviet views of the hunter-rescuer, Chinese and Japanese perspectives of the child, modernist and post-modernist wolves, and many different waves of feminist influence. It has helped me enormously to know about the great illustrators who produced picturebooks as a means of political, artistic critique and survival during the Russian Revolution, the anti-war rebellion of the European Dadaists and the dark and playful risks of American and British Modernists, but I'm conscious I know too little about avant-garde Asian, African or South American picturebooks as yet.

Equally, as part of our overall literacy education, shouldn't we be learning some metalanguage for the picturebook: some technical, visual vocabulary? Given so much of what a developing reader now "reads" is digital, interactive, visual or aural, rather than print-based, the teaching of reading remains stuck in the C19th past! For example, why not extend and apply our knowledge of rhythm to that of image size and repetition, to screen jumps and page turns, to the rhythm and dynamics of sound, line and colour? Why not learn how and why images 'bleed' across the page into "doublespreads"; the effects of "white space", the "gutter" or "speech bubble" in comicstrip or graphic novels; illustrator or graphic designer's decisions for "endsheets"? It was only until I researched a presentation on endsheets for the last *Child and the Book* conference that I realised how much I had been missing! In visual arts, a discourse of *parergon* (translated from Kant's *zeiraten* as something "beside the work"; an ornamental accessory, subsidiary, supplement, or by-product) is almost always interpreted as the

surrounds or frame of an artwork, like Shaun Tan's marbled frame, falling leaves, dappled light and duck's beak endpapers to his and Gary Crew's *Memorial* (1999). Why are they there? The images have no evident relationship to the rest of the text. Derrida argues that a particular kind of parergon could have the power to initiate a scheme or plot and thus act as a 'frame-up' to the rest of the text. Tan uses endsheets to frame and stage his picturebooks; what he calls "visual intermissions", when we run out of things to say.

Endsheets, like so many aspects of paratext, are part of the avant-garde project. Auxillary -thus undervalued because they inhabit the margins- and accessory to the service of something other than itself, endsheets are metaphoric and symptomatic of picturebook discourse itself; a change in the frame of literature. Both metaphor and *metalepsis*: the trope of a trope, the metonymic substitution of a work already figurative.

4. Karin Westman (2007) affirms that the relationship between children's literature and modernism is little explored by scholars. A very similar statement was made by professors Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2015) in which regards avant-garde children's books. According to them, "avant-garde studies generally disregard avant-garde children's literature, while children's literature research, with some exceptions, has not paid much attention to the avant-garde topic" (p. 05). Westman selects *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (2005) and tries to justify this lack of interest in a two-part explanation. She quotes its preface, written by editors Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, Lynne Vallone, Peter Hunt, and Gillian Avery, in which they affirm that children's literature is typically marked as something separated from 'real' literature, and also points to the emphasis on genre in the collection, once (although its table of contents is organized by chronology) the works selected are separated by genre: "Alphabets", "Chapbooks", "Primers and Readers", "Fairy Tales", and so on. How do you evaluate this apparent "lack of interest" by scholars? Does it still exist?

Is it a lack of interest? Perhaps it could be a lack of interdisciplinary insight that I feel is required to appreciate the avant-garde? Perhaps we needed more art historians or practicing visual artists in children's literature study?

Many scholars come to children's literature by way of first studying Literature (with a capital "L"). Books without pictures, in the main. "Real" literature! I like to quote JP Hartley who ends his novel of "green" childhood *The Go-Between*: "to see things as they really were- what an impoverishment!" For me, children's literature is a go-between, tossed from here to there without bothering to consult actual children, both victim and champion to its outsider status. "Victim" as it will always have adults making their (as they see it) superior judgements, banning, censoring or promoting books from their perspective. 'Champion' because children have access to a freer, more open category of what counts as literature or narrative; even what counts as a book.

Perhaps there will always be a sense of children's literature operating as a (smaller/lesser) category within a larger one, 'a poor relation' as the English say, of the main family and genres of Literature. The reality is that 1 in every 3 books published is for children (in the UK at least) and given publisher age-determined categorisation counts for little in reality, children could easily be reading 2 out of every 3 books published. I think comic-books suffered from adult snobbery and lower status and for a long time, and it's only with the invention of the more "professional" category 'graphic novel' that they have been taken more seriously in the educational and academic world. Literary critics, educationalists, archivists and librarians tend to organize and categorise, invariably by genre, which of course has its practical uses. However, it's also psychometrics at work. In many of the categories chosen for children's literature, (Alphabet books, Primers, Fairy tales) you can clearly see an enactment of didactic adult influence upon the child (teaching the ABC, teaching and testing reading, using scare and warning to control behaviour) ultimately to draw attention to *difference* (children's language, literacy, morality). Sadly, what can happen is that boundary-nudging genres are either subsumed into one major category, as Suspense/Horror/Mystery/Whodunnit/Detective/Crime/Pulp/Noir/Nail-biter/Page-turner might be collapsed into 'Thriller', for example) or that they effectively disappear, as the "Avant-garde" might be an unseen and unexplored part of a "Nonsense" category in children's literature. To be fair, the avant-garde is an enigmatic category, as you are just as likely to find it in Alphabet books, Fairy tale or Poetry, and very likely to find it in Nonsense, but it might be hiding, and it will be subversive.

We need to resist stereotyped and fixed definitions of children's literature, just as we should of the child. As I have written elsewhere: "it's all madey-uppy!" Now, in the Anthropocene, postcolonial and posthuman aware, we must also question collapsing the primitive/ primal/mad/child-like, or even the child as ever 'new' and emblematic of the future. Many European artistic movements like CoBrA were embodied by children and the expressions of children, or, like Modernism, strived for the unconstrained vitality of children and a child-like consciousness, but never to merely mimic or reproduce it. As Paul Klee said, "childlike but not childish. It's very difficult to fake. To get that quality you need to project yourself into the child's line. It has to be *felt*". He suggested we should see with one eye and feel with the other.

5. I would dare to summarize *Alice to the Lighthouse* (1987) in a single sentence: "radical experiments in the arts in the early modern period began in the books which Lewis Carroll and his successors wrote for children" (p. 05). That's because, according to its author, Juliet Dusinberre, "the absence of a deliberately pointed moral, and of linear direction in narrative, the abdication of the author as preacher, and the use of words as play, all of which were pioneered in children's books in the latter half of the nineteenth century, feed into the work of Virginia Woolf and her generation of writers" (p. xxi). How do you analyze Lewis Carroll's legacy in modernist/avant-garde children's books?

Lewis Carroll's work is certainly part of Nonsense's legacy to modernist and avant-garde children's books, but for me, the *Alice* books do follow relatively linear narrative direction, and though Carroll enjoys wordplay and playing with the idea of author as preacher by making the child Alice the opinionated, moral arbitrator, I feel we shouldn't overstate his contribution. He's certainly not the first. I must admit, I do always quote: "'And what is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?'" and I also use "Jabberwocky" when teaching grammar in schools or at university, but for me, Carroll's *Alice* project has nonsense limitations that I don't see in some of his other work such as *The Hunting of the Snark*, (1874-1876). The edition of that poem as illustrated by Mervyn Peake (1941) – who also illustrated *Alice in Wonderland* - highlights the intriguing subtitle: 'An Agony in Eight Fits'. Following a

nervous breakdown, there is certainly a striking nervous energy to his illustrations, with scribbled notes on sketches revealing his concern to avoid any form of ‘static’.

I also recommend Peake’s first picturebook: *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* (1939) as a fine example of the avant-garde in the illustrations’ level of tension, the immediacy and boldness of plot (a vicious pirate falling in love with a ‘yellow creature’ on an exotic island) as much as what is left untold, such as: is the relationship homosexual? Is the creature yellow as a coward? (Peake was invalided from the army), or the “yellow peril” of East Asia’s existential danger to the west? (Peake was born in China months before the revolution). Peake’s Nonsense poetry, *Rhymes without Reason* (1944), another book he wrote and illustrated in full colour himself, pictures the title on a sheet that the books’ characters are hiding behind. I imagine his nod to surrealist bizarre assemblages and exaggeratedly bendy figures was doubtless an inspiration to Dr. Seuss from *The Cat in a Hat* (1957) onwards.

There is no doubt that Carroll’s work has inspired countless translations and interpretations – from philosophers to filmmakers – but in terms of Victorians leading the advance, I prefer Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* (1846) and “The Dong with a Luminous Nose” in particular. This is not surprising as the nose is an important trope for nonsense and avant-garde work, inspiring a book I co-edited titled *Nose Book* (not to be confused with Dr. Seuss’ (1970)! but *Representations of the Nose in Arts and Literature* (2000). Just think about Gogol’s *Hoc Nos* (The Nose 1836) or Shostakovich’s *Opera* (1928) with the giant tap-dancing noses scene! If you look at so many of his limericks you will see that Lear really understood noses, and despite having to hide both his epilepsy and homosexuality and being shy and awkward, he was a fascinating forerunner of illustrator/writer/performance poets to come, as skilled a painter as a poet, who apparently sang his poems at the piano “somewhere between laughter and tears”. I think of all Victorians, I would love to have met Edward Lear, and seen and heard that.

6. One of our common interests is Gertrude Stein’s production – especially for children. Unfortunately, just one book by Stein for young readers was translated in Brazil. In 2017, *To Do – a book of alphabets and birthday* became *Para fazer um livro de alfabetos e aniversários*, as translated by Dirce Waltrick do Amarante and Luci

Collin. According to Amarante, they selected this book for translation, because “this is a good introduction to Stein for children and perhaps it is a text in which they can identify immediately; after all, they [Brazilian children] all know the alphabet and they all already celebrated a birthday. Besides, the alphabet is a frequent and traditional procedure in children's literature” (p. 140). In the course of children's literature, we have seen a lot of alphabet books. If we think solely on the traditions in English, for instance, we have books by John Amos Comenius, Kate Greenway, Edward Lear, Dr. Seuss, and so on. How do you perceive Stein's subversion of the genre and what does she add to it?

Stein is definitely subversive, I agree, and her *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* is no exception. Unsurprisingly, I believe it was first rejected as a work for children, and has been republished with illustrations by Giselle Potter (2011). Though Potter's work evokes what is traditionally thought of as child-like folk art, I'm not sure its rustic charms complement the radical, unflinching way Stein's book questions the whole tradition of names and birthdates, of keeping your own or not wanting to share, of choosing not to be born on your birthday, of the way things go wrong despite our repetitive 'to do' lists: dogs go on the rampage, a soldier loses an eye, children drown and writers have block. I'd like to have seen more radical collage work with this text, as Hannah Höch might approach it, or abstract, Lorca-style drawings.

“The thing to do is to think of names./Names will do./Mildew./And you have to think of Alphabets too”. Such condensed text is work for the brain: it could read as a simple, innocent, direct address or a savage criticism: what if “the thing to do”/“names will do” suggests an unthinking traditional didactic or a rotten human fungus (“Mildew”) is behind naming, with Alphabets as bad, “too”? For me, Stein's darker side evokes uncensored, unsanitized fairy tales of the northern European tradition such as the Brothers Grimm “The Mouse, The Bird and the Sausage”, or those of Arctic folk and fairy tale, such as the “Women Who Lived in a Whale”. In these tales, not everyone lives or learns, though they might escape the worst. The sausage should never have gone to the woods and risk meeting the dog (who eats him), the women should never have married the man who beat them, but the tales are unsentimental and, somehow, upbeat. They look resolutely forward.

“Fairy tale” is often given where critics find work unclassifiable, such as the case with Gertrude Stein’s work generally, where for example The New York Times called *Ida* “either a short novel, a long poem or a modern fairy tale”. Stein’s style is characteristically rather like folk or fairy tale in that there’s an immediacy of condensed, abstract ideas, of the kinds of uncertainties, questions, repetitions and rhythms found in oral forms: “[...] and just then was it a pen was it a cage was it a hut but anyway there was no but she saw it was a dwarf, and it was not a woman it was a man and if it knew how, and it did, away it ran” (STEIN, 1939).

I love this kind of steam-of-consciousness writing, as it’s also very characteristic of children’s early narratives that mirror their unmediated speech, so may feature excessive repetition, make playful or mistaken use of grammar; all at great, unpunctuated speed. The text has an urgency about it, like a dream you wake up from and want to remember. I like the advice on how to read Stein in a press release: “Don’t bother about the commas which aren’t there, read the words. Don’t worry about the sense, read the words faster. If you have any trouble, read faster and faster until you don’t”.

Alphabet books attract avant-garde artists as they are what Susan Stewart calls the “convention of conventions”; both arbitrary and sequential. One can arrange and rearrange in what appears to be a closed field (thus easily subverted). The children’s literature Alphabet oeuvre is enormous and very inspiring: some of the most talented artists of their day either began with an Alphabet book or made sure they contributed one. Go round the world and you can see there are certain periods where the more experimental Alphabet books match that of avant-garde art movements and dramatic social change: Britain’s Alphabet expert Edward Lear and the “Absolutely Abstemious Ass” in his *Alphabet with Consonance* (date) or Walter Crane’s *Absurd ABC* (1874) to America’s Maurice Sendak’s *Alligators All Around* (1962), Dr. Seuss’s *ABC* (1963) and Edward Gorey’s *The Gashlycrumb Tinies: the A-Z of Children’s Deaths* (1963). A work of dark genius! Avant-garde design ABC’s such as Italy’s X’s Alphabet book (date), which includes naming things in a cool four languages and Chile’s Diego Bianki’s *Rompecabezas* (2013) which has playing with toy bricks as its language.

I decided that my first picturebook would also follow this arts tradition, so my own *A-Z of Dangerous Food* (2012) follows a Russian constructivist design and

playfully warns of the potential risks in seeing Ants, Bats or Crocodiles as food (which of course various peoples around the world do) or even Eggs and Ice-cream.



Images 1 and 2: taken from *A-Z of Dangerous Food* (2012).

7. I asked you about Lewis Carroll earlier and while reading Stein's books for children I noticed the presence of nonsense as a literary device that helps building her artistic diction. We can also notice the presence of nonsense (as a literary device) in books such as Leonora Carrington's *The Milk of Dreams* (2017) and Jean de Bosschère's *The City Curious* (1920), which are mostly characterized by their surrealist aesthetics and atmosphere. What's the importance of nonsense for the avant-garde picturebook and how does surrealism (or even cubism in Stein's case) contributes to its making?

In her book *Nonsense* (1979) Susan Stewart describes how the surrealist E.L.T. Messens created an alphabet in verse, *Alphabet sourd aveugle*. This was 26 poems, one for each letter of the alphabet, each line beginning with the same letter, thus both arbitrary and systematic, merging the principles of surrealism with those of C19th nonsense verse. She argues that Surrealists and Dadaists inverted the categories and hierarchies of language, for different reasons: the Surrealists to reinvent the world, and the Dadaists to contradict world order. I feel that the written and visual art work of both movements has contributed to free children's literature from the spatial, temporal or causal constraints of logic. In this dream-like way, fate, chance, accident and mistake are a valid part of the process. Johan Huizinga reminds us in *Homo Ludens* (1938) that play works like this, interrupting logic or reason, like the perpetual ambiguity and contradictions of the human mind. So, we should all take play seriously, when studying modernism and the avant-garde!

A C19th game called "What is My Thought Like?" had one player think privately of some object and ask the others in turn "What is my thought like?" They would answer "nose, book, moon, whatever". The leader then tells what her thought was and

calls upon the others to prove the resemblance. This is a good game to think through metaphor's role in the avant-garde! I don't know if Gertrude Stein would agree, as I think she argues that we must get rid of nouns, as things are never stable. I certainly think nouns are often faking it!

I guess this leads us to Cubism and the rejection of art following nature, reality or order, in preference for messing with perspective to the point of Matisse's "bizarreries cubiques", and the attempt to see an object from multiple points of view at the same time. You can see the link to collage in that Cubists worked with fragments (sometimes cut up perspectives of one object or face) and reassembled the fragments like a jigsaw that you overlap rather than fit together. If we think about books in this way, Stein's writing certainly has this quality, as do C20th postmodern picturebooks such as Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992). Here, the writer plays around with subverting narrative order (half way through the book, the contents page falls on the narrator) and the illustrator uses cut-outs and collage to further disrupt the plane of the page. This is an excellent book to explore the fragmentation of the postmodern, in my view.

8. Karin Westman ends "Children's literature and modernism: the space between" (2007) wondering what a modernism course would look like if it contained Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* (1899), Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947), among other children's books alongside the usual adult works selected for this kind of course. So, inspired by her, I want to end this interview by asking you: which modernist/avant-garde children's books would you include in a modernism course and why? What do you think this course will gain from this addition?

I like the idea of any kind of course that examines 'space between'! Spaces between literature for children/young adult/adult, read to you/read by you. One of the spaces I would want to explore, in my course, is that of reading fiction *as* theory. This would mean viewing avant-garde children's literature as expressive of the kinds of ideas we might normally expect to find in theoretical books, discussing these ideas and testing them out, applying them to our thinking and practice.

For example, we could discuss Stein's "using everything and beginning again", and ask what does it mean? What does voicing lists, series and repetitions mean? A reframing of the very beginnings of literary experience (orality) into a rethinking of narration as thought pictures, discursive imaginings, or pedagogic? I have the sense that her tone can be that of a teacher asking questions she does not know the answer to (sadly rare in classrooms), or someone thinking out loud, without over-processing or meditating the thoughts. When she reflects on her own writing: 'one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning happening', this helps me theorise artistic practice being in the middle of itself as the artists makes work: a practice 'as if', shaped by the metaphor of a 'continuous present.' In universities, we have been struggling to theorise this practice (in the form of artists' practice PhDs, for example) for a long time! I am not suggesting that reading fiction as theory would be easier - as a case in point, reading Stein's work does not make this process easy by any means! I just believe fiction goes well beyond entertainment, into what imagining can do for us; how it can change us, and move us beyond our limits.

So, I would include a history of the avant-garde picturebook, as tracing that takes us through Soviet and Revolutionary Russia and Constructivism, (eg: El Lizzitsky's *About Two Squares* 1922; Vladimir Lebedev's *Yesterday and Today* 1925) the European experience of two world wars (Umberto Eco and Eugenio Carni's *The Bomb and the General* 1920; Davide Cali & Serge Bloch's *Enemy* 2007), how artistic movements such as Cubism and Futurism of the early C20th (Gertrude Stein's *The World is Round* 1939) led into Dada (Hannah Höch's *Picturebook* 1945), Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War (Walter Dean Myers & Ann Grifalconi's *Patrol* 2002; André Leblanc & Barroux's *The Red Piano* 2009) to a C21st urban human crisis (Renata Grieco's *Black Cat Big City* 2013; Shan Tan's *Tales from the inner City* 2018).

A history and interrogation of Alphabet books and Nonsense would definitely feature!

The first article I had published in the journal I now edit, (*Children's Literature in Education*) was a dialogue with a child of 10 years old about a book that eludes easy categorisation: Richard Hughes' modernist *The Innocent Voyage* (1929), later published as *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Its changing publishing history suggests it moved from

being aimed at children to adolescents, and finally the adult market. (Is this because we protect the child more and more from what modernism questioned?) I wanted to show the depth of a child reader's response - particularly to the book's suggestion that children might potentially be more evil than adult pirates (!)- and the ability of a child to actively contribute to an academic article. I would absolutely use this novel in a modernist/avant-garde children's book course, as it would kick things off nicely, by disrupting notions of the innocent child, childhood, adulthood and narrative certainty!

Russell Hoban's work is important: *The Mouse and His Child* to explore the Absurd and Absurdist savage irony, linked to Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd. Also, I love *The Marzipan Pig* (1986). A pig made of marzipan falls behind the sofa and no one notices. He becomes stale with neglect. "‘I am growing hard,’ he said, ‘And bitter. What a waste of me’" (p.3). A mouse eats the pig, then falls in love with a clock which stops. The mouse is eaten, by an owl, who then falls hopelessly for a lit up taxi-meter on the London streets. Meanwhile, a bee dances for a shedding hibiscus flower in a flat, another mouse makes a skirt out of the fallen petals and the tale ends with her dancing alone on the Embankment by the Albert Bridge. Is this fiction or the Butterfly Effect of chaos theory? A series of reflections on the interruption and continuation of life and love, *The Marzipan Pig's* approach to misdirected desire and loss reads like a concrete poem or Gertrude Stein for six-year olds. Fabulous.

I would include calligrams, concrete or shape poetry, such as Christian Morgenstern's 'Fisches Nachtgezung', e. e. cummings 'r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r' (*grasshopper*) taught alongside Federico Garcia Lorca's fabulous drawings, his work across folklore, poetry ("The Cricket Sings" (1954)) and his collaborations with the Surrealists, linked to onomatopoeia and the later symbolism of Shaun Tan's *Cicada* (2018) "Tok Tok Tok!"

As we read, we would also make. A range of artistic techniques such as automatic drawing, collage, assemblage, scribble and expressionist work would complement texts. As we 'take a line for a walk', the artist Paul Klee's *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* [*Pedagogical Sketchbook*](1925) written for the Bauhaus will help us achieve 'Resonanzverhältnis': reverberations of the seen and the felt, of outer and inner perception, of the finite and infinite, as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy says in the introduction.

Comics must feature in a modernist framework, such as Oulipo and Outapo, playing with constraints. Etienne Lecroart's *Cercle vicieux* (2000) about a mad scientist and a time machine, uses the model of the literary palindrome- read backwards and forwards. Graphic novels or comic-strip, such as Raymond Briggs' radical anti-war *Where The Wind Blows* (1982) and the end of modernism with the Holocaust and the Atom Bomb.

Now I come to look my imaginary course, does it look too crazy? Or worse- too serious? I would want it to *feel* playful, nonsensical, immediate, active, and involve all of the participants in change. It's possible that many governments' mismanagement of Covid19 (and other viruses yet to emerge) will change the way we research and study, but should we wait for their wrong-headed heartless decisions? Perhaps our most positive response would be to take that learning into our own hands... So, shall we run this course? I'm up for it, if anyone else is! The avant-garde is a riddle, a puzzle, a moving target, always defined by what came before. So, even as I write this or you read it, it is changing, just as the world is.

"Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around". Stein makes me think of the world in a fairground carousel, with all its exotic promise of travel: painted horses galloping a grand coach a tiger an elephant an ostrich a hot air balloon a car a plane and if you're lucky the spinning tea-cup turning round and round and up and down to the music of the organ. After all, the world is always new, isn't it? And if not, on the next turn, the avant-garde will make it new.

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