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The use of Laika as a character and a historical reference in non-fiction for children

This paper charts the use of Laika in non-fiction picture books about astronomy, space and the universe. In the introduction I will give a brief discussion of non-fiction for children in general and especially their use of characters and narrative strategies. In the second part I will discuss concrete examples of the use of Laika, both as a character and a historical reference. My examples are both traditional non-fiction books and books which cross the borders between fiction and non-fiction, both books produced for an international, more or less anonymous market, and books produced in a more local context. This paper contains a study of a certain motif, but it is also meant to be a part of a broader discussion of the values and qualities of non-fiction for children.

Children's literature is often defined by academics as fiction for children (e.g. Maria Nikolajeva 1998 and Torben Weinreich 2004), 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 subjects as animals, football and even astronomy in their spare time. 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, and they are often translated books co-produced without any aesthetic or scientific ambitions. Of course there are also exceptions and examples of non-fiction books with both scientific and aesthetic experiments and exciting didactic strategies. 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, I will present a working definition of children's literature that includes non-fiction. In this definition, literature means 'something written' (littera means letter in Latin). My aims are, on the one hand to discuss different definitions and characteristics of non-fiction for children, and on the other hand to identify the use of the mythology of Laika. I will discuss a number of recent books and make some conclusions about non-fiction for children in general.

Definition

Non-fiction is often defined as "that which is not fiction". *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* 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 1992, 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 2006, 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. My 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 very 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 my project. Many of my 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. I 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. Provide a range of platforms non-fiction texts communicate a subject or a case, and have an informative or a didactic purpose. Non-fiction is of course 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. The motif-study of Laika can serve as an example of that (slide 5)

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. There is no tradition for analyzing non-fiction picture books 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. I have 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 different motifs and perspectives in the illustrations has a highly dramatic effect", which would be relevant for the book of astronomy by Inge Duelund, Anja C. Andersen and Lilian Brøgger.

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. Non-fiction can contribute to the education or "bildung" of the young readers. "Bildung" occurs when the reader learns about himself/herself and his/her place 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.

Examples of Laika in non-fiction books

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I will present three different examples of the use of the mythology of Laika in non-fiction books for children, a photographic catalogue without much text: National Geographics' *Pictures from The Universe* (1996), a Swedish non-fiction series book, George Johansson's *Ut i rymden med Mulle Mek* [In the Universe with Mulle Mek] (2008) and a Danish book which combines fiction and non-fiction, Inge Duelund, Anja C. Andersen and Lilian Brøgger's *Pigen der ville give sin mor en stjerne* [The girl who wanted to give her mother a star] (2008).

In *Pictures from The Universe* there is a reproduction of one of the official photos of Laika as a space dog. It is a close up picture where the dog more or less is portrayed as you would portray a human cosmonaut. According to the historian Amy Nelson Laika looks tense and a little bit nervous. Whereas the picture is appealing, the text is very dry and factual. The year and date (1957 November 3rd) are mentioned together with the names of Laika and Sputnik. There is also a short sentence where it is said that Laika died after a few hours because of the heat.

The communication of Laika's fate in this book is very similar to a lot of other non-fiction books, appealing and factual, but not explicitly interpretative.

In *Ut i rymden med Mulle Mek* there is a first person narrator Mulle Mek. He tells his stories about space to his own dog, named Beef. He is the explicit narratee and the representation of the child reader. Beef is expected to ask questions (not always explicitly), and he got answers from Mulle. The communicative form of this book could be described as a kind of Socratic dialogue between teacher and pupil.

The passage where Laika is mentioned is interesting, because it explicitly addresses the anxiety of Beef as an equal of Laika.

After telling the story of Laika Mulle says: "Oh, no, I would never ever send you to outer space without knowing that you would return safely".

The story of Laika is connected to the child's basic anxiety of being betrayed by the parents and left alone, and Mulle's answer to Beef is clearly enough meant as a consolation of the child reader, but at the same time it underscores the brutality of Laika's fate.

The dog was in fact betrayed by her responsible “parents”, and the message send by the story of Laika could be that you should never trust a grown up. Mulle’s consolation of Beef could be interpreted as a kind of denial of the most depressive interpretation of Laika’s story, that it is a meaningless story of lost illusions connected to childhood.

My third example is a book which combines a narrative about a lonely dreaming girl with a non-fictional introduction to astronomy and the universe. The book is named *The girl who wanted to give her mother a star*. All ready at the front page there is a reference to Laika. The dog functions as a guardian angel for the main character who is seeking for stars.

The book starts with a narrative about a girl who wants to bring her mother a star from heaven because she is depressive. The girl looks at the stars, discovers different stars and reflects a lot, and at least she succeeds in making her mother laugh during their conversation about space, the universe and the different stars. The narrative ends with a picture of the girl with stars in her eyes, and in the text it is said that “a little tear sprang from the girl’s eye to the mother, and she smiled”. In the picture there are two references to Laika and (maybe) another space dog. These references are neither mentioned in the narrative nor in the non-fictional part of the book which follows. The references to Laika and the space dogs in general are placed by the illustrator in a context of dreams, tears and sympathy between adult and child. The story of Laika is turned into a story of hope and dreams. All though the books is declared as partly a non-fiction book Laika is referred to as a fictional character, and her historical role isn’t mentioned at all.

Conclusions

The use of Laika in non-fiction (as well as in fiction) is ambivalent and complex. Pictures and text about Laika are used to bring some factual information about the Soviet space dogs and the circumstances of life in space, but first and foremost Laika is used as a character to identify with for a child reader. Of course it can be discussed whether it is reasonable to anthropomorphize animals and to underscore

the poetry of dreams in a non-fiction book, but I think astronomy and space is communicated in a very thought provoking manner in the more experimental books whereas the repetition of historical pictures of space dogs isn't in itself very interesting.

A more general conclusion of this paper is 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 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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