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Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde ed. by Elina
Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (review)

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Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde, edited by Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2015.

Reviewed by Julia L. Mickenberg

Merely perusing the table of contents made it clear that essays in this book would be essential sources for an essay I was writing for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* on "Radical Children's Literature," and, reading the book itself, I was not disappointed. This is an important book. *Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde* is self-consciously international in its approach, although its focus is on Europe. The volume emerged from a conference on Children's Literature and the European Avant-Garde, held in Sweden in September 2012. Despite the explicit focus on Europe, the conference call for papers suggests that the impact of the European avant-garde on non-European children's literature should be investigated as well; however, when it comes to this volume, outside of Europe, only the United States and Britain, which may or may not be considered part of Europe, are represented, although the Soviet Union seems to play a larger role than the conference organizers had originally anticipated. Divided into three sections, "Vanguard tendencies in the early twentieth century," "The impact of the Russian avant-garde," and "Postbellum avant-garde children's books," this volume's eleven chapters are richly illustrated with color plates, adding immeasurably to the book's quality and utility, and contributing to a growing scholarly literature that recognizes children's literature's connection to modernism, postmodernism, and the avant-garde, a literature the editors cite in their excellent introduction. Notably, much of this scholarship and the works themselves are not published in English, making the volume under review especially valuable.

Editors Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer explain that the term "avant-garde" emerged in late nineteenth-century France to designate progressive and politically engaged art and literature, but note that the term has had various meanings in different times and places. Their overarching definition of avant-garde is "a spatial-temporal network that has constituted an artistic alternative to hegemonic art since the beginning of the twentieth century, with peaks in the 1910s and 1920s and again in the 1950s and 1960s, which still lives on in contemporary art" (4). Applied in the context of this book, they add: "avant-garde ideas about children's literature often reflect a general desire to break free from artistic boundaries and labels, but also from previous norms in children's literature and traditional conceptions

of childhood, similar to the concept of ‘radical children’s literature’ explained in Reynolds (2007).” In her book of that title, Kimberley Reynolds defines “radical children’s literature” as boundary breaking in terms of form and/or content. Finally, they emphasize—and individual essays in the book confirm this point—that avant-garde ideas in children’s books are always related to “movements in arts, education, social systems, and ideologies” (8).

Chapters are rooted in varying national and transnational contexts, with some focusing on individual authors or texts and others offering more of a general overview. Marilyn Olson’s marvelously rich and provocative essay on “John Ruskin and the mutual influences of children’s literature and the avant-garde” actually does both of these things by focusing on an individual who had a wide-ranging influence. Olson tackles an earlier period than any other essays, making it a good choice as the volume’s opening chapter. Although Ruskin is a focus for her essay, Olson more broadly “looks at childhood as a touchstone for the overthrow of Academic standards in painting, at children’s books and their influence on those who became avant-garde artists and thinkers, and at the power of the Victorian avant-garde to influence the ideals of the twentieth-century picturebook” (20). She points to Ruskin’s influence on the pre-Raphaelites, early examples of England’s avant-gardes, and also on William Morris and, through him in particular, on the Arts and Crafts movement. Ruskin’s emphasis on art and beauty as tools of social reform, as well as his ideas about the grotesque as a vehicle for truth and social critique, influenced a range of important illustrators, such as Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, and Joseph Tenniel, several of whom moved between work as political caricaturists and illustrators of children’s books. Olson suggests that the spirit of reform that infused the Arts and Crafts movement influenced major illustrators such as the socialist artist Walter Crane, who absorbed the notion that “children’s literature is an obvious place to start when attempting to reform society through art” (37). Moreover, Morris’s attention to “total design” and his emphasis upon utilitarian objects “also legitimates a children’s book project as a medium for avant-garde experimentation” (40), paving the way for picture books as significant media for avant-garde expression.

The two chapters that follow focus on individual authors. In “Einar Nerman: From the picturebook page to the avant-garde stage,” Druker analyzes two picture books by Swedish artist Einar Nerman—*Crow’s Dream* (1911) and *Knight Finn Komfusefej* (1923)—in relation to his

commercial work, caricatures, and work for theater sets. *Crow's Dream*, one of more than twenty he wrote and/or illustrated, "satirizes human society by reversing the conventional order between humans and animals" (48): a crow flees from his cage at Stockholm Zoo and leads an uprising, after which "the zoos display humans instead of animals, and pets change places with their owners" (48). Druker suggests that while Nerman's picture books are not representative of Swedish picture books in the 1910s and 1920s, in their interaction with other visual media, especially magazine illustrations, they set a precedent for later author/illustrators such as Astrid Lindgren, Lennard Helsing, and the Finnish-Swedish Tove Jansson.

Samuel Albert's "Sándor Bortnyik and an interwar Hungarian children's book" examines multiple versions of the only children's book by an important member of the Hungarian avant-garde, whose international connections linked him not only to a range of artistic movements including German expressionism, French cubism, and Soviet constructivism, as well as the "radical modernist Ma group" in Hungary, but also to the Hungarian Soviet republic, which lasted for just six months in 1919, an allegiance that would force Bortnyik into exile. Bortnyik's only children's book, first created in the 1920s, was not self-evidently political—which was not surprising given that in order to return to Hungary he was forced to foreswear political activity—but it was groundbreaking in that pictures drive the text rather than vice versa. Through extensive archival research, Albert found several versions of Bortnyik's book in Hungarian, English, and German; in doing so he discovered that the texts accompanying the images in each of these versions are not *translations* but are actually different stories that writers created in response to Bortnyik's images. Echoing his poster art, these images "employ a simplified palette, bold geometric shapes, and elimination of detail for greater impact" (82). However, unlike his commercial work, in which "where word generates the image, here, the image generates the word" (82–83). It would be interesting to compare Bortnyik's picture book to the wordless picture books that Lynd Ward created around the same time in the US.

Kimberley Reynolds's essay, "The forgotten history of avant-garde publishing for children in early twentieth-century Britain," draws from the groundbreaking research in her recent book, *Left Out: The Forgotten Tradition of Radical Publishing for Children* (2016), to explore the institutional basis for radical experimentation in children's literature through a series of publishing houses. Noting the great interest in

children's art among the British avant-garde in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Reynolds analyzes several key texts that employ avant-garde devices. For example, *The City Curious* (1920), by Belgian-born illustrator Jean de Bosschere, uses surrealistic devices like associative logic in the narrative and dreamlike and grotesque images in the illustrations, and "anticipates the call in the first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924 for artists to return to the unrepressed condition of childhood" (91). Another one of her examples, *The Football's Revolt* (1939), is "at one level . . . a politically pointed, highly topical, parable about the responsibilities and abuses of power supported by illustrations that clearly draw on avant-garde movements from Cubism to the Absurd" (99). About a football match from the perspective of the football, the way the story is told is actually more radical than the story itself, Reynolds argues: she points to "expressive use of color, experiments with rendering dynamic motion on the page, and incorporation of collage effects, unusual perspective, and a delight in excess" (100).

Reynolds is among those who have pointed elsewhere to the impact of the Russian avant-garde; that a third of this book is devoted to that subject demonstrates just how important Soviet influence was for the European, British, and American avant-gardes more generally. Sara Pankenier Weld's "The square as regal infant: The avant-garde infantile in early Soviet picturebooks" serves as a fitting opening essay to this section of the book in that it suggests not so much the Soviet avant-garde influence more generally, but its particular interest in origins, the primitive, and, by extension, childhood. Moreover, she argues, rather than simply wishing to address an "infantile audience" (114), Soviet artists cultivated "a participatory ethos that involves the child reader in creative and constructive action," based on "an artistic attempt to more fully enter into the perception and cognition of the child" (114) in a process we can see likewise in the interest in children's drawing among European and American child psychologists (see, for instance, Kidd 2011). In the Soviet example, Weld emphasizes, an interest in the interiority of children's minds came from a desire to have children "actively participate in the creation of a new aesthetic [and political] future" (126).

An essay on the 1929 Amsterdam exhibition of early Soviet children's books is useful as a reference source but reads more like a compendium than an analytical essay, and in that sense it seems out of place with other essays in the book, and I won't dwell on it here. Far more interesting and nuanced is Nina Christensen's essay, "Rupture. ideological, aesthetic,

and educational transformations in Danish picturebooks around 1933," which looks at the concrete ways in which Danish children's literature was affected by an exhibition of Russian picture books in Copenhagen, especially in relation to progressive educational ideas and practices that increased in popularity around the same time. Christensen focuses on four texts that exemplify the reformist or radical ethos that filtered into Danish children's literature through progressive education in general and Soviet influence in particular. *Jørgens Hjul* (1932) by Hans Kirk, for instance, celebrates modern technology, "explicitly and deliberately exposes the child to an aesthetics inspired by contemporary art, design, and architecture," and emphasizes a participatory and communitarian ethos: "You should not speak of "my" but "our"/community is what we seek," Christensen quotes from the book. Other books she discusses more directly reveal a debt to the Soviet Union, as in the illustration, reproduced in the essay, from a book whose title translates to *What Do We Learn in School* (1933), which shows people marching and holding a flag with a hammer and sickle. One especially important contribution of this essay is the way in which it demonstrates the Soviet influence on progressive education as it visibly played out in the avant-garde.

The final essay in this section, Evgeny Steiner's "Mirror images: On Soviet-Western reflections in children's books of the 1920s and 1930s," builds upon Steiner's analyses in his insightful book, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children's Books* (1999). Here he focuses on the "production book" as a site of mutual influence in the Soviet Union and the United States, a theme that comes up in Nathalie op de Beeck's *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity* (2010) and in some of my own work (see, for instance, Mickenberg 2006, 2010). Steiner's essay reiterates the importance of exhibitions of Soviet children's books throughout Europe (in addition to those in Amsterdam and Copenhagen, he notes ones in Paris, Berlin, Essen, and Zurich), and also mentions the large number of Russian émigré artists and writers working in the West, especially in France and the US.

The final section on "Postbellum avant-garde children's books" includes two essays that overlap somewhat in content, but that overlap is, on balance, productive rather than repetitive. Sandra Beckett's "Manifestations of the avant-garde and its legacy in French children's literature" offers a sweeping yet rich overview of avant-garde tendencies in twentieth-century French children's literature by highlighting several key works and publishers, for example Edy Le Grand's *Macao*

et Cosmage et L'Experience de Bonheur (1919), which is groundbreaking and arguably radical in its illustrations, its design, and its message, privileging images over text (and thus serving as a forerunner to the contemporary picture book); evoking art nouveau, Japonism, and other avant-garde artistic movements, and calling into question "industrial and technological progress" (218). Beckett also discusses the impact of surrealism and constructivism, and the importance of a number of publishers including Robert Delpire, Christian Bruel, and, especially Éditions Harlin Quist, several of whose books are likewise featured in the next essay by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, entitled "Just what is it that makes Pop Art picturebooks so different, so appealing?"

In the latter essay, Kümmerling-Meibauer characterizes "Pop Art picturebooks" partly in terms of a particular visual aesthetic: one that draws on a range of avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, expressionism and surrealism; that uses or visually alludes to popular media such as advertisements, comics, film, photography, newspapers and poster art; and that tends to show "preference for unmodulated and unmixed color bound by hard edges," thereby crossing the boundaries between popular culture, children's literature, and modern art while often suggesting "the attempt to artistically convey innovative matters of perception," both visually and through linguistic play or unexpected narrative turns (243, 247). Such works also tackle previously taboo subjects in children's literature, such as environmental catastrophe, the consequences of war, or adult fallibility, marking a broader shift in thinking about childhood that accompanied the dramatic ruptures of the 1960s. In addition to noting books published by Harlin Quist such as groundbreaking work by Eugene Ionesco (*Story Number 1* [1969] and subsequent books) and Albert Cullum (such as *The Geranium on the Windowsill Just Died but Teacher You Went Right on* [1971] and *You Think Just Because You're Big You're Right* [1976]), as well as several works illustrated by Etienne Delessert, including an innovative collaboration with child psychologist Jean Piaget, she discusses the contributions of several other publishers in Germany, Finland, the US and elsewhere as well as a range of well-known artists who illustrated pop art picture books, among them Heinz Edelmann, Peter Max, and Andy Warhol. In terms of these works' impact, Kümmerling-Meibauer concludes that "the development of an entirely new perception of art and picturebooks for children in the quarter century following the arrival of Pop Art and Pop Art picturebooks would have been unthinkable without their example" (263).

This wide-ranging essay primarily covering material originally published in the 1960s and 1970s works well as the book's penultimate essay; Philip Nel's "Surrealism for children: paradoxes and possibilities" makes for a fitting conclusion to the book, as Nel's essay implicitly invites a rethinking of many of the book's essays and general points. Nel revisits his own discussion of an avant-garde for children in *The Avant-Garde and Postmodernity: Small Incisive Shocks* (2002), noting the direct allusions to a historical avant-garde in picture books by David Wiesner, Guy Billout, Chris Van Allsburg, and Anthony Browne (the latter specifically cited in the previous essay by Kümmerling-Meibauer), but also suggesting that the very notion of an avant-garde is predicated upon audience in ways that are not always acknowledged. For one thing, children do not usually recognize historical allusions such as those noted above. While children may appreciate avant-garde work, they do not appreciate it for the same reasons adults do. That is to say, "works deploying avant-garde strategies may simply resonate with children, without fundamentally altering their perceptions" (268). Still, Nel suggests that works affirming the world's absurdity can in themselves be subversive. He points to works such as Dr. Seuss's *Fox in Sox*, with tongue twisters that are more challenging for seasoned readers, i.e., adults (who read more quickly) than for beginning readers, i.e., children, who are used to reading more slowly and sounding out every word; in that sense, this playing with expectations can have a liberatory effect. Nel's example of a successful children's avant-garde is Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955): "affirming the child's creative impulses, Johnson's book suggests that art can change the world" (279).

As with Pankenier Weld, who warns against fetishizing the "avant-garde infantile" by reminding us that "the infant is the unspeaking subject who cannot protest" (133), so too Nel recalls the racist and colonialist assumptions undergirding the notion of the primitive that inspired many facets of the avant-garde. This is an important corrective with which to end, as was Pankenier Weld's allusion to the violent projects served by the Soviet avant-garde. Even so, taken together, essays in the volume certainly do more to point to the possibilities the avant-garde opens for children than to its limitations.

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Playful Texts and the Emergent Reader: Developing Metalinguistic Awareness,
by Anne Plummer. Bristol: Equinox, 2016.

Reviewed by Jennifer Farrar

We are ushered into this book about the potential of playful texts with a warm welcome that comes straight from the opening pages of Janet and Allan Ahlberg's famous picture book, *The Jolly Pocket Postman*. "Dear Reader!" it begins, "Enclosed you'll find a useful lens. It's in here—take a look!" (1). Indeed, Anne Plummer's informative text does offer its readers a "useful lens," in that it provides us with a helpful perspective from which to regard, or reconsider, the multifaceted and often underappreciated relationship between play—and playful texts—and the development of young children as readers and thinkers.

Aimed primarily at teachers, students and scholars who may be relatively new to the field of children's literature and literacies, Anne Plummer's text is underpinned by a drive to celebrate and share the benefits of reading playful texts. According to her quite specific definition, a playful text is one that "plays on words and/or images in the same way that children play in games of make believe, transforming the everyday world of common sense meaning into a self-reflexive play world which works to disclose, and subvert, the rules which sustain it" (2). As Plummer notes in the introduction, such texts tend to delight in the chaotic pursuit of multiple, sometimes contradictory plot lines; are often narrated by disruptive and unreliable storytellers; and frequently invite readers to toy with their linguistic and literary assumptions about how books—and language—ought to work. Consequently, Plummer makes an explicit connection between the texts she has labeled as textually playful and the concept of metafiction, an approach or set of devices that is said to interrupt or undermine readers' expectations by deliberately drawing attention to the "artifice of fiction" or the constructedness of a text (Pantaleo 212). In fact, the extent of this con-