

Lathey, G. (2006). Emer O'Sullivan (2005). Comparative Children's Literature. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 6, 224-226. <https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2006.758>

This article is publish under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International* (CC BY):
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



© Gillian Lathey, 2006

O'Sullivan, Emer (2005). *Comparative Children's Literature*. London: Routledge. Pp 205. £ 60.00 ISBN 0415305519

At last Emer O'Sullivan's scholarly, state-of-the-art study of comparative children's literature is available in an English version by Anthea Bell, whose commitment to children's books makes her an excellent choice as translator. O'Sullivan addresses here, and in the more comprehensive German original (*Kinderliterarische Komparatistik*, 2000), the history of children's literatures across the world, the intercultural exchange of children's books, and the intriguing cross-cultural transformation of individual texts. She places her enterprise firmly within the tradition of comparative literature by listing a number of constituent areas, ranging from research into contact and transfer of children's books to image studies, comparative genre studies (the development of girls' stories or the school story in particular countries, for example), and the comparative historiography of children's literature.

O'Sullivan sets the historical context for her study by presenting a critical summary of global perspectives on children's literature, starting with the idealistic internationalism of pioneers Paul Hazard in the 1930s, and Jella Lepman in the post-war period. Hazard's 'universal republic of childhood' was one dominated by western children's literature, an untenable position today. O'Sullivan also challenges recent theories that all children's literatures follow a similar pattern of development from didacticism to diversity (Zohar Shavit, Maria Nikolajeva), citing as counter examples the children's literatures of the Irish Republic and black Africa. Since each postcolonial children's literature has a unique history and may follow a very different trajectory from that familiar in North America and Europe, the social purpose, conditions, and genres of recently emerging children's literatures offer a rich seam for future research. O'Sullivan suggests, too, that to preserve an international children's literature heritage not represented by current published 'classics', scholars should take on the task of establishing exemplary canons of children's books in different cultures. Although the promotion of an 'objectively legitimate canon' is likely to be highly contentious and problematic, the proposition certainly deserves further debate.

In addressing translation specifically, O'Sullivan demonstrates the implications of the essentially asymmetrical adult-child relationship for translation practice. Historical examples of censorship, cultural context adaptation (Klingberg), and didacticism reflect changing expectations of childhood and the peripheral status of children's literature: the wholesale removal of culture-specific references or detailed translators' explanations and admonishments would not be tolerated in books for adults. To bring the survey of translation strategies up to date, O'Sullivan introduces Riitta Oittinen's child-centred emphasis on the dialogue between the translator and her audience (*Translating for Children*, 2000). Oittinen believes that the translator serves the writer of the original text best when the

translated text is successful with the child reader. The translator should, therefore, privilege read-aloud qualities in translations for the younger child, and even adapt texts – an approach that is anathema to many translators and theorists – provided that alterations respect the child and are not the result of adults' didactic or moralising intentions. To regard the child reader's response as a criterion for a successful translation is indeed a radical step in historical terms, yet children's responses differ wildly and, as O'Sullivan points out, it is impossible for an adult translator to deny completely contemporary adult constructs of childhood.

In one of the most thought-provoking and original sections of the book, O'Sullivan extends reader response theory to offer a systematic approach to the translator's role in the cultural transition of texts for children. She applies the work of Seymour Chatman and Giuliana Schiavi to children's literature by identifying the 'discursive presence' (Hermans) of the mediating 'implied translator'. Whatever the nature of the relationship between author/narrator and reader in the original text may be, the translator overlays or amends it by directing the translation towards what s/he perceives to be the requirements of the young audience in the target culture. At one end of the spectrum O'Sullivan cites some crass examples of the underestimation of young readers, such as the addition of lines of text to the final, wordless pages of the first German edition of John Burningham's poignant and challenging picture book, *Granpa*. The translator appears to be unable to trust German child readers to fill textual gaps, thus depriving them of an invaluable opportunity to exercise inference and interpretation and to engage in the kind of reading experience no primer can offer. On the other hand, at least in Germany, such unnecessary condescension to the child reader can be rectified. There is a new translation of *Granpa* sanctioned by the author, and, after introducing the reductive translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* into German that omits all Milne's witticisms intended for an adult audience, O'Sullivan praises Harry Rowohlt's retranslation that preserves Milne's dual address and is appreciated by children and adults alike.

Finally, O'Sullivan turns her attention to globalisation in an era when the international exchange of children's books is changing rapidly and radically. Adjustments to the 'packaging' of books are designed to ease entry into another country, often with reference to existing models or genres within target cultures in blurbs and promotional material. A worrying trend in recent decades is the removal of awkward differences in the interests of uniformity and unproblematic distribution. Picture books are particularly vulnerable; only texts that are not too culture-specific are accepted for expensive co-production. Indeed, O'Sullivan reproduces a disturbing, unsigned document circulating in German publishing houses in the early 1990s which recommends that artists and illustrators avoid representing folk customs, regional costume, or street furniture such as post-boxes, signs, and traffic signals that betray the country of origin. The result is a bland internationalism that once again denies children insights

into difference. As O'Sullivan concludes, Hazard's utopian vision of a world republic has, inexorably, become a world market dominated by the English-language children's book: the accelerating international distribution of the Harry Potter books are is case in point.

O'Sullivan's award-winning book (International Research Society for Children's Literature Award for outstanding research, 2001) will undoubtedly become a standard reference work in the field. Above all, she demonstrates that children's literature, precisely because of its international history and perceived marginality, offers telling comparative case studies and insights.

Gillian Lathey
Roehampton University, London