

## CANDY AS A MEDICINE ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE, THE MODERN FAMILY AND SOCIETY, AND THE IMPRESSIONABLE PRESCHOOL CHILD

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**Abstract:** *The author of this paper is concerned with the problems of mental illness (and Alzheimer's disease in particular) – the principal subject of the book by Ivona Březinová entitled Candy for Great-grandfather Eda (Albatros 2006). The reader is acquainted with difficult situations in life through the experiences of the young protagonist of the novel. Honza (who is five or six) learns within his own family to recognise one of the many ways in which people can be different from one another, and learns to be tolerant of people who look or behave differently from the majority of society. Communication with the literary text can help reinforce the young reader's social and personal skills.*

**Keywords:** *mental illness, the young reader, diversity, tolerance, communication with a literary text, social skills*

The General Educational Programme for Primary Education (GEP PE) includes an important chapter devoted to the issue of Mankind and Health, which focuses primarily on the need to teach children how to acquire the kind of behavioural skills that can help them preserve and support their health. In determining the targets of this educational area the GEP PE states that education develops children's key skills by leading them "to see people as biological individuals, dependent at various stages of life... on the quality of interpersonal relationships" and connects behaviour associated with healthy interpersonal relationships with "basic ethical and moral attitudes"<sup>1</sup>.

The increasing average length of human life is accompanied by an increase in the number of people affected by the diseases of old age. In addition to the ailments of the body such diseases also frequently take the form of ailments of the mind. While the infirmities of old age are the subject of consideration by the social sciences (in addition

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<sup>1</sup> From the General Educational Programme for Primary Education, Prague: The Research Institute of Education in Prague, 2004.

to medical science) from, for example, the psychological, theological and ethical viewpoints, there are only isolated cases of both enlightening and moving depictions of mental illness in artistic form. Literature can, however, be a useful tool enabling children to recognise the problems involved or perhaps overcome the trauma that may be experienced if they are confronted with such illness in their immediate surroundings.

Czech literature for young readers was characterised by a complete or partial taboo on various forms of handicap for decades following the Second World War. The reasons for this were social conditions with a clear preference (particularly after 1948) for topics depicting problem-free childhood, and the official pedopsychological attitudes designed to protect children from the manifestations of harsh reality.

The subject of mental handicap entered into literature in the nineteen nineties along with the end of the taboos on such subjects as physical handicap, death, sex and violence.

The subject of mentally handicapped children began to appear more frequently both in translated works and in original Czech literature<sup>2</sup>.

Mental disability is also the subject of Ivona Březinová's book *Lentilka pro dědu Edu* (Candy for Great-grandfather Eda). It should be noted that the author has placed the contemporary problems of society at the centre of her work on a number of occasions, the most important of these including the issues of dependency, ethnic minorities and children's homes<sup>3</sup>.

Březinová has, however, taken an untraditional approach to the subject of mental illness in her book about Great-grandfather Eda and his young great-grandson Honza. What is the book about? To put it briefly, it is about the manifestations of Alzheimer's disease, the contemporary family and contemporary society, and the impressionable and sensitive age of childhood.

The subject of illness in literature generally takes the form of a handbook – the presentation of material information about the given problem and instructions for coping with it. In contrast to Ivona Březinová's books *Holky na vodítku* "Girls on a Leash" (in which the author adopts the strategy of graphic description of individual "cases" and repellent cover illustrations, the depressive content alleviated only by an ending characterised by cheap optimism, its language and style corresponding to teenage jargon) her book about the young preschool child and his great-grandfather is written with the poetological devices of narrative prose, with a child protagonist, and with the expectation of the reader's identification with him and emotional acceptance of the story. The author has not, however, resigned herself to intellectual or purely didactic aims. The degree of instruction in the book is limited by the level of understanding of the target reader, is bound to the experience provided by its reading, which mediates the emotion response to the work.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare with, for example: M. Drijverová, *Domov pro Mart'any* (Home for Martians), Prague: Albatros, 1996.

I. Remunda, *Bryčka pro biskupa* (A Barouche for the Bishop), Boskovice: Albert, 1996.

D. Střihavková, *Na tom záleží...* (The Important Thing Is...), Prague: JPM Tisk s.r.o., 1999.

J. Treiberová, *Pokoj s vyhlídkou* (A Room with a View), Prague: Amulet, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with, for example: I. Březinová, *Holky na vodítku* (Girls on a Leash), Prague: Albatros, 2002 – 2003. Titles of individual parts:

*Jmenuji se Ester*, *Jmenuji s Alice*, *Jmenuji se Martina* (My Name is Esther, My Name is Alice, My Name is Martina) I. Březinová, *Začarovaná třída* (The Enchanted Class), Prague: Albatros, 2004, et al.

It is the colourful illustrations of the book *Candy for Great-grandfather Eda* that make the first impression on the future reader (the child it is to be read to) or the person buying the book. The large print used for the text, suitable for young readers, also makes it an attractive purchase. Its subject matter, however, may come as something of a surprise to the unsuspecting adult taking a closer look at the story. Is it appropriate to write a story for children about a serious illness that affects old people? In contrast to the prevailing customs of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary society does not generally count on long-term family care for incurable patients, tending rather to rely on professional institutions. Only in the last decade have we begun to see a trend, backed up by medical science and knowledge of modern psychology, towards engaging the physically disabled in everyday life and broader acceptance of the idea of avoiding the placement of certain mentally handicapped individuals in medical or social institutions. There are not, however, many alternative solutions – adequate and effective forms of state social aid are only beginning to develop for families caring for old people suffering from mental deficiencies associated with the aging process. This book tells children in an intelligible manner about how the forgetful great-grandfather is really nothing of a burden at home.

In real life it is often difficult to recognise the initial stages of the illness that is later termed Alzheimer's disease by the experts, and this is also the case in Ivona Březinová's book. Great-grandfather, known familiarly as Eda, is brought home by the police one day – he has got lost and doesn't know where he lives or how to get home. At first his family has no idea what is wrong with him (perhaps they are scared to think about it), though the diagnosis is not long in coming, as there are more and more such episodes as time goes by.

Five-year-old Honza, who gets on tremendously with his great-grandfather, plays an important part in the family's story. Adult reservations concerning the child's comprehension of the subject are groundless. The child need not "know", either in life or in a work of fiction. The important thing is his or her natural ability to put himself or herself in the position of the child in the story and, of course, the acceptance of reality. The mentality of the child and his ailing great-grandfather brings the two representatives of opposite ends of the age spectrum together, and is the source of comic situations (*Mum picked Honza up from nursery school every afternoon, and then they used to go to get Eda from his club. Honza loved going there. Sometimes his great-grandfather would be in the middle of some terribly important work and wouldn't want to leave the club for anything. So Honza would sit down and they would draw or play a game with his great-grandfather Eda and his friend Karel. Karel and Eda got on together well. Sometimes, it is true, they didn't recognise each other when they got to the club in the morning, but they would get to know each other again during the day and play table football or pool together. Honza was rather envious of his great-grandfather because they had pool at the club and they didn't at his nursery school. When he told the other boys about it, most of them agreed that they would rather go to the club than to nursery school, where there were lots of useless dolls and prams with pink bedding*).

In this way the young reader becomes acquainted with difficult situations of the kind he or she might encounter in real life and learns the most important thing – to recognise one of the ways in which people may be "different", to behave with "different" people in a way that is satisfactory to both sides, to acquire the capability of tolerance and not stop loving relatives if it is they who are affected (*"Luboš Kroupa said that he would swap their granny for our great-granddad. He said she does nothing*

*but cleaning and washing all the time and is no fun at all. But I said no. I wouldn't swap great-grandfather Eda for anything in the world.”).*

It is just such a relationship that gives Honza the idea of giving his great-grandfather chocolate sweets instead of the pills he needs all the time, and at the very end of the book leads to his decision to “*become a famous medicine seeker*” – “*What do the pills that great-grandfather Eda needs look like?*” “*I don't know Honza. No one knows yet.*” “*Do you think they might look like sweets, Mum?*” “*Maybe. Now for goodness sakes stop asking so many questions and go and play.*” “*I am not going to play,*” said Honza, tossing his head defiantly, “*I am going to find the right kind of sweets for great-grandfather Eda, so that he gets better and can play pairs with us again.*” At that moment it occurred to Honza that he could become a famous medicine seeker. “*Go on then,*” smiled Mum. “*I'll tell the boys at nursery to help me. Maybe I'll tell the girls too. You wouldn't believe how good girls are at looking for things sometimes Mum. And if we all look then we are bound to find the right kind of sweets for great-grandfather Eda in the end.*”

The author of the novel counts on the reader identifying with the book's principal character on the basis of the narrative position of the protagonist and simple dialogue between adults and children that will be comprehensible to the child reader. (“*And maybe they'll find something for his disease by then. Some kind of pills.*” “*But he's already got some pills. He's got some sweets, the right kind that you always give him with his food.*” “*Yes, they help him, it's true, but they won't make him better,*” admitted Mum sadly. “*They'd have to find something else.*” “*Where do you look for pills like that, Mum?*” “*I don't know. Somewhere... around us. In flowers, in trees, in animals, maybe even in stones... I don't know.*”)

The book avoids trivialising the nature of the illness. It chooses a matter-of-fact depiction with both an educational and emotional purpose; the functionality of the text meets up with the resultant experience, and the two complement and augment one another.

Ivona Březinová's book was written at a time at which society's approach to the given issue, the urgency of which the author became acquainted with personally during a study residency at a short-stay geriatric hospital and a psychiatry ward, was changing. She has treated the topic, which could have received a negative reaction from the public in a book for young children, sensitively and in an artistically effective manner. Young readers will accept it intuitively – their rational cognition will follow their subjective experience only later.

The experience obtained in this way, by means of communication with a work of literature, may help in increasing the child's social and personal skills.

## **LENTILKA JAKO LĚK**

### **O ALZHEIMEROVĚ CHOROBĚ, SOUČASNÉ RODINĚ A SPOLEČNOSTI, O VNÍMAVÉM PŘEDŠKOLÁKOVĚ**

**Abstrakt:** Autorka stati se zaměřuje na problematiku mentální (Alzheimerovy) choroby, hlavní téma knihy Ivony Březinové *Lentilka pro dědu Edu* (Albatros 2006). Čtenář se seznamuje s obtížnými životními situacemi prostřednictvím prožitků malého hrdiny novely. Pěti- či šestiletý Honza se učí ve vlastní rodině poznávat jednu z mnoha

variant odlišnosti, být tolerantní k lidem, kteří vypadají nebo se chovají odlišně než majorita společnosti. Komunikace s literárním textem se tak může podílet na posílení sociálních a osobnostních kompetencí malého čtenáře.

**Klíčová slova:** mentální choroba, mladý čtenář, odlišnost, tolerance, komunikace s literárním textem, sociální kompetence