

## THE DEPICTION OF CONCEPTION AND BIRTH IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** *The conception and birth of a new human life is generally cloaked in secrecy for preschool children and children in their early school years. The Outline Educational Programme for Preschool Education, however, states that the educational area Children and Their Bodies should lead to children being able to name the individual organs of the body (including the genitals) and having a basic idea of the origin of life and of birth. Fiction for children, which often provides children with the knowledge they are lacking and acts as a substitute for their lack of experience in life, can be an important and sensitive way of supplying them with information about this matter. How, then, is conception and birth depicted in literature designed for children?*

**Keywords:** *children's literature, conception and birth, fiction*

### **Fairytales as a reflection of popular views, ideas and superstitions associated with conception and parenthood**

Fairytales, which were not originally intended necessarily to be read to or by children, are a reflection of pagan and early Christian ideas and rituals. They provide a reflection of the value system of people for whom the birth of a child is connected with subordination to the laws of nature or the laws of God. The moment of birth (and the moment of death) was perceived as a turning point at which the boundaries of the human and that which is beyond human, the boundaries of social space and time (which are otherwise closed) are opened (Navrátilová, 2004). Pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period were, in view of the high infant mortality rate (and the mortality rate among mothers resulting from numerous births undergone without outside help or conducted in an unprofessional manner, and as a result of the complete absence of postnatal care), associated with fear for the lives of the child and the mother that lead to a large number of superstitious customs. There was an empirical or rational basis to some of these customs, though many grew rather from a faith in their magical effect. Both the birth and the death of a child were seen as the expression of God's will, and childless families were, to a certain extent, stigmatised. There was also an economic aspect to this stigmatisation (a child was a form of insurance for an untroubled and secure old age for its parents).

Human procreation was depicted hyperbolically in fairytales, negating or conce-

aling the true physiological essence of conception and development in the womb (a woman becoming pregnant after eating a particular herb or food). Many fairytales ignored the moment of conception altogether, preferring to emphasize the parents' great desire for a child. It was generally the man who created their offspring with his own hands in an effort to satisfy his wife's unfulfilled maternal instincts. The man appeared in the role of the creator in these fairytales (in the fairytale *Otesánek*, for example, he digs up an old tree stump and carves it into the shape of a child, in the Ukrainian version of the story he creates a child from a wisp of straw, in the fairytale *Snow White* he makes the figure of a little girl out of ice). It is the woman, however, who gives life to the child by the strength of her love and her longing for a child – the artificially created child comes to life when the mother's tears fall on it, when the mother kisses it, holds it in her arms, or sings to it in the cot. Sometimes a personified animal (e.g. *The Hedgehog and the Princess*) appears in the role of an adopted child. In a number of fairytales the child rapidly attains adulthood (in *Tom Thumb*, for example), as if the story symbolically emphasises the image of childhood as a temporary state that must be bridged as quickly as possible in order for the child to join adult society. The longed-for child not infrequently turns against its parents as punishment for them daring to oppose God's will (*Otesánek*) or perishes (*Snow White*). We also find a similar depiction of conception and infant development in modern fairytales (*František Nepil's Little Poppy-seed Boy* is made from a poppy seed, *Václav Čtvrtek's Cipisek* escapes from the cradle after birth and wears out his shoes made from the bark of a pine tree), though they lack the motif of punished or heartbroken parents. Fairytales may well be an irreplaceable part of a child's reading, but they provide no impetus for discussion of the issues in question.

## **Birth as depicted in Czech fiction for children**

Conception and birth were taboo subjects in children's literature for a long time, as were dying and death. While depictions of death appeared in children's literature on a routine basis in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when death and funeral rituals were a natural part of a child's life, and were not to disappear from the horizons of the child's world until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the subjects of conception and birth, and the topic of sex in general, found their way into literature for children and the young in a more open manner only from the nineteen sixties onwards. The turning point at which they began to cease to be such a taboo in the context of Czech literature for children came in the nineteen nineties, when both fictional prose and educational and pictorial publications began to appear with the aim of providing children with appropriate information about the given issues.

The first breakthrough in the process of detabooisation in the Czech context came with the short animated film *The Mole and the Mother* (1997) written by Zdeněk Miler. The way in which the pair of rabbits depicted in the film meet, their short honeymoon and the birth of their three little rabbits, during which the clueless parent rabbits are helped by the little mole, met with a negative reaction from parents at the time, who were surprised by the realistic nature in which birth was depicted. Colouring books and an illustrated book of *The Mole and the Mother* based on the film, with text written by Hana Doskočilová, appeared in 2002. The subject of pregnancy and birth is depicted through the personified animal protagonists in such a way as to provide children with

a more precise idea of the given events and to form something of a bridge to further educational activities.

The arrival of a new sibling in the world is a frequent theme in fiction for children, though attention is generally focused primarily on the child protagonist coming to terms with changes in the family situation. The subject of birth is often connected with the subject of death, with authors presenting children with an image of life as an eternal cycle in which pain and sadness have their place alongside moments of joy.

In her two-part film *Nefňukej, veverko!* (Don't Cry, Squirrel!) (1989) Věra Plívová-Šimková portrays her young heroine Kačka in the midst of a number of turning points. The girl shares her parents' eager anticipation during her mother's pregnancy, only to battle with feelings of jealousy towards the newborn twins. Just when she begins to form a clear awareness of her place within the family, she is confronted by another emotional trauma – the sudden death of her beloved grandfather. The loss of a loved one is, however, offset by the promise of a new addition to the family.

While Plívová-Šimková included pregnancy in her depiction of family life as one of its natural stages with no particular educational ambitions, Ivona Březinová was guided by an endeavour to provide children with a lucid explanation of pregnancy, childcare and the shaping of sibling relationships during the writing of her short story *Mimínek* (1999). Her prose begins with the mother announcing that she is pregnant. The first-person child narrator Vítek sees his awaited sibling and its growth with a child's naivety, and an image of prenatal development is presented to the child reader through Vítek's discussions with his parents. Recipients of preschool or early school age will not, however, form a particularly clear idea of events on the basis of this work. Conception is glossed over with the explanation that a baby is made from two seeds, while pregnancy is reduced to the unborn baby *lying quietly in Mummy's tummy and growing and growing until it reaches about half a metre in length*. Březinová has tried to provide a certain amount of information directly by means of various plot devices (Vítek worries that there is a baby in his tummy after he has eaten too much), though this is insufficient as far as forming a clear idea of conception, pregnancy and birth is concerned.

Jaroslava Pašťíková refers directly to the topic under consideration in the title of her first book *How Brothers are Born* (2008). Preschool child Anička shares her parents' anxious expectation and looks forward to her mother coming home from the maternity hospital, but her brother's arrival arouses feelings of disappointment and rivalry. Only when she begins to share in caring for the baby does she draw close to her parents again and finds a new role as a sister within the family. The author's stylistically and compositionally unbalanced text adheres largely to the omniscient narrative perspective and provides the child reader with a generally realistic depiction of birth in Anička's dialogue with her mother. She describes birth with the aid of accessible analogies (a mention of a film in which a whale gives birth to its young) and the unsophisticated vocabulary of a child (*When the baby has grown big enough in the tummy to be able to breath and drink on its own, it tries to get out. And at that moment Mummy's tummy starts to hurt, and she knows that it's time to go to the hospital so that the doctor can keep an eye on things. Sometimes it takes several hours before the baby makes a kind of tunnel with its head and peeks out at the world from between its Mummy's legs.*). The unexpected death of Anička's grandfather acts as a counterpoint to this new life – the joyous celebrations

accompanying the birth of her brother are followed by the funeral ceremony. The author's didactic intent is rather too evident from her prose, and the artistic value of the work badly affected by its stylistic clumsiness.

## **The depiction of conception and birth in Czech educational literature for children**

Czech educational literature for children has paid little attention to matters of sex education, conception and birth. This gap in the book market was evidently the impetus for the publication of the book *Lucka and Lucinka* (2001) by the authors Lumír Komárek and David Komárek, with illustrations by Helena Dušková. The book was published as an edition not designed for commercial sale by the Czech National Institute of Public Health, evidently intended to serve educational purposes.

Brother and sister Ondra and Lucka help a young couple become acquainted and then attend their wedding, which becomes the exposition for the story of the birth of little Lucinka and how she is looked after. Expectant mother Adélka tells Lucka that she is going to have a baby. Information about the conception is presented by means of sequences of drawings of a markedly anthropomorphisational nature, while the text itself avoids the issue entirely. Lucka accompanies Adélka to her ultrasound examination and follows the growth of the baby, though there is no indication of the length of the pregnancy. The birth is merely alluded to, with the authors focusing greater attention on the expectant mother being taken to the maternity hospital, which is described with farcical exaggeration. The topics of childcare, breastfeeding and bringing up the infant and subsequent toddler are considered in further chapters. The final chapter emphasises the importance of vaccination to the healthy life of every child.

The publication makes a rather confusing impression. Its attempt to merge factual information with a storyline and illustrations falls flat. An important role in the story is played by a figure taken straight out of fairytale – the fairy figure Lukin and his magic mirror that shows everything that would otherwise remain concealed to the human eye. The character of Lukin enables the children to witness the birth, while the fairy figure also serves the authors as a welcome means of overcoming the necessity of realistic description, explanation and narration.

The lack of modulation of an implicit addressee proves a fundamental shortcoming detracting from the entire process of literary communication. Assuming that the child recipient is to identify with the central character of Lucka, then the text was presumably designed for children aged around eight to ten. Neither the tone of the narrative discourse selected nor the plot construction with the fairy figure Lukin correspond to this, however, tending rather to indicate that it was written with preschool children in mind. The text, replete with a quantity of diminutives, is full of explanatory notes that underestimate children's general knowledge (ultrasound, for example, is described as *a special kind of medical instrument that can see the baby inside Mummy*). The stylistic indecision of the text, in which terms such as *connector*, *bacteria* and *antibodies* later appear without explanation, and which explains terms such as *immunoglobulin* and *B-cells* with the aid of anthropomorphisation, make it inaccessible to younger addressees.

The text has no aesthetic value and also misfires unfortunately on the strictly informative level.

Zuzana Baudyšová's preface to the illustrated book of verses *Bříško, bříško, kdo v tobě bydlí* (Tummy, Tummy, Who Lives Inside You) (2008) by Miriam Pešková refers to it as a *remarkable and poetic textbook to sex education for the youngest of children and primary school pupils*. Baudyšová emphasises the fact that the text is intended to serve primarily as a source of inspiration when talking to children about parenthood. This characterisation is, however, a great exaggeration.

The introductory poem *What the Dandelion Wanted to Know* leans towards a tame anthropomorphisational conception of the subject in question, though thankfully serves merely as a motivational bridge. The matter of conception is chastely dismissed in the following poem *What Do You Want to Know* – continuing the analogy with the plant kingdom from the first poem – with some verses about a seed planted by Daddy that somehow makes its way to the ovary in Mummy's tummy.

The following nine poems correspond to the nine months of pregnancy. The accent is placed on an important stage of intrauterine development, from the human embryo to incipient birth, in each poem. The text of the poems tackles the informational aspect in a lucid manner, the excessive quantity of diminutives caused rather by a stubborn endeavour to retain the regular structure of rhythm and rhyme. The typographic emphasis placed on certain words in bold type enhances the educational impact of the text. The poetic form, however, seems to be something of an end in itself, the verses lacking both figurativeness and melodiousness.

The illustrations by Kristina Küblbecková provide a realistic depiction of the development of the human foetus. The fact that they are situated in a stylised frame, however, elevates them above the level of a standard textbook accompaniment to the text. The title of the book, a paraphrase of the title of a fairytale, indicates that the publication is intended for younger children. The author tries to maintain a dialogic position in the text (note the questions in the titles of the poems, visualisation of the intended addressee, etc.) and the publication can, in spite of the clumsiness of some of the verses, be expected to engage its child recipients on the whole, despite failing to provide all the answers it promises.

The title of the book *How I Came into the World* written by the Swedish author of Czech origin Kateřina Janouch is an apposite one. It was published in a Czech translation by L. Johnová in 2004 with accompanying illustrations by the Finnish illustrator Mervi Lindman.

The very first sentences of this pictorial book give a suggestion of its stylistic outlook: *Before I was made, I was just a little seed that Daddy carried around in a little bag. And a tiny little egg in Mummy's tummy. Just imagine, Mummy and Daddy walked around the world, and each of them had a little piece of the jigsaw inside them without even knowing it!* The addressee is immediately drawn into the story of human creation, which is described with undisguised astonishment as a real mystery. The narrator, stylised into the position of a child aged something roughly between four and six, uses a natural, universally comprehensible child's vocabulary that is sufficiently descriptive without the slightest vulgarity, while remaining realistic. The text is oriented towards the perspective of the child recipient, and develops from the perspective of the child

narrator, for which reason mention is made of what precedes procreation, this matter being handled in the form of a series of childlike fantasies that enable the reader's own projection. Attention is also paid to the child's emotional relationship with its biological or adoptive parents, while love between the parents themselves is also emphasised. In accordance with modern demographic trends, the author does not neglect the kind of family situation in which the children are not brought up by their biological parents. The text is constructed with a rather too obvious disregard for gender stereotypes (Daddy wants *a little girl he can play football with, and a little boy he can paint a rainbow on the wall with*).

The description of conception is of a realistic nature corresponding to the initial narrative situation: the narrative explains the term sex (*Maybe you think that sex is the same as six in Swedish. Well, that's true enough, but sex is also what grownups do together to feel good and so they can have children. They hug each other. And they kiss each other too*). The genitals are referred to as a *peg* and a *crack*. In this way, the book responds to preschool children's interest in their own bodies and the difference between the sexes – the illustrations depict nudity without any kind of sensationalism. The recipient is carefully made aware of the meaning of additional words that appear in the book's depiction of the course of pregnancy (the womb as a little room for the baby that grows in size, test-tube babies, the umbilical cord, the placenta, etc.). Prenatal development is again presented through a child's eyes, with unequivocal answers given to the anticipated searching questions (doesn't the baby drown in the amniotic fluid, what does it eat, how does it excrete). The wait for the new addition to the family is also portrayed with a view to a child's perception of time. *One day Daddy and Mummy look very happy, and tell you, "We've got some great news for you. You are going to have a little brother or sister! And you think HOORAY, that's great! A little brother or sister, I'll have someone to play with! So you wait a few hours, and suddenly it's time for supper, but no one has rung on the doorbell and your parents haven't even laid a place at the table for the new member of the family."*

Birth is portrayed with a sufficiently vivid illustration, accompanied by text anticipating possible questions and uncertainties: *Most children are born in hospital. They come out of Mummy's tummy through the crack she has between her legs. They certainly do not come out of her tummy through her bottom, though some children think this*. A mention is also given to the possibility of the baby being born by caesarean section or a hasty birth before Mummy can get to the hospital. The text comes to an end with a passage about the development and growth of the infant baby.

This publication is a model of the openness with which such sensitive topics are treated in foreign-language literary contexts – Scandinavian literature is particularly progressive in this respect. Conception and birth are depicted with an objective, almost documentary precision, while also being presented as an unfathomable mystery that still conceals a great many unanswered questions. *How come I was born and not somebody else... well, let's just say that's my little secret*, says the narrator in conclusion, leaving good scope for the child reader's own reflections.

There is neither great quantity nor quality to be found in fictional depictions of conception and birth in Czech literature for children. Similarly, educational literature on the given topic is also not available in the kind of scope that would encompass various

age groups of child recipients and provide them with reading on a commensurate level. The creation of life, the birth of a child and the role played by parents in conception and subsequent care for their offspring are, however, basic topics in sex and family education. Fiction in this country focuses largely on the social aspects of the given issue – relationships in the newly structured family, the conflict between expectation and reality, coming to terms with one's role as a brother or sister. Only Kateřina Janouch's book can be used as a source of sound and natural answers to children's questions relating to parenthood and human sexuality. It is indicative that of all the literary works considered here, it is the publication by a Czech–Swedish author that is the only one to combine effectively the artistic with the educational and serve as a notable motivational stimulus for sexual and parental education. It is, however, worth noting in a positive light the fact that all the publications considered here bring an important element in terms of the cultivation of interpersonal relations to the issue of sex education, rather than reducing it merely to a question of physiology and reproduction.

## **OBRAZ POČETÍ A PORODU V LITERATUŘE PRO DĚTI**

**Abstrakt:** Problematika početí a zrodu nového lidského života bývá pro předškolní děti a děti mladšího školního věku opředena tajemstvím. Podle Rámcového vzdělávacího programu pro předškolní vzdělávání však děti jako jeden z očekávaných výstupů ve vzdělávací oblasti Dítě a jeho tělo mají umět pojmenovat jednotlivé orgány (včetně pohlavních), mít základní představu o vzniku života a narození. Umělecká literatura, která dítěti mnohdy pomáhá dotvořit chybějící poznatky a nahradit nedostatečné životní zkušenosti, může být významným a citlivým zprostředkovatelem informací o této problematice. Jak tedy vypadá obraz početí a porodu v literatuře určené dětem?

**Klíčová slova:** literatura pro děti, početí a porod, představa