A feminist critique of knowledge production

edited by
Silvana Carotenuto, Renata Jambrešić Kirin
and Sandra Prlenda
A Fairy Tale of One's Own: Early 20th Century Croatian Children's Popular Literature and Theatre

Marijana Hameršak

Twentieth century was already at its beginning proclaimed to be, to borrow the title of famous Ellen Key book, the century of the child. And indeed, children in that century came into the focus of endless number of various institutions, agendas and discourses. Numerous academic disciplines, old and new, also showed remarkable interest in children. But while, for example, youth were very often, especially in the framework of cultural studies, conceptualized as subversive, contra-cultural or at least active, children were often explicitly or implicitly approached as 'in becoming', with restricted agency or with agency in need of restriction. In the opposition to this tendency, some of the most prominent late twentieth century research in sociology and media studies directed their interest to the issues of children's agency and conceptualization of children as active subjects.¹


These programmatic discussions of children’s agency mostly refer to ethnography and anthropology as their intellectual and methodological background and inspiration. Epistemological ancestors and frameworks of this, as it is sometimes called, “new paradigm” of children’s culture research are, of course, more complex and diverse, and they encompass feminism as well.\(^2\)

As it can be seen from Henry Jenkins Children’s Culture Reader, several crucial studies of children as active subjects came from the tradition of feminist analysis to slide “back and forth between psychological and sociological investigation, exploring the charged and unstable relations between mothers and daughters in order to rethink the social and psychic dynamics of patriarchal family.”\(^3\) In this vein the work of Carolyn Steedman, Nancy Schepker-Hughes, Carolyn Sargent and others clearly set feminism as the background or even foreground of the research dedicated to the research of children’s agency and development of approaches dedicated to the conception of children as active subjects.\(^4\)

Moreover, Jenkins in his plea for “progressive conception of children’s culture” explicitly address feminism as inspiration, and gender studies as related and relevant field for finding:


...the models that account for the complexity of the interactions between children and adults, the mutuality and the oppressions between their cultural agendas. Feminist analysis has taught us that politics works as much as through the micropractices of everyday life as through large-scale institutions and that our struggle to define our identities in relations to other members of our families often determines how we understand our place in the worlds.5

Interest in children’s agency and the following interest in children as active subjects with the capacity to make a difference, rather than merely be constituted as different (from adult), in the new millennium extended to the fields such as children’s literature studies and history of childhood.6 Term agency is today widely used in these fields, most often without referring to the long, rich and differentiated epistemological traditions of this term in social sciences.7 Because of introductory and primary historiographic bias of this article, it will also employ term agency in everyday use of that word i.e. for describing activity, acting or active subject, and without aspirations to resolve complex debates about the relationship of individual and collective, particular and structural, free will and determination. The aim of this article is merely to outline how concepts of children as active subjects emerged in Croatian context and in the relation to the introduction of new ways of presenting and producing of fairy tales.

Fairy Tales and Children’s Agency

Fairy tales were not always part of children’s literature. In Croatian context, for example, fairy tales entered the field of children’s printed literature long after the first Croatian fictional children’s books were published.8 Although fairy tales were published already in the second half of nineteenth century, they

8 For the history of fairy tales in Croatian children’s literature see Marijana Hameršak, Pričalice. O povijesti djetinjstva i bajke, Algoritam, Zagreb, 2011.
step into the center of Croatian children’s literature production only between the First and the Second World Wars.

Fig. 2: The cover of the fairy tale book Pričalice: Pепелjuga (Storytellers: Cinderella), [1881], Zagreb, Croatia. Photo by M. Hameršak (courtesy of National and University Library [NSK], Zagreb, Croatia).

Between the First and the Second World Wars famous fairy tales, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Puss in the Boots, Hansel and Gretel and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, were published as picture books in several versions and by different publishers.\(^9\)

In the interwar period the production of collections of translated, as well as Croatian fairy tales continue to flourish and the production of serial penny fairy tales was introduced.\(^10\) Moreover, in these few decades fairy tales became not only the

---


dominant genre of children’s, in particular, popular literature and culture, but they also became the core issue of vigorous public debates about children and children’s literature. Setting aside these debates, this article will focus on the conceptions of children’s agency employed in then new forms of fairy tales production and distribution.11

On the one hand, the focus will be on the conceptions of children as active subjects in the children’s literature production, particularly in the penny literature for children that flourished in the Croatia during the period between two World Wars. On the other hand, focus will be redirected to the conceptions of children that were inherent to the multimedia (radio, theatre, gazette) project for children named The children’s kingdom (Dječje carstvo) which was realized in the 1930s and in which children participated not only as consumers (readers, viewers, listeners, costumers etc.), but also as active participants (actors, dancers, musicians, writers etc.). At the end, the article will touch upon class biases and exclusiveness of The children’s kingdom, as well as paradoxes of fairy tales expansion in that period. In this, the feminist critique of fairy tales production for children will be called together with the well known arguments proposed by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own will be adopted or, better to say, adapted.

Fairy Tales as Penny Literature and Children as Consumers

The beginning of the continuous production of penny literature in Croatia can be traced back to 1919 when publisher Vinko Vošicki from Koprivnica launched a penny book edition Once upon a time (Tako vam je bilo nekoć). Almost a decade later, other penny literature editions were introduced. At the end of 1920s Nakladni zavod “Neva” started its own penny edition In the kingdom of children (U dječjem carstvu) later named All over the world (Širom svijeta) and publisher Kugli initiated his own book edition named The stories of grandfather Niko (Priče djeda Niko). In 1929 Zabavne novine launched the edition The kingdom of tales (Carstvo priča), while next year Pučka nakladna knjižara started to publish The stories for children (Pripovijesti za djecu). All of these penny literature editions were published on regular (sometimes even weekly) basis for more than a year or, as in the case of Once upon a time and The Stories of Grandfather Niko, for a decade or more. Beside that, they all were published periodically and sold by the

extremely low prices. The presumed audience of this small, tiny books printed on a cheap paper were low class urban readers. In the 1931 one could buy one to eight booklets from this series for the price of one white bread. Penny editions such as Once upon a time and The kingdom of tales were oriented on fairy tales, as their titles rightly suggest. Fairy tales were dominant genre of the other interwar penny editions: In the kingdom of children and Stories for children. Berislav Majhut and Dina Franić in their detailed analysis of books edition The stories of grandfather Niko showed that fairy tales also prevailed in the first and last volumes of The stories of grandfather Niko. With the exception of several fairy tales published in The stories of grandfather Niko, Croatian penny literature fairy tales of the period were mostly translations.

Fig. 3: First three books of the penny edition Pripovijesti za djecu (Stories for children), 1930. Photo by M. Hameršak (courtesy of NSK, Zagreb, Croatia).

---


15 Fairy tales were dominant, but not exclusive genre of Croatian penny books series from the period. Between 1926 and approximately 1933 novels were also popular genre of penny literature. For the history and poetics of these serial novels see Sanja Lovrić, "Poetika hrvatskih dječjih petparačkih romana u razdoblju između dva svjetska rada", in Ante Bežen and Berislav Majhut, Redefiniranje tradicije: dječja književnost, svremene komunikacije, jezik i dijete, Učiteljski fakultet, Europski centar za napredna i sustavna istraživanja, Zagreb, 2011, pp. 165-179. In the yeas before First World War, Makso Bruck, publisher from Đakovo, started his penny literature edition of novels, focused on girls adolescents. More about this and other Croatian editions aimed to adolescent girls at the beginning of 20th century see: Berislav Majhut, "Nakladičke cjeline namijenjene djevojkama iz dvadesetih godina XX. stoljeća. Sastavnica rane hrvatske književnosti za mladež", in Marija Turk et al., Peti hrvatski slavistički kongres. Zbornik radova s Međunarodnoga znanstvenog skupa održanoga u Rijeci od 7. do 10. rujna 2010., Vol. 2, Filozofski fakultet, Rijeka, 2012, p. 620.
For the discussion of issues of children’s agency it is important to notice that these penny editions addressed directly children. As Berislav Majhut and Dina Frančić point out: “Now for the first time there are no intermediaries between publishers booksellers and their children reader. For the equivalent of one third price of the daily newspaper (i.e. for the half of dinar) publishers such as ‘Neva’ or Pučka nakladna knjižara launch new book volume every week. The book became financially affordable to the child, and gained completely new costumer”\(^5\). One of these costumers was also Croatian folklorist Maja Bošković-Stulli, born 1922 in Osijek in the middle class family. According to her childhood recollections:

> These were the books that were sold on the newsstands every week. They were very cheap booklets, and I am not sure if they are saved today. They were fairy tales ... My [parents] bought them for me. I am not sure, maybe I bought them. I don’t remember, but I do remember that I consumed them very intensively every week. They were named *Once upon a time*.\(^6\)

Penny literature editions form the interwar period introduced new form of publisher-reader communication in the field of Croatian children’s literature. Prior to them, but for the most part after, distribution of Croatian children’s books was based on the triangle: publishers – intermediaries (teachers, parents etc.) – children. Until 1880s the communications circuits of Croatian children’s magazines and children’s literature in general functioned primarily as expanded classroom circuits.\(^7\) In other words, as Milan Crnković argued some time ago, nineteenth-century Croatian children’s books were predominantly produced (edited, written, translated, etc.) by teachers or catechists and they were distributed through schools, primarily as books for school libraries or as reward books for school children.\(^8\) Several illustrated children’s fairy tales editions published around 1880s introduced parents as intermediaries between publishers and

---


\(^6\) The interview with Maja Bošković-Stulli is available in Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb, Croatia (IEF CD 807-808).

\(^7\) In this article the concept of communication circuit is defined as proposed in Robert Darnton, “What is the History of Books?”, *Duchais*, 3, 1982, pp. 65-83.

children. Although these relatively luxury designed books established fairy tales as relevant genre of Croatian children’s literature and positioned children’s books as toys, only with the post First World War penny fairy tales, fairy tales and children’s books in general were for the first time offered directly to the children. Therefore it could be said that in Croatian context the interwar penny fairy tales introduced the concept of children as autonomous consumers or, from the perspective of the publisher, as relevant economical agents.

In order to minimize the risk of addressing directly children some of these penny editions addressed both children and teachers. As Majhut and Franić in their analysis of book series The stories of grandfather Niko point out, this and some other editions (Once upon a time) were expected to be purchased directly by the children. Books from these editions were also, in slightly adapted versions or not, aimed to school children and advertised as reward books for school children.

---

21 Majhut and Franić, “Kugljev nakladnički riz”, cit., p. 149.
One marginal ethnographic fieldnote of Croatian folklorist Ljiljana Marks suggests that these two, newsstand and school, pathways of distribution were complementary in practice although they were, as Majhut and Franić point, contradictory in theory.\textsuperscript{22} In her manuscript collection of tales from Šaptnovci (Slavonia) Marks noted that her best informant (born in 1914), showed her among other his favorite books the booklet from the \textit{Once upon a time} which he was given in primary school as a reward for his accomplishments.\textsuperscript{23} School distribution thus functioned as a mechanism which brought penny books to those who other ways would be excluded from their reception. It enabled rural children to participate in their consumption although they, contrary to the urban children, generally did not have their pocket money which was a prerequisite for purchasing penny books.

Both school and newsstand distribution of penny book series suggest that the introduction of the concept of a child as an autonomous consumer was in the ‘experimental phase’ at the time. In other words, the simultaneous direct addressing of children and teachers suggest that the introduction of a new concept of a child was based on the integration into the existing system and that the concept of children as economically active was developed not as an alternative to the existing concepts, but as supplement to them.

\textbf{Fairy Tales at Stage and Children as Artists}

In 1930s fairy tales were deeply embodied in another project: children’s organization \textit{The children’s kingdom}. The play \textit{Little Red Riding Hood} (1938) was first theatre production of \textit{The children’s kingdom} with children as performers. In the following years other famous popular fairy tales for children (\textit{Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Puss in the Boots, Snow White} etc.) were staged by children and within this children’s organization. Moreover, fairy tales characters (princesses, kings, dwarfs, fairies etc.) and fairy tale poetics (magic) were more or less part of every theatre and public performance by, or for, the members of \textit{The children’s kingdom}.

The detailed notes about the activity of \textit{The children’s kingdom},\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} The manuscript of Ljiljana Marks is available in the Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb, Croatia (IEF rkp. 930, p. 107).

\textsuperscript{24} One of the leaders of \textit{The children’s kingdom}, Croatian play-writer and theatre director Mladen Širola, conduce detailed journal and press-clipping of all activities by \textit{The children’s kingdom}. The journal is held at the Archive of the Department for Literature and Theatre Studies by the Croatian Academy of Science and Art, HAZU, Zagreb, Croatia.
show that fairy tales were periodically performed and/or discussed in the weekly radio show which functioned as integral part of the project. Fairy tales (for children and by children) were also published from time to time in the gazette of The children's kingdom, although it functioned primarily as an informative organ of this society. Finally, the very organization of The children's kingdom was structured as an imitation of a fairy tale world. It literary has had the king (Tito Strozzi), his great knight (Mladen Širola) and numerous devoted subjects (children).

Fairy tale world of The children's kingdom at first glance promoted the concept of children’s as active subjects. According to the detail history of The children's kingdom by Croatian theatre studies scholar Antonija Bogner-Šaban,25 the radio show Sat cara pričala (The king storyteller's show, 1935-1941) at first functioned as children's show by adults, but it gradually became almost fully oriented to the casting children’s performances (recitations, discussions etc.).26 After the gazette for children Pričalo (Storyteller, 1936-1941), was launched and the children’s society named The children's kingdom was officially founded in 1936, the most of this radio program was based on performances by children. Children's recitations, songs, plays and children's performances in general became the emblem of this radio show, while children's written contributions (letters, poems and tales) became the emblem of the gazette.

---


26 The king storyteller's show was not the first radio show for children on Radio Zagreb. This radio station recognized children as relevant audience at its very beginnings. Grimms' and Andersen's tales, as well as excerpts of Bonsels's Maja the Bee were broadcast already in the first days of Radio Zagreb (in May 1926). See Nikola Vojčina, “Hrvatski književnici i Zagrebački radio (1926-1941)”, Republika, 7-8, 1995, p. 57.
Parallel to the transformation of radio show for children into the radio show by children, the children’s theatre and public performances, as well as numerous guest performances in nearby (Karlovač) and remote theaters (Split, Belgrade, Ljubljana etc.), The children’s kingdom were introduced by the members of the society. For the discussion of children’s agency it is of importance to note that these radio, theatre, music and dance performances of children for children were often casted as the final products of numerous sections and courses for children (theatre course, dance course, language courses, music courses etc.) organized within The children’s kingdom.

Fig. 6: Children’s plays Crvenkapica (Little red Riding Hood) and Obuveni mačak (Puss in the Boots) by Djeco carstvo (The children’s kingdom) with children’s as actors. Excerpt from the journal of Mladen Śirola. Photo by M. Hameršak (courtesy of Archive of the Department for Literature and Theatre Studies by the Croatian Academy of Science and Art, Zagreb, Croatia).

According to the internal documents of The children kingdom the mission of this organization was to guide and prepare “children for the autonomous work in the community, to stimulate their creativity and to comprehend themselves as if they are adults”. In other words The children’s kingdom insisted on children’s creative and artistic agency. On the other hand, quite similarly to the penny literature editions, the very existence of the project of The children’s kingdom relied on the concept of children

27 This description of the aims of The children’s kingdom is quoted from the rules of this organization. This document is held at the Archive of the Department for Literature and Theatre Studies by the Croatian Academy of Science and Art, Zagreb, Croatia.
as consumers. *The children’s kingdom* relied on the funding of its spectators and its members. With no intention to discredit the social bias of *The children’s kingdom* represented for example in the regular staging charitable performances, its commercial foundation must be placed in the foreground. Namely, every member of the organization was obliged to pay annual membership fee which included subscription to the gazette and (free or discounted) ticket for the performances. These were the fees necessary for consumption of the production by *The children’s kingdom*. Participation in the productions of *The children’s kingdom* also was not free of charge. Members who participated in the performances were recruited among those who attended the paid courses. Although as press-clipping of *The children’s kingdom* suggest,\(^{28}\) this project was committed toward inclusion of children from different social backgrounds, commercial bias, as well as main medium (radio, theatre) of the project in 1930s restricted the participation of lower class children to the auditorium, far from the stage lights.\(^{29}\) Few months before *The children’s kingdom* will be disbanded in September 1941, the participation in the project was furthermore restricted on the anti-Semitic basis.\(^{30}\) This restriction was conducted, among all, on the grounds of promptly after the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia adopted law regulation which prohibited any participation of Jews in “the work, organizations and institutions of social, youth, sport and cultural life of Croatian nation in general, and especially in literature, journalism, art, music, urbanism, theatre and film.”\(^{31}\)

During the 1930s, for active participation in *The children’s kingdom*, children needed more than a fairy tale of one’s own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.\(^{32}\) As

\(^{28}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{29}\) According to the study by Nikola Vončina (“Prilozi za povijest radija u Hrvatskoj”, in *Zbornik trećeg programa*, Radio Zagreb, Zagreb, 1986, p. 183), in the eve of the Second World War the radio audience in Croatia was predominantly of middle class background. The radio receiver and the subscription to the radio program were out of the scope for working class audience, as it is illustrated by the statistic from 1940 reproduced by Vončina. According to this statistics, less than a 600 agricultural workers as opposed 30 000 of clerks, craftsmen and other middle class occupations were subscribed to the Radio Zagreb. Working class radio audience was so insignificant that it was not even registered in this statistic.


five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door were, according to Woolf, prerequisites for women’s writing in 1920s, such a pocket money, radio receiver, leisure time and parents support – means that were unavailable for the most working class children at the time – were prerequisites for active participation in one of the most notable forms of children’s cultural agency in the Croatian society of 1930s.

Although it is tempting to see The children’s kingdom as emancipator project, Virginia Woolf’s observations lead us in different directions. They orient our attention from achievements of The children’s kingdom toward its constraints; from admiration of The children’s kingdom dedication to children’s cultural agency toward its economical and social framework; from exclusively age centered perspective to perspective which would explore the paradoxes or structural ambivalences between The children’s kingdom conception of active children and passive heroines produced in the framework of 19th century children’s literature editing policies, which spread on other media when The children’s kingdom was at its peak.\(^{33}\)

At the moment, when feminists globally and locally reexamine the implications of post 1980s, feminist orientation toward cultural representations, and call for the return of class in the center of feminist analysis, the social exclusiveness of The children’s kingdom turns out to be more evident than ever. From this perspective the Croatian interwar fairy tale expansion in general furthermore appears, as it was detected by some of the contemporaries, as strand of commodification of childhood and children’s culture throughout of provisory broadening of children’s agency.\(^{35}\)


\(^{34}\) See, for example, Nancy Fraser, Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History, An Introduction, FMSH-WP-2012-17, august 2012; cf. Lilijana Burcar, “Post-feminizam v službi neoliberalnoga humanizma: obstranjenje kritične refleksije in delegitimizacija družbeno-političkoga boja”, Pro feminia, winter/spring, pp. 27-45.