

Images of Childhood and Children in Early Photobooks: Capturing Reality and Expectations

Photography in Children's Literature (Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Eds., 2023)

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Article abstract

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Images of Childhood and Children in Early Photobooks: Capturing Reality and Expectations

A Review of *Photography in Children's Literature* (Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Eds., 2023)

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Photography in Children's Literature, edited by Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (John Benjamins, 2023) offers a transnational investigation of children's photography spanning from the early 1870s to the late 1980s. It sets itself apart from many counterparts because of its wide range of analyzed topics, genres, and artistic techniques. This edited volume is recommended for all researchers and scholars interested in the transnationality of childhood politics and how photographs and children's picturebooks play a vital role in promoting powerful transnational children's images.

Key words: children's literature, photography, childhood politics, avant-garde movement

Research focusing on images of children and the social construction of childhood is situated at the interplay of visual studies and critical childhood studies. Recent books (Brewster, 2023; Duncum, 2023) and journal articles (Barker & Smith, 2012; Holmes, 2005) have investigated the relationship between how children are visually portrayed and broader societal expectations of an ideal child and childhood. *Photography in Children's Literature*, edited by Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (John Benjamins, 2023), adds another significant contribution to the existing body of critical childhood scholarship as it offers a transnational investigation of children's photography spanning from the early 1870s to the late 1980s. This edited volume sets itself apart from many counterparts because of its wide range of analyzed topics, genres, and artistic techniques.

It is a recommended read for all researchers and

scholars who are interested in the transnationality of childhood politics and how photographs and children's picturebooks play a vital role in promoting powerful transnational children's images.

The relationship between reality and fiction in early photobooks

The book is structured around four themes, with three chapters contributing to each. The first three chapters focus on the relationship between reality and fiction in early photobooks. Contrary to the assumption that photographs depict children and their surrounding reality, the three chapters in this part collectively argue that photographers in the late 1800s and early 1900s intentionally used different photographic techniques to portray children's environments in ways that departed, to a greater or lesser extent, from their reality.

The first chapter, by Olle Widhe, analyzes the relationship between visual and textual elements in *En barndomsdag. Sex bilder ur verkligheten* (A Childhood Day. Six Pictures from Reality)—the first known photographic picturebook for children, published in Sweden in 1879 by M. Scherer and H. Engler. Widhe focuses on the translation and

reception of *En barndomsdag* as it was performed as *tableaux vivant*. Widhe argues that the interplay between translated words, photographic images in the original picturebook, and the stage performance “unfold[ed] a romantic subjectivity in a media that is often perceived as the most lifelike and neutral” (p. 40).

In Chapter 2, Jessica Medgurst discusses how commentaries on photographs of Chinese children taken by Western photographers present a dichotomy between what children are like and how they should be. While Medgurst’s approach is similar to Widhe’s in that she attempts to understand the relationship between texts and photographs, Medgurst focuses more on discourses about representations of Chinese children and childhood present in captions. The captions preceding all photos of Chinese children either ignored characters in the frame or generalized Chinese childhood and ways of life.

Chapter 3 by Jörg Meibauer systematically investigates questions of truth, objectivity, and abstraction by drawing on recent analyses of picture theories and philosophies. The author used *The First Picture Book* and *The Second Picture Book* by Mary Steichen and Edward Steichen as two landmark picturebooks to explore potential implications of picturebooks on children’s image reading. Meibauer concludes that both picturebooks implicitly taught children the representational nature of pictures through the absence of captions, intentional arrangement of objects, and photographic perspectives.

Implications of the modernist and avant-garde movements

Part Two of this volume considers the implications of the modernist and avant-garde movements in the 1920s and 1930s on the introduction of different photographic styles to children’s picturebooks. Artists during this time period, including those who worked on children’s picturebooks, pursued a quest to capture and sometimes distort and reimagine reality by experimenting with different techniques, such as Soviet surrealism, photomontage, and photocollage.

In Chapter 4, Aleksandar Bošković and Ainsley Morse suggest the idea of “sup-realism” as an alternative designation for the turn in manipulating photo images in the late 1930s photobooks in Russia. Illustrations for children’s photobooks situated in the context of the socialist Soviet Union in the 1930s share many common features with superrealism, such as manipulation of the scale of the objects, protagonists, acknowledgment of objects’ agency, and the expression of variability, possibility, and alternative or absent reality. Bošković and Morse posit that the use of photographic technologies during this period created “narratives in which reality exists in palpable tension with fantasy and invention” (p. 116) and simultaneously eliminated unwanted parts of the story.

Chapter 5 by Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna presents a historical review of photomontage, photocollage, and collage in Polish children’s books in the 20th century. Wincencjusz-Patyna explains the popularity of photomontage in the light of changes in Polish society between the two World Wars, when the country sought to introduce modernity to all areas, including arts and children’s literature. Polish artists used photomontage, photocollage, and collage as original means of expression to construct surreal and fictional worlds and authenticated whimsical and creative stories in children’s picturebooks.

The last chapter in Part Two focuses on the works of Bruno Murani—an Italian artist and the relationship between his creativity and photographic works. Marnie Campagnaro is particularly adept at pointing out the lasting impacts of Murani’s works and how photography and photographic experiments were at the centre of his creativity. Murani applied different techniques in different picturebooks, such as closeups, long shots, and image sequences in the photomontage in *Cappucetto Giallo* (Little Red Riding Hood, 1972) or using black and white photographic double spreads showing images of stones and surroundings in *Da lontano era un’isola* (From Afar, It Is an Island,

1971). Most importantly, Murani's exquisite techniques and innovations elevated picturebooks beyond a source of information to an art-immersion experience, thus challenging young viewers' visual perceptions and imaginative reinterpretations of the world.

Contributions of female photographers

Part Three of this volume addresses a dire gap in the scholarship on female photographers and their contributions to the growing prevalence of children's picturebooks in the 20th century. The four chapters highlight the practices, positions, and contributions of four female pioneers in photography. Each chapter sheds light on how female photographers have defined their professional identity through their work while using their work to challenge contemporary conceptions of children and childhood.

Laurence Le Guen juxtaposes the works of two female photographers, Madeline Brandeis and Dominique Darbois, who authored *Children of All Lands Stories* and *Enfants du monde*, respectively, and discusses the roles of text and images in carrying broader messages of hope, peace, and celebration of diversity and complexity. Through detailed analyses of both visual techniques and content, Le Guen concludes that both authors intentionally used country portraits and depicted geographical and historical places to promote shared understandings of other places while underscoring each one's distinctive features. The author is particularly adept at identifying both collections' shortcomings—a tendency to present a stereotypical cultural imaginary, such as developing idealistic images of family life, vineyards and French high fashion.

In her contribution, Elina Druker investigates the photographic techniques and genres in the works of Anna Riwkin, an influential Russian-Swedish photographer active in the second half of the 20th century. Riwkin specialized in individual portraits and dance photography works, all of which reflected a mix of realist, documentary, and staged approaches to capturing individuality. Druker compares Riwkin's exhibited works and those selected for her published children's photobooks. The author asserts that the ones chosen for children's photobooks prioritized narrative, clarity, and storytelling capacity over artistic quality and uniqueness. Druker emphasizes that Riwkin should not only be known for her work with children or for her female approach, which is often seen as "products of temperament, instincts, and feelings" (p. 205). Riwkin was highly committed to telling stories about people from different ethnic groups or oppressed minorities and about women and children through a culturally radical stance and professional and artistic photography.

In the last chapter of this part, Kimberley Reynolds tells the largely forgotten story of Judith Tudor-Hart, a female photographer working in Britain, who narrated children's stories and issues affecting their well-being. The two signature works about children of her career were *The Basque Children in England* and *Moving and Growing*. The former was a photography book addressing the economic, political, and social implications for children and their well-being post World War II. *Moving and Growing*, on the other hand, captured images of children dancing, climbing, and throwing with a seemingly future-oriented aspiration and confidence. Regardless of the different dynamics in the two collections, they both demonstrate Tudor-Hart's commitment to using photography to reshape public thinking about childhood and children—not just as innocent and incompetent but as socially aware, engaged, and interested in making societal improvements.

The convergence of artistic, educational, ideological, and political orientations

The final part of this volume accentuates how artistic, educational, ideological, and political orientations converge in picturebooks for children. From the socialist ideas in Eastern German picturebooks, the vision of childhood and children living in kibbutzim in Israel, to narratives of American history in the Black art movement in the

1970s, the three contributing chapters expand and deepen our understandings of various ways in which art and artists' photographic techniques interplay and serve as a powerful political and ideological shaping tool.

In Chapter 10, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer consider the tension between different notions of the child and visions of childhood portrayed in three children's books published by the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The authors identify three key messages about the child across these books: the child is introduced to the world of labour, the child is the protagonist, and the child is curious and eager to learn. The use of montage, which was under skepticism for its appropriateness after the 1950s, seemed to echo the state's discourses of protagonist children and their curiosity, yet at the same time deviated from them by highlighting their individuality.

Chapter 11 by Ayala Amir introduces readers to three photobooks portraying children and childhood experiences living in kibbutzim in Israel. The photographs shown in the books were taken by local photographers, which was believed to offer insiders' points of view. A common feature among the photographs was the combination of realism and nostalgia that captured growing tensions of kibbutz life—individual needs versus collective demands and the idea of living in harmony with nature versus the pressures to develop the Zionist enterprise. This set of books about children of kibbutzim offers yet another example of how children's photobooks, as an interplay of genre, medium, and context, represent those photographed and the larger underlying social and political state of affairs.

In the last chapter of this volume, Katharine Capshaw explores how Black creators in the US wielded picturebooks to involve readers in thinking about Black identity and history. The publication of children's photobooks such as *Weusi Alphabeti*, *A is for Africa*, *Dry Victories*, or *The Black Blood* was part of the Black arts movement that “married aesthetic and political struggles, embracing a range of ideological and representational strategies” (p. 227) to retell historical narratives and fight for social changes. The intentions behind the assemblage and arrangement of photographs and texts were clear—to create mirrors where young readers could see themselves in the images and to urge readers to identify with and construct an understanding of their histories. Works by Black artists suggest ways in which photographic texts and techniques can contribute to mirroring, aspiring, and affirming the multiplicity of perspectives on identity and history.

Discussion

This volume is a comprehensive collection of works underlining artists' extraordinary creativity and photographic strategies to explicitly and implicitly convey messages about children's experiences, conceptions of childhood, and disruptions of official state discourses. Each chapter, while distinct in its approach to investigating the life and works of photographers and the impacts of broader social contexts on the content and representation of visual images, presents insightful analyses of how children's picturebooks reflect artists' individuality and the influence of contemporary conceptions of childhood in the content and design of individual picturebooks. However, it is important to note that because of multiple interpretations of images, novice visual readers might wonder how authors arrived at their analysis. They will benefit from more detailed explanations of analytical frameworks used for analyzing photographs and the relationship between texts and images.

Different groups of readers, including academic scholars and professional photographers interested in children's literature, will find this book a great resource, not only because of the transnational perspectives it offers but also because of its relevance to making sense of today's world of evolving artistic techniques and forms of expression. For academic researchers and educators, this book brings to life many underresearched aspects, such as the transnational influences of the avant-garde movement in children's picturebooks and women's roles in promoting

children's voices and agency through photographic works. Professional photographers passionate about capturing children's images and producing children's photobooks will better understand different techniques and genres used by photographers through history to deliver aesthetic and educational messages. Regardless of one's profession, if they are interested in understanding how visual works have shaped, challenged, and changed common perceptions of childhood and children, they will find something helpful in this comprehensive volume.

With my interest in children's thinking and their ideas about their roles in the larger society, this book's findings and discussions open multiple research ideas. As a scholar from Vietnam, a former colony, I found it fascinating to read Chapter 2 about representations of Chinese children under colonial perspectives, because it offers insights into how Chinese society and people were perceived by its colonists. Future research might compare how children of former colonies in Asia and other parts of the world, such as Africa, were represented to better understand Western views and approaches to controlling their colonies. Even though photography was a Western invention and was initially used to document exotic and mystical images of the Middle East, photographs and their representations were products of rich and complex cultural exchanges between the East and the West (Behdad, 2020). Scholars can study how photographers in non-Western contexts represented children and childhood in their works when cameras and photography were first introduced in their lands. Investigating how Eastern photographers in the early periods documented their children and people is important to understand their agency in representing their society and ways of seeing children and childhood. Last but not least, future research could look into how children interpret photographs of children and childhood. Children have never been passive individuals who unquestionably accept social expectations. Tapping into children's thinking and getting them to talk explicitly about their thinking is one of many ways to show respect and advocate for children as active agents in our society.

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