Adult Picture Books as Liminal Spaces: Exploring Some Inventive Invitations to Philosophical Reflection

Wendy Turgeon

In Thinking Children and Education, Matthew Lipman edited a broad collection of essays from the IAPC journal Thinking. Eva Brann's essay "Through Phantasia to Philosophy-Review with Reminiscences" opens with the tantalizing challenge to distinguish children's literature from adult literature. A number of criteria are examined.

- Are children's books written specifically for children?
- Are children's stories written exclusively by adults?
- Are they only about children or only children's books have children featured in them?
- Are there topics that only appear in children's books?
- Are children's books always gentle and safe?
- Do only children's books have pictures?

All of these proffered criteria fail since we can find books that appeal to adults as much as to children (*Alice in Wonderland*, for example), children appear in stories aimed at adult readers (*The Turn of the Screw)*, topics of violence and love are present in children's stories, they can disrupt and upset (Roald Dahl books), and many adults books also include illustrations. The genre of "comic book" appeals to many adults as well as to children and some are clearly for adults only (certain examples of Manga comics are blatantly erotic.) So, what can we point to as a sign that this book is "for children?"

It appears as if the best definition is that we know one when we see it. Children's books are clearly marked off in libraries and in bookstores and often the markers used are lots of illustrations and few and simple words. But pinpointing a criterion that clearly sets them apart from adult stories proves to be elusive. And when the Philosophy for Children movement inserted children's literature into the philosophical arena, the borders became even more porous. Books that seemed easy to designate as children's books were presented as offering serious and conceptually challenging ideas for adults as well as for children. The writings of Gareth Matthews, Thomas Wartenberg, Philip Cam, Peter Worley, among many, guide us into realizing the conceptual richness and philosophical potency of even the simplest picture book. For those who might dismiss "kiddie literature" as simplistic and banal for the adult, Brann's essay serves as an eye-opening corrective to such glib categorizations on both fronts.

However, there is a new "genre" of literature that is aimed explicitly at adults *and* children, or sometimes simply at adults, which follow the formula of the picture book: the inclusion of a simple text accompanying provocative images, and sometimes images alone. On the surface they may seem best suited for the "children's section" of a bookstore or library. But we discover that their linguistic and visual simplicity can fool us into thinking that the content itself is simplistic. And in many cases, they are directly inviting the adult reader to view their own experiences through the lens of a child. They appear to be growing in number and it can be hard to classify them easily, just as we find it difficult to define a "children's book." One might find them grouped with graphic novels but in some ways, they appear to be their own genre. These books openly adopt a façade of being "children's stories" but in fact offer directly to adults visual and conceptual invitations to think deeply about genuine metaphysical issues. This paper offers a tour of a collection of such books and why they can provoke deep philosophical reflections for adults—and in some cases for children as well.

In the visually rich picture book, *Stormy Night*, Michelle Milieux[1] shows a young girl getting ready for bed, kissing a parent good night, and climbing into her bed… only to embark on a journey of questions. She wonders about infinity, life on other planets, from where do humans come. She muses over questions about the nature of self, animals, bodies, her emotions, future, and on and on it goes. Meanwhile a storm rages outside. Each page includes a simple sentence with these astonishing huge questions, accompanied by line drawings that capture her imaginations in fanciful representations. In many ways her nighttime musings offer the reader the full spectrum of the human dilemma. As lightning flashes across the sky and page, she implores her dog to stay with her. Fears assail her: fear of being alone, war, robbers, and the always present monsters. Is there a soul? God? She confronts the idea of death and the fear of losing all her memories. What if she lived forever? As she finally goes to sleep with her dog nestled next to her, the storm abates, and she happily sleeps.

An adult reading this story will recognize all the worries and reflections of their childhood as well as their present adult self. These metaphysical questions continue to haunt us. This can be read along with a child where an exploration of each, or some, of the questions can generate a lively interchange of ideas as well as allow for the expression of genuine fears and concerns but with opportunities to both voice them and reflect thereon. But one could also use each question as a prompt for philosophical meditation within one's self. One would be hard pressed to classify this as for children or for adults. It is for humans.

Charles Mackesy offers a charming book which is written in cursive (so maybe a bit of a challenge to read!) along with lovely and suggestive images. Entitled *The Boy, the mole, the fox and the Horse*[2]. This story seems likewise to defy classification as for children or for adults. It is more directive in conveying its messages. The small boy is also full of questions and in this story, the animals serve as foil to his uncertainties as they speak with him. "Is there a school of unlearning? The boy asks. The mole tends to see the solution to everything as cake, but they discuss how important kindness is, how to confront fear, beauty, forgiveness and the search to find home. "I think everyone is just

[1] *Stormy Night*, Michele LeMieux, Kids Can Press, 1999.
[2] Harper One, 2019.

trying to get home," says the mole. The fox is mostly silent but after the boy and mole rescue him from a trap he follows along, sharing their comradery. Images vary from black and white to beautifully colored washes of the characters wandering around the forest and meadows as they continue their conversation. After meeting the horse, the questions continue in earnest. Being brave, strong, vulnerable, and accepting being ordinary is fine: "the greatest illusion is that life should be perfect." Now the outside world interrupts the friends when on a page the boy asks if he is seeing the moon, but the response is that it is a teacup stain. We are reminded that we are here, reading a book, perhaps with a cup of tea in our hand. Almost all of the classical virtues and Socratic concepts are mentioned and addressed in simple responses: curiosity, love, gratitude, and the threaded theme of kindness. Yes, the book ends with warmhearted advice to accept one's self and see love as the guiding force in living one's life.

Reading this book alone or with others can generate some thoughtful challenges to some of these platitudes but readers will also find the creatures endearing and the communication among such diverse species an imaginative invitation into thinking about our relationships with ourselves and the world around us. We are not journeying alone. How does each character express their view of the world and share that vision with the boy? The boy is full of questions and perhaps the characters have too many pat answers, but then again, maybe those very answers need to be sounded.

The text *A Serious Thought* by Jonas Taul[3] features a little boy who goes to bed and like the girl in our first story, he spends the night pondering a myriad of fundamental questions. Now, this text is more provocative and the accompanying drawings on each page help unpack his reflections as he experiences:

- Dangerous thoughts
- Admirable thoughts
- Questionable thoughts
- Beautiful thoughts
- Frightening thoughts
- Thoughts that reach far and wide

However, these vague ideas, hinted at in the whimsical pictures, are followed by more sustained concerns about how the Earth is just a tiny ball in space and the boy an insignificant speck on his planet. How small and insignificant he is! In the morning he tries to talk to his father but like most of us adults, he was too busy. The little boy goes out for a walk and at some point realizes he is lost in the middle of a woods. A cat finds him, and he follows the cat; as they walk along he encounters a hedgehog, frog, and ants. Each creature is living their lives fully engaged and not worrying, seemingly, about their insignificance. Our boy realizes that he too is real and important.

Here we find a small boy pondering the meaning of life, his life, in the scope of the universe. And here also animals offer him a lesson in reflection. There is the journey out and the return home. This is a classic fairy tale trope as our hero starts off into a foreboding world not knowing what will happen and along the way he learns valuable lessons from these animals. The opening pages, in

[3] Groundwood Books, 2020.

particular, could generate some wonderful discussions in terms of exploring the kinds of ideas that visit our minds in any given day. What is it to be significant? Why is size so important? This book seems very suited to read with children and use as a prompt for some serious philosophical explorations. But the little boy is really all of us, isn't he?

The artistically crafted book *The Forest* by Ricardo Bozzi[4] features cleverly designed pages with cutouts, embossed surfaces, and beautifully colored images of the forest. Described as the "journey of life," it parallels childhood into old age. Each embossed white page has the face of a baby, young child, young adult and ends with an old man. As the person ages, they move from carefree exploration and play into the realization that others are in the forest, they form alliances, friendships, and in some cases enmities. They get bruised and scratched by branches but then may come on a clearing and see the blue sky above. As they find themselves climbing upward they will ultimately come on to a ravine into which they will fall. What lies beyond? "Some say a grove of young pine trees"—precisely where they started out.

This text may be more of a challenge to problematize since it is so clearly paralleling the trajectory of a human life through the metaphor of roaming through a forest. But each page invites the reader to stop and think how the simple text may in fact translate into the rich dense experiences of we humans. Finding one's self in this forest may offer readers an opportunity to stop and ask what it is they seek and why? And who is on this journey with us?

The next book to consider is by Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo, *The Lost Soul*.[5] This exquisite picture book offers a morality tale inviting us to take note of time, to slow down, to allow one's "soul" to inhabit a life. The story warns us not to rush onward, abandoning one's soul behind in the cacophony of modern living which is too often focused on accomplishment, material possessions, and our obsession with a man-made world. The majority of the written story occurs on one page, followed by pages of beautiful yet somewhat eerie drawing of a cottage in the woods, animal presences, and the passing of time in the quiet. The man has rushed through his life career building and constantly moving around the world. When he wakes up one morning and discovers that he has forgotten who he is, he visits a doctor who advises him to find a place of his own and "sit there quietly, and wait for your soul." For souls move slower than bodies and too many people have left their souls behind in the rush to join the booming and buzzing world around them. The protagonist takes his advice and moves to a small cottage. The following pages are mostly images of time passing as the man grows older, his hair and beard longer as the sign of the passage of time. Then a parallel series of images appears of a small child sitting in a café; the man continues to sit quietly at his table, accompanied only by mysterious deer, a cat, and a growing plant. The child makes his way on a journey (note the common theme of "journey" among our texts) until he peers into the window of the cottage and the man and child gaze out at the reader from a double page, each reflecting the other. The story ends with the "two" of them living together in the peace and

[4] Illustrated by Violeta Lopiz and Valerio Vidali, Enchanted Lion Press, 2018.
[5] Seven Stories Press, 2017; translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones from the Polish original, 2021.

timelessness of the natural world, marked only by the growing vines and flowers that ultimately consume the cottage.

So, this story is a story told through images with only a setup of text. There are no questions here, only provocations of reflection about how we spend our time, what it means to be a self/soul, how we can lose ourselves in busyness. Each illustration suggests another story that invites unpacking. Who are the dancers outside the cottage? Why that deer who shrinks into toy size inside the house? What do the plants tell us about life, about ourselves? What role does childhood play in our adult lives and how can we relate to our lost selves? Perhaps this book, despite its deception appearance, is really only for adults. Or is it?

Jean-Pierre Weill has created a large format book, *The Well of Being*[6], and included the subtitle of "A children's book for adults" as a recognition of how his text mimics the format of a picture book but is intended for the adult reader. Each page offers a simple line of text accompanied by a suggestive watercolor. Weill credits Saul Steinberg, the cartoonist, "for showing me how imagery approaches the written language,"[7] but in truth every one of the books referenced in this article does precisely the same thing. Clearly inspired by Jewish mysticism and history, Weill asks the reader, shown waiting for a train, to go on a conceptual journey. Is life a meaningless concatenation of material causality? Or is there a primal source, the titular "well of being?" The author strings a bead on a string to start the "journey." Finding this well of being is challenging at best, as images of Auschwitz and a man falling from the World Trade Center building powerfully show. But well-being is a choice we make and it can free us to enjoy the world and those around us but when we lose sight of it, we spiral downward, cut off from others and from ourself. Continuing the metaphor of threading a bead on a string, Weill adds a second bead to signal a reflective move: consider the immediacy of childhood and the innocence of being at one with the world… until we discover we can do wrong, fail, lack sufficiency or be defined by what we are not. The final bead asks us to see our life not as at the mercy of forces outside of ourselves but as emanating from within. We must become aware that the stories we have woven have come from ourselves and we can change them: When we become aware of our own thinking, we awaken."[8] Interestingly, the following text of coming to accept one's self and living in the moment are accompanied by images of the man and a child. If we go this route we are "drinking at the well of being."[9]

While there is no mention of a god, the author's accompanying notes highlight the connections to his Jewish faith tradition. One could read this story through a theological lens but it is entirely possible to focus on the personal agency and goal of self-reflective choice as to how to navigate the world, perhaps even as a nod to positive psychology and theories of well-being so popular today. As a guide for philosophical reflection and discussion, each stage from despair, doubt, discovery, affirmation can open up avenues for questions and an unpacking of each image. Man's

[6] Call of the Shofar Publishing, 2013. This phrase, "the well of being" may come from Heidegger but is also the title of David Kennedy's book on the philosophy of childhood. See David Kennedy's *The Well of Being*, State University of New York press, 2006.
[7] Weill, on the title page.
[8] Ibid., p. 154 and 156.
[9] Ibid., p. 180 and 182.

inhumanity to man is clearly evidenced and yet the tenor of the work is that of hope and goodness. Two of the most striking illustrations are the drawing that the young child makes on the wall of a garden, a deer, and simply a beautiful scene which is followed on the next page by the "reality:" blotches of paint all over the wall. The mother's anger is not entirely misplaced, although we feel for the child who saw his creation as beautiful only to have it condemned as a mess. This event seems to parallel the Fall in the garden of Eden. This book might be an important artifact for older children, teens, to explore since they can so easily identify with feeling out of place, as failures for not fitting in or living up to parental expectations. But this text is also in the group of highly didactic stories with a theme to be conveyed and accepted. Nevertheless, some of the best philosophical prompts are morality tales that we can problematize and question the conclusions offered.

The final book to consider is called *The River*[10], by the Italian artist Allesandro Sanna. Punctuated only four times with a short text which introduces each season, this story is told mostly in images. The four seasons of the Po river are captured in watercolor ribbons, four to each page, that seem to suggest a story, or stories that take place as the season moves along. Reading images with only a hint of what we are being told allows the reader/viewer to engage their own imagination in deciphering a story within each season. It centers on a small town, a house out in the country, and a series of events like circuses, autumn floods, the experience of the birth of a calf in a frosty winter barn, springtime love and marriage, and during high summer the circus again with an escaped tiger. The painter confronts the tiger who becomes his "muse." The tone of each image varies dramatically from serene, to threatening, to excitement, to tense, to exuberant. In some ways the artist/author captures the trajectory of human life. Sharing these picture stories with others could invite some intriguing retellings or alternative narratives. Unlike some of our other examples above, this text seems neutral in terms of offering a specific point of view or moral. Here the challenge is studying each watercolor to try to interpret what is it telling us, or what it might tell us with multiple directions possible. One can also step back and reflect on the power of the image, art, to convey ideas, suggest points of view, question what we see, think, feel. This text in particular could be a delight to explore as offering story prompts that include questions, challenges, the big concepts of what it is to live a life.

Conclusion

The selection offered here is limited but what we find is a blurring of lines between children's books and adult stories, and particularly stories and philosophy. Practitioners of doing philosophy with children, young people, and adults will find these stories as offering yet another source of rich reflective opportunities. As with many stories, the challenge may be to problematize ideas presented but one can do that and still not "destroy" the text or dishonor the story itself. Perhaps the most noticeable aspects of these examples are the common themes of journey, the presence of animals as guides or provocateurs, and the stream of classic philosophical questions that we find from the Pre-Socratic philosophers and Socrates in ancient Greece and the long tradition of Western philosophy, to the sages of first millennial BCE China or India, and in the mythic and philosophical traditions in many indigenous societies. As humans we question things. These books caution us to avoid

[10] Enchanted Lion Books, 2014; translated by Michael Reynolds.

dichotomizing stories into child/adult categories, instead embracing an invitation to reflect together on the quintessential human enterprise as a search for meaning.

Works cited

Bozzi, Ricardo. **The Forest.** Illustrated by Violeta Lopiz and Valerio Vidali. Enchanted Lion Press, 2018.

Brann, Eva, "Through Phantasia to Philosophy- Review with Reminiscences." As found in Lipman, Matthew, editor. **Thinking Children and Education**, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendell Hunt Publishing Co., 1993. The cited article runs from p. 287-297

Mackesy, Charles. **The Boy, the mole, the fox and the Horse.** Harper One, 2019.

Milieux, Michelle. **Stormy Night**. Kids Can Press, 1999.

Sanna,Allesandro. **The River.** Translated by Michael Reynolds. Enchanted Lion Books, 2014.

Taul, Jonas. **A Serious Thought.** Groundwood Books, 2020.

Tokarczuk, Olga and Joanna Concejo. **The Lost Soul.** Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones from the Polish original. Seven Stories Press, 2021.

Weill, Jean-Pierre. **The Well of Being.** Call of the Shofar Publishing, 2013.

Address Correspondences to:
Dr. Wendy Turgeon
St. Joseph's University, New York
email: turgeon@optonline.net