

INTERVIEW

SANDRA BECKETT to TSILIMENI TASOYLA

**1. Which was the occasion that made you interested in children's books?
When did that happen?**

SB: My interest in children's books grew indirectly out of my PhD studies in French literature because my PhD dissertation dealt with the twentieth-century French author Henri Bosco, who had written for children as well as adults. I subsequently wrote several books on Bosco in French, but devoted chiefly to his novels for adults. When I was hired by Brock University in 1990, the department was looking for someone who could also teach a course in French children's literature at a time when such a course was extremely rare in Canada. At that time, my qualifications in the field of children's literature were chiefly that the majority of authors on whom I researched had also been published for children. In 1991, I attended my first congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL) in Paris, where I was elected secretary. I served on the board for ten years, eventually as president. The IRSCL has members in more than fifty countries worldwide and my involvement with that organization was decisive in my career path. In 1997, I published *De grands romanciers écrivent pour les enfants* (Great novelists write for children), devoted to books published for children by five major French novelists. At the same time, my research was shifting toward an international corpus and a more cross-cultural approach to children's literature, as demonstrated by *Reflections of Changes: Children's Literature Since 1945* (1997), *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults* (1999), which was recently released in paperback, and *Beyond Babar: The European Tradition in Children's Literature* (2006), which I edited with Maria Nikolajeva. Since the 1990s, my research has focused largely on the crossing of borders, notably age borders, but also cultural and geographical borders. My involvement with international scholarly societies made me acutely aware of the need for comparative studies of a truly global nature. I became particularly committed to introducing to English-speaking readers important international authors and illustrators who too often remain unknown due to lack of translations. *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* (2009) and *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages* (2012) both examined the phenomenon of crossover books in a global context and cited examples from as many countries as possible.

2. As a child, what was your relationship with books like?

SB: As a child, I was an avid reader. My father was a teacher for a time, so we had a small library of books, mostly classics, at home. I was also a frequent visitor to the local municipal library, where I borrowed the maximum number of books allowed at one time. I also spent hours on the library floor, reading everything from classics to *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*. Many of the books I read as a child, particularly those that left a lasting impression, were what I refer to now as crossover classics: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Arabian Nights*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables* (the quintessential Canadian crossover classic), novels by Charles Dickens, and so forth. Among the personal books that I remember most from my early childhood is an illustrated collection of the Grimms' fairy tales. The book seems to have left a permanent and powerful mark because to date I have published three books on "Little Red Riding Hood" and have written extensively on other fairy tales.

3. Your book *Revisioning Red Riding Hood around the world* refers to intertextuality and to meta – modern children's books in relation to the tale of Red Riding Hood. How does this game contribute to the child's relationship with books?

SB: I have always been very interested in intertextuality. I am particularly drawn to the "recycling" or retelling of well-known stories in works that address a crossover audience of adults and children. I began a book on the subject in the 1990s, but my research for the fairy-tale chapter highjacked the project and I ended up writing three books on a single fairy tale. *Recycling Red Riding Hood* (2002) was devoted to contemporary retellings for children, while *Red Riding Hood for All Ages: A Fairy-Tale Icon in Cross-Cultural Contexts* (2008) examines retellings for diverse age groups. As the majority of the works discussed in these two books are inaccessible to English-speaking readers, it seemed indispensable to translate a selection of these and other retellings and make them available in English. *Revisioning Red Riding Hood around the World: An Anthology of International Retellings* (2014) contains fifty-two retellings from twenty-four countries and fifteen languages. It includes two Greek retellings, both published in 2007: Ioulita Iliopoulou's *Prassini Soufitsa*, illustrated by Yannis Kottis, and Hara Yiannakopoulou's "I Kokkinoskoufitsa apo mesa" (Little Red Riding Hood from the Inside), illustrated by Vassilis Papatsarouchas, from *Mia agapi, epta chromata kai enas lykos*. The tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" has strong appeal for authors and illustrators because it is one of the familiar icons of Western culture. It is

therefore a highly effective hypotext (to borrow Gérard Genette's term) even in children's literature, which must take into consideration the reader's limited cultural heritage. Due to the fairy-tale heroine's cult status, the processes of intertextuality become quite accessible for a young audience. Authors can generally assume that their young audience is familiar with the tale and can play with the intertextual tension created between the classic tale and the retelling. Such works help children learn to decode intertextuality at an early age. The familiar story allows authors to introduce young readers to other literary concepts and to introduce more complex narrative structures and techniques. In addition, authors are able to address difficult subjects such as sexuality and violence in an appropriate manner. Retellings also give adult mediators the opportunity to introduce children to the classic work, thus ensuring the survival of such works in our cultural heritage. In my case, the number and diversity of the retellings of "Little Red Riding Hood" worldwide offered a rare opportunity to introduce, through a very familiar story, many important international authors and illustrators who all too often remain unknown outside their own language markets.

4. *Last March in your presentation in The Child and the Book conference in Aveiro you claimed that picturebooks are crossovering the readers' age in favor of adults. What is your opinion about this? What is the purpose of this fact? After all, do you think that young readers benefit from this fact?*

SB: In Aveiro I stated that crossover picturebooks cross or transcend boundaries between young and older readers, attracting a cross-generational audience to a genre traditionally seen as only for children, because they challenge the conventional codes and norms of that genre. I certainly do not believe that true crossover authors favour an adult audience over a child audience. Crossover picturebooks are multilayered works that engage and appeal to multiple audiences of different ages. Although crossover picturebooks have become a more common phenomenon, I also pointed out in Aveiro that the innovative, boundary-breaking nature of picturebooks dates from the early days of the genre. I definitely believe that young readers benefit from this phenomenon. Many crossover picturebooks, particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s, were created with the intention of challenging the conventions and codes that traditionally governed the genre. This included the notion that the picturebook is a genre only for children. Their transcendence of the traditional age boundaries of book publishing opened up new horizons for the picturebook. The potential of this art form has made it attractive to an ever increasing number of artists from a diverse range of fields and they bring new inspiration to the picturebook. The radical

innovations occurring in the picturebook make it one of the most exciting art forms of the twenty-first century, for young readers as well as older readers.

5. *What is your opinion about the text – image relationship? Which is more important for the child?*

SB: It is the interplay of text and image that makes the picturebook genre distinct from other narrative forms. It is what also gives picturebooks their capacity for innovation. In Aveiro I mentioned the pioneering role of *Macao et Cosmage ou L'expérience du bonheur* (Macao and Cosmage or The experience of happiness), a French picturebook published in France in 1919 by the artist Edy Legrand. It was a landmark work in the development of the picturebook due to the reversal of the conventional text-image relationship. As the picturebook evolved throughout the twentieth century, the role of the image became increasingly important. This culminated in the wordless picturebook, a popular sub-genre and a natural evolution in our technological age of visual media. Picturebooks without text have traditionally been associated with very young children but they can be highly complex works that invite multiple readings on many levels. Children are often more adept at reading visual texts so wordless picturebooks empower child and adult readers more equally. Perhaps wordless picturebooks, more than any other literary form, can truly be books for all ages. At the same time, there has been exciting experimentation with the text-image relationship, resulting in picturebooks where the complex dialogue between text and image invites readings on different levels by all ages.

6. *According to your opinion which is the leading country in relation to innovation of content, image, publication, etc. of picturebooks?*

SB: Today I think it is impossible to point to a single country, as exciting innovations can be found in many countries. However, France has long held a reputation for groundbreaking picturebooks that defy conventions and taboos. Throughout the second half of the twentieth-century, pioneering authors and illustrators found the support of innovative publishers who were willing to take risks and defy the conventions that governed children's books. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Robert Delpire initiated a renewal of children's publishing in France, seeking in particular to improve the status of images. A meeting of Harlin Quist and François Ruy-Vidal in the mid-1960s led to the publication, on both sides of the Atlantic, of revolutionary and controversial picturebooks that left an indelible mark on children's book publishing and opened new horizons for the genre. This pioneering work was continued in

the 1970s and 1980s by publishing houses such as Le Sourire qui mord, Ipoméé, and Grandir, which were often created with the express intention of ridding children's books of existing stereotypes and taboos, and of breaking down the barrier between child and adult readers. The result was provocative, visually sophisticated picturebooks that were often the subject of much controversy. Many of these picturebooks were too avant-garde for other children's book markets and even in France they often had a limited market. They nonetheless had a profound influence on the future of the genre. In recent decades, the Scandinavian countries have produced very innovative picturebooks that are often too unconventional for the majority of markets. The groundbreaking picturebooks that repeatedly take Norwegian readers by surprise are possible in part thanks to generous government funding. It is important to point out, however, that very innovative children's publishing houses exist in many countries, for example, Media Vaca in Spain, Orecchio acerbo in Italy, the Creative Company in the United States, One Stroke in Japan, and so forth.

7. *You have visited Greece for the previous The Child and the Book congress. What is your opinion about the Greek children's books?*

SB: Regrettably, my knowledge of Greek children's books is very limited. I frequently lament the fact that so few foreign children's books are translated into English, particularly in North America. It was largely for this reason that I published my anthology of Little Red Riding Hood retellings. I speak several other languages, but Greek is not one of them, so I am largely reliant on Greek colleagues to introduce me to their children's literature. That is how I discovered *Prassini Soufitsa* and "I Kokkinoskoufitsa apo mesa," which could only be included in the anthology thanks to the generous help of Greek colleagues. I became very interested in the work of Vassilis Papatsarouchas, who seems to share my fascination with Little Red Riding Hood. His illustrations for *Kokkinoskoufitsa* and *Oi 12 kokkinoskoufites kai o kourdistos lykos* offer highly original portrayals of Riding Hoods. At The Child and the Book conference in Athens, I mentioned briefly the wonderful version of Alice that Vassilis Papatsarouchas published with Polaris in 2012. I was delighted to be invited to speak in Athens and to have the opportunity to discover a small sampling of other Greek children's books at the conference. It is obvious that there are some very innovative children's books being published in Greece and I hope to have the opportunity to discover more of them.

8. *Could you recommend 5 picturebooks that a child should absolutely read?*

SB: That is a very challenging question, perhaps more difficult even than choosing five children's books in general. Some of my favourite children's books are picturebooks. Picturebooks never cease to amaze me due to their diversity and their capacity for innovation. The genre is constantly evolving and some of the most radical innovations in the arts occur in picturebooks. So the titles I propose today are not necessarily those that I would have given yesterday or would choose tomorrow. They are simply some of my personal favourites at this point in time. I have deliberately selected them from five different countries and I am not listing them in any order of preference. Bruno Munari's innovative *Nelle notte buia* (In the Darkness of the Night, 1956), in which the narrative is carried largely by paper and paper cutting techniques, is a landmark picturebook which has had a profound influence on picturebook makers around the world. Maurice Sendak's pioneering role in introducing subjects from the dark, disturbing side of childhood needs to be acknowledged but I hesitate between his groundbreaking, universally influential *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and his revolutionary and much darker *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993), which was published thirty years later to a great deal of controversy. Wolf Erlbruch's *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* (Death, Duck, and the Tulip, 2007), which addresses the taboo subject of death in a simple and eloquent manner accessible to young children, has been called one of the best books about death for any age. Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* (1998) is a complex, multi-layered work that uses a polyphony of first-person voices to show how just how different perceptions of the same events can be. Finally, Frédéric Clément's *Magasin Zinzin, ou, Aux merveilles d'Alys* (The Merchant of Marvels and the Peddler of Dreams, 1995), winner of the Premio Grafico at the Bologna Children's Book Fair in 1996, deserves to be included for its innovative format, whimsical fantasy, and poetic text. I was very reluctant to try to pick five titles because picturebooks constitute an astonishingly rich sphere of literary creation and many authors and illustrators have forged new directions for the genre.

9. Are you writing a new book at the moment?

SB: I am always working on at least one book. It has no doubt become obvious that I am very interested in the "recycling" or retelling of well-known stories, especially in works that address a crossover audience. I began a book on the subject in the 1990s, but my research for the fairy-tale chapter hijacked the project and I ended up writing three books on "Little Red Riding Hood." Now I am returning to my research on other retold stories, including several other fairy tales, oriental tales, biblical narratives, fables, classics such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pinocchio*, etc. I am currently working on

a book devoted to re-visualizing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which considers a wide range of visual interpretations of Carroll's classic. Eventually I plan to complete a book dealing with the various genres of retold stories.