

Cornelia Pokrzywa, “Illustration as Text: Reflections on Literacy Development in a Bilingual Childhood

I think I have a somewhat unusual literacy narrative, or path to literacy, than a lot of people do. Because when I was growing up, before I went to school, my parents were immigrants and they did not speak English, so in the home, uh, we spoke Croatian, and that was really, that was the only language I spoke, uh, before I went to school. Now we did live in a neighborhood where my sister and I, um, my sister was 18 months older than I am, we did play with neighborhood kids. But you know, little kids, they play, and I don't know how they find ways to communicate, but we must have found things to communicate, um, about, and I really didn't know much English before I went to kindergarten. Um, my sister was one grade ahead of me, and so she was bringing home a lot of her, you know, early readers and picture books, and I'd had some exposure to that, uh, but most of the books in our home, uh, were Croatian books, obviously because that's um, that was the language that my parents spoke. So I have, um, some picture books that I'm going to be looking at and talking about what my memories were with these books, and um, this particular set that I'm looking at, uh, was a set that is written in Croatian, but it they are American books and they're translated from Italian, uh, into uh, from English to Italian and then, uh, into Croatian. And the copyright on these is 1967, and the artwork, um, I remember just spending a lot of time looking at these pictures before I really could read because this was a read aloud book, so it was intended for the parent to read, and I guess my mother read me these books, but most of the time I was just looking at the pictures and sort of making up my own stories to go along with it.

So the first one, um, that I'm looking at is um, *Puss n' Boots*, and in this *Puss in Boots* the, um, illustrations feature, uh, some very strange looking people, uh, some people with frightening and evil faces, and I remember making up stories to go along with this book, um, that just didn't have anything to do with the story of *Puss n' Boots*. In particular, I remember the pictures of the princess and prince who, um, are very conventional, uh, you know, traditional drawings, and I remember trying to draw beautiful princesses, and the dresses always had these very elaborate, romantic, um, romantic embellishments, uh, and I just thought that they were, I thought that was the epitome of beauty is just looking at these. Um, same thing when I go through, uh, there was um, the *Prince and the Pauper*, so a translation of Mark Twain. It's obviously uh, abridged, and um, same thing, we have these uh illustrations with people's faces that used to just draw me in because they were so, so strange um, the kinds of faces that they made.

Um, *Tom Thumb* is another one, but probably the oddest one that, um, I just have not seen this in a children's version like this, is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Um, I don't remember from my mother actually reading this text to me, but we had the book, and I had these pictures, and the pictures, the illustrations were frightening to me. I remember being really frightened. I remember not knowing anything about um, about slavery really, at all, and there are people in chains and uh, a man with a whip, and it was just very frightening, and I just remember being so puzzled by this whole thing, um, and then there are these illustrations of uh, Caucasian people dressed in beautiful clothes, and um, I just didn't know anything about the story, and I just remember being so puzzled by it and coming back to it again and again. Uh, so those are some picture books that, um, that I was not able to read, but I was, it was the start of literacy because I was seeing these

pictures and then thinking about, um, what possibly these, what could be these symbols next to these pictures, and what did it all mean.

The second book, um, or the second set that I'm looking at, is, um, a book that is actually taped together because it was so beloved by my sister and me. And this is, it was called the *Encyclopedia for Girls*, and it is also a Croatian book, and um, it is basically one of those books that, uh, goes over activities for kids to do at home, right. What are you going to do when you're bored kind of thing, and so um, this book I remember loving it so much because I thought the little girl in this book was not only the most beautiful girl that ever lived, she's a, uh, blond, blue-eyed, perfectly dressed, uh, little girl, who I thought just must be the most beautiful girl. But also she had and did everything that I dreamed about doing, um, she organized her room, uh, she worked on these wonderful crafts, independently was doing things like using a sewing machine and um, scissors. Uh, because this is a Croatian book, and uh, was intended primarily for children that live in the city, um, there are scenes where she and her friend who appear to be no more than, I don't know, 9 or 10 years old, walk the city streets dressed like little women and um, just enjoy a lot of independence that I couldn't imagine in the life that I lived, which was living in the suburbs. And you know, um, I was allowed to go in my backyard, and here were these very cosmopolitan girls um, allowed to use irons, and and all kinds of things like that. Um, so this book had all of these directions for crafts and things that you could do and recipes that you could make, and um, I really wasn't such a strong reader at this point, and so a lot of these things, I just saw the finished product and thought, "I wish I knew how, how she did this. How did she do this?" Um, and this was a book that just I loved it so much.

There are a lot of cultural things here too, that looking back on it now, um, I might have been puzzled at the time, but Croatia at the time was part of uh, former Yugoslavia, and so it was uh, it was a communist government, and so in the section on holidays, um, you have these things that maybe didn't stick out at the time but they stick out now. For holidays, instead of saying Christmas, or you know, the holiday that most people would celebrate, would would would have been Christmas. Most of the people are Catholic. It just says New Years. And there is a Christmas tree, and they have presents, but it says New Year because it they don't want to talk about Christmas. Um, then they have instead of, um, Mardi Gras or you know, festival, they call it carnival, but they can't relate it to Ash Wednesday or or any Christian holiday, and then they also feature, um, May Day, right. So the first of May, and you have these girls, um, in their young communist uniforms and so they're they're good patriots, I guess. Uh, so that was always, that was always very interesting to me, you know. At the time I didn't think much of it, but looking back on it, I did. This girl also has, you know, she explains how to have a dog and a cat and a hamster and a bird, and I always remember thinking. She has everything. This girl has everything. She's the luckiest little girl in the world. I loved this book. And now I have daughters and they like looking at this book. This book does not have a copyright on it, but based on the pictures, um, and knowing that I had it when I was a little girl, it must be late 60s, early 70s, and from the fashions, I think that's consistent with, um, what you would find. Uh, so that was a much beloved book, uh, in my early childhood.

Eventually, you know, I went to school, and I really became a very strong reader. Um, and one of the series of books that was just a great favorite for me was the Laura Ingalls Wilder *House on the Prairie* series. Um, of course I did grow up watching the television show as well, but I

always remember feeling that the television show, especially in later years, was really not related to the books at all. Um, but the books, when I was growing up, my favorite was the *Little House in the Big Woods* and um, *Little House on the Prairie*. I really liked those two books the most. As I got older, um, I came to really enjoy *Farmer Boy*. I don't know that when I was that young, maybe third or fourth grade, that I really loved *Farmer Boy* that much because *Farmer Boy*, of course, is about Almonzo and not about Laura. So, not having any brothers and not being very interested in boys, it was a little bit, you know, foreign to me. But there was a picture in this book um, uh, and of course the illustrations are done by Garth Williams and uh, I just love Garth Williams and uh, I remember him from a lot of different books um, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Stuart Little* and so on, but uh, he did the Laura Ingalls Wilder series. And the illustration that he does on the chapter "Surprise" where the schoolboys um, try to uh oust Mr. Corse the the schoolteacher, and this mild-mannered teacher has a bullwhip that he uses to pull them all into line and throw them out and the illustration that goes with that, um, was for some reason, for me when I was younger, one of the most exciting, shocking and just compelling illustrations that I'd ever seen in a children's book. Um, the teacher has this whip, and the children's faces, they're just terrified. There's one boy who seems almost ghoulish there in the corner who's watching what's going on, and of course the big boy, I think his name is Bill Richie, who is being whipped, um, has this face that is just, it's coarse, and it's swollen, and he doesn't look anything like a child, a schoolchild. I couldn't imagine how he could even be in school. Um, and in the description of course, uh, Laura Ingalls Wilder writes it's about how he was bleeding, and being, uh, being thrown around by this lash that was hissing and crackling, and I just always remember, um, how interested I was in this picture. So this book now is still a favorite for me.

So I don't think that I would ever get rid of these books. I don't think I would give them away; I wouldn't donate them anywhere because um, when I come across them they're still, they're a part of me, they're a part of my history, uh, they're a part of my literacy development, and I do share them with, uh, my own children, and they might have their own memories attached to these books or other books. And sometimes you can share that. Um, but in any case, I definitely want to keep these books, and um, I'm glad I had a chance to talk about them because I look at them and these thoughts go through my mind, but I don't know that I ever really reflected on it.