



Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska

orcid.org/0000-0002-7753-5463

e-mail: hanna.dymel-trzebiatowska@ug.edu.pl

University of Gdańsk

## Environmental Activism. The Image of Greta Thunberg in Picturebooks in the Swedish Book Market

Zielony aktywizm. Wizerunek Greta Thunberg w książkach obrazkowych na szwedzkim rynku wydawniczym

### KEYWORDS

climate activism,  
Greta Thunberg,  
picture book,  
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### ABSTRACT

In the article, I focus on the image of the Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, in two picture books from the Swedish book market in 2020: the informative one: *Småmänniskor, storadrömmar: Greta Thunberg (Greta Thunberg. Little People, Big Dreams)* by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara and Anke Weckmann; and the fictional book: *Greta och jättarna. Inspirerad av Greta Thunbergskampför klimatet (Greta and the Giants: Inspired by Greta Thunberg's Stand to Save the World)* by Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico. My analysis aims to discuss and compare these books from the perspective of the third wave of ecocriticism that urges for taking up remedial actions. I attempt to evaluate the means of artistic expression that have been employed to implement these actions in both the iconotexts. I also confront the third wave agenda with ideas about contemporary literature for children, which, since the twentieth century, has been renouncing offensive didactic activities in favour of aesthetics and entertainment. The conclusion is that the picture books represent a similar degree of light didacticism, and their hybridity blurs clear-cut genre boundaries between fiction and reality.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

aktywizm  
klimatyczny,  
Greta Thunberg,  
książka obrazkowa,  
ekokrytyka, Szwecja

W artykule skupiam się na obrazie szwedzkiej aktywistki klimatycznej, Greta Thunberg, w dwóch książkach obrazkowych obecnych na szwedzkim rynku wydawniczym: informacyjnej *Små människor, stora drömmar: Greta Thunberg* (Mali ludzie, wielkie marzenia. Greta Thunberg) Marii Isabel Sánchez Vegary i Anke Weckmann z 2020 r. oraz fikcyjnej *Greta och jättarna. Inspierad av Greta Thunbergs kamp för klimatet* (Greta i olbrzymy. Zainspirowane walką Greta Thunberg o klimat) Zoë Tucker i Zoe Persico z 2020 r. Celem analizy jest omówienie i porównanie tych książek z perspektywy hasła trzeciej fali ekokrytyki, nawołującego do działań zaradczych. W badaniu staram się ocenić środki artystycznego wyrazu, które zostały wykorzystane, aby implementować te działania w ikonotekstach obu utworów. Postulat trzeciej fali ekokrytyki konfrontuję z wyobrażeniami o współczesnej literaturze dla dzieci, która od XX wieku odżegnuje się od działań ofensywnie dydaktycznych na rzecz estetyki i rozrywki. W badaniu została wykorzystana metodologia z zakresu narratologii oraz badań książki obrazkowej. Wnioski wskazują, że obie książki reprezentują podobny stopień lekkiego dydaktyzmu, a ich hybrydalność zaciera granice genologiczne między fikcją a rzeczywistością.

## The Climate Crisis and Children's Literature in Sweden

Literature seen as a lens focusing the world's problems clearly illustrates the escalation of the climate crisis. This is reflected in the Nordic Council's publication *Påtversaf Norden*<sup>1</sup> (Goga & Eskebæk, 2021), of which the second volume is devoted to ecocritical currents in Scandinavian books written for young readers. This key issue for the future of the planet also resonates when we follow the latest reports from SBI -Svenskabarnboksintitutet (Swedish Children's Book Institute) concerning the market of children's and young adult literature. In the publication entitled *Bokprovning 2019* (Book Market Research 2019), which discusses the previous year 2018, these issues appear in the common category "Activism". The subsequent *Bokprovning 2020* report already singles out a separate thematic section "Miljöfrågan i barn- och ungdomslitteraturen 2019" (Environmental Issues in Children's and Young People's Literature 2019), indicating that the importance of the issue and its literary representation deserve a separate discussion:

1 The literal translation of the title of this anthology is *Across the North*. The publication is one element of a project supervised by the Nordic Council and planned for three years (2019–2021), and also including annual seminars on the latest trends in children's and young people's literature. Its aim was to consolidate the research and create a space for discussion and exchange of opinions across Scandinavia.

Environmental issues have been part of literature for children and young people since the 1960s, and they are more relevant today than ever before. Last year's report identified this subject matter as highly relevant, and the same can be said for books published in 2019. Climate change, environmental protection, endangered animals and extreme weather phenomena are central themes and recur in all forms of literature: from picturebooks and teen novels to collections of poetry and non-fiction (SBI, 2020, p. 9).

Unsurprisingly, many of the items in this category were inspired by the person and environmental activism of Greta Thunberg. Interest in Greta began in August 2018 with the so-called climate school strike<sup>2</sup>, and the reaction in the book world followed just a few months later. As the SBI writes in its 2019 report, publications on the girl have taken various forms: Thunberg's speech at the UN was included in a multi-author essay collection entitled *Vad håller ni på med? En antologi om klimatet (What Are You Doing? An Anthology on Climate)* (Östnäs et al., 2019). The teenager herself was featured in the factual books such as *Sveriges historia. Från stenåldern till smartphone (Swedish History. From the Wooden Axe to the Smartphone)* by Björn Höglund (2019), and *Fakta om Greta Thunberg (Facts about Greta Thunberg)* by Tomas Dömstedt (2020); and Valentina Camerini (2019) wrote her biography: *Gretas historia. Ingen är för liten för att göra något stort (Greta's Story. No One Is Too Small to Do Something Big)*. However, there were still no books for the youngest readers.

The next SBI report, *Bokprovning 2021*, which discusses books published in Sweden in 2020, also presents the critical issues in a separate subsection; this time slightly differently titled: *Miljöfrågor och miljöförstöring (Issues of the Environment and Its Pollution)*; and we learn from the introduction that these issues are still as popular as they were in 2019. Examples from non-fiction and fiction are mentioned here, both teaching sustainable lifestyles and presenting catastrophic-dystopian visions. The report also says that the Swedish book market has been enriched by new titles on Thunberg: this time these are picturebooks for the youngest children. One of them is informative and its title is *Greta Thunberg*. It has been published as a part of the series "Småmänniskor, stora drömmar" ("Small People, Big Dreams") and its authors are Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegary and Anke Weckmann (2020). The other picturebook is fictional: *Greta och jättarna. Inspirerad av Greta Thunbergs kamp för klimatet (Greta and the Giants: Inspired by Greta Thunberg's Stand to Save the World)* by Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico (2020). What's interesting is that both books are translations, from Spanish and English respectively. Given the wealth of iconotext literature offered by Scandinavian authors, the fact that they have not produced a picturebook about the girl who made Sweden famous around the world may come as a bit of a surprise. However, it is difficult to give an answer as

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2 This is a literal translation of the Swedish name *Skolstrejkförklimatet*. In Polish, the action was called the Youth Climate Strike.

to why this is the case. The market of children's books in Sweden in 2020 offered two picturebook translations about Greta Thunberg to preschool and early school-age children, and most likely another title representing this genre was considered unnecessary.

## Objective and Conceptual Framework

The aim of the analysis is to discuss and compare the picturebooks: *Greta Thunberg* and *Greta och jättarna* from the perspective of the slogan of the third wave of ecocriticism, i. e. pro-environmental remedy actions, together with an attempt to assess the artistic means that have been used to implement this slogan in literature for the youngest children. This is interesting from the perspective of perceptions of contemporary children's literature, as the perspective resigns from activities that are too offensively pedagogical or didactic in favour of aesthetics and entertainment. I will try to assess the efforts (by authors of words and images) to strike a balance between these two aims, given that one represents non-fiction, the other – fiction.

Adopting the wave model from feminism, we can assume that the first wave of ecocriticism is characterised by a focus on nature; in the second there is a redirection of attention to the environment; and the third, in the spirit of the Anthropocene, sees “ecocriticism as a current commenting not only on the current situation in which man has found himself and to which he has led the whole environment, but also as a tool to postulate a fundamental change: the restoration of unity that has been shaken” (Tabaszewska, 2018, p. 10). Although it is difficult to find a consensus in the scientific community on whether to stick to the academic discourse of description or to use literature to promote an activist demand for change, when analysing the data from the SBI reports we can clearly see that authors of books for children and young people mainly represent the latter position and teach pro-environmental forms of behaviour. It is interesting, especially when we look at fiction, how this third-wave education is implemented so as not to cross the subtle line separating it from indoctrination, while avoiding scaring children about the inevitable end of life on Earth, which increasingly leads to climate anxiety<sup>3</sup>.

In 2000, Torben Weinreich wrote about the dilemmas of children's literature in terms of its aims in his monograph *Children's Literature: Art or Pedagogy?*<sup>4</sup>, stating that

3 This is demonstrated by the results of a large-scale survey (Hickman et al., 2021) conducted by a team of specialists among 10,000 young people (16–25 years old) worldwide. The research was published in 2021 in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, and it shows that 59% of young people are very seriously concerned about the climate, and 84% are moderately concerned. In turn, 50% say they have been betrayed by their country's governments and 39% do not plan to have offspring because of the climate threat. To date, no study of similar scope has been published that addresses younger children.

4 In Poland, similar research was previously conducted by Eugeniusz Czaplewicz (1990).

every book for young readers is inherently pedagogical, i. e. more or less educational. It becomes didactic when its main strategy is pedagogical, but even this does not classify it as bad literature. The researcher emphasises that it is only when the pedagogy is too “heavy” and authoritarian that readers are discouraged and simply judge it as bad literature. Moreover, Weinreich is reluctant to distinguish between pedagogy and art and believes that forms of pedagogical and artistic expression are often closely united (2000, pp. 109–110). It should be emphasised that, in his analyses, the Danish researcher did not take into account a picturebook as a medium that makes essential use of illustrations in the creation of the storyline and thus connects the spaces of pedagogy and aesthetics even more strongly. Taking these insights into account, I will reflect on the form of ecological pedagogy in the iconotext of the two analysed works. In addition, I will use concepts from narratology and picturebook research in my analyses.

## Activism in the Informative Book

*Greta Thunberg* by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegary (text) and Anke Weckmann (illustrations) is part of the series “Småmänniskor, stora drömmar” (“Small People, Big Dreams”)<sup>5</sup> the aim of which is to present inspiring biographies of famous people to the youngest readers in two age groups: 0–3 and 3–6 years. *Greta Thunberg* can be placed in the second of these groups, and in Sweden we encounter marketing descriptions in which the suggested age of readers is raised to 9 years. The book has been translated into Swedish by Elsie Formgren and Sten Sundström, and it was published in Sweden in the same year (2020) as in its native Spain. It represents a type of literature called the *biographical picturebook* (Lierop-Debrauwer, 2018, p. 83) the popularity of which has been growing since the 1990s.

The text features the voice of a hetero-intradiegetic narrator, i. e. one who is not the protagonist of the world presented and who weaves a story about the life of the title character, set in the chronological order. In the first double-page we learn that the girl was taught at an early age by her parents to switch off the lamps and not to throw away food. This information is illustrated with a garden scene in which two adults and the girl are planting flowers, accompanied by a dog. The visual narrator, portraying the female protagonist in the picture, harmonizes with the third-person verbal narrator, which is considered to be more easily perceived by the young viewer

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5 The series published by Smart Books bears the same name in English as in Swedish, ‘Small People, Big Dreams’. In Poland, it has been called ‘Small Greats’. The author of the already dozens of titles is Barcelona-based Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara, and the illustrations for them have been and are being created by various artists. The first volumes were published in Spain in 2014, but it was only in the following years that her English translations brought international fame to the series. To date, a book about Greta has not been published in Poland.

(Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 125). The figures in the picture, rendered in the convention of naïve art in fauvist colours, seem static, as if frozen in stillness. Their faces are as if cast from the same mould: a round shape, sharply defined expressive dark eyes, the line of the nose being an extension of one of the eyebrows. They are distinguished only by certain distinctive features: Greta has brown pigtails, mum has light hair and dad has a small beard. These are attributes that, to some extent, characterise the authentic prototypes of these characters.

Another important piece of information for the development of the storyline concerns one crucial day at school, when the protagonist watched a film about climate change. The illustration on this double-page uses a binary division of information for the first time: on the left-hand page we see a group of children leaving the classroom who, as we read, have immediately “forgotten the problem”<sup>6</sup> (Sánchez Vegara, 2020), while the right-hand page shows a worried Greta, sitting alone on one of the school desks. Although the reader can see that it is the same space (one student’s elbow and another’s bag cross the division of the pages), this separation of visual content gives symbolic expression to the distance that grows between the environment and the girl.

As the reading goes on, Greta worries about climate change and almost stops talking, while doctors diagnose her with selective mutism and Asperger’s syndrome. And this time, on the double-page, we see seemingly the same space in which two mental worlds are placed together: on the right we see the worried parents and the doctor; on the left we see Greta alone, sitting in an armchair with her back turned to the others. The next opening is the turning point of the story, when we learn from the text that these problems have only made it easier for the girl to focus on what is now most important, namely stopping the warming of the Earth. The illustration that accompanies this message departs from the realistic convention of the previous ones and shows Greta flying above the smoke-emitting chimneys. She is in the Superman’s pose and with the letter G on her T-shirt.

From this point onwards, the events cited in the verbal-visual narrative will be closely linked to the strike with which Greta wishes to exert pressure on politicians’ decisions. She is joined by other children, and characteristic of the iconic escalation of this event are the accompanying boards with slogans: first we see inscriptions on them in Swedish and English, and then in many other languages. The double-page that concludes this part of the storyline again has a fantasy feel to it: it shows Greta’s face and her hair, surrounded by green leaves, blowing in the wind, into which are embedded further placards with more environmental strike slogans.

<sup>6</sup> All the quotations in the article, from Swedish and English, are provided in my own translation. Page references are missing in the cross-reference as the book is not paginated.

The penultimate double-page reports on Greta's trip to the USA where she asked the world leaders not to ignore climate issues and to make appropriate decisions before it was too late. The illustration has again been divided into the left-hand page, with Greta standing in front of a lecture stand with a card in her hand; and the right-hand page, with adults sitting in rows. They are facing the reader, suggesting that this is how Greta sees them. The visual narrator not only says a lot, but he also changes the point of view on this page and, by focalizing the protagonist, he sends a clear signal that she has come face to face with the world of adults who have been quite sceptical about her words: the faces of the listeners are not smiling and, with their static indifference, rather give an expression of distance.

The final double-page has an optimistic tone, both in words and image: "It started with a lone girl who hand-lettered a poster, and the protest spread across the planet. Global warming is the biggest challenge humanity has faced, but now Greta is not alone in her fight..." (Sánchez Vegara, 2020). This text is set against a gradient illustration, typical of the composition of this book, which covers the entire double-page. In it, we see Greta who is followed by children, one by one, of different ages, genders and skin colours. They are carrying "ecological attributes": the first boy is carrying a pot with a green plant; the girl who is following him is riding a bicycle; and the last youngest child is eating a carrot. They are walking as if in a carnival parade (Greta's jumping dog is wearing glasses typical of carnival costumes) and all (including the dog) are wearing supermen's capes. The symbolism of the scene suggests a carnival reading of it: children, too, should have power over the world, because they are the ones who will live in it in the future.

Surrounded by a bordure of flowers and leaves, the parade crowning Greta Thunberg's story is a happy ending, making it clear that green activism, and not negativist resignation or climate anxiety, is the best solution. It is an evocative, verbal and visual affirmation of action that is not conditioned by age or position, but embodies Greta's famous words: "Du är aldrig för liten för att göra stor skillnad" ("You are never too small to make big changes"). The final closure of the book is a spread with a paratext in the form of a biographical note about Greta's life, the content of which coincides with the events of the book.

## Activism in the Fantasy Book

The book *Greta och jättarna. Inspirerad av Greta Thunbergs kamp för klimatet* was published in Sweden in a translation by Marie Helleday Ekwurtzel in 2020, while the

original: *Greta and the Giants. Inspired by Greta Thunberg's Stand to Save the World* debuted on the US market a year earlier. The story, dedicated to children aged 3–6, opens with a fairy-tale formula, delivered by a hetero-intradiegetic narrator in the past tense: “There was once a girl who lived in the heart of a wonderful forest” (Tucker, 2019). This text is embedded in an idyllic illustration showing a small, manga-like girl with brown pigtails and wearing a yellow raincoat. She is standing surrounded by large, majestic animals. She has big eyes and an expressive face.

Already on the second double-page we read that one day some disturbed animals came to her and asked for help because “giants” were destroying the forest, making the animals homeless. The hybrid world depicted here, created on the basis of humans and personified animals, seems to be a deliberate action that the authors are keen to use. This is pointed out by Reinhard Hennig (2021), who, investigating the depiction of climate change in Scandinavian pictorial literature, reflects on how often difficult and potentially climate anxiety-generating issues are presented to children in such a way that, while teaching activist attitudes, they avoid generating fear of the inevitable end of the planet. The first solution the researcher discusses is precisely to use animals as the main characters (Hennig, 2021, p. 53).

As we learn on the first pages of the book, the giants have always existed, but now they have become much more dangerous. This verbal information is complemented by an illustration showing a powerful male figure in the foreground and a female figure in the background. They are unnaturally large, they have very small heads and gallop through a forest that reaches their knees. However, they do not look as diabolical here as on the cover where they lean out from behind the trees like two black, powerful trolls with small, sinister eyes that are glowing yellow.

Further double-pages provide verbal information about the destructive activities of the giants who cut down forests, build houses, cities and factories, forgetting in their greed about the wonderful flora, birds, butterflies and animals... These messages in the text are accompanied by illustrations in which the green of the forest is gradually replaced by the industrial grey and black of the smoke billowing from chimneys. It turns out that no one dares to stop the giants because everyone is afraid of them and... only Greta comes up with an idea. She stands in the middle of the forest and waits for them with a big “STOP!” sign. Soon she is joined by both children and animals, holding banners in their hands and paws that “shout” on their behalf: “Who will help us?!”; “Save our forest!”; “We live here!”. The crowd grows until there is a confrontation between the strikers and the giants, and a transformation of their attitudes that

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7 My analysis is based on the American edition of the book. *Greta och jättarna* was sold out on the Swedish market and was unavailable at the time of writing this article. Due to the length of the title, I will further quote only the first part of it.

is only possible in a fairy tale. In the groundbreaking illustration, we see a colourful crowd of children, animals and banners in the foreground, and in the background we can see a small, huddled trio of already-ashamed giants sitting on the ground, rendered in purple and brown. The illustrator operates with perspective and colours that express the symbolic content both regarding the course of events and valuing their participants. The giants seem ashamed, confused, and not knowing what to do: they feel terrible and promise to be better.

This idyllic tale with a wishful happy ending is crowned by the double-page in which, once again, large figures of giants in colourful clothes and finally with human faces are sitting in a forest glade together with children and animals. The woman is knitting one sock; the man is trying on the other, and the dystopian skyscrapers in the background are covered with plants. The scene is watched by Greta sitting on a hill, behind whose back is sitting a mighty wolf<sup>8</sup> – the same wolf who turned to her for help at the beginning of the story.

## Comparison and Conclusions

On first contact, the two iconotextual tales of Greta differ significantly. The verbal narrative in *Greta Thunberg* is closer to the facts, and the didactic tone, which promotes remedial action in light of the third wave of ecocriticism, rings out more clearly in the book. This is confirmed on the very first page where we read how Greta learns from her parents to turn off the lights and not to throw away food; followed by the double-page in which the girl teaches her parents to give up flying by planes. This kind of instruction represents, as Weinreich wrote, an explicative variant of didactics.

The visual narrative works in tandem with the words and, for the most part, persists with the realistic convention. Greta's face is serious, almost devoid of facial expressions, and seems to be copied in most of the illustrations, which can be read as a reference to Asperger's syndrome and to her authentic images in which she usually does not smile and is focused. Maria Nikolajeva, discussing the contribution of cognitive criticism to the development of picturebook research, argues that both the character's facial expressions and body posture are ways of expressing feelings that are much more powerful than verbal description as they immediately send a strong signal to the brain (Nikolajeva, 2018, p. 114).

In *Greta and the Giants*, Greta is visualised in a different way: as a determined, energetic and, at the beginning of the story, smiling girl. In the images, her body posture embodies a dynamics that seems to match her activism. The narrative, both

8 There is a hint of intervisuality here – the scene recalls an analogous shot from *The Lion King*.

verbal and visual, draws on fantasy, and the authentic climate strike of 2018 is set in a fairytale world. Other elements from the girl's biography are removed, with no mention of her family or health problems. The construction of this fantastic book relies mainly on metaphors and on the play of imagination. Both the figure of the forest and the enemy (the giants) play a dual role in it. The forest, which is taken away from children and animals, can be read on a metaphorical level as a planet, but, at the same time, its literal interpretation as a space ruthlessly devastated in order to acquire timber and new land is justified. The giants are the adults, by nature bigger than the children and deciding their fate and the fate of "their forest", and this power relationship is highlighted in the images through a hyperbolic play of perspectives. At the same time, these giants can be interpreted as a metaphor for industrial giants carrying out environmental destruction in the spirit of mindless escalation of consumption, affirmation of development, and the desire to multiply profits. The didactic aspect, activating the young reader in line with the third wave of ecocriticism, will resound more implicitly in this book than in *Greta Thunberg*, but this does not mean that the impact of the book on the young reader will be weaker here.

Also, the two books share many similarities, such as the same message: activating young people to take pro-environmental action and convincing them that, despite their age, they should get involved in social debates because their voice counts. The two picturebooks are also crowned with happy endings, although different in content and form. In the realistic *Greta Thunberg*, the happy ending consists of convincing the protagonist that she is not alone in her fight against global warming and adult decision-makers, but the consistently concerned expression on the protagonist's face and the outlined seriousness of the Earth's climate situation give the book a slightly more serious tone in terms of possible climate anxiety. The ending of *Greta and the Giants* takes on a fairy-tale form: the adults have realised their mistakes, changed, and the environment has begun to regenerate. Of course, this can be seen as wishful or naïve, but it certainly matches the positive tone of the whole piece and the call against climate anxiety.

Both works end with afterwords, which begin with a description of the deteriorating condition of the planet as a result of global warming. Further on, in both narratives, Greta appears as a girl who refuses to accept this state of affairs and organises a strike, which other children join, first in Sweden, then around the world. This makes those in power want to meet her and listen to her. Later, however, the paratexts begin to diverge. The informative *Greta Thunberg* mentions that the girl inspires millions around the world and that she has Asperger's syndrome which has become her superpower. This is not mentioned in *Greta and the Giants* in which the positive characteristics of the protagonist and her activism are emphasised. As can be seen, there is an interesting reshuffling in both books in the light of the genological determinants.

In the fictional book, kept in the convention of a fairy tale, we encounter an afterword with a strongly didactic overtone, which explains that what the child has just read was a happy ending, but that in the real world Greta is still fighting against “giants”. Interestingly, the data is still illustrated with the face of Greta from the book, and not, as in *Greta Thunberg*, with authentic photographs.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of these two books comply with the observations of the authors of the chapters in the *Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Writing about the multifaceted hybridisation of contemporary picturebooks, Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer draws our attention to their genre mixes. She considers autobiographical and biographical picturebooks to be particularly interesting, as they are characterised by the fusion of elements of fact and fiction, the interanimation of images and words, and the integration with art (Lierop-Debrauwer, 2018, p. 83). Also, Nikola von Merveldt, when discussing informative picturebooks, notes the trend towards their hybridisation: they integrate fantasy, non-fiction, and even metafiction (Merveldt, 2018, p. 235). As can be seen, the authors of the two books discussed here have chosen to create (in the spirit of contemporary hybridization) iconotextual stories that deviate a bit from the usual genre paths in order to teach children about green activism in a more or less didactic tone. Both titles are interesting, complementary books on the Swedish market, enabling educators and parents to choose a reading experience tailored to the tastes of young readers.

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