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Post-Apocalypse in Shorts or How to Prepare Kids for (Each) Catastrophe

Postapokalipsa w Krótkich Gatkach, czyli jak przygotować dzieci na (każdą) katastrofę

KEYWORDS

postapocalypse,
art therapy,
bibliotherapy, comic
book, children's
literature

ABSTRACT

Post-apocalyptic literature, including its pictorial form, is a well-known subgenre of popular culture. However, while the market offers an abundance of works of this kind for adults or young adults, this convention is rarely chosen by the authors of literature aimed explicitly at children. One of the few exceptions is the series of eight comic books *Bajka na końcu świata* [*Fairytale at the World's End*] written and drawn by Marcin Podolec and published in the years 2017–2023 by the “Kultura Gniewu” publishing house. The series presents adventures of the girl named Wiktoria and her dog Bajka who wander through the world after the global catastrophe, i. e. through abandoned and destroyed lands full of all kinds of animal, vegetal and physical anomalies. In terms of the plot, the vision presented in the subsequent volumes draws on a wealth of the gloomy repertoire of post-apocalyptic visions familiar from literature or films for adult audiences. The author of the article attempts to trace how the author of the book narrates the adventures of Wiktoria and Bajka in this damaged and dreadful world in a softened form suited to the perception of children.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

postapokalipsa,
arteterapia,
biblioterapia,
komiks, literatura
dziecięca

Literatura postapokaliptyczna, również w wydaniu obrazkowym, od lat stanowi stały podgatunek kultury popularnej. O ile jednak na rynku nie brakuje utworów tego typu skierowanych do dorosłych czy starszej młodzieży (*young adults*), o wiele rzadziej obierają tę konwencję autorzy literatury kierowanej jednoznacznie do młodszego, dziecięcego czytelnika. Jednym z niewielu wyjątków jest autorska, ośmioczęściowa seria komiksowa Marcina Podolca „Bajka na końcu świata” opublikowana w latach 2017–2023 przez Kulturę Gniewu. Jej bohaterkami są dziewczynka Wiktoria i jej psia przyjaciółka Bajka, które wędrują przez „świat po wielkim wybuchu”, czyli wymarłe i zniszczone krainy pełne wszelkiego rodzaju anomalii w zakresie fauny, flory oraz zjawisk fizycznych. Na poziomie fabularnym wizja przedstawiona w kolejnych częściach serii czerpie pełnymi garściami z posępnego repertuaru postapokaliptycznych wizji znanych z literatury czy filmów dla dorosłych odbiorców. W artykule podjęta zostaje próba przesledzenia, w jaki sposób autor scenariusza i rysunków opowiada przygody Wiktorii i Bajki w tym zniszczonym i budzącym groźę świecie w złagodzonej formie dopasowanej do percepcji dziecięcego odbiorcy.

Introduction

Reading comics, similarly to contact with another form of a picturebook or literature in general, can play therapeutic and educational roles among non-adult readers, and it can constitute both an opportunity for self-therapy through reading and material for interventions combining elements of art therapy and bibliotherapy (cf. Taluć, 2017; Grzymała-Moszczyńska & Różańska-Mgłej, 2019). It is no different in the case of the literary genre commonly known as post-apocalyptic fantasy, also abbreviated as “post-apo” (cf. Gąska, 2016, p. 13), which is, in a way, already a result of its concept: basically, it presents the world after a catastrophe that has drastically changed the reality of life, which, in turn, confronts the protagonists with the need to face unknown phenomena, which often involves the need for various redefinitions, including internal ones (cf. Błaszowska, 2019, p. 106). In this article, I would like to look at a few selected examples of how the post-apocalyptic convention has been adapted to the perception of a non-adult audience in Marcin Podolec’s series of comics for children entitled *Bajka na końcu świata* [*Fairy tale at the World’s End*] (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021b, 2022, 2023).

Calling this series children’s comic books may seem somewhat at odds with the widely accepted belief that books for children may actually be addressed to everyone (cf. Shavit, 1986, p. 63; Zabawa, 2013, p. 92). I made this choice mainly on the basis

of the publishing context, as a brief analysis of the basic paratexts with which the *Kultura Gniewu* [*Culture of Wrath*] publishing house tries to influence the reception of the individual albums (cf. Genette, 2002, p. 25) points to just such a target audience. The entire series appeared within the *Krótkie Gatki* [*Shorts*] publishing line which was established “to publish comics for young and very young readers” (*Kultura Gniewu*, n. d.), and the notes on the fourth page of the cover regularly use the phrase: “post-apocalyptic series for the youngest”, and quote positive statements from readers of the series with their ages, ranging from 6 to 8. 5 years, in brackets.

By the way, it is worth noting that for the author born in 1991, who is currently one of Poland’s leading comics creators, the first volume of *Bajka* represented an entry into a new field of activity. So far, as a cartoonist working with screenwriters and creator of his own albums, Podolec has created comics aimed at the adult reader, such as (successful and sometimes translated into other languages) *Fugazi Music Club* (2013), *Podgląd* (Chmielewski & Podolec, 2014), *Dym* (Pablopavo et al., 2016), and *Morze po kolana* (Kołodziejczyk & Podolec, 2016). Interestingly, since *Bajka na Końcu Świata* was published, work for children has clearly dominated his bibliography: in addition to the eight parts of *Bajka...* and the album *Bajka i jej gang* [*Bajka and Her Gang*] (2021), published outside the series, Podolec also drew the two-part *Bardzo dzika opowieść* [*Very Wild Story*] for the script by Tomasz Samojlik, while he did not publish any work aimed at an adult audience during this period. The author is currently involved in work on an animated version of *Bajka...*

Post-Apocalypse in Eight Parts

Bajka na Końcu Świata is a series of eight comics that appeared between 2017 and 2023 (this study does not take into account the comic book published outside the series: *Bajka i jej gang*, which tells the adventures of the title dog Bajka from before the adventures described in the main series). The main character is Wiktoria, an early school girl who travels through a post-apocalyptic world in search of her parents from whom she has been separated by a mysterious catastrophe. It is worth mentioning that Marcin Podolec combines half-conventional and half-realistic scenery with rather cartoonish characters in his graphic design: Wiktoria has a very simple face and limited facial expressions, which certainly makes it easier for young readers to identify with the protagonist through the so-called masking effect (McCloud, 2021, p. 43). Wiktoria is accompanied by the bitch named Bajka [Fairytale], already encountered after the aforementioned apocalypse. The pair of protagonists follow a light (something like a brightly shining star) that appears in the sky every night, believing that it will lead them to the girl’s parents (the reason for such a choice is never verbalised and remains

unquestioned for a very long time). Along the way, the protagonists experience numerous adventures which mainly stem from confronting the changes that have taken place in the post-apocalyptic world.

Reaching for the convention of post-apocalyptic fantasy in a series of children's comic books seems interesting for at least two reasons. First, narratives maintained in this convention are mostly directed at older audiences (adolescents and adults) due to, for example, the vision of the world built on the basis of "the image of a dark and unfriendly future for man" (Wierel, 2017, p. 52), as well as the philosophical content which is intended to inspire the viewer to "search for the meaning of human existence and what man does or should abandon" (Wierel, 2017, p. 60). Second, it is a type of fantasy that, as a rule, operates with quite expressive means, sometimes close to thrillers or horror stories (Wierel, 2019, p. 59). Therefore, the aim of the following cursory study will be to describe, using selected examples, the tricks used by the author of the series in order to adapt the above-mentioned characteristics of post-apocalyptic fantasy to the perception of a young reader, and, at the same time, to try to grasp the therapeutic message flowing from the entire eight-part story.

As Jerzy Szyłak writes, a cartoonist, in his work, never offers a perfect representation of a particular view, but "freely chooses between greater or lesser simplification or grotesque degeneration", while each of his choices "has an artistic character, for it transforms the world into a story and makes us see it differently and understand it better" (2017, p. 157). In the case of *Podolec*, the elements with which he builds a fantastic world on successive comic strips can be divided into those taken from the typical post-apo repertoire proper mainly to literature for adults or older adolescents (the "founding" catastrophe, the changes taking place in the world) and those more fairy-tale or allegorical, closer to narratives typical of children's books (personification of animal characters, fantastic monsters).

The Big Bang

As the name of this subgenre itself implies, the specific features of the post-apocalyptic world is defined by its "founding" catastrophe, i. e. an event that has led to a radical change in the existing world (cf. Nijakowski, 2011, p. 252). In the case of *Bajka...*, the reader is kept in the dark for quite a long time about the origins of these changes. Part Two (*Podolec*, 2017a) evokes, in flashbacks, something like a powerful disintegration of the world, which, in volume three (*Podolec*, 2018), is called the "big bang". It is shown mainly graphically and with the two protagonists experiencing it separately. At that time, the dog is in a shelter where the floor and bars begin to ripple and then disappear, and the birch floats into the air. Wiktorija, in turn, is walking with

her father in the park, where also, at one point, they both detach themselves from the ground amidst a landscape that disappears completely. Part six (Podolec, 2021b), in the meaningfully entitled chapter: *Bajka i tajemnica końca świata [Fairy Tale and the Mystery of the End of the World]*, also features heavily individualised speculations linking the fate of individual characters to the catastrophe (still undefined) of the entire planet. Each of the four protagonists: Detektyw Pies [Detective Dog], Ćma [Moth], Bajka and Wiktoria, links the moment of the catastrophe in their story to an unpleasant event or experience they had just before the disaster.

The World After the Disaster

Regardless of the discussions on the origins of the disaster, one thing is certain from the very first images: the land has undergone a massive transformation. At first glance, the destruction and changes in the landscape resemble the effect of an earthquake or another natural disaster. Houses are destroyed; there is rubbish and debris everywhere. Added to this is the typical, almost iconic element of post-apocalyptic realities, i. e. the omnipresent vapours and smoke rising on the horizon. In the world traversed by Bajka and Wiktoria, they are so ubiquitous that they can be called a graphic leitmotif; one of the basic means with which the author creates a vision of the post-disaster world. Sometimes, mysterious clouds evaporate from holes in the ground, at other times the comic frames are obscured by a multicoloured fog carried by the wind. It is worth mentioning that precisely this element in “adult” post-apocalypses is one of the more suggestive means of arousing terror in the audience, and its roots go back to the mass fear that spread during the First World War as a result of the use of undetectable and deadly war gases (Witkowski, 2020). However, in the case of *Bajka...*, smoke, fog or vapour are a non-threatening element of the landscape that has been stripped of its dangerous aspect. Throughout the entire eight parts, only once does it occur in the form of a threat: in the second album in the series, the protagonists are fleeing from small light brown clouds, somewhat reminiscent of cirrocumulus, until at one point one of them falls straight into Wiktoria’s face, causing her to lose consciousness for a long moment.

Another ubiquitous effect of the unspecified catastrophe includes the changes that have affected the world of plants. In this case, the graphic leitmotif is overgrown fungi of all kinds, as tall as trees or shrubs, and unidentified plant species of unusual shapes and colours. It is worth noting here that while visually these elements draw the reader’s attention (though not that of the protagonists, who rarely comment on passing landscapes), they never pose a threat to Bajka or Wiktoria. Thus, while the mutation

itself may cause some concern, the author is by no means judging whether the changes that have occurred in the aftermath of the catastrophe are negative, positive or neutral.

The general concept of softening post-apocalyptic motifs which usually arouse terror (in the “adult” version), is clearly visible in the colours chosen by the author. A significant number of scenes taking place in the world after the catastrophe (a part of the narrative includes flashbacks) are maintained in warm colours: mainly smoky shades of brown, yellow and orange: these are the hues of the soil, the houses encountered by the protagonists, but also the already mentioned omnipresent vapours and fumes. As a result of the research into the human perception of colour and the influence of colour on the human psyche (and especially on emotions), it has generally been established that brown can be associated with security, stability, warmth and comfort; yellow is often described as cheerful and warm, associated with confidence and cheerfulness; orange symbolizes happiness and uplifting spirits (cf. Zeugner, 1965, pp. 121–127; Popek, 1999, pp. 100–108). Thus, although various shades of the above colours fill a world that is empty and shattered by disaster, the world nevertheless gives the impression of being relatively cosy¹. When shades of cold colours, such as green or blue, appear in the frames, they are bright, saturated, vegetal: as, for example, in the scene with the botanical garden from the first part. Finally, it is also worth adding that the technique of the so-called flat colours, i. e. filling the contours with a uniform shade, with very sparing use of additional effects such as shading, used by Podolec most often, additionally emphasises the dominance of the colours chosen to create this post-apocalyptic, but, in a way, cosy and friendly scenery.

From the point of view of the plot dynamics, the most important change in the world, and the only unambiguously negative effect of the apocalypse, is the complete absence of other people: Wiktoria and Bajka do not encounter any representatives of *homo sapiens* on their way. The loneliness of the protagonists is also emphasised by the framing: wide images show the girl and the dog against the background of a desolate landscape which clearly dominates the two small characters (Podolec, 2017b, 2021b), which is particularly clear when such a scene is spread over the entire double-page (Podolec, 2018, 2019). Then, the two heroines are almost lost in the vast landscape. It is the loneliness of the girl, who longs to find her parents, that is the main drive of the two main characters’ journey through the destroyed world. As Lech Nijakowski mentions, “the imagined world after the apocalypse is not a detached fantasy, but

1 Of course, we are talking about the reception of the visual layer, which is much more intuitive than the reception of the text, and also reaches the young reader more quickly (cf. Mazepa-Domagala, 2011, p. 74; Zając, 2000, pp. 22–23). It should also be noted that the colours mentioned above are by no means entirely alien to the “adult” post-apo imagery, and often appears, for example, in stories in which the “founding” catastrophe resulted from global warming (e. g. in the *Mad Max* film tetralogy), but is then used mainly to create inhospitable scenery, which we do not experience in ‘Fairytale’.

reflects the fears and hopes of the present” (2011, p. 245). Taking this perspective, one could therefore assume that Wiktorija’s situation is a reflection of her childhood fears of loneliness and, in particular, separation from her parents.

A Post-Apocalyptic Fairy Tale

The above examples show how the author has made use of elements typical of an “adult” post-apocalypse (which show a certain degree of realism), appropriately tempering them both in the plot and in the visual layer of the story. However, the world created by the author is also made up of purely fantastic (non-realistic) means, which we rarely come across in works aimed at a teenage or adult audience. They are more typical of fairy tales or mythological texts. The most important of these is undoubtedly the personification of all the animals appearing on the pages of the comic book, which acquire not only a voice, but also typically human traits or behaviour – both positive and negative. On the one hand, we have, for example, the tapir from part one, who has taken on the role of repairing a destroyed world by planting plants, taken from an ancient botanical garden, in a barren area. On the other hand, we see actions that would not be difficult to call propaganda, when the pigeons, who write history like winners from the popular maxim, present Wiktorija and Bajka with a tale of a “pigeon civilization” that was far more advanced than human civilization and to which humans owe much of their progress. The story of how the pigeons shared some of their discoveries with backward humans is presented by an individual who officially plays the role of the “minister of propaganda” in the pigeon community (Podolec, 2019). This is, in fact, given in a simplified and witty form, one of the most common reflections included in post-apo works, namely the questioning of the anthropocentric perspective and the recognition that the new reality may require a change in hierarchies and ideas about who can “repair” the world that has been destroyed (cf. Wierel, 2019, pp. 255 and 278).

Finally, among the personified animals there are also overtly negative phenomena, i. e. hierarchy imposed by force, the subjugation of one species by another, as in the case of the demonic bulldog called Pułkownik [the Colonel] in part five, who terrorised the local animal society. It is worth mentioning that the author did not make use of the possibility of anthropomorphisation in the graphic layer (humanisation of animals), widely used in comic books, which introduces an additional comic motif into the world of *Bajka...*, as the animals perform all the above actions equipped with their “standard” body build.

It is easy to see that, apart from the symbolic meaning of this carnival role reversal – which can be seen, for example, as an ecological lesson in the form of “rebuking”

humans for destroying the earth – it also has an important role for the psychology of the characters. This is because it relieves the theme of Wiktorija's loneliness in a world without people thanks to the possibility of interaction with the animals she encounters (first of all, by the title dog, Bajka): in this way, the girl's loneliness seems less acute and certainly easier for the young reader to assimilate.

Unusual Residents

Another typically fairy-tale element that appears infrequently, but is worth noting, are the non-animal creatures that are pure invention (creation) of the author. Sometimes they are friendly, such as Zmiennokształtny [Shape-shifter] resembling a blue cloud, who appears like a *deus ex machina* many times and saves the heroines from trouble. In the third part of the series, however, Wiktorija and Bajka also encounter a monster that poses a threat to them: it is an animated green heap of rubbish (which Bajka calls a “walking rubbish heap”), with two long arms and something resembling a face or mouth: an eye made of a bicycle wheel, a tongue made of a striped scarf, and a clearly outlined mouth with teeth made of sticks and planks. Interestingly, the protagonists are rescued from this junk monster by a dinosaur-mascot which grows to the size of a real tyrannosaurus as a result of a magical (or mutating) raindrop. Regardless of the course of the protagonists' confrontations with the creatures or monsters they encounter, it should be noted that these are not mutants, i. e. typical monsters encountered in “adult” tales from the post-apo books, whose existence in the post-catastrophe world was nevertheless based on a certain degree of realism and modelled on mutations observed in nature (cf. Gaška, 2016, p. 22). We would definitely classify them as fairy-tale creatures, typical, for example, of mythology or folk tales.

Post-Apocalypse in a Few Frames

As can be seen from the above examples, Marcin Podolec skilfully combines and mixes elements and motifs that arouse terror, fear and anxiety, but also laughter or amusement, giving them to the child reader in a form and content tailored to his/her perception, using a wide range of means offered by a comic book. The essence of this style can be seen, for example, in Wiktorija and Bajka's adventure with acid rain, presented in the third part, in which one can clearly see both strictly post-apocalyptic and fairy-tale elements, intertwined in a funny-scary sequence of events typical for the sequential art of comics. First, among the raindrops, colourful drops appear. The one that is orange falls on the ground and burns the plant that is growing there. Wiktorija

reacts nervously to this, stating “I think it’s acid rain”, but Bajka, in the following frames, sticks her tongue out for the blue drop, swallows it with a satisfied gulp, and soothes the girl’s anxiety by saying: “Acid? It tastes as sweet as the raspberries in Tapir’s garden”. However, in the subsequent images it turns out that the colourful drops cause mutations: Bajka grows six extra tails. The bitch is delighted by this, so she starts chasing and ingesting other coloured drops, triggering a series of further changes in herself: first she turns bright green and her body becomes unnaturally angular; then she returns to her normal form, but turns rotten green, brown and then red, and her muzzle becomes increasingly bloated. At the end of this sequence Bajka literally explodes, accompanied by an onomatopoeia of “poof!”, but on the next frame she reappears at Wiktorija’s side in her original form. Similar things are also experienced by the girl, who ingests a yellow drop and is reduced in size and then gets a morbid rash as a result of the pink drop. After the blue drop her feet grow unnaturally, until finally the green drop restores her to her normal size and reverses all deformities. In both cases, therefore, we have a frightening element taken from the “adult” post-apo repertoire (acid rain, mutations), softened by the graphic comedy of the sequence showing the successive changes and by the application of rules closer to fairy-tale reality: the successive mutations follow one another in a flash and then disappear just as quickly, like a spell that vanishes without a trace. This effect is further emphasised by the author’s inclusion of successive frames, dominated by so-called “event-to-event” transitions, which give the narrative an effective and abbreviated character (McCloud, 2021, pp. 70, 76).

Big and Small Apocalypses

Post-apocalyptic stories, at least when narrowed down to literary fantasy, are often therapeutic in nature: they make it possible (based on the example of a fictional world and invented characters) to work through real fears related to the development of civilization and the destructive influence of man on his environment. As Paweł Gąska writes:

The aim of PA works seems to be to play out an anxiety-inducing scenario in order to weaken its impact. The unknown grows to enormous proportions in our imagination, while learning about the object of fear reduces the fear to a manageable size. Post-apocalypses exploit this mechanism: by showing ruined worlds, they allow the viewer to experience them in the safety of their own armchair. This is not equivalent to actually experiencing a catastrophe, but it is enough to dampen the anxiety associated with the threat (2016, p. 14).

It is no different in the case of *Bajka...*, although, in this case, somewhat surprisingly, the author did not use the potential of the post-apo story to convey a pro-ecological lesson that would suggest to young readers what to do to avoid the catastrophe the consequences of which we can see on the following pages. The ending of the story shown in the last album makes us look at the comic apocalypse in a slightly more metaphorical way. For it turns out – through flashbacks – that the mysterious catastrophe happened at a time when both Wiktor and Bajka experienced very unpleasant events. The girl was with her father on a walk in the park when she learned from him that, due to her mother's professional promotion, the whole family would be moving to another city, which was a strong shock for her, as she did not want to abandon the life she had established in her previous place. Bajka, in turn, experienced another Saturday which is "adoption day" in the shelter (Podolec, 2017a). As usual, no one chose her for adoption. In both cases, then, we can speak of a "small end of the world", which has nothing to do with a global catastrophe or cataclysm, but on the scale of a child's perception of the world is, at least, as tragic and painful. Fortunately, at the end of their comic adventures, the main characters find a way to travel back in time and, each separately, find themselves back in the day when the catastrophe happened, but, of course, with the knowledge that it will happen and with a firm resolve to prevent it. The only way to do this is to prevent the aforementioned "small apocalypses" from happening: Wiktor and Bajka have to find each other so that the girl can persuade her father to adopt the dog, which, of course, succeeds. In the end, the world – both in the global sense and in the micro-sense of Wiktor and Bajka – is saved and no catastrophe occurs.

When we learn about this ending, it becomes clear why, throughout the series, the author did not want to reveal to us the origins of the apocalypse that turned the world into a rubble-filled wasteland inhabited by talking animals. We learn that it was all about using the post-apocalypse convention as a certain scenario. By following the adventures and experiences of the protagonist, with whom the readers can easily identify, they can work through their various fears and doubts (e. g. fear of loneliness, lack of subjectivity when dealing with adults) and prepare themselves for the smaller and larger challenges that await them in life (e. g. the need to make difficult choices, combining personal autonomy with friendship, finding themselves in new, unfamiliar situations and environments). And then, after the comic ends, they can safely return to their lives as Wiktor did travelling back in time, enriched by new experiences, stronger and ready to face bigger and smaller disasters.

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