

Kateryna Nikolenko

*Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical
University*

MODERN YOUTH LITERATURE

In recent years, youth literature has become a lot more prevalent among new book releases. Looking to attract teenagers and young adults as an audience, authors have been exploring a diverse spectrum of genres, ranging from social novels to sci-fi blockbusters, many of which have also moved from bookstore shelves to classrooms and provided ample opportunities for discussion and contemplation. In the following article, I would like to focus on three authors specifically (Ulf Stark, Sue Townsend, and Eoin Colfer), who in my opinion may serve as representations of the tendencies and values characteristic for youth literature in Europe and around the world.

Ulf Stark (1944-2017) was one of Sweden's best-known and most loved authors. Having written about thirty books, he has been translated into twenty-five languages, including Ukrainian and Japanese. He wrote everything from picture books to novels for young readers, and it is also worth noting that he has reworked several of his books into film scripts and has been awarded many prestigious prizes such as the August prize, Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis and also an Emmy for an original script for a Danish television series.

According to Ulf Stark himself, "Jag har en stor lust att gura konstruerade verkligheter. Lagnen har med skapandet att gura. Orden dr ett slags legosystem som man kan bygga om och skapa verkligheter med" (*"I enjoy being able to construct my own reality, creating stories that don't necessarily have to be true. Words are similar to Legos – like building blocks which you can use to construct your own world."* – translated by K. Nikolenko) (Stark, 2003)

The book “Can You Whistle, Johanna?” (1992) became a resounding success among children and adults all around the world. It tells the story of two boys, Berra and Ulf, who are looking for friendship and understanding across generations. While one of the boys (Ulf) has a grandfather, who would always offer him coffee, cake, or take him fishing, the other one doesn’t have the opportunity to enjoy a grandfather’s company. So Ulf has a brilliant idea: he’ll take his friend to a retirement home where they will find him a grandfather. And so they do.

Berra brings a bright orange flower to his new grandfather Nils – as a gesture of friendship and good will. The two boys help their new friend with the most mundane tasks: they help him shave, carry his bags when they’re too heavy, and take him to a picnic on his birthday. The grandfather in question doesn’t seem to mind, because he’s been extremely lonely since his wife’s passing. He’s got a framed picture of her, and he’ll often whistle a song called “Can You Whistle, Johanna?”, not in the least because his wife’s name was Johanna. The song itself dates back to 1932, with music written by Sten Axelson, and lyrics by Eke Söderblom, and serves as a symbol of a much simpler, more joyful time, when two young lovebirds could take delight in music, nature, happiness, and time spent with each other. Hence the refrain: “Kan du vissla, Johanna? ... Kan du sjunga, Johanna? ... Kan du hotta Johanna?”.

However, at the end of the song Johanna goes silent. Not as much as a whisper passes her lips. This is also symbolic, in that Nils’ wife passed away and he misses her – that’s why a little boy finding him and claiming him as his grandfather inevitably warms the old man’s heart. The themes of loneliness and the search for genuine human connection are very prominent in Ulf Stark’s work. It is all the more symbolic when the old man makes a kite out of Johanna’s scarf and his tie, and gifts it to the boys – as a

way of sharing the love and warmth that fills his heart after all these years.

Professor Lena Kereland of Uppsala University, Sweden suggests that, in Swedish picture books, “the underlying mysteries of life and the seriousness of existence are often to be found side by side with the trivialities of everyday life”. (Clement & Jamali, 2015)

In “Can You Whistle, Johanna?”, thoughtful illustrations by Anna HUGLUND interact with the text to tell a universal story that evokes the laughter, outrage, happiness and sadness of daily life. Humor – a strategy typically used by picture-book creators as an acceptable way to introduce difficult topics to young readers – also becomes a means to distance the reader and so develop empathy. HUGLUND, who is one of Sweden’s top illustrators, was able to capture the light-hearted, witty and insightful spirit of Ulf Stark’s books and depict them with the same kind-natured humor and irony that the author intended.

Sue Townsend (1946-2014) was one of Britain’s most popular, and most loved, writers with over 10 million copies of her books sold in the UK alone. Born in Leicester (Great Britain), Sue left school at 15 years of age, and worked in a variety of menial jobs including factory worker, shop assistant, and as a youth worker on adventure playgrounds. She wrote in secret for twenty years, eventually joining a writers’ group in Leicester. At the age of 35, she won the Thames Television Playwright Award for her first play, “Womberang”, and thus began her writing career.

However, she became most famous for her series of books about Adrian Mole, which she originally began writing in 1975. The first of these, “The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 s” was published in 1982 and was followed by “The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole” (1984). These two books made her the best-selling novelist of the 1980s.

It's safe to say that "The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole" has already become a modern classic. The main character is an ordinary English boy, 13 years of age – or, to be more exact, 13 s. Writing candidly about his parents' marital troubles, the dog, his life as a tortured poet and 'misunderstood intellectual' in the small town of Leicester, Adrian's painfully honest diary is still hilarious and compelling reading even thirty years after it first appeared. Some highlights from the book may include:

- "I read a bit of *Pride and Prejudice*, but it was very old-fashioned. I think Jane Austen should write something a bit more modern."
- "I lent Pandora my blue felt-tip pen to colour round the British Isles. I think she appreciates these small attentions."
- "I wish my parents would be a bit more thoughtful. I have been through an emotional time and I need my sleep. Still I don't expect them to understand what it is like being in love. They have been married for fourteen-and-a-half years." (Townsend, 2003)

Adrian Mole is extremely relatable, in that he has a lot of the same problems and thoughts compared to his peers. The scabs and spots on his face are constantly giving him grief, the family dog is always goofing around, his first love is going out with his best friend, and to top it off, his parents are splitting up. The book itself is written as a diary, which presents a fairly accurate glimpse into Adrian's mind – with the books he reads, the people in his life, and daily experiences which help him to understand himself better: "Anyway I think I'm turning into an intellectual. It must be all the worry. <...> It all adds up. A bad home, poor diet, not liking punk. I think I will join the library and see what happens." (Townsend, 2003)

The format of a diary also allows the reader to watch Adrian Mole grow day by day, wherein the character's perception of himself and the world around him inevitably

changes. As time goes by, he becomes a lot more mature and accepts responsibility for himself and his own actions.

Eoin Colfer was born in Wexford on the South-East coast of Ireland in 1965. He first developed an interest in writing in primary school with gripping Viking stories inspired by history he was learning in school at the time.

After leaving school he got his degree from Dublin University and qualified as a primary school teacher, returning to work in Wexford for a while. In the 1990s, Colfer and his wife spent about 4 years working in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Italy. When in 2001 the first *Artemis Fowl* book was published, the author was able to resign from teaching and concentrate fully on writing. Since then, *Artemis Fowl* has sold in excess of 25 million copies and has been translated into 40 languages. As of right now, there are eight books in the series. These books have won a slew of awards, all of them have hit the New York Times Bestseller list, and they have been translated into dozens of languages.

In an interview, Eoin Colfer said, "I think a lot of grown-ups have that little kid inside them, who needs to be let out every now and then. I don't try and hold back on the vocabulary or the story so I do like to make them appropriate for teenagers or younger, but I don't like to make them too simple." (Eoin Colfer Author Interview, n.d.)

Artemis Fowl is an Irish teenager, and he's a criminal master-mind, or at least he used to be. At just twelve years old he's a little genius, plotting to restore his family's fortune with a spot of corruption and kidnapping. His family resembles a criminal dynasty of sorts, but they are unfortunately going out of business, and it doesn't really help that *Artemis'* father has disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

So, the boy will restore their fortunes by kidnapping a fairy and blackmailing the fairy people, the leprechauns, for

their crock of gold – which is a classic story, young boy trying to kidnap leprechaun and get the crock of gold. However, the twist here is that the fairy people described by Eoin Colfer are not those lovely, simple creatures that we typically see in legends. On the contrary, they are armed, dangerous—and extremely high-tech. Fowl kidnaps one of the fairies, Holly Short, and holds her for ransom in an effort to fulfill his elaborate scheme. But he may have underestimated the fairies’ powers, which just about triggers a cross-species war.

The name “Artemis” stems from Greek mythology and Greek culture, where it was originally a girls’ name associated with the goddess Artemis. She was revered as lady of the wild things, deep forests, animals and wild hunt. The daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin sister of Apollo, Artemis was known as a patron of girls and young women.

Just like the Greek goddess, Artemis Fowl demonstrates a great deal of courage and intelligence. He is smart, cunning, manipulative at times; however, he is also quite ambitious, and not always in a good way. The theme of greed is quite prominent in this book, in that Artemis’ main goal is to acquire the crock of gold held by the fairy people; however, in pursuing that goal he might become not just the hunter, but also the prey.

Despite his plan to swindle the fairy people, Artemis is not entirely callous and cruel. With the sudden disappearance of his father and his mother’s health steadily declining, the boy wants to get his family back to normal. There is also an ecological message in these books: for instance, when Holly Short is flying over the Earth, she can see nature suffering from humanity’s actions: polluted oceans, sick dolphins, the pervasive smog etc. Throughout the book, Eoin Colfer masterfully combines his perspectives on the most serious of topics with mind-boggling adventures and snarky Irish humor.

To conclude, the variety of youth literature available nowadays is significantly larger compared to even a few decades before. The most important topics addressed in teen and young adult books include family relationships, friendship, growing up in a difficult and turbulent world of today, interpersonal (and interspecies) communication, concerns for the environment and many, many more. Not only does talking about these issues make the books more relatable (from the perspective of their accessibility to a wider audience), but it also allows us to start important conversations about values and problems of the 21st century.

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