

Marcin Lutomierski

Literary portraits of Nicolaus Copernicus for the young

The Year of Nicolaus Copernicus provides an excellent opportunity to reach out not only to contemporary, but also to slightly older and forgotten works intended for young readers that introduce the figure of the famous astronomer. Reading these works is an interesting form of journey through Copernicus' biography, Polish and European history, and history of literature.

Gazing at the sky and books

The uniqueness of Nicolaus Copernicus as a man and a scientist is emphasized by poetry (not only poetry for children). Evidence of this can be found in an interesting poem by Edward Szymański titled *Mikołaj Kopernik* [Nicolaus Copernicus] (written during the interbellum period), which portrays the astronomer in a very evocative way. Copernicus is shown at night in Frombork, "leaning towards the stars, / he looks up, up, up, unceasingly. / Beside him telescopes, compasses, / books, maps, circles, and dashes – / only strange, unusual things, / like the unusual man who does not sleep." The astronomer was and is dedicated to his passion: "And for so many days, and for so many nights, / staring at the sky and the books, / did not take his eyes off for a moment / from the universe of mysterious power." Thanks to this, he discovered the truth, which "[...] will remain for centuries, / will move from the foundations of our immense globe – / and the whole world will be like a great / monument to the Polish scientist."

A future great explorer

In Jan Parandowski's short story titled *Mały Kopernik* [Little Copernicus] (graphic design by Zygfryd Gardzielewski, Toruń, Joachim Lelewel Bibliophile Society, 1968), we see a boy hungry for knowledge, whose "eyes welled up with tears from listening." Following a comment made by his uncle, Łukasz Wätzenrode (spelled by the author as Waczen-



Photo by Marcin Lutomierski



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rode), on the solar eclipse that had just occurred, the future astronomer confesses: “- Thank you, Sir. One thing I find so strange is that the Sun, so big, so bright and so... I can’t say it... but when it was missing a while ago, everyone was talking about the end of the world and it was cold right away... that this Sun is running around our small and round Earth like a docile servant.” To this his brother Andy (named here as the elder; in light of Prof. Krzysztof Mikulski’s research, however, he was younger than Nicolaus) responds with leniency: “- Don’t worry, Nicky, you can’t change it.” That ends the story...

In love with books

The results of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus included a novel by Mira Jaworzakowa, a well-known author of books for children and young people, titled *Gdy odbijamy od portu* [When we depart from a port] (Warsaw, Instytut Wydawniczy “Nasza Księgarnia,” 1975). The



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work shows selected parts of the astronomer’s life – from his studies in Cracow, Bologna, and Rome, through the period when he was the administrator of the estates of the chapter, to the last days of his life in Frombork.

At first, Nicolaus Copernicus appears as a modest, quiet, timid, sickly, and science-focused young man. Unlike his brother Andrzej, he avoids noisy places and rarely goes into taverns. Unlike his friends, he cannot “rejoice in such a carefree, unrestrained manner,” and sometimes he even “feels sorry that he has never ran around with boys along the city walls or on the banks of the Vistula River.” As a student, Copernicus was, in a sense, a romantic: thinking about the cosmos, reminiscing dreamily about his hometown of Toruń. Jaworzakowa describes him as a capable and hard-working introvert who would rather stay in Cracow and study and hold discussions about planets than go to Bologna to study law. Copernicus is also very conscientious and thorough: “he would not get up from the table until he put a period after the last sentence and carefully put away the sheets filled with text written in small letters.”

He was primarily in love with books, although the golden-haired Italian woman Beatrice also captivated him with her beauty. In contrast, he mentioned Anna Schilling in a cursory manner, saying that she was the daughter of his relative who was his housekeeper for some time and “always made sure that the food was deliciously seasoned with various herbs, and even that field flowers in a pitcher were put on a table covered with a tablecloth.”

However, both as an adolescent and an adult, Copernicus did not always behave in an exemplary manner, for example when he “stood in front of his uncle with his eyes wide open, with a face perhaps not even frightened, but not very wise, and with one and only one desire in his heart: to be let go as soon as possible.” Before the eyes of the reader, Nicolas matures mentally, becoming more and more resolute and impatient at the same time: he was irritated by administrative chores, because they prevented him from writing the book about the Earth and the Sun that he always dreamed of writing. At the time, he would sometimes “alienate kind-hearted people with coldness or harsh words.” Age also strengthened in Copernicus the desire, hidden from an early age, to decide on his own destiny (which was first hindered by his father and later by his uncle).

A kid, a student, a doctor with a distress

Cezary Leżeński's novel *Bartek, Zuzanna i Kopernik* [Bartek, Zuzanna, and Copernicus] (illustrated by Lech T. Karczewski, Toruń, Wydawnictwo "Graffiti BC", 1999) looks at the figure of the famous astronomer from a completely different perspective. The book is a continuation of the adventures of Bartek, a student at one of Warsaw's late 20th century schools, who, urged by his friend Zuza, traveled to the time of Copernicus and tried to find him. First he found himself in 15th-century Toruń, where he learned surprising facts about the younger son of Mr. and Mrs. Copernicus from their housekeeper: "He stole lots of gingerbread from the Reverend's table. Seemingly quiet and calm, he broke the precious glass of the Vicar's bedroom (!) with a stone." Nicky – as his colleagues called him – was a slim boy with sharp facial features, dark hair, an unruly forelock, and playful yet kind eyes. In Bartek's eyes at the time, little Nicolaus was an inconspicuous "kid" who did not look like an intellectual and a great explorer who would be famous for centuries to come. Even though he liked Nicky, the main character concluded that the Copernicus – junior was a regular rascal and hooligan who shot at pigeons from a slingshot and broke windows in a townhouse. To top it all off, he even wanted to drop out of school and become a soldier, but Bartek, concerned about the future fate of the boy and the humanity, successfully persuaded him not to follow that idea.

The second meeting with Copernicus introduces readers to Nicolaus as a student, who still could not speak Polish well and even had to take private classes to learn it. Although he had an excellent memory, he could be a bit distracted at times. In addition – to the great surprise of the boy from the future – Copernicus took an active part in student feasts, shouting, singing, and drinking alcohol on a par with his friends. However, the apogee of Copernicus' decadent lifestyle took place only at Bartek's "hazing ritual," after which Nicky confessed: "I have never been so drunk."

The next part of the book shows Copernicus as a physician at the castle in Heilsberg (Lidzbark Warmiński) who knows cures for all the world's ailments, except for one called "unhappy love." A servant of Copernicus depicts the doctor's well-being this way: "He is in great distress [...]. His status of a priest stands in the way."

In Frombork, Copernicus was already a serious and almost accomplished scholar. He had a study –

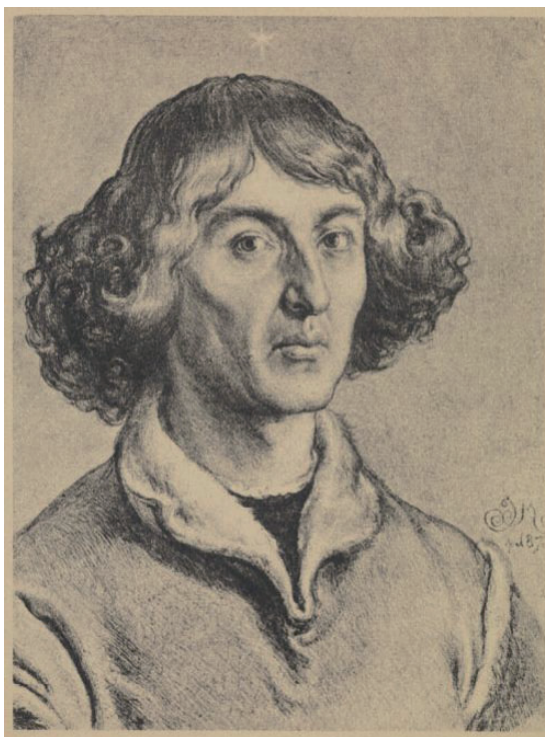


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observatory in the tower, which he often did not leave for several days, "and his housekeeper Anna, a good soul, cooked food and did not leave him for a moment." Unlike Mira Jaworczakowa, Cezary Leżeński paid a little more attention to Anna Schilling. In his hovel, Anna appears several times. It is known, for example, that she was "very beautiful and with a great figure," "of medium height, with a shapely figure and chestnut hair," moved "with a rare grace and charm that made her proportional figure apparent," and that his face radiated whenever he saw her. Despite the fact that he parted with Anna, a smile appeared on Nicolaus' face one more time when he received the book of his life from Zuzanna (Bartek's girlfriend).

A boy who reached for the stars

The book *Mikołaj Kopernik: chłopak, który sięgnął do gwiazd* [Nicolaus Copernicus: a boy who reached for the stars] by Marcin Przewoźniak, an acclaimed author of children's books, with modern illustrations by Dorota Szoblik (Kraków, Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, 2010), shows the famous astronomer in a similar manner. The book has both literary and educational qualities.

Thanks to the varied poetics of the text, the appropriate typography, and the attractive layout, this book can be read "casually," in portions, as there is



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no uniform narrative. Small, witty, and humorous statements present a broad historical background (especially that related to customs) and, according to the contemporary state of knowledge, bring answers (attempts to answer) a number of questions probably asked both young and older readers. Here is a handful of examples: What was Copernicus' name? What if he had been born into a poor family? What did little Nicolaus' school timetable look like? Did Copernicus spit under the table? Did Copernicus kiss? Did Copernicus like luxury? What if he had worked faster and published his work 10 years earlier? What did Copernicus use to explore the sky?

An ordinary/extraordinary man

The 20th- and 21st-century literary works about Copernicus for young readers include a biographical novel by Jerzy Broszkiewicz titled *Samotny podróżny* [A lone traveler] (Warsaw, Iskry, 1973), a stage play by Marta Reszczyńska-Stypińska *Mikołaj z Torunia* [Nicolaus of Toruń] (London, Polish Educational Society Abroad, 1973), a stage play by Tadeusz Rostański *Sceny z życia Mikołaja Kopernika* [Scenes from the life of Nicolaus Copernicus] (Toruń, Esperanto Society – FLAMO, 2003), an adventure novel by Sebastian Miernicki *Pan Samochodzik i... listy Mikołaja Kopernika* [Mr. Samochodzik and... letters of Nicolaus Copernicus] (Olsztyn, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Warmia," 2006), and a book by Katarzyna and Paweł Ziemiński *Droga do gwiazd. Opowieść o Mikołaju Koperniku* [Road to the stars. The story of Nicolaus

Copernicus] (illustrated by Ewa Beniak-Haremska, Łódź, Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2019). The latter publication is a collection of short stories that show Copernicus at various points in his life – from his childhood to his death. Thanks to a properly guided narrative, the reader can imagine the day of the birth of the future explorer, for example. "On February nineteenth, 1473, it was cold and windy. Nevertheless, the Old Town Market in Toruń was bustling with activity." Moments later, the narrator describes us one of the townhouses, where "there are excited servants running up and down the stairs, while the fat cook Adela quietly mumbles some kind of prayer and glances apprehensively at the bedroom door of her mistress, Barbara. Finally, when the only hand on the large oblong clock visibly moved, a loud cry of a baby could be heard. It was later recorded in a special chronicle that on that day, at 4:48 in the afternoon, Nicolaus Copernicus was born." Later, we get to know Nicholas in various situations and learn, among other things, that he did not like to waste time, was taciturn, loved Italy, preferred wearing a shirt, a jacket and pants to wearing a cassock, was often thoughtful and stuck his head high, as a physician he was particularly surprised that "no one washes their hands, even though they are the dirtiest." The story ends with a dream from which the astronomer never woke up: "[...] he was invited into his chariot, pulled by shiny-eyed peacocks, by Zeus' beautiful wife, Hera. "I have heard," she said in a deep, sweet voice, "that you are very interested in the Milky Way. How would you like taking a trip with me and taking a closer look at it?"

Fairy tales? Legends? Facts?

Contrary to appearances, literature for young audiences presents various portrayals of the life and work of Nicolaus Copernicus. This is because these works not only present facts from the famous astronomer's biography, but also enrich them with more or less plausible fiction, which stimulates the imagination and inspires the reader to do his or her own research related to Copernicus.



Dr. Marcin Lutomiński — NCU Press, Children and Youth Culture and Literature Research Unit at the Faculty of Humanities of the NCU



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