

Poetry, Art and Historical Memory: Fostering Dialogue about War

Francisco Antonio Martínez-Carratalá¹ & Sebastián Miras²

¹ University of Alicante, franciscoantonio.martinez@ua.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0587-5063>

² University of Alicante, sebastian.miras@ua.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4259-3890>

Abstract

Art, in its different manifestations, is one of the many ways that human beings have to express themselves and reflect on how they construct meanings not only about themselves but also about their historical, social, and cultural context. In the case of literature, these stories bring readers closer to realities and topics that are different from their own, which allows them to broaden their experience. This work focuses on the analysis of two poetic works that interpret, from different perspectives, the effects and consequences of some of the most terrible events of the 20th century, namely World War II and the dictatorships in Latin America. The conclusions highlight the relevance of this type of work for the development of critical thinking through art to keep track of and repair the wounds of historical memory.

As Bruner (11) pointed out, human beings use language and culture to construct meanings to represent and understand the historical reality of the community to which they belong. Military conflicts are not exempt from this need for understanding. In such deeply disturbing circumstances, the use of literary language can be a powerful means of expression that enables us to face the complexities embedded in these conflicts and metaphorically encapsulate our emotions. An example of the need for expression in situations of conflict can be found in UNICEF's *Poems for Peace* initiative, a collection of poetic texts by young people living in conflict situations in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Mali, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. These preliminary considerations are connected to the

objective of this study, which is to look for the reflection of war in children's literature, especially through picturebooks and poetic text. Although these complex topics in picturebooks can be explored from various angles, there is always an acknowledgement of the educational value that underlies these narratives. This underscores the imperative of embracing the "necessary discomfort," as Magnet and Dunnington (11) put it in their conclusive findings.

In this regard, picturebooks can be considered as a window for the promotion of intercultural education through the recognition of some of the conflicts that we face as a society, and which foster the development of empathy and critical thinking based on the recognition of 'otherness' (Stephens, 138). The inclusion of these topics in the classroom can thus build 'communities of conscience' (Deliman, 46) around the different points of view that readers can offer about a text, as well as identify different picturebooks to develop three essential aspects such as 'creating communities of care', 'exhibiting social responsibility' and 'supporting self-reflection and critical thinking'. These issues form the basis of teacher training for early educational stages, wherein the importance of selecting quality picturebooks can represent a temporary framework in order to recognize and develop cognitive and affective responses which help us react with empathy in moments of crisis (Crawford et al. 54). In this study critical reading In the critical reading in this study, one of the essential aspects is the recognition of the conflict from a personal perspective. Behind a major conflict or humanitarian crisis, as Evans (784) points out, lie different individual stories, whose point of view depends on who is telling the story.

War represents one of the main generators of crisis and carries along a series of consequences derived from the rupture of peaceful coexistence. Picturebooks incorporating representations of wartime conflicts, as Myers (39) emphasizes, are ways to promote dialogue and to engage readers in these historical events; preventing the

readers from being estranged from a reality without which the importance of peace, love, or responsibility cannot be understood. Although numerous high-quality picturebooks effectively portray the terrible consequences that war brings, it is still necessary to acknowledge the difficulties that these works may encounter within the educational framework.

The value of these narratives and the preservation of historical memory are fundamental and closely related to the need to provide children with appropriate materials, as Ana María Machado (7) pointed out. It is, however, also necessary to consider the risks and possible biases that may arise during observation of other cultures and historical moments, the teacher/mediator needs to assume a social responsibility. Analyzing a specific event poses a very big challenge, as we encounter democratic and cultural memories implied in it. Neraas (459) gets to the heart of the matter when she analyzes two picturebooks that represent the war conflict: "shared cultural memory does not necessarily exist only within a single nation and that nation's frame of reference but can span great geographical distances and reach a multitude of readers". Reading and creating dialogue, thus, should promote other information-searching strategies to contextualize the ideological element that these readings bring forward, as "[D]ialogue combines critique and inquiry, as readers pose questions, challenge the status quo, and collaboratively consider multiple viewpoints on an issue." (Short 9)

The creation of this kind of dialogue becomes more challenging in the reading of picturebooks, because readers are then faced with a space of indeterminacy (iconotext) that lies between the linguistic and the visual mode. It is within this context, as Wolfenbarger and Sipe (280) conclude, that readers become active agents in the process of aesthetic reception, and therefore require more time to inquire about how poetic and social meaning are created. In this regard, Arizpe and McGilp (197) in their review of

trends in picturebooks highlight the growing interest in poetry, with the ‘slow but steady increase’ of poetry picturebooks in recent years, where the meanings of the texts are visually expanded.

Following the classification proposed by Neira-Piñero (136), two main categories of poetry picturebooks are to be distinguished: one is a collection of poems in which each poem appears as a whole on each page, accompanied by an illustration, and the other category contains a single poem whose verses are shown separately on each page of the book. In the latter case, poetic picturebooks are thought to establish a metaphorical relationship between the visual code and the poetic text.

In light of these preliminary considerations, this study aims to analyze two poetic picturebooks that show different approaches on the idea war. The first book, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944* (1993) collected by Hana Volavková, contains poems written by children in the Terezin concentration camp during World War II. The second book is a poetry collection by the Chilean poet María José Ferrada, *Niños* (2020), which she dedicated to the thirty-four children under the age of 14 who disappeared and were executed during the Pinochet dictatorship.

Children’s poetry at concentration camps: *I never saw another butterfly*

Wars left an indelible mark on the 20th century—two World Wars followed by the different civil wars and dictatorships that devastated several countries. One of the most dramatic events that scarred the twentieth century is the Holocaust. For the preservation of the memory of such events, Simpson (118) points out, educators must integrate these contents in the classroom so that new generations are well aware of the causes and consequences of genocide. It is, thus, important to analyze the type of texts we can use to

convey these events and their historical accuracy, given the existence of both fictional and non-fictional texts for children to represent these situations. This is particularly relevant when we are dealing with the picturebook format, as the text is complemented and expanded by images and special attention must be paid to the extra information supplied by the images. However, it should be considered, as noted by Bosmajian (220), that the visual representation of the Holocaust in picturebooks “usually attempts to teach as it displaces and obscures the horror through archetypal conventions and Holocaust images that have become iconically acceptable.”

Therefore, a piece of work that avoids such conventions can be found in the collection of poems and drawings, *I never saw another butterfly* (1993). In order to understand the texts, we first have to understand the situation these children were living under. Terezin was a German-occupied territory in Czechoslovakia, in the northwest of the Czech Republic, that became a concentration camp (Theresienstadt) between 1941 and May 8, 1945, when it was liberated by Soviet troops. Among the population of Terezin there were some individuals that belonged to the Jewish cultural elite, and this was what, as documented by Gilbert (438), fueled Himmler’s intention to turn it into a “model camp” in which cultural activities were allowed under the prior censorship of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Administration of leisure activities).

Among all the cultural activities that were carried out at the concentration camp, one stood out: the creation of a magazine called *Vedem* by children between 13 and 15 years old, of which around eight hundred pages have survived. One of the young authors, Petr Ginz, drew a picture of the Earth seen from the Moon which became a symbol of the hope for freedom among those children that were forced to live under such extreme conditions. Aside from creative writing workshops, the children also received drawing classes from artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis who, as Rubin (229) points out, trained with Edith Kramer,

one of the pioneers in the use of art for therapeutic purposes. Furthermore, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis's work was influenced by the Bauhaus school and Paul Klee, and that can be seen in the art practices she developed with children in the concentration camp. The complete collection of artworks amounts to more than four thousand drawings and is part of a traveling exhibition that has visited different countries.

In Ruwe's words (258), this collection of poems is an oddity in the field of illustrated poetry because it combines both styles of production (text and illustrations) to convey the oppressive living conditions of the children living in the concentration camp. Moreover, the visual component enhances and amplifies the historical context of these drawings, whose minimalist style, according to Painter et al. (34), contributes to further detachment of the reader. Even so, the symbolic load of these drawings in their intermodal relationship (text and image) deeply affects the reader, especially when the drawings depict human figures in everyday situations in the concentration camp. The poems and drawings in the poetry collection come together with several informative texts that document the historical circumstances experienced in Terezin, with a prologue written by Chaim Potok and an epilogue by Vaclav Havel (the first President of the Czech Republic). In addition, the paratexts complement the drawings and the poems with biographical notes about the authors, and that is how we get to know the small number of survivors not sent to Auschwitz—just five in the whole collection.

The organization of this poetry collection is mainly sequenced through the use of double pages; each poem is accompanied by a drawing that enhances the feelings of melancholy, hope, sadness, anger, and fear, conveyed through all the objects, everyday situations and landscapes pictured there. The act of flying is used as a metaphor for freedom in two anonymous poems that close the collection (*Birdsong I* and *Birdsong II*), and also in the verse after which the whole poem collection is named—Pavel Friedmann's *The Butterfly*.

Friedmann's verse captures the melancholy of contemplating the beauty of the last butterfly's flight, the warmth of the sun, and the nature that surrounds this last flight of freedom—something that the people living in the Terezín ghetto are deprived of. This beauty of the butterfly's flight in Pavel Friedmann's poem is contrasted against reality in the last lines: "That butterfly was the last one. /Butterflies don't live in here, /in the ghetto" (39).

The poetry collection also includes five poems by Franta Bass (who died in Auschwitz at the age of 14) that capture the children's intense feeling of melancholy, their despair and sense of uprooting after being snatched away and taken from their homes, as can be read in *The Old House* or *Home*. Aside from sadness and the questioning of their situation, there are also some warm moments as in *Illness*, where a child's fever disappears when his mother tells his favorite story. The resilience and resistance of the Jewish people in the face of adversity is a common topic that underlies all Bass' poems, particularly in the poem entitled *I am a Jew*: "I am a Jew and will be a Jew forever /Even if I should die from hunger, /never will I submit" (57). The symbolism of the poem is enhanced by an anonymous watercolor illustration of a candle burning away on the left side of the page as a ship sails through the darkness of the night guided by the moon and the stars.

In addition to these feelings of sadness and melancholy, the poems also convey fear towards illness, repression, forced labor, and death. One of the best examples is in Eva Picková's poem *Fear*, in which the shadow of death hovers over the people of Terezin (signaling the coming of a typhus plague) and the author wonders whether it might be better to be deported or to stay there and witness all those atrocities. These harsh verses are illustrated by Sonya Spitzová's collage, *Guard with stick*, which portrays a threatening figure of a whip-wielding guard standing behind a lectern. The last lines of the poem show the resistance against oppressors and the desire to survive as an act of struggle: "No,

no, my God, we want to live! / Not watch our numbers melt away./ We want to have a better world, / We want to work – we must not die!" (55).

Expressing our views on life through painting and poetry is an example of our need to preserve not only our historical memory but also human's resilience after witnessing the horrors of war and other traumatic events in history such as the Holocaust. Furthermore, it shows that the act of writing is crucial and transcendent, as Sartre said (67): "Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are committed, willy-nilly".

Poetry and memory restoration: *Niños* by María José Ferrada

The second poetry picturebook in our analysis is *Children (Niños)* (2020) by Chilean writer and journalist María José Ferrada. The second edition of this book received an honorable mention in the poetry category at the 2021 Bologna Children's Book Fair. The Chilean author has received numerous international awards for her works, such as the recent Cervantes Chico Ibero-American Prize in 2022. This poetry collection was initially published in 2013 by Ediciones Grafito and featured illustrations by Jorge Quien. The second edition features illustrations by Mexican artist María Elena Valdez and has been translated into different languages, such as Italian and English. María José Ferrada's work stands in contrast to *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*: instead of compiling stories written by the children themselves, she writes poems to honor them, particularly the thirty-four children executed under Pinochet's dictatorship.

In this case, therefore, we are faced not only with a work of art that preserves the democratic memory but also a poem compilation that aims to bring back the lost childhood, the innocence that was cruelly snatched away from those children during the Chilean dictatorship. The author's stance could be described as what Sutherland (146)

called the "politics of attack," an allegation or complaint against the feelings that arise in her in the face of these events that go against her ethical principles and values. Thus, the critique is not expressed through a biographical reflection of the difficulties that each child went through, but rather in the purpose of restoring their childhood through her words, through those bright verses that claim to bring back a warm and motherly environment. In this way, María José Ferrada's poems envelop the memory of each of these thirty-four children's names in a warm environment filled with nature, games, and a whole series of microscopic elements that flow through her verses.

We can also see the same stance in María José Ferrada's other book, *Mexique: el nombre del barco* [Mexique: the name of the boat] (2017), which is dedicated to the 456 sons and daughters of Spanish republicans who emigrated to Morelia (Mexico) from Bordeaux (France). In sum, Ferrada's intimate view is connected through her verses, influenced by Japanese poetry, with the children's perspective, with the way children expand their vision of the world through symbolic thinking and everyday experiences. The brevity of some of these poems may call haikus to mind, wherein the sensorial experiences are enhanced by elements of Nature (with special attention to sounds, as in the poems *Soledad*, *Hugo*, or *Luz*).

These features are still present in the English translations of the poems. The conveyed warmth in the verses increases with the visual metaphors created by illustrator María Elena Vázquez—the contrasting grayish tones with bright shades of yellow that are a metaphor of the lives of the different characters alongside emphasis on the representation of Nature touched by magical realism. This connection between text and images can be seen (see Fig. 1) in the poem dedicated to Samuel Roberto Castro Castro¹ (*Killed, 13 years old*) in which he is portrayed flying following the sun's path from sunrise to sunset

and concludes: "That he wanted to prove for himself/ the fact that the Earth is a round sphere" (22).

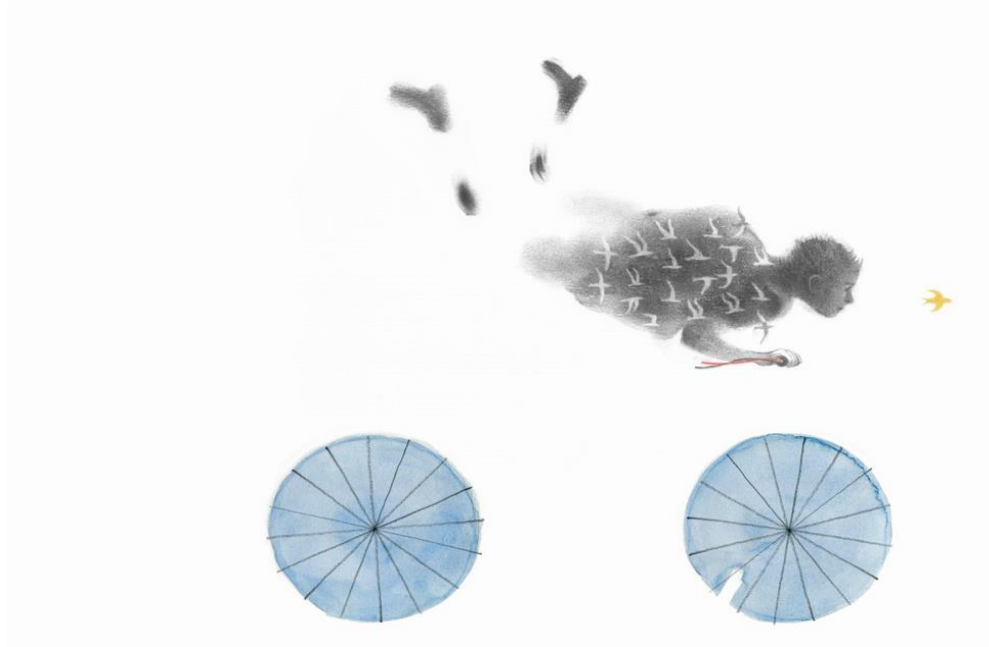


Fig. 1. Visual metaphor of María Elena Valdez for the poem dedicated to Samuel Roberto Castro in *Niños* (2020) written by María José Ferrada.

The picturebook/poetry anthology includes an epilogue about the historical events that took place after the bombing of the Palacio de la Moneda in Santiago de Chile on September 11, 1973. We are shown that the names on each poem's titles are real—they are the names and surnames of 32 children executed when they were under fourteen years old. This becomes more powerful as the readers learn that ten of those boys and girls were only four years old when they were killed. According to García-González (180), this paratext is a crucial element that not only provides the author's work with historical authenticity, but also offers a dialogical space which makes us question what happened to that lost childhood described in each of these poems and adds real names to the list of missing children. The potential of this poetic-visual manifestation offers mediators an

opportunity for revisiting these readings and creating new meanings. The last poem, as a final coda, is dedicated to Pablo Athanasius who was removed from the list when he was found by the non-governmental association Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo [The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo] in 2013, and to whom the book is dedicated with the wish that "the stars always shine for him." (73).

Conclusions

From the analysis of these two picturebooks/poetry anthologies, we can see two complementary ways to explain the consequences of war to young children by the means of literature. Firstly, the poetic approach in the studied texts fosters the reader's empathy through the intimate contact with the voices of the victims as they give testimonies of what they went through in life. This consideration stands in contrast to other works in which historical events are remembered by means of dates and figures that dehumanize the victims and focus democratic memory on the symbolic vision of childhood. In this way, poetry as an artistic expression acts as a therapeutic means of showing the expression of emotions related to traumatic events of the past and recognizable in the particular view of the world that children have.

Secondly, the presentation mode as picturebooks enhance the message conveyed through the poetic text by adding visual metaphors in the intermodality process that combines the two codes. In these works, two different options are contemplated: the reflection of a reality with the aim to preserve the historical memory of the horrors that took place in Terezin, and the restoration of memory through the reparation and retrieval proposed by María José Ferrada. Both approaches are, thus, complementary in the search for historical truth and emphasize the need to resort to well-documented sources and real documents that bring the reader closer to the trauma these children experienced, so that the brutal consequences of war are never forgotten and the same mistakes are not repeated.

In conclusion, these poetic works are in themselves useful documents for fostering a culture of peace in the classroom—by learning about true testimonies of other children, our students can develop empathy and thus a better understanding of our present society, making our commitment to literary mediation acknowledge the promotion of peaceful coexistence in the world. The intellectual autonomy that is achieved through the development of critical thinking also implies the ability to reflexively engage in other people's stories, as a way of understanding the human condition.

Notes

1. Image on Figure 1 is reproduced by kind permission of Alboroto Ediciones, México.

Works cited

Children's books cited

Ferrada, María José. *Niños*. Illustrated by María Elena Valdez, Alboroto Ediciones, 2020.

Ferrada, María José. *Mexique: el nombre del barco*. Illustrated by Ana Penyas, Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2017.

Volavková, Hana. *I never saw another butterfly: children's drawings and poems from Terezin concentration camp: 1942-1944*. Schoken, 1993.

Secondary Sources

Arizpe, Evelyn, and Emma McGilp. "Picturebook Futures." *A Companion to Children's Literature*, edited by Karen Coats et al. Wiley Blackwell, 2022, pp. 193-206.

Bosmajian, Hamida. *Sparing the child: Grief and the unspeakable in youth literature about Nazism and the Holocaust*. Routledge, 2002.

Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of meaning*. Harvard UP, 1990.

- Crawford, Patricia, et al. "Addressing 21st-Century Crises through Children's Literature: Picturebooks as Partners for Teacher Educators." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2019, pp. 44-56. [doi: 10.1080/10901027.2019.1570401](https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2019.1570401)
- Deliman, Amanda. "Picturebooks and Critical Inquiry: Tools to (Re)Imagine a More Inclusive World." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2021, pp. 46-57. [doi:10.1353/bkb.2021.0044](https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2021.0044).
- Evans, Janet. "We are all born free and equal. But are we? Children's responses to issues of conflict, migration and refugees in picturebooks." *Education 3-13*, vol. 46, no. 7, 2018, pp. 782-801. [doi: 10.1080/03004279.2017.1364062](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2017.1364062)
- García-González, Macarena. "Post-representational Cultural Memory for Children in Chile: From La Composición to Bear Story." *Children's Literature in Education* vol. 51, 2020, pp. 160–178. [doi: 10.1007/s10583-018-9361-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-018-9361-y)
- Gilbert, Shirli. "Music in the nazi ghettos and camps." *The Routledge history of the Holocaust*, edited by Jonathan C. Friedman, Routledge, 2011, pp. 436-51.
- Machado, Ana María. "Censura, arbitrio y sus circunstancias." *Ocnos. Revista De Estudios Sobre Lectura*, no. 14, Nov. 2015, pp. 7-17. [doi:10.18239/ocnos_2015.14.01](https://doi.org/10.18239/ocnos_2015.14.01)
- Magnet, Shoshana and Catherine-Laura Dunnington. "Necessary Discomfort: Three Preschool Classrooms Break Open *The Heart and the Bottle* and Sit with Hard Feelings." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2020, p. 1-14. [doi:10.1353/bkb.2020.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2020.0009).

Myers, Lindsay. "What Do We Tell the Children? War in the Work of Roberto Innocenti."

Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, vol. 47, no. 4, 2009, pp. 32–9.

Neira-Piñero, María del Rosario. "Poesía e imágenes: una nueva modalidad de álbum ilustrado." *Lenguaje y Textos*, vol. 35, 2012, pp. 131–8.

Neraas, S. "Past Wars in Present Stories: An Analysis of the Picturebook *Vanishing Colors*." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 52, pp. 449-463. [doi: 10.1007/s10583-020-09422-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-020-09422-9)

Painter, Claire, et al. *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. Equinox, 2013.

Rubin, Judith Aron. *Introduction to art therapy: sources & resources*. 2nd reprint, Routledge, 2010.

Ruwe, Donelle. "Poetry in Picturebooks." *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmmerling-Meibauer, Routledge, 2017, pp. 246-259.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "*What is literature?*" and other essays. Harvard UP, 1988.

Short, Kathy G. "The Dangers of Reading Globally." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2019, pp. 1-11. [doi:10.1353/bkb.2019.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2019.0025).

Simpson, Kevin E. "Hitler's Genocide: Teaching the Psychology of the Holocaust." *Teaching of Psychology*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2012, pp. 113–120. [doi: 10.1177/0098628312437726](https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628312437726)

Stephens, John. "Picturebooks and ideology." *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmmerling-Meibauer, Routledge, 2017, pp. 137-145.

Sutherland, Robert. "Hidden persuaders: Political ideologies in literature for children." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1985, pp. 143-157.

Wolfenbarger, Carol Driggs, and Lawrence Sipe. "A unique visual and literary art form: Recent research on picturebooks." *Language Arts*, vol. 84, no.3, 2007, 273–280.

Citation

Martínez-Carratalá, F.A., & Miras, S. (2023). Poetry, Art and Historical Memory: Fostering Dialogue about War. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 61(3), 36-44. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2023.a903438>.