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Someone Else's Story as Your Own

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"Translated children's books offer children a chance to read literature from other countries, literature that talks about different experiences, ways of life, cultural models. Consequently, that different culture stops being impalpable and incomprehensible and it becomes normal and as much valuable as one's own." (Todorova, 2012: 21) This idea was an incentive to share my thoughts on the two books the children now have the opportunity to read in Macedonian language. The books are *Glass Children* (Skopje: Tri, 2018) by the Swedish author Kristina Ohlsson translated by Ivica Chelikovikj and *Nothing* (Skopje: Publisher, 2019) by the Danish author Janne Teller translated by Lara Krsteva-Ichokaeva.

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This paper focuses on two children's books that the Macedonian young readers have the opportunity to read in Macedonian thanks to the process of translation. On one hand, these books are opening new areas of interest for children, they are openly discussing subjects which are unspoken, and via other cultures – in this case the Swedish and the Danish – these books can help start a conversation about subjects that are still taboo in the Macedonian culture and then encourage an open discussion. These translations also give the Macedonian readers a chance to discover new cultures and to see what their peers in Europe read and want to read.

“Translated children's books play an important role in the process that helps children develop understanding (and have respect) for other cultures” (Todorova, 2012: 21) as well as for other children, those who are different from them, those with different and special educational, sociological and cultural needs. As Todorova further points out “translated children's books offer children a chance to read literature from other countries, literature that talks about difference experiences, ways of life, cultural models. Consequently, that different culture stops being impalpable and incomprehensible and it becomes normal and as much valuable as one's own” (2012: 21). As a result, someone else's experience becomes personal, someone else's story becomes familiar. In the foreword of *Children's Books in Translation*, Philip Pullman says: “You never know what will set a child's imagination on fire (...) but if we don't offer children the experience of literature from other languages, we're simply starving them” (cited in Todorova, 2012: 32).

Therefore, this paper is a small contribution in that regard. It centers around two books that I have recently read: *Glass Children* (Skopje: Tri, 2018) by the Swedish author Kristina Ohlsson translated by Ivica Chelikovikj and *Nothing* (Skopje: Publisher, 2019) by the Danish author Janne Teller translated by Lara Krsteva-Ichokaeva.

I. *The Glass Children* for Our Glass Children

The last page of this book says:

"The Glass Children is Kristina Ohlsson's first children's book. She is one of the most eminent crime novels authors in Sweden, who has successfully adapted her skills for creating mystery and thriller atmosphere for the younger audience as well".

Taking this recommendation into account one will without hesitation and especially if it is a person who enjoys such excitement while reading, one will read this exceptionally interesting, extremely mysterious and intense story. And, obviously, not only the awards that this book received (Swedish Radio's Children's Novel Award in 2013 and Swedish) but the flowing and elegant writing of this interesting and exciting story have made this book a true challenge both for the experienced and recognized translator, Ivica Chelikovikj with about thirty translations under his belt, and for the publishing house "Tri" to offer this book to their youngest readers in Macedonia.

Although the translation carries the risk of establishing hierarchy between the major and minor languages, between the hegemonic and subordinate cultures the new translations of children's books can serve as a method of introducing children to the selected literary works from other countries that surmount stereotypes and encourage understanding, tolerance and respect. In addition to exposing children to different ways of life they help them discover that the human experience is at the same time unique and universal when the cultural boundaries are transcended (Todorova, 2012: 30).

Therefore, *The Glass Children* is a book with several small stories within **Billie's "big" story**. After the loss of her father, Billie does not want to lose her house, and her home, too. This is an every child's story, regardless of where he or she is living, here in Macedonia or in some other place, Sweden for instance.

In *The Glass Children* you can read about:

the mysterious house in Åhus built hundred years ago, painted in blue, speckled with yellow crevices, uninhabited for one, maybe two years; about the grim, cold and shabby house which still breathes in the rhythm of the old furniture from the previous owners;

Billie, who does not care at all if the house is green, yellow or black, because all she wants is to get out of there and go back home;

her mother Ebba who, following the death of her husband, tries to gather her strength and start a new life with and for her daughter; who blinded by her enormous love for her child sometimes thinks that only she is right and has the sole responsibility and obligation to decide on most matters, because simply put, she is the grown-up.

Also, *The Glass Children* is a book:

about **Billie's strangest summer break** in the **even stranger house** where the light bulb swings in the room with closed windows, where someone leaves handprints and a message written with childish handwriting saying: "Get out from here!", where someone knocks on the window over Billie's bed, where two little glass figures appear from nowhere standing on the drawing carrying another scary message: "Stop searching for answers. Or else".

The *Glass Children* is a book:

about the **strange and inexplicable disappearance of the previous family** that lived in the house;

about the **even stranger Ella Bengtsson**, the short – shorter than Billie – eccentrically dressed woman in her old dress that looks as old as she and smells funny;

about **Billie's friends**, the old ones, like the redhead Simona from the city who reminds us of a distant literary cousin of the popular Pippi Longstocking, and the new ones, like Aladdin, the symbol of diversity in Sweden, who came from Turkey when he was two years old. His name transports us in the exotic story of Aladdin and the magic lamp from the *Arabian nights*.

The idea of intimacy matches the idea of the rooms, the coffee table and the trunk as hidden places where one can dream, where one can hide one's secrets. Because the "wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life" (Bachelard, 2002: 126). All those places in *The Glass Children* serve as objects-subjects, serve as those memory boxes in our heads in the grey matter where fragments of the past reside. In order to evoke intimate, private, personal moments, to share even the most painful ones – the loss of the loved ones (her father), to speak openly about illnesses, about the strange "glass children" – the former tenants, about the meningitis of Billie's mother, the reader needs to enter a state of unfinished reading.

Glass children are children who are born with severe case of osteoporosis, or **bone fragility**. Therefore, they should be constantly monitored so that they do not fall or hurt themselves. However, in my opinion the phrase "glass children" has a deeper meaning and I do not think it is a coincidence that the book carries that title! Natalija Tasevska's article about her generation (about our children) made me think in the following direction: "We are a **fragile generation**. We cannot take responsibility for our own actions. We are **glass children. Spoiled and**

overprotected. Our parents made us take sports and computer courses. At age six we had already passed all English courses. We were forced to become wunderkinds. We were raised to be afraid (...) from our own mistakes. But how are we to become better people if we do not make mistakes? We were raised to fear the world *and* to scare it. We got used to staying home in our comfort zone. Because they taught us that if it is raining outside, we should not go out. That is the rule. We might come down with a cold". Our children's fragility is in fact in their easily broken heart and soul.

Hence the reader discovers different stories:

the story about the house which once had been an orphanage called *Sunny Valley* where "the girl who worked as a caregiver had hanged herself" (2018: 150);

the story about Aladdin's boathouse which to Billie it looks like a shoe box compared to her old, haunted house: "The house was filled with sounds. It was crackling, like it was growing and it ached. It must not be like that in Aladdin's house. Billie imagined that he can hear the sound of the waves and thought that that was a wonderful lullaby. If Aladdin and she became friends, maybe Billie and Simona can go to his house and spend the nights" (2018: 52);

the story about Ella's house with oil lamps, so small it had "only one room and a kitchen in the corner", so small "there was just one sofa, a bed and a small table" (2018: 87);

and the story about the room with slanted ceiling where Billie hanged photos of her father and grandparents, arranges her books along with the books of the previous owner thus becoming "the first twelve-year-old with her own library" (2018: 72);

The library can be experienced both as a **closed** (Billie's room can be read as a micro cosmos) and **open** space (there are countless books on the shelves opening new spaces as macro cosmos or invisible spaces that are created by our imagination) (according to Surio, 1982: 44-105). It is a place where the literary and artistic experience has been stored through centuries. It matches "Borges' idea of the Library which will bring order to the world and of the infinite Book which will integrate all books within itself" (cited in Prokopiev, 2000: 179).

Then the search for the truth begins revolving around the mysterious house that was once a school for the so called glass children. Ela worked as a cleaning lady there for the four families that lived there afterwards but not one of the families lasted

more than three years in that house and all experienced some type of an accident. That is why Ela says to Billie:

“I don’t know everything. But I know enough to be sure that the house **you are living in is not normal**” (2018: 89).

So the curious Billie embarks on a detective adventure.

Embarking on this detective journey “the reader is so wrapped in the role of the protagonist in his fight against evil and impatiently waits for the outcome, but also uses his own ability to play, to fantasize”. Today, the child living in a big city has the “same desire and **sweet fear** to embark on an adventure outside the home”, says Aleksandar Prokopiev in his book “The Travels of the Story” (1997: 151) This can be achieved by reading a detective novel: “the identification of the reader with the fearless protagonist in an efficient and fun way”. (1997: 151). Because **reading is also a part of the culture**. And children create their own culture, a type of a subculture in the culture of the adults. “They have similar artefacts, traditions, beliefs, behaviors, and books should help them to build their identities” (Todorova, 2010: 42). But we must admit that there are not many books which follow the detective pattern in Macedonian literature. The first book that comes to mind is the popular book by Slavko Janevski’s *Sugar Story* (1952). The sugar-boy (or the so called Macedonian Pinocchio) is a little detective who tries to save the kidnapped nightingale. Also, I would like to remind you of the book *Winter Detectives* (1972) by Olivera Nikolova – story centered around the search for Vera’s lost “jinxed sweater” in a criminal-detective, contents-composition manner.

Popularity sometimes exploits the commercialization of feelings, but we should not forget the fact that the detective book’s popularity “is equal to the fairytale’s popularity which is indisputably the most read, most famous and most loved folklore genre. Just as Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella are among the most famous characters in the world, some detectives have become true literary legends”, concludes Prokopiev (1997: 153) thinking about Sherlock Holmes.

The detective story – like the fairytale – supports and defends individual freedom and action. At the beginning of the fairytale the protagonist usually leaves his/her home and is on his/her own and depend on his/her courage and wits. In the same way, the detective is often a loner – just like Billie. However, with the help of those who believe her the most, Simona and Aladdin, she succeeds in discovering the truth thus bringing cathartic satisfaction to Billie and to the reader.

II. There is Something That Means Something, After All

On the other hand, the book *Nothing* (Intet, 2000) by Janne Teller has been travelling around the world for almost twenty years. It finally arrived in Macedonia (Skopje: Publisher, 2019). She is an exceptional writer, raising her voice and speaking her mind on many modern and philosophical issues regarding religious and political fanaticism, ethics in art and the modern world, dilemmas and views on the European identity. The book *Nothing* – her debut novel in **children's literature** – is thought to have revolutionized the young adult novel genre. In 2001, the novel received the **Danish Ministry of Culture's Children Book prize**. Although the book was initially banned, has since risen as an international bestseller, receiving the prestigious award Le Prix Libbylit in 2008 for **Best Children's Book published in French**.

Nothing is a modern story about the **essence of life**, about the everlasting dilemma: what is the meaning of life. Is it in the existence or in the essence? The title itself has a scary ring to it. Is it really possible, in today's world, people to deal with NOTHING? Can NOTHING be such a strong motive to write a whole book? Many compare this book by Janne Teller with *Animal Farm* (Skopje: Ikona, 2012) by George Orwell, the biggest satire of modern history and *Lord of the Flies* (Skopje: Nasha Kniga, 1984) by William Golding. I feel free to compare it to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*.

Because just like Sartre's existentialist Antoine Roquentin all of a sudden gets the feeling and realizes that he exists, the children in Teller's book get the feeling that they have to dissuade their friend Pierre-Anthon from believing in his wrong philosophy, who left school the day he realized that nothing was worth doing, because nothing meant anything anyway.

Just imagine, Pierre-Anthon parks himself up in a plum tree and from there, like a little God, starts observing the world. He looks at the sky and practices doing nothing, yet he still pelts his friends with unripe plums. He also preaches the following:

"If something's worth getting upset about, then there must be something worth getting happy about. And if something's worth getting happy about, then there must be something that matters. But there isn't! (...) In a few years you'll be all dead and

forgotten and diddly-squat, nothing, so you might just as well start getting used to it!" (2019: 11)

So just as Anthoine Roquentin suddenly gets the feeling that he is existing while he is observing the root of a huge chestnut in a Bouville's park and realizes that in fact **to exist means to be present, to live**, all those children from 7th grade realize they have to find a way to get Pierre-Anthon down on the ground and show him that there is **something that matters**.

Roquentin tries to discover the pure state of existence, of life, state of being freed from physical existence. He believes that he is getting closer to the discovery. He believes that when he is listening to a **jazz record**. The melody does not physically exist, but it is here, it lives and fills the air around him. He therefore concludes that "to exist is to be here, simply, without any necessity". The students share the same view so they decide to create the **heap of meaning**. Agnes, one of the children, tells us the story in a very skillful and precise manner, eight years after the events took place. So the heap constantly grows, even begins to look like a Christmas tree. The idea was to gather all things that mean most to the children, such as Agnes' green wedge sandals or Gerda's hamster Oscarlittle and use them to show Pierre-Anthon that there is SOMETHING, sometimes and somewhere... which is worth living for!

In Orwell's story the animals want to create a utopian model of communism where everyone would work according to their capacity, respecting others' needs. Unfortunately, that does not happen and the pigs begin their authoritarian rule. Pigs are shown as the cleverest of all animals, but they are the laziest as well. Orwell's genius is in his perfect way of presenting the totalitarian regime. The Revolution is doomed from the beginning despite its promising start reflected in the maxim: "No animal must ever tyrannize over his own kind. Weak or strong, clever or simple, we are all brothers". To this end, they create the seven commandments on equality and prosperity for all. However, the pigs as natural leaders succeed to rule over the other animals through terror and propaganda with Napoleon as their leader – the most respected and the evilest pig. Thus, "all animals are equal" transforms into "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". Orwell creates a situation where pigs succeed in convincing the other animals that it is for their own good that pigs eat more apples and drink milk and that leadership is a "big responsibility" and they in fact should be thankful to Napoleon. In a simple, yet

effective way Orwell describes **mind control** – the animals actually think and believe that "Napoleon is always right". Can we experience Pierre-Anthon as a new Orwell's Napoleon?

"Nothing" is a story about Pierre-Anthon.

It all begins on a beautiful day at the beginning of the school year when he stands up and announces that "nothing matters, so nothing's worth doing", that life is meaningless and we should not worry about anything. We should not worry about school, friends, family... Eager to show him that he is wrong, his friends go on a quest looking for **the meaning of life**. So they decide to give up their most valuable things, the things that mean the most to them like Frederik's **Danish flag** representing his patriotism; Anna-Li's **birth certificate** showing her Korean origin and that she was adopted; lady William's **diary** which is his life; Hussain's **prayer mat** representing his religious belief. Each next request becomes crueler than the last and the story has a morbid twist. But can we really confirm by giving things up that nothing matters and that nothing has meaning? Teller succeeds in showing that the fear of meaninglessness can influence person's actions as much as the pressure from the surroundings and the people.

In that regard, *Nothing* reminds us of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. A brief recap. The book focuses on a group of British boys stranded on an uninhabited island and their attempt to govern themselves. The boys learn how to survive on this island, but also are faced with the challenge of growing up. In the beginning, they form a society with a leader and members who have different tasks. Initially it seems that everything can function perfectly. However, in time the boys succumb to the powers of primitivism and soon violence and evil begin to rule the island. After one incident, Jack the evil incarnate in this story, will erect a **totem - a pig's head, mounted on a sharpened stick** which will be named Lord of the flies. In the same way, Pierre-Anthon gives his friends incentive to work more than half a year on building the **heap of meaning** – the heap of meaningful items in the dilapidated sawmill which will become a sacred place (for rituals) where only those who know the combination of the padlock can go into. The combination of the padlock is 502 – Pierre-Anthon's birthday. Golding's story is also a story about the history of civilization and the origins of religious beliefs based on the **fear of unknown**, as well as the ways in which the religion and superstition can be used as an instrument of power! All that will lead to the death of one of the boys and in Teller's story will make

the whole class dedicate themselves to creating the heap of meaning. In order to do that, the children will dig up the coffin containing Elise's baby brother, cut off Ursula-Marie's braids, who "looked like someone who had gotten lost on her way to the asylum" (2019: 68), take Sofie's innocence, desecrate Jesus on the Rosewood Cross, decapitate Cinderella, cut off Jon-Johan's index finger and burn Pierre-Anthon alive, he who started the whole thing about the NOTHING. So maybe around twenty children successfully faced the challenge of creating a heap of meaning which even made them popular. However, as Agnes confessed, they did not succeed in one thing:

The heap of meaning had started to smell less than pleasant.

Less than pleasant. Unpleasant. Sickening (2019: 92)

And Pierre-Anthon does not have any plums to throw at them, so instead he started throwing his words at them:

What smells is decay. But when something starts decaying, it's on its way to becoming a part of something new. And the new that's created smells good. So it makes no difference whether something smells good or bad, it's all just a part of life's eternal round dance. (2019: 92)

So the uninhabited island in Golding's story is the abandoned sawmill in Teller's story. These settings are aiming to unmask the natural, uninhibited behavior of the children away from school, away from parents and teachers. In fact, the story of nothing is a story that opposes the generally accepted belief that children are innocent. It shows that just like adults, children are capable of deep thinking and making serious decisions, but are also capable of brutal behavior because evil is intrinsic to human nature.

Translated by Paulina Jamakova

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