

Voronina, Olga, ed. *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. iv + 508 pp. \$179.00. ISBN 978-90-04-40148-8.

It is always a delight to get one's hands on a new book about Russian or Soviet children's literature. Outside the former Soviet Union, Russian children's literature has been, until lately, practically *terra incognita*. It is good to see that it has become more established subject of international study, perhaps the most notable recent English language work being Ben Hellman's *Fairy Tales and True Stories: The History of Russian Literature for Children and Young People (1574-2010)*, which came out in 2013. Also in Russia the scholarly interest toward children's literature has changed in recent decades, and it is now studied to a greater extent as part of literature and culture in general, not only from a pedagogical point of view. *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film* is a welcome new contribution to the study of the subject.

Although Soviet culture can be regarded as a historical phenomenon, its actuality is underlined in the introduction by the editor, Olga Voronina, where she invites the reader to see children's literature and film as a vital part of the Soviet propaganda machinery. She points out the problematic nature of looking at Soviet culture with nostalgia and calls for the reevaluation of Soviet children's literature and film from today's perspective. The essays in the tome take part in this process by discussing the organizational structures behind the culture production: state driven publishing houses, children's magazines, censorship, and film industry. The texts also illustrate the ambiguous nature of Soviet children's literature and film as both a vehicle of ideology and a forum for subversive Aesopian writing.

*A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film* is not a systematic presentation of the subject. Each of the twelve articles concentrates on a specific topic, and the theoretical background of the articles varies: in the first article, Sara Pankenier Weld analyses the relationship between early Soviet picturebooks and censorship in terms of natural history and

evolution, while the book ends with Anna Fishzon's psychoanalytical study of the queer in Soviet children's culture. One of the common themes running through almost every article is the Soviet image of the child: Ana Hedberg Olenina illustrates the early steps of Soviet child psychology through examples from cinema, and Olga Voronina discusses the role of the child character with relation to education. The choice to combine film and literature in one volume is indicative of the close contact between these two art forms in the Soviet Union. It also follows the example set by Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova's edited volume *Russian Children's Literature and Culture* (2008) by presenting children's literature as a part of the bigger picture of children's culture.

The focus of the collection is on the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, the most popular author probably being Daniil Kharms, who is mentioned in almost every article on literature. The preference is reasonable: avant-garde literature is generally considered one of the most interesting achievements of Soviet culture, whereas Socialist Realism is, at least in the eyes of the non-Russian audience, the most exotic yet notorious "genre" of Soviet children's literature. Genres like fairytale and fantasy get fewer mentions as literature. However, fairytales become the main topic of both Lora Wheeler Mjolsness's and Larissa Rudova's articles on cinema, which broadens the view on Soviet children's literature that, after all, was not only (socialist) realist stories about brave pioneers and valiant child warriors but also fantastic fairytales that left more room for the reader's interpretation and imagination.

The articles deal almost exclusively with Russian-language literature; the existence of literature in other Soviet languages gets only brief mention. Books in other Soviet languages receive the most attention in Maria Khotimsky's article on translation. The article is most valuable also in the sense that it illustrates the connection between Soviet and international children's literature. Although the translation of children's books was strictly controlled, and

the choice of the texts often based more on ideological than aesthetic values, the reading repertoire of Soviet children included world classics like *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Astrid Lindgren's stories--though often in different form than the original texts--and they had a vital presence in Soviet culture.

The scarcity of female authors in the material reflects the fact that the most famous Soviet children's authors and main actors in children's publishing were men. Some prominent female authors and illustrators--such as Agnija Barto and Alisa Poret--get a few mentions in the articles, but none is lifted to the center of attention. Elena Guro is one of the few female authors whose text is quoted and analyzed in depth: Ainsley Morse studies her poem when examining the intertwined relationship between avant-garde aesthetics and children's literature. Female authors get the most attention in Tatiana Voronina and Polina Barskova's article on Siege narratives, where the gender roles are also approached in terms of different expectations for girl and boy protagonists.

*A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film* is essential reading for anyone interested in Soviet children's culture. I would also recommend it to readers wanting to widen their perspectives on Russian culture in general. The images of famous avant-garde authors gain new dimensions through their works for children, and making acquaintance with hero narratives and historical fiction for children offers new approaches to the same themes in both literature and cultural studies. The illustrations chosen for the book give the reader a glimpse of the visual abundance of Soviet children's literature and film. When you read this book, make sure you have an internet connection available: while reading, you will want to google illustrations of the books and films analyzed in this volume in order to get deeper into the visual world of Soviet children's literature and film.

Jenniliisa Salminen, University of Turku, Finland