

Through a Child's Eyes – a special role of the child as narrator in Macedonian literature

Ohio State University
Occasional Papers in Slavic Studies

World literature includes a considerable number of works in which a child serves as narrator. Mark Twain's classic childhood adventure story, which is of course much more than that, *Huckleberry Finn*, immediately comes to mind. Another American classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, is also narrated by a child. Such works also include those in which a writer revisits his own childhood, such as in the classic autobiographical work, *Childhood*, by Russian writer Maxim Gorki.

Macedonian literature has a number of works with child narrators that are worthy of note. These include *Makedoncheto (The Macedonian Boy)* by Petros G. Vocis, whose childhood memoir is written in the child narrator's voice of five year old Petros, who recounts his life in the lost world of his family's ancestral home village of Setina in northern Greece. The book is a memoir of a year when the Greek Civil War raged in his home village. The author recounts the tragedy of a family and a community torn apart by the events of that war. Another work that deserves our attention is Zhivko Chingo's novel, *Golemata Voda (The Big Water)* that is narrated by the young boy, Lem, during his time in an orphanage in post World War Two Macedonia. A third noteworthy work in which a child frequently appears as narrator is the collection of short stories by Jadranka Vladova, *Voden Znak (Water Sign)*. Her child narrator often evokes a certain magic and romance in every day family life in Macedonia's capital Skopje in the 1950's and 60's.

While these three authors and their works will be the focus of my discussion, there are other noteworthy works by Macedonian writers with child narration. These include the works of writers such as Slavko Janevski and Olivera Nikolova. I have chosen to focus, however, on the three specific works described above because they are addressed to an older audience. They are works that cannot be described as children's literature, although they certainly appeal to older children and children whose reading and analytical skills are more advanced.

In the schoolyard or in the rougher neighborhoods, strength matters. If you're smaller and

weaker you get pushed around, unless you develop survival skills, learn to use creativity and cunning to survive. One of the roughest neighborhoods on earth is the Balkan Peninsula. Small and weak nations frequently get preyed upon by stronger neighbors. Macedonians, with one of the smaller national territories and populations in the region, know this all too well. Tragic stories of Macedonian oppression at the hands of more powerful neighbors abound in their national literature. Mere survival of a distinct Macedonian ethnic identity has often hung in the balance during times of foreign occupation, and over time there has been a steady erosion of the land base in ethnic Macedonian hands as each subsequent war has led to the further displacement of Macedonians by more numerous and aggressive neighboring peoples.

In response to this loss of homes and fields, the uprooting of whole communities, this dispersion of the people, often in foreign lands where their children become assimilated and lose all memory of a lost homeland, a lost language and culture, way of life and identity, Macedonian writers have fought back with the pen. If they could not defend their homes and identity from invaders, at least they could raise their voices in protest, regain a certain amount of dignity and self-respect through the power of literature, of memory mixed with dreams committed to the printed page.

One of the more clever ways that certain Macedonian writers have chosen to raise their voices against the bullies in their neighborhood is to voice their protest through a child narrator. As we all know, bullies rarely react kindly to complaints from their victims, so the clever person looks for ways to avoid retaliation for their protests. A child narrator can, among other things, create a degree of distance between the adult author and his or her message that serves to lessen hostility to that message. Readers tend to be more accepting of a child rather than an adult who gives voice to certain uncomfortable or controversial truths, because, after all, as American talk show host Art Linkletter, who made a career out of publicizing their utterances would say: "Kids say the darndest things".

Mark Twain took full advantage of this fact in his classic work of American fiction, *Huckleberry Finn*, when he had the wild, irresponsible child Huck give voice to the evil of the former institution of slavery. He did this mere decades after the bloody American Civil War, at a time when many southern white people, although defeated in war, were in deep denial concerning the cruel injustice their former ownership of Black Americans had constituted. One of the most telling moments in Twain's subtle indictment of slavery in the story comes when Huck decides to help the runaway slave Jim, despite his misguided belief that it would be wrong of him to aid and abet the "theft" of someone's property, i.e. the slave Jim. When Twain has Huck say, "All right, then, I'll go to hell-...", after he has decided to help Jim, the reader tends to react by

laughing at the absurdity of Huck's response. No doubt the widespread bigotry among southern whites was inflamed less by such a carefully crafted delivery of his message by Twain. Otherwise his book might have been subject to suppression, and he himself might have become a target for abuse by racial bigots.

Similarly, the Macedonian minority author in Greece, Petros Vocis, could have been intimidated into silence by the prevailing Greek public opinion and policy that there is no Macedonian language, people, or nation, past or present, inside or outside the borders of Greece. Something as simple as his use of words from non-Greek (Macedonian) language that he and his fellow villagers spoke, or the use of the old name of their village rather than the more recent Greek name given to that village by the Greek authorities, could have led to serious consequences for the author. He could have received death threats or his publisher could have been threatened if they dared to publish his book, as happened several years back when Cambridge University Press was considering publishing a book on the separate and distinct minority Macedonian language and culture in northern Greece. Or his book, upon publication, could have been withheld from distribution or destroyed before it ever reached the public, such as happened to Krste P. Misirkov's *On Macedonian Matters*, in 1903 in Bulgaria or to the *ABCEDAR* intended for the Macedonian population in Greece in the 1920's.¹

The fact that Vocis's book did not meet such a fate is not so much a result of some change in relations among Balkan neighbors as it is the result of creative use of a child narrator to avoid a hostile reaction. If the same author had chosen to simply interview older family and friends to document his village and people's experience in the Greek Civil War in 1947, there might have been a firestorm of opposition to his book in Greece, where it was first published in Greek before it came out in a Macedonian language edition in the Republic of Macedonia. But his five year old narrator evokes a different response from readers, tapping universal wells of sympathy for the child-like and innocent.

This crafting of a sympathetic child main character begins on the opening page of the book. At the same time, readers get a taste of the factual, documentary account of a village caught up in the tragic events of the civil war. Discerning readers will understand that the five year old narrator is a figure of literary invention, that his narration is the literary product of the adult researcher, organizer and arranger of this story, masterfully crafted so that readers will fall under the spell of the stream of consciousness immediacy of the five year old boy's narration:

This book is dedicated to all of my fellow villagers and particularly to those who were not allowed to return to their native land, even in death. To my first cousins Itso and Lazo who perished in their early twenties...

Chapter One "How can I ever recall those memories without sorrow."

Now if I can just get my mother to lift me up in her arms, so that I'm even with her head. This time I'm sure that I'll grab it - so I'm always begging her to pick me up.

But I always have to watch out that there aren't any other kids around, or they'll laugh at me and call me a little baby, which isn't fair, since I'm not little! I'm especially afraid to when Grandma Dala is there, since she told me that I was a little donkey who didn't need to be carried by his mother anymore. As if I didn't already know that I'm a big boy, since I'm going to be five years old soon, and don't I have my own dog and a lamb, I can ride on a donkey, and Uncle even made me a staff, with a handle and told me it was mine.

But every time I reach my hands up to try and grab the sky - even when I'm in my mother's arms - they come back empty. It doesn't make sense when I can see that the sky starts at her head, that I can't grab it. It appears to be a little higher. Maybe if my older cousin Itso picked me up, he's really tall, when his head hits the sky, I can grab it. I've got to finish this business, because I've got so much else to do. So I've got to tell Itso the next time I see him. But he's always sleeping whenever he comes home. He sets down his rifle, a really big gun, we call it a blaster, he washes up, eats and then sleeps so that nobody can wake him. Cousin Itso eats a lot, he eats as much as everybody else together. When we make a pot of stew, he'll eat a whole pot all by himself, what everybody else eats combined. His mother, Grandma Dimana, and his wife, Auntie Ordana, gather up his clothes, as soon as he undresses and they boil them, as if we were going to eat them.

"That's the only way to kill the lice and their eggs. That's what Grandma Dimana says, and then she repeats it every time when he comes. But, why is he so tired, when his work is to make war, while how many hours do I play at war and I never get tired?"

They say that he is fighting against the monarcho-fascists. I don't know them, and I've never seen them. Maybe they're from other villages. It seems that they're different than us, but definitely bad and that is why they fight against them. But when they get so tired too, why doesn't he just kill them with his blaster, which is the real thing. Is he too tired from fighting to pull the trigger? I'll have to remember to ask him when he comes. But I'll beg him to help me, since his gun is heavy, it's not possible to move it, even my brother Kolche can barely lift it. But if I really try and put my weight into it, maybe I can do it. When he comes another time, I'll try that. ...

excerpt from the book by Petros G. Vocis, Makedoncheto, 1999. translation of the excerpt by Michael Seraphinoff

Another Macedonian writer who effectively uses a child narrator to, in this case, challenge unjust arbitrary state authority, is Zhivko Chingo. In his novel *The Big Water*, the main character, a boy named Lem, whose parents perished in the recently concluded Second World War, is sent to a state-run orphanage, where he and the other children will live under a harsh regime that mirrors in many respects the authoritarian communist regime of the time in the Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia.

Again we have a character whose child-like innocence creates sympathy for his victimhood at the hands of a more powerful and dictatorial authority. If Chingo had chosen instead to create a documentary account of arbitrary unjust communist rule in then Yugoslavia, he might have suffered the fate of other critics, censorship of his work or worse. And even if he had chosen to

tell his story, as he did in other works such as the collection of short stories entitled *Paskvelija*, through adult narration, he would not have created the degree of sympathy evoked by his young orphan narrator. Already in the opening passage of chapter one of the book, he reveals the theme of rebellion against unjust authority that he will explore in the course of the narration:

The comrade from the ranks, the dream of the Big Water:

They ordered me to be a comrade from the ranks. They obligated me with it. They hung the burden round my neck. Each exemplary one was obliged to take on a bad comrade from the ranks. I said, exemplary, damn it. Because of that word I came to hate the whole world. Exemplary comrade, exemplary pioneer, exemplary communist youth, exemplary builder. Exemplary, which is still not, damn it, exemplary bullshitter. But that was the order, I swear.

It was spring of the year 1946, the first spring after the war. A thousand years have certainly passed since then. I remember only so much. The weather turned bad, snow, gale winds. A great blizzard dumped snow over the land and every tree that was blossoming was turned to ice, made white. And everything suddenly grew hushed, silent, the wonderful and endless sounds that heralded the beginning of spring. Nothing, nothing remained of that beautiful, powerful perfection. Ice. That I remember for sure, because I had short summer pants sewn from a gay Italian blanket. The snow was deep, up to my waist. Everything, everything was laid down, covered.

We were one sorry gang of hungry and dirty kids, homeless ones. Bad, dark little filthy creatures, as the good instructors called us. Hunted from the fields, the gardens, the forests, the barns, the cliffs, the deep snow. Damn it, we didn't give ourselves up. Of course, we didn't know that we would be transported to a home, under a roof, in a bed, that they would give us warm coffee and a hunk of bread, that they would do that for our good, in order to get us involved in all the foul business that they envisaged in detail for the rule of the home. For the rules, damn it. That's all fine, but we still didn't give ourselves up, I tell you, that entire spring like beasts they hunted us, the detachments of do-gooders from the Red Cross, detachments of instructors and all sorts of hunters.

I have to admit, I quickly changed my mind, after seven days. Damn it, I gave myself up. Good, I said. I didn't want to trouble the hearts of my good uncle Ilko Kostadinovski and my golden aunt Kola Kostadinovska any longer. Fine, I said, I'll leave the empty barn, I'd had enough of the companionship of the mice. However, my uncle Ile, my good uncle Ile, when I departed, on parting, when I gave him my hand to say good bye, I swear, he put down the pitchfork, he was cleaning manure out of the stall, he wiped his hands on his knee and chest. He hugged me so hard that it seemed like every bone in my body would break. He said: "Leme, son! Leme, little nephew, I'm not telling you good bye. My name's not Ile Kostadinovski if I don't get you back from that hellish place."

That's what he said, with such a voice that they could even hear him down by the river, as if he wanted everybody to hear him. Then from some hushed place my aunt Kola showed up along with my cousins, Stojna and Mara, my dear cousins. But my uncle maintained a manly manner. This time he didn't notice anything, all so fiercely did he hold me to him. (He certainly didn't feel my hurt.) All the more fiercely he took me to himself, all the while shouting: "I want you to believe me, Leme, little nephew. By this golden sun, Leme, I'll rescue you." (Lord, the grey, snow-laden heavens joyously opened up above our heads. A ray of sunshine appeared and that small light, victorious, showed us that it was springtime. Damn it, Spring.) "Believe me, Leme, dear nephew, I'll save you!"

At that auntie's ears were burning! As her tear-swollen eyes said: what's that!?

"Nothing, Leme," my uncle said softly, tears glistening in his eyes, I swear. "Just let these sparse, hungry years pass," he said. "You see for yourself, Leme," he said quite softly. "You see how painful life is, it's good for no one, son. What's to be done, dear, you have to go to that prison."

Damn it, so he said - prison. Of course, I still couldn't know what that word meant. For the most part I was

simple and unschooled. In my twelfth year I signed my name EM, since I couldn't remember the shape of the letter L at all, because that reminded me of something terrible.

Excerpt from the book *Golemata Voda*, 1984, by Zhivko Chingo, excerpt translated by Michael Seraphinoff

Other Macedonian writers have also made use of child narration to achieve a similar effect. Jadranka Vladova, for example, in her collection of short stories entitled *Water Sign*, includes the short story "A game", in which the author-narrator returns to a particular moment in her childhood to reexamine the unfair treatment that one vulnerable child received at the hands of the other children.

Teachers of children all know how extremely difficult it is to protect a vulnerable child from bullying at school. If the teacher tries to lecture the other children about this, it may only draw more hostile attention to the child being bullied. However, if the message is conveyed more subtly in the form of a story about a similar situation involving a vulnerable child that is narrated in a way that the children can identify with the child narrator, it is much more likely to touch the readers' hearts.

I would mention again that the works I focus on here appeal to adults, but also to children whose reading and analytical skills are becoming more sophisticated. World literature includes many examples of books with narration, as in the case of Vladova's story, in which an adult narrator has stepped back in time or returned to her childhood to narrate the story. Vladova succeeds in drawing her readers back in time in the short story "A Game" despite the obvious fact that an adult is reminiscing the story. Readers fall under the same spell of a child narrator as they did in Chingo's or Vocis's works with their more immediate direct child narration here in this opening passage of her story:

A Game

The kids from my street called the son of the famed tailor, Lale the fool. I didn't. My mother said quite strictly that Mister Marko, the master, did not deserve that. The man sewed better than the factory stores. How he could attach a sleeve! Then there was the way he would style the lapels...And how he knew the art of alterations! Perfection!

The greatest misfortune for the parents was their child's illness.

I can't call him as such a pitiable child.

And Lale was able to pass by us when we played in the neighborhood with his head held high. The boys began with their mocking "La-le the foo-ool", but he, if he controlled his distorted, drooling mouth, passed by with an almost rational-looking face. Of course, he would stick out his tongue at us as he passed by when he was in the secure hands of the master, Marko.

The master sewed only two child's coats for me. After that I no longer wanted to go to him. Most likely, as I look back on it now, with a smile, it was because Lale, as if concealed behind the tailor's dummy, behind the screen where the customers changed clothes, laughed in a silly sort of way inviting me to play with him. I looked

away in fright, shaking imploringly in the direction of my mother, who had eyes for nothing but the darts and the length of the hem of the coat she inspected, turning herself around in front of the mirror.

Excerpt from the short story "A Game" from the book *Voden Znak*, 1990, by Jadranka Vladova, excerpt translated by Michael Seraphinoff

Macedonian literature is one of the voices of the Macedonian people. It is, therefore, only natural that its themes should include the oppression that Macedonians have endured in the past. In exploring this subject a number of authors have found a special usefulness in child narration, particularly for the way it evokes sympathy for the suffering of the innocent. At the same time, it should be stressed that the works with child narration that I have cited have rightfully earned an enduring place in the literature of the Macedonian people for all of their literary qualities taken together.

Michael Seraphinoff, 2003

End Notes:

1. Documentation of Greek discrimination against the Macedonian minority in Greece can be found at Human Rights Watch website, also greekhelsinki.gr/bhr/English/special_issues/cerd.html

Literary works cited:

Twain, Mark. (1985) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York: Doubleday, p. 237.

Chingo, Zhivko. (1984) *Golemata Voda, Srebrenite Snegovi*. Skopje: Misl, 11-12.

Vladova, Jadranka. (1990) *Voden Znak*, Skopje: Kultura, p. 32.

Vocis, Petros. (1999) *Makedoncheto*. Skopje: NIP, 9-10.

Reference works:

Drugovac, Miodrag. (1975) *Makedonski Pisатели za Deca*. Skopje: Makedonska Kniga.

Gjurchinov, (1973) Milan. *Sovremena Makedonska Knizhevnost*. Skopje: Misl.

Ivanovic, Radimir. (!979) *Portreti na Makedonski Pisатели*. Skopje: Misl.

Abstract:

Through a Child's Eyes – a special role of the child as narrator in Macedonian literature

World literature includes a considerable number of works in which a child serves as narrator. Mark Twain's classic childhood adventure story, which is of course much more than that, *Huckleberry Finn*, immediately comes to mind. Another American classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, is also narrated by a child. Such works also include those in which a writer revisits his own childhood, such as in the classic autobiographical work, *Childhood*, by Russian writer Maxim Gorki.

Macedonian literature has a number of works with child narrators that are worthy of note. These include *Makedoncheto (The Macedonian Boy)* by Petros G. Vocis, whose childhood memoir is written in the child narrator's voice of five year old Petros, who recounts his life in the lost world of his family's ancestral home village of Setina in northern Greece. The book is a memoir of a year when the Greek Civil War raged in his home village. The author recounts the tragedy of a family and a community torn apart by the events of that war. Another work that deserves our attention is Zhivko Chingo's novel, *Golemata Voda (The Big Water)* that is narrated by the young boy, Lem, during his time in an orphanage in post World War Two Macedonia. A third noteworthy work in which a child frequently appears as narrator is the collection of short stories by Jadranka Vladova, *Voden Znak (Water Sign)*. Her child narrator often evokes a certain magic and romance in every day family life in Macedonia's capital Skopje in the 1950's and 60's.

While these three authors and their works will be the focus of my discussion, there are other noteworthy works by Macedonian writers with child narration. These include the works of writers such as Slavko Janevski and Olivera Nikolova. However, their works are created from childhood for children. I have concentrated on examples from works created from childhood but not necessarily intended for children. This discussion includes several excerpts from these works with the intention of drawing the reader's attention to certain significant features. These excerpts include the first page of *The Macedonian Boy* by Petros Vocis, the first page of the first chapter of *The Big Water* by Zhivko Chingo, and the first page of the short story "A Game" by Jadranka Vladova.

Dr. Michael Seraphinoff, Ph.D. Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Washington. Examiner Responsible for Macedonian for the International Baccalaureate Organization, Cardiff, UK, and occasional special programs lecturer, humanities, Skagit Valley College, Oak Harbor, WA, USA. Author of *The 19th Century Macedonian Awakening*, University Press of America, Lanham and London, 1996.

Summary or abstract of this study, in Macedonian:

“Niz detskite o~i” – posebnata uloga na deteto kako raska`uva~ vo makedonskata literatura

Svetskata literatura v~klu~uva zna~itelen broj na dela vo koi {to deteto e raska`uva~ot, i koi mo`at da pottiknat socijalni predrasudi od pove}e aspekti koi {to vozrasnite raska`uva~i ne bi mo`ele da gi postignat bez premnogu kontraverzii. Prvo delo koe {to doa|a na pamet e klasi~eniot avanturisti~ki detski raskaz od Mark Tven, Hoklberi Fin, koj{to sekako pretstavuva i mnogu pove}e od toa, Hoklberi Fin. U{te edno amerikansko delo, Da se ubie Mokingbrd, od Harper Li, isto taka e raska`ano od edno dete. Vakvite dela isto taka gi v~klu~uvaat i onie vo koi pisatelot se prisetuva na sopstvenoto detstvo, kako {to e prika`ano vo klasi~nato biografsko delo, Detstvo, od ruskiot pisatel Maksim Gorki.

Vo makedonskata literatura ima pove}e dela vo koi deteto e vo uloga na raska`uva~ koi vredni da se spomnat. Vo niv pripa|a i knjigata Makedon~eto od Petros Vocis, ~ii {to detski se}avava se zapi{ani preku glasot na detskiot raska`uva~, petgodin{niot Petros, koj se prisetuva na negoviot `ivot vo izgubeniot svet na Setina, seloto na negovite predci, koe se nao|a vo dene{na Grcija. Knjigata e memoar od edna godina koga Gr~kata gra|anska vojna se plamte{e vo negovoto rodno selo. Avtorot se prisetuva na tragedijata na negovoto semejstvo i zaednicata koja be{e rastrgnata od slu~uvawata na taja vojna. Edno drugo delo koe go zaslueva na{eto vnimanie e Golemata Voda od @ivko ^ingo, novella koja {to e raska`uvana od mladoto mom~e, Lem, vo vremeto pominato vo dom za siraci vo Makedonija od periodot po vtorata svetska vojna. I u{te edno zna~itelno delo vo koe deteto ~esto se pojavuva kako raska`uva~, e zbirката od kratki raskazi Voden Znak od Jadranka Vladova koja{to e objavena pred deset godini. Nejziniot detski raska`uva~ ~esto pati vzbuduva odredena magi~nost i romansa vo sekojdnevniot semeen `ivot vo makedonskiot glaven grad Skopje vo vremeto na petdesetite i {eestetite godini.

Iako jas se skoncentrirav na delata od ovie tri avtori, ima drugi zna~itelni dela od makedonski pisатели raska`uvani od detski raska`uva~i. Tuka pripa|aat delata od pisатели kako Slavko Janevski i Olivera Nikolova. Me|utoa, nivnite dela se sozdavani od detstva I se nameneti za deca. Jas se skoncentrirav na primeri od delata sozdavani od detstva no ne mora da se nameneti za deca. Diskusijata v~klu~uva nekolku izvadoci od ovie dela so namera da go svrtam vnimanieto na ~itatelot kon nekolku va`ni elementi. Izvadocite v~klu~eni vo ovaa diskusija se: prvata stranica na Makedon~eto od Petros Vocis, prvata stranica na prvata glava na Golemata Voda od @ivko ^ingo i prvata stranica na kratkiot raskaz “igra” (Voden Znak) od Jadranka Vladova.