

The Representation of Disability in Children's Picturebooks: Analysis of Four Russian Picturebooks

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the ways in which four contemporary Russian picturebooks address and represent characters with special needs. Drawing mainly on the Critical Disability Theory and the Theory of Mind studies and applying Critical Content Analysis, this study examines and discusses four Russian picturebooks and considers if and how they challenge the conditions of inequality in society and whether they have an impact on the formation of positive attitudes towards people with disabilities in young readers. In addition, I categorise books that describe complex situations that occur in the lives of characters with special features as Challenging Picturebooks. Devoting part of my research to the Russian context, I clarify the current social position of people with special needs in Russia, their material and welfare support, integration processes, and the status of inclusive children's literature in the field of literature. To analyse the corpus of chosen picturebooks I use a toolkit methodology, consistently leading through the study of publishing data, literary representation, text and image relationship, and depiction of disability with a focus on the meaning of authenticity and the position of the disabled character in relation to other characters.

KEYWORDS: Critical Disability Theory, Disability Representation, Inclusion, Russian Picturebooks.

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of my research has been primarily guided by my personal interest and passion to learn what children's literature should convey in order to create and advance an image of an inclusive society where all are equal regardless of individual differences. During my experience of working with people with special needs and close contact with NGOs of people with disabilities, I have often faced misunderstanding, prejudiced attitudes, intense interest, and stereotypes from people around me. According to the World Health Organisation, around 1.3 billion people with significant disabilities live on Earth, representing 16% of the world's population or one in six of us. Building an inclusive society, in particular, ensuring inclusive education is the fourth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals and part of the UN Assembly's 2015 plan to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. In the field of academic studies, many scholars such as Evans (2015), Hall (2016), Kleekamp, & Zapata (2019), Koss (2015), and Pennell, Wollak, & Koppenhaver (2018) have focused their research on exploring the representation of people with special needs in children's literature. In the book industry, international awards are celebrating inclusive picturebooks, such as the Schneider Family Book Award, the Bologna Ragazzi Award, the Little Rebels Children's Book Award, and The Inky Awards. In addition, the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) organization presents the Collection for Young People with Disabilities once every two years, which includes books from all over the world.

One of the aims of children's literature is to promote this social model so that young readers grow up with a vision of a universal, diverse, and inclusive world. Traditionally, picturebooks have been a prevalent format in children's literature, especially for younger children (Corroero, 2018). Due to the multimodal structure of picturebooks, the books evoke emotional engagement in young readers through images, as well as through words and by reinforcing words with illustrations (Nikolajeva, 2013). Moreover, a picturebook is the first book through which a child is introduced to the world of literature, whereas the synthesis of art and language together creates an aesthetic object (Sipe, 2011). Picturebooks depicting people with disabilities give young readers the opportunity to learn about the life of a person with a disability, as well as allowing children to see a reflection of themselves in the book. Each of the picturebooks also has the pedagogical potential to stimulate a transformative discourse about each person's individuality, relationships, multiplicity, and the diversity of the world. Moreover, the picturebooks have great potential to raise a kind and open-minded member of society, the fostering of empathy and mind-reading skills. The structure of the article entails a literature review of current academic studies in the field of children's literature relating to the issue of the portrayal of people with disabilities, transitioning into a practice-oriented part of the paper, elaborating and drawing on theoretical data collection. I believe that my research does open new perspectives for exploring Russian contemporary picturebooks depicting

characters with disabilities while focusing on the aspect of authentic character representation and the role of narrative with textual-visual interactions in young readers' perception of a story. Currently, Russian society is in the process of building social attitudes and the perception of the phenomenon of disability as part of the 'norm' (Grashchenkova, 2017). Hence, the intensive rise in the number of children's books representing characters with special needs in Russia is logical, and my research allows me to assess the quality of picturebooks created by Russian authors and illustrators.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Disability Theory : Applying Critical Disability Theory (CRT) as a methodology in my research, enabled me to consider CRT as a coherent but interdisciplinary field of study, where disability is viewed as a cultural, historical, relative, social, psychological, and political phenomenon, not simply a medical condition (Dolmage, 2014; Hall, 2019). One of the aims of picturebooks portraying characters with disabilities is to challenge the universal view of disability as a negative that is so tightly rooted in society that is seen as a 'naturalized' response to a deviation (Campbell, 2009). In Critical Disability Studies the concepts of disability and impairment are frequently separated. Impairment refers to a "lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body"; while disability is defined as a disadvantage or restriction of functioning resulting from modern social organisation that takes few or no account of people with physical impairments and thereby eliminates them from involvement in core social activities (UPIAS, 1976, p. 14). A number of researchers (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, Olkin & Pledger, 2003; Shakespeare, 1996) argue that the dominant disability model in the Western world remains the medical model. In contrast to the medical model, the social model, on which Disability Studies scholars most commonly rely, suggests that people become disabled not because of their impairments, but because of the barriers created by society. Breaking down these barriers will contribute to the development of an inclusive society where everyone has equal rights and opportunities. The social model also applies to racial, gender, and sexuality studies, as all of these groups fall under the definition of 'minority'.

Theory of Mind : Theory of mind (ToM) draws on psychological, pedagogical, and neurological studies and covers such significant aspects of reader-book interaction as emotional and cognitive empathy and mind-reading. Primarily, by ToM I mean "a concept from cognitive psychology, refers to the capacity to understand how other individuals think" (Nikolajeva, 2013, p. 250), and by empathy I refer to a focus on the capacity to understand how others feel, and involves different intergroup, interpersonal, and intrapersonal processes and mechanisms (Bertrand et al., 2018, n.d). Empathy is currently seen as a key tool for addressing inequalities in today's globalized world (Krzrnaric, 2014). Thus, picturebooks are a powerful tool in evoking empathy in young readers and for demonstrating the injustices in the world. In studying children's literature, portraying characters with disabilities, one should consider empathy for in-group (child with impairments) and out-group members (child without impairments). From a pedagogical point of view, picturebooks with characters with special needs are a good tool for talking about How can other people feel? Why do we care about how others might feel? What are the particularities in the lives of people with special needs? How should we communicate and not pay attention to the otherness of the person? And how should we try to overcome misunderstanding and misinterpretation?

Challenging Picturebooks : Nowadays, there is a growing debate in the world about commonly accepted norms, principles, and concepts considered being acceptable for children. In the field of children's literature, about what should be read to children and what should not are controversy. It is Challenging or Controversial Picturebooks that fall into the category of books that raise complex topics, describing difficult situations and inner feelings that both children and adults may encounter. Picturebooks featuring characters with special needs may contain moments where other characters mock people with special needs, treat them inappropriately, or simply do not accept them in society, as it is presented in *#Kira'sBlog* (2021). In my paper, I examine four picturebooks where disability is a fundamental issue in the narrative. Through reading these books, the reader will encounter problems such as societal stratification, injustice, inner conflict, self-acceptance, misunderstanding, bullying, and physical disabilities. All these topics make children and adults empathize and sympathize, think, and ask themselves, What is the right thing to do?

Russian context : Since in my research I analyse picturebooks by Russian authors and illustrators, I believe it is necessary to study the stage of development of inclusiveness in Russian society and the conditions that contribute to the creation and promotion of inclusive picturebooks in the field of children's literature. The principal support for persons with disabilities is provided through material support and social services. The

amount of financial and social support depends on the severity of the impairment. In addition to direct financial support, the state provides different kinds of benefits: free entry to museums and public transport for the person with a disability and their entourage, trips to health resorts, assistants, specialized libraries, tickets to cultural events, etc. The primary way of including people with disabilities in society is through inclusive education, which takes place at all levels of education. After school, there is an extensive variety of higher education institutions and specializations fully adapted for the full development of programs at secondary and tertiary levels of education by people with physical disabilities. After analysing multiple resources, I can conclude that the greatest part of support in promoting books depicting persons with disabilities is financial, through the awarding grants, a publication of winning books, and a publication of books by public organizations. The presentation of books about special childhood by an individual sector at exhibitions, in literary competitions, and to the Russian Children's Book Council as Books for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities shows the intention of Russian society to create and promote books about special childhood. I should note that for 2022 the list of recommended books about Special Childhood by the Russian Board of Children's Books included 22 books, where Russian authors wrote 15, which shows the current relevance of the topic among writers.

III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Since this study seeks to examine how characters with disabilities represented in four picturebooks created by Russian authors, I apply Critical Content Analysis to explore the portrayal of characters with disabilities in picturebooks to define the reflection of the position of people with impairments in social practices and to challenge the conditions of inequality. Furthermore, I adopt the qualitative approach, which allows me to take a coherent and comprehensive view when analyzing picturebooks and covers several aspects: Literary representation, Text and image relationships, and Representation of disability.


3.1 Selection Criteria :


In choosing picturebooks, I followed the criteria below:

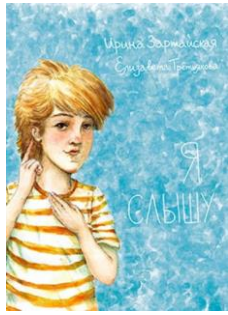
- a) Selected picturebook should contain at least one character with a limited health condition.
- b) Picturebooks should be written and illustrated by Russian authors and artists.
- c) Suggested age of the readers: 5-11 years old.
- d) Recent publication period: from 2013 to 2023.
- e) Picturebooks should be critically acclaimed.
- f) The plot should be complete and give insight into social and/or family relationships.

Table 1

Synopsis and Key Points of Four Picturebooks Selected for the Study

| Title and Cover | Impairment, which is the focus of the story | Synopsis, Key Points |
|--|---|--|
|  <p><i>Musika Moego</i></p> | <p>Visual impairment</p> | <p>The book contains four short stories about the life of a visually impaired girl who plays, dreams, and makes friends like all children. The fascinating stories tell about her hobbies, family, and trips to the zoo, theatre, library, music school, shop, and outdoor activities. The picturebook tells the story of how the main character learns about the world and describes some specific moments, such as learning braille or walking with a cane. This book has room for children's friendships and fantasies, along with adults' untactfulness and suggestions about how to improve and adapt the urban environment.</p> <p>Key Points. The main idea of this book is to show that the main character is happy. What makes this picturebook noteworthy is the</p> |

| | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| <p><i>D'yatla</i> (The Music of My Woodpecker)</p> | | <p>way it very clearly and authentically describes details from the life of a person with visual impairment. In her choice of words, the author uses “looked at the exhibits”, although, in the literal sense, the girl was touching them. Besides, the author introduces the girl’s need to use a cane in the future when moving around the city independently, familiarises the girl, her friend and the reader with Braille, and much more. Showing independence and fearlessness towards the new, the girl has the voice to tell her own story. The author also interacts with the reader and writes the last few words of a chapter using Braille. That is, to find out what the author has written, the reader has to translate the Braille into text.</p> |
|  <p><i>#Kirinblog</i> (#Kira's Blog)</p> | <p>Alopecia</p> | <p>Here is the story of a fifteen-year-old girl being diagnosed with alopecia. The main character, Kira, begins to worry about her future and shares her thoughts and what is happening on the blog, which the book is styled after. After visiting many doctors, the girl has no choice but to accept her new appearance, which is not immediate or easy for her. Kira’s close friend is unable to provide support, as he is preoccupied with his future and his relationship with his parents. Therefore, Kira has to find support in music and believe in her dreams.</p> <p>Key Points. The book tells the story of how Kira accepted who she is and became happy. Fifteen-year-old Kira shares her experiences and the difficulties she encountered as she walked this difficult path. There is a strong message in the book about not being afraid to be yourself and not hiding it. This is the only way to change public perception. The unusual design, the use of colour, and graphic techniques to convey the emotional state of the characters make this book fascinating and multi-layered to read. As in the previous book, the author here criticizes the prejudicial attitudes of a society full of stereotypes and misconceptions about people with disabilities or illnesses.</p> |
|  <p><i>Moy Brat y Ya</i> (My Brother and Me)</p> | <p>‘Incurable complex illnesses’</p> | <p>This picturebook can be seen as a home reading book as well as a guide or a practicum for working with a psychologist. The narrator of the story is a boy who has a younger brother constantly in need of medical help. Despite the lack of parental attention, the protagonist is aware of the situation and appreciates the time spent with his brother, family, and friends.</p> <p>Key Points. Unlike the other books I have reviewed, this picturebook is written primarily for children whose brother or sister has a severe, incurable illness and is intended to be read with the family or as a material for work with a psychologist. The author portrays a brother with a severe terminal illness as weak and helpless with no voice or agency at all. This book teaches compassion, responsiveness, appreciation, and joy for what you have, while at the same time evoking longing and pity for the boy with a disability.</p> |
| | | <p>In this book, the main character is a ten-year-old boy Genka, who has quarrelled with his parents and gone to the playground, where he meets a new neighbour, a boy about his age, and begins to share his worries with him, where through this monologue the author raises</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  <p data-bbox="268 595 379 663">Ya slyshu (I hear)</p> | <p data-bbox="480 320 603 383">Hearing impairment</p> | <p data-bbox="651 259 1406 383">issues of adult attitudes towards children. The boy with hearing loss also talks about his pet and his family. Although the reader may guess that the new boy next door is hard of hearing, it is only at the end of the story that the grandmother says the boy has lost his hearing.</p> <p data-bbox="651 398 1406 663">Key Points. The issue of child-parent relationships becomes central. Without focusing much on the life and interests of a boy with a hearing impairment, the author describes the peculiarities of pronunciation and perception of speech and the world around him by persons with hearing impairments. Along with colourful illustrations, the book shows the reader that deafness is not a barrier to communication. The book's endpapers and illustrations depict the main character using sign language.</p> |
|---|---|--|

3.2 Corpus Analysis

Publishing data :

For better systematization of the selected literature and to ensure that the picturebooks fulfil the selection criteria, I made a tool that focuses on different aspects, such as publishing data and examining the external characteristics of picturebooks. For example, Publishing House and its Size point Cover: Hard or Soft enables me to verify that the format of the book is appropriate for the specified age of the target audience.

Literary Representation :

The analysis section Literary Representation of the World helps to answer the questions What is the position of a character with disabilities in society in a story? And define other characteristics of representation and its diversity, in terms of a literary representation of the social values essential to our times. Examining the relationship context helps to determine the portrait of a protagonist, how and with whom he or she lives and to identify the type of relationship, with peers and adults. The Space frame provides insight into trends due to globalization and the growing urbanization of post-industrial societies (Correro, 2018). As far as the Time frame, the choice of time indicates the character of the narration and the author's intentions: whether the book is about events that have passed; current events; about future events, where the author gives a pattern of behaviour and society or, conversely, seeks to portray an anti-utopia to avoid that future in real life; and finally, in an indeterminate time that allows the reader to imagine events in any time and relate themselves even more closely to the story. I also identify the main conflict in the book, and then I define ways of resolving that conflict. In the case of children's literature, where there is a strong focus on impairment, a positive outcome will be related to the protagonist's acceptance of his or her impairment and the presence or creation of an inclusive environment.

Text and Image Relationship :

Textual Depiction : The definition of Narrative form gives insight into the complexity of the text and its characteristics. The position of narration influences the level of agency of the character. As Davison (2016) and Ellis (2019) state, a story narrated in the first person (I/we) gives the character agency. According to Correro (2018) classification, in examining the structure of a story and the degree of Fragmentation of its narrative, I first determine whether the structure is simple and has a single narrative thread, and if it is narrated from one point of view or whether the structure is complex and includes autonomous, connected, embedded or alternating parts and uses different styles (direct, indirect, mixed speech) in verbal discourse. It also indicates the presence of non-narrative texts in the works, such as songs, letters, advertisements, poems, or other discursive forms and non-verbal resources.

Visual Characteristics : Most of the criteria in the analytical block of visual characteristics seek to explore picturebooks as tools for the emotional development of young readers and empathy growth (Nikolajeva, 2013). In my examination of visual characteristics, I focus on the semiotics aspect, analyzing colors, positioning, lines, visual signifiers, and their meaning. It is essential to determine which colours have become dominant in the book's illustration and what emotional tone they will create since these factors affect our mental state. The

elements such as motion lines and thought balloons can convey intense emotions, for example, aggression and fear, reflect the inner state of the character, and be drawn as memories (Nikolajeva, 2013). I chose Sipe's (2011) classifications to study orientation patterns on the page and line types and Nikolajeva's (2012, 2013) Theory of Mind to analyze characters' facial expressions, body language, and gestures, which carry essential information that gives a clear idea of the emotional state and relationships between the characters.

The Interplay between Text and Image :

By interacting in a picturebook, text, and visual images mirror and enhance each other's meaning and all together create a deeper meaning than each of them can convey independently, illustrations are integral to the reader's experience and understanding of a book (Martinez, & Harmon, 2012; Short, 2019). To examine the relationship between text and images I followed Nikolajeva & Scott's (2000) classification, which identifies four variants of the relations: symmetrical (words and illustrations convey similar meaning); complementary (text and illustrations give different but complementary information); or enhancement (text and illustrations extend from one another meaning); counterpoint (words and illustrations tell different stories); contradiction (text and illustrations are contradictory). Since adults inevitably read children's books with kids, with Ommundsen's (2006, 2015) categorization, it became possible to determine the extent to which a narrative is accessible to a reader according to its maturity by analyzing the levels of complexity and stylistics of text and images: Naïve (the book is presented in a childlike manner); Complex (contains polyphonic multilayered narrative structures and suggests reading at different levels); Existential (controversial for both adults and children).

The design of picturebooks is not limited to the illustrations on the pages where the story unfolds. All the other surrounding text and illustrations elements such as endpapers, board cover, and blurb also contribute to making the book an artistic whole, preparing the reader to understand the story and its mood. All these elements are called peritext and "they can be used in many ways to help set up the story or add inviting or complementary imagery" (Sipe, 2011, p. 255).

Depiction of disability :

Authenticity in Disability Representation. In my paper, I refer to authenticity as a core criterion for evaluating the quality of a picturebook in which a character with special needs is an influential figure in the story. By addressing the aspect of authenticity, I try to give a detailed answer to the question of 'Whether the representation of impairment in a picturebook is authentic, positive, and multidimensional; not provoke any stereotypes, and use proper language?' I consider it necessary to know whether authors and illustrators of picturebooks have a disability or close contact with people with special needs because according to Metheny's (2022) study authors with disabilities "wrote more authentic and nuanced depictions of disability whereas the nondisabled authors included stereotypical portrayals of disability" (p. 192). Furthermore, by having an author and/or illustrator with a physical condition, it serves as an example of equality in society and an indicator of opportunities for people with special needs, that the world of publishing is open to all people, no matter their race, gender, or ability, and that they have opportunities to realize a career in the publishing industry (Feelings, 1985; Roethler, 1998). I also review the text and the particular words and expressions, as this determines how the young readers will feel about people with disabilities. **Type of Literature Portraying Disabilities.** Applying Gail Ellis' (2019) classification, which distinguishes between Inclusion and Immersive kinds of literature, according to differences in the representation of disability. While Inclusion literature has a didactic purpose to teach children about a particular type of disability; to raise awareness of disability, Immersive has an enjoyment purpose to engage children in an interesting topic and storyline; to show characters who are fully engaged in life.

Critical disability theory. The majority of the analytical questions relating to the study of the position of a character with characteristics in relation to other characters. Thus, it is essential to reveal how multidimensional the character with special needs is represented in the story and how involved in the interaction with peers, family, and adults, whether the character is dependent on them if he or she has a direct speech in the text and whether or not the character has an agency. Research into Critical Disability Studies (CDS) has made it clear that in examining picturebooks I need to understand whether there are any advantages for nondisabled people or prejudice on their part towards people with disabilities (Dunn, 2019).

IV. DISCUSSION

Publishing data :

After analysing these criteria, I can make a positive conclusion that, in the Russian market, the subject matter of books published does not depend on the size of the publishing house. Another fact is that most Russian publishers are not universal but have their target designation (Zarubin, 2008). The picturebooks have been published by large (two books), medium (one book), and small (one book) publishers specializing in children's literature. The year of publication demonstrates a positive tendency towards promoting inclusive children's literature, as three books out of four were published in 2021, and only one book from my list in 2013. All picturebooks except *My Brother and I* have a hardcover, which indicates the high quality of the books and makes them more resistant to frequent use. The state also provides financial support for the publication of children's books. For example, *#Kira's Blog* was published with the support of the Russian Culture Foundation, as it won the Sergei Mikhalkov International Competition, and *My Brother and I* was released with a grant from the President of the Russian Federation and the support of the sponsors of the charity project. The extensive system of children's libraries in the Russian Federation makes children's books, including books about special childhood, available in print and electronic format for young readers.

Literary Representation :

The unifying factor of the picturebooks is that they are written in a single genre: fiction, and *#Kira's Blog* is written in verse. All authors narrate in the present tense and follow a linear temporal order, which is appropriate for the age of the target children's audience. The next similar element is the portrayal of characters with disabilities. The characters with special needs are children, presumably Russian: two boys and two girls, one of them a teenager. By considering the position of characters with disabilities, at the beginning of a picturebook or towards the end, they accept themselves with their disabilities or at least do not deny them (in *My Brother and I*). The environment, including friends and family, is ambivalent towards people with disabilities. In the story of the happy girl with a visual impairment in *The Music of My Woodpecker*, the family supports the main character greatly by having her parents go with her to cultural venues, spend a lot of time together and teach her not only the necessary skills but also let her learn new and curious things about the world. In contrast to the previous book, in *#Kira's Blog*, the role of the family is almost reduced to nothing and certainly does not act as a supporting factor. Because of the severity of the boy's impairments in *My Brother and Me*, his family is the primary social setting in which he resides, while home and the hospital are his place where he lives. The last book I reviewed was *I Hear*. Taking the conflict between a boy with an abled body and his mother as the basis of the story, the boy with a hearing impairment becomes a new friend of the main character. As we can guess from the illustrations, where the protagonist speaks in sign language, the boys' future friendship has only grown stronger. It also appears in *The Music of My Woodpecker* that the protagonist's friend learns to write and read in Braille with her. Such literary techniques encourage the reader to be more open to learning new ways of communication, even if they are unnecessary. In plain words, the picturebooks *The Music of My Woodpecker* and *#Kira's Blog* provide a broader space frame, the most comprehensive insight into the interests and life of the protagonists with special needs, highlighting the positive and negative aspects when interacting with others. The books *I Hear*, and *My Brother and I* give a narrow view of the life of boys with impairments, focusing most of their attention on the main characters who do not have disabilities.

Text and Image Relationship :

Textual Depiction : Focusing on language implications allows me to determine the degree of agency of a character with a disability, as indicated by the narration point of view. In *The Music of My Woodpecker* and *#Kira's Blog*, girls with disabilities narrate the story. Giving girls a voice to tell their own stories means empowering them and showing their strength and autonomy. What's more, the book features girls' and other characters' direct speech. In comparison, in *My Brother and I* and *I Hear*, the narrative is narrated by characters without disabilities, which according to Ellis (2019), denies agency to characters with special needs. Furthermore, in *My Brother and I*, the boy with complex disabilities is wordless and does not have a single direct speech utterance. However, narration from a child with a disability perspective is not the only criterion that defines a character's agency. All of the books are written using narrative units and have direct speech. The most comprehensive narrative has *#Kira's Blog*, where the reader sees letters, song titles, dates, and hashtags.

Visual Characteristics : Colours palette. After studying all four picturebooks, I revealed that the most used shades were yellow, orange, and blue. Shades of blue make the reader calm down (Bazyma, 2005). Blue symbolize harmony, sympathy, trust, sadness, honesty, honor, tranquillity, and communication (Cerrato, 2012). Yellow and orange were used in the clothing elements of the main characters in all the picturebooks except *My Brother and I*. According to Nikolajeva (2013), yellow is the colour of joy. By reading, yellow gives readers an energysing and uplifting feeling (Bazyma, 2005). Orange tones give the stories energy, playfulness, and vibrancy (Cerrato, 2012). The picturebook *The Music of My Woodpecker* consists of four stories, where each one has a different colour scheme. For the illustration in the *#Kira's Blog* picturebook, the illustrator chose only three colours: orange, black and white. The combination of the three colours does not harmonize but contrasts, evoking a sense of caution and heightening the reader's attention and perception. Each colour has a particular purpose in the book: orange in this book is the colour of positivity and energy, acceptance of yourself, hope, support, transformation, and uniqueness; black, conversely, is absorbing and denotes depression. Black is often used as a background, smeared in circular strokes with a thick brush, where brush strokes are visible at the edges (Fig.1) or in spiraling lines, denoting loss, loneliness, and a depressed state. According to Nikolajeva (2013), black is the colour of distress and associates with fear. White is mostly used as a background colour. In *I Hear*, illustrator uses watercolours, and mostly red, blue, and yellow-green palette, where colours are used objectively according to their use in reality. However, the door painted red can be characterized as a source of aggression, as the protagonist leaves the house because of the conflict (Fig. 2). The dominant colour in the picturebook *My Brother and I* is blue. It is predominantly used for blankets and quilts that protect and shelter the characters from their surroundings, giving them some safe space for themselves. Painting the bedspread and curtains in blue has a special meaning, evoking feelings of peace and compassion in the reader (Fig. 3).

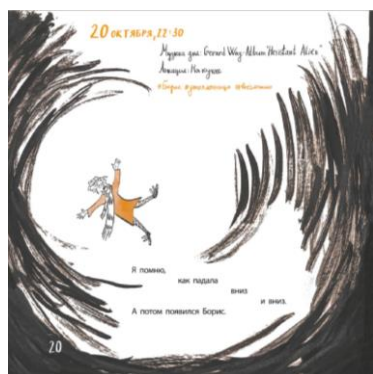


Fig. 1: #Kira's Blog, Natalia Volkova, 2021, page 20.

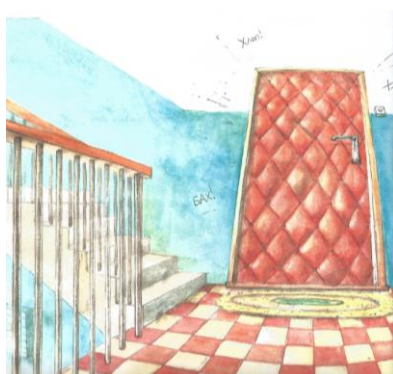


Fig. 2: I Hear, Irina Zartaiskaya, 2013, page 1.



Fig. 3: My Brother and I, Olga Kharkova, 2021, page 12.

Placement on the page. In *The Music of My Woodpecker*, the majority of the illustrations show the main character on the right-bottom of the page, or in the middle, more rarely on the bottom-left of a page (Fig.4). Placing the characters at the bottom of the page gives the reader a sense of 'down-to-earth-ness' and seriousness (Sipe, 2011). The bottom position can also be explained by the fact that in almost all the images, the illustrator draws the ground on which the characters stand and shows the background (trees, walls, etc.). By depicting the main character in the center of the page, the illustrator puts the girl at the center of the events described and draws the reader's attention to her.

The illustrator to visually indicate the hierarchy between the characters in order to affect the reader emotionally often uses the placement of the characters in *#Kira's Blog*. A prime example of the hierarchy can be found in the scene in which the doctor informs Kira of her diagnosis (Fig. 5). The positioning on the top grants the doctor the power to exert pressure on Kira. In turn, Kira is depicted as smaller than the doctor several times in the lower right corner, as if huddled in a corner out of fear. In this case, Kira's position at the bottom of the page will reflect the seriousness and sadness of what is happening, while her position in the right corner will reflect her desire to escape from the doctor and hide from the shocking news. According to Sipe (2011), the placement on the left side of the page symbolises status quo and stability, while on the right side, it represents change and movement, such as turning the page. Looking at the location of the character with complex disabilities in *My*

Brother and I on the page spreads, I noticed that in almost all cases, he is located on the left side of the page, which can be seen as indifference and inactivity in the story, once again indicating the boy's lack of agency. Likewise, as in the previous book, in *I Hear*, the boy with a disability is portrayed only a few times. In *I Hear*, the character with a hearing impairment is pictured in the middle and on the right side of the pages, focusing the reader's attention on him and giving a sense of further development. In locating the characters on the page, the illustrator also pays attention to the visual composition of images with the text, and the positioning of the characters about each other, to contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal and balance of the illustrations (Fig. 6).



Fig. 4: *The Music of My Woodpecker*, Anna Anisimova, 2021, page 21.



Fig. 5: *#Kira's Blog*, Natalia Volkova, 2021, page 13.



Fig. 6: *I Hear*, Irina Zartaitskaya, 2013, page 7.

The use and purpose of motion lines and thought balloons. Moving forward, I focused my attention on graphic conventions: motion lines and thought balloons. These elements play a significant role in the narrative only in the picturebook *#Kira's Blog*. Motion lines and thought balloons express emotion and reflect the characters' state of mind. For example, thoughts, dreams, or test letters are usually depicted in thought balloons with 'cloudy' edges, the wavy outline denotes uncertainty and doubt, and the pointed thought balloons convey the volume of the expression and the certainty of the tone. More than that, the emotional effect depends on the colour predominant in the thought balloons. The use of orange thought balloons with sharp corners let readers know that Kira is happy or/and thrilled if this is her statement (Fig. 11). Whereas, the predominance of black in the balloon gives a sense of anxiety and aggression.

Type of Lines. The type of lines that can also convey emotion. Primarily, the thickness and structure of the lines depend on the material with which the illustrator works (pencil, watercolour, pastel pencils). The crayons in *The Music of My Woodpecker* have a dense, non-transparent texture and enable the illustrator to draw quite fine details and make the pictures sharper (Fig. 4). In *#Kira's Blog*, the illustrator also turns to dense and rich material. The contour lines and lines of writing are fairly thin but rich, giving a sense of firmness and definition (Fig. 5). The illustrations are dominated by broad strokes that create an emotional background to the events. Their direction is also relevant. For example, the rounded strokes that gather around the protagonist create a sense of a black hole and hopelessness of the situation (fig. 1). A particular role in the illustrations is given to the spiral line, reflecting Kira's inner state and the attitudes of those around her. The spiral lines vary in strength of pressure (saturation). They represent background, noise, clutter, or tension. In *I Hear* and *My Brother and I*, the illustrators have resorted to watercolours, giving a sense of lightness and unobtrusiveness. The author uses thin lines to draw details and outlines (Fig. 3, 6).

Characters' facial expressions, Body language, Gestures. Theory of Mind considers facial expressions, body language, and gestures as physical manifestations of emotions that can be depicted in illustrations. Traditionally, a smile indicates that the character is happy, contented, and pleased (Fig. 3, 4, 6). An open mouth in a smile raised eyebrows, and closed eyes convey a sense of utter delight (Fig. 11). Lowered corners of the mouth, drooping eyebrows, and downcast gaze mean that the person is disappointed, upset about something (Fig. 12). Surprise is usually defined by raised eyebrows (Fig. 4, 7, 11). The posture in which the characters draw their knees to their chests can be interpreted as their state of anxiety, focus, and inner concentration (Fig. 7, 8).

Turning to sign language in all the books, one can find a gesture where one character puts his hand on another's shoulder. This gesture expresses friendship, closeness, comfort, and/or support (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7: *The Music of My Woodpecker*, Anna Anisimova, 2021, page 5.



Fig. 8: *My Brother and I*, Olga Kharkova, 2021, page 14.



Fig. 9: *#Kira's Blog*, Natalia Volkova, 2021, page 62.

The Interplay between Text and Image :

Through my analysis, I concluded that two picturebooks have enhancing and complementary word-picture relationships, as “words and pictures support one another by providing additional information that the other lacks” (Nikolaeva & Scott, 2000, p. 229). The missing information in the text in *The Music of My Woodpecker* and *I Hear* is complemented by illustrations showing the reader the communication tools used by people with sensory impairments. The Braille imagery is essential in *The Music of My Woodpecker* in order for the reader to have an idea of it and to understand the meaning of the Title of the book. Another discovery for most readers will be the introduction to Russian sign language in *I Hear*, where pictures of the main character showing words in sign language frames some pages of the story. In addition, the main character's knowledge of sign language suggests that the boys' friendship will grow stronger in the future, which also points to a barrier-free communication environment between the children. In the two other books, I define the intermedial relationship between text and picture as a minimal enhancement. The illustrations in *#Kira's Blog* book have a significant emotional effect alongside the text, thanks to the rich expressions and non-verbal communication, the particular use of colour, the type of lines, and the inclusion of text in images that convey the characters' emotional state. In *My Brother and I*, the text is more substantial than the images, there are several elements in the verbal text that are not illustrated.

Viewing the books according to their levels of complexity and stylistics of text and images, I can state that the most books are Existential or Complex crossover picturebooks. It means that the books are complex and involve reading at different levels and the more advanced the reader is, the more he or she will understand the incidents that happen to a character with a disability. I refer *I Hear* picturebook to the Naïve category, since there is no deep conflict, and the world seen by people with hearing impairments described in an accessible way for children and adults alike.

There is a significant contribution of peritext in the three books *The Music of My Woodpecker*, *#Kira's Blog*, and *I Hear*. I can conclude that the contribution of peritext in the picturebooks varies and that each element carries its own individual meaning. In all the picturebooks, the front covers depict elements from the stories and a main character, and back covers contain the author's speech to the reader. Comparing the analysed picturebooks, I can say that the greatest contribution of the peritext the reader can find in *The Music of My Woodpecker*. Young readers will find Braille on the pages in the book, which is crucial to the reader's comprehension of the text (Fig. 10). The endpapers are coloured yellow, since yellow is the colour of the protagonist and illustrated by elements from the stories. Each half-title page before a story (the book contains four short stories) displays the theme of the following story. At the end of the picturebook, the book has recommendations about How to help a person

with visual impairment, presented in an easy-to-understand way for children and adults. #Kira's Blog picturebook is designed as a blog - an electronic diary (Fig. 11). Therefore, at the beginning of each 'post', Kira has a date, a mood, a hashtag and location section (also related to a better understanding of the inner state), and the name of a music composition (music was the only source of constant support for Kira throughout the book). Opening *I Hear*, the reader can already guess, from both the title and the cover, that the book's story will involve auditory perception. On the backboard cover, the author addresses the reader by suggesting that he should plug his ears and see what it is like not to hear. Additionally, both of the endpapers depict the Russian Sign Language alphabet. Regarding the blurbs on the pages of the picturebook, the main character is drawn on the edges with a thin black line, showing words in Russian sign language (Fig. 12). He is not coloured and does not carry any meaning in the plot development, but is depicted as if parallel to the story, indicating the promise of friendship among the boys. After the story, one can find additional elements, addressed to presumably young readers who are not hearing impaired, like illustrations of the main character asking in sign language, 'How old are you? Let's play together! Let's go for a walk!' and a text caption underneath the image. Finally, the least meaningful elements surrounding the story itself are in *My Brother and I*.

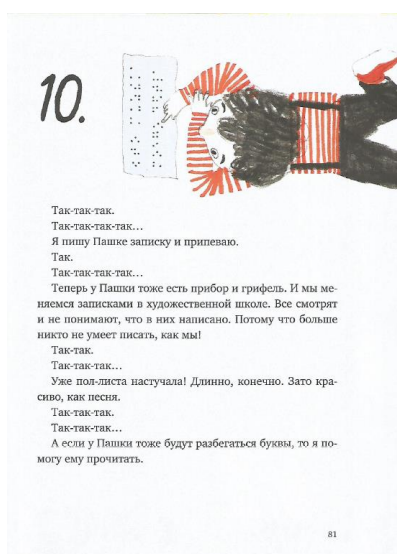


Fig. 10: *The Music of My Woodpecker*, Anna Anisimova, 2021, pages 76, 81.



Fig. 11: #Kira's Blog, Natalia Volkova, 2021, page 64.



Fig. 12: *I Hear*, Irina Zartaiskaya, 2013, page 5.

Depiction of Disability :

Concerning authenticity in disability representation it remains a crucial aspect of literature with characters with disabilities. Although none of the authors or illustrators has the disability described in the book, all of the creators have worked closely with or in organizations that provide support to people with special needs. Moreover, authors of *The Music of My Woodpecker* and *I Hear* have consulted with a researcher in children's literature, which has made it possible to portray the disability and events in the lives of children with disabilities as believably as possible. All of the books have emphasized the lack of barriers in communicating among children, and #Kira's Blog and *I Hear* focus on accepting oneself with individual characteristics. Unlike most of the books, only *The Music of My Woodpecker* picturebook did not mention the character's loss of sight in either the text or the illustrations, and the reader is expected to guess about the girl's special feature from the context and specific details (using a cane when walking and learning Braille), while the other books stressed the disabilities. After my review, I can confirm that in two books, the disturbance was neutral; in *The Music of My Woodpecker*, the loss of vision was positively positioned, having a happy protagonist; and only in *My Brother and I* the complex disorder has a negative connotation and requires compassion.

Additionally, my selection of picturebooks refers to two types of literature, each of them essential for developing young readers' comprehensive understanding of people with impaired interaction with them. Two picturebooks *I*

Hear and *My Brother and I* belong to the inclusion type of literature and are written to promote awareness of impairment, and are aimed toward non-disabled children. In contrast, *The Music of My Woodpecker* is aimed at all children, and the plot of the book does not focus on disability, so the book belongs to immersive literature. And *#Kira's Blog* has a mixed type, as it contains characteristics from inclusive and immersive literature. Regarding Critical Disability Theory, I want to say that in the two books: *The Music of My Woodpecker* and *#Kira's Blog*, the authors give extensive insight into the position of a character with a feature in society and the attitudes of people around them. In all the books, it is possible to notice, the fragments that demonstrate the non-acceptance of disability by society, prejudice, or a sense of compassion on the part of family members. However, each of the attitudes listed has its own meaning in the story. For example, the authors criticise people who use inappropriate language towards a character with a disability or through empathy try to evoke empathy in the reader, or put the opinion of a character with a disability over the opinion of a close person who does not accept disability. When creating a picturebook presenting a character with special needs, authors were careful, as in all the books analyzed, the writers avoided a disability-oriented form, in which the illness defines the person (visually impaired instead of a person with visual impairments) and chose proper expressions to describe characters with special needs.

V. CONCLUSION

The reflection in picturebooks of the real attitudes of society towards people with disabilities is highly valuable, but what is even more precious is that the author gives appreciation, encouragement, or criticism of these attitudes. At this point, the book becomes a pedagogical tool and has the potential to shape the reader's view of what is going on. Another positive aspect is the variety of picturebooks I have presented, including children with different disabilities, written from different perspectives and perspectives, with a focus on friendship, personal experiences, and strength of spirit, written with different intentions and for all children. All this diversity prevents the reader from forming a narrow and generalized idea of disability and prevents the creation of stereotypes. Multidimensional depictions of a character who is interested and well-rounded as a person, where disability is only one factor among many in the character's life, enable more readers to find similarities between themselves and the character, to connect with them, and to become empathetic (Bogart, 2019). Thus, the picturebooks I have presented contribute to the further progress of an inclusive society in Russia by fostering social awareness of disability and offering diverse, authentic, and meaningful representations aimed at young children as target audiences (Ellis, 2019).

In this research, I limited myself to the age category of the intended readers without considering other mass communication media influencing the formation of perceptions of 'normality' in children and did not explore further avenues for further elaboration of an inclusive society in Russia. Since my study is based in the context of Russian picturebooks, I cannot make general inferences regarding trends and common characteristics in contemporary picturebooks representing a character with special needs. In future studies, it is worth paying attention to the pedagogical aspect concerning children's response to reading books and conducting constructive discussion and reflection for a meaningful understanding and acceptance of characters with special needs. I would also like to draw attention to further study of books representing people with special needs aimed at adolescents, as books continue to influence the formation of readers' worldviews throughout their lives. Changing the target age of readers would also expand the genre range beyond fiction, in which are written picturebooks I have analyzed.

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Biographies and Photographs



Julia Demidova, After obtaining my teacher's diploma and a diploma in special education, I continued my studies at the Master's programme in Children's Literature, Media and Culture. As an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Programme scholar, I studied current trends in children's literature, the history and current academic research of the child-oriented Media field and the possibilities of children's literature together with various art genres to create an immersive cultural space. The majority of my time during my Master's study was devoted to research on picturebooks illustrating people with disabilities and authenticity in the representation of different cultures in these books. My thesis focused on exploring how characters with physical conditions are represented in contemporary picturebooks. Through this study I explored the main theories on the position of people with disabilities in society and the main categorisations of picturebooks.



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Note that the proceedings title is set in italics.

Biographies and Photographs

Short biographies (120-150 words) should be provided that detail the authors' education and work histories as well as their research interests. The authors' names are italicized. Small (3.5 X 4.8 cm), black-and-white pictures/digitized images of the authors can be included.