

Undirþema: Merking fagurfræði í menningu (fullorðinna) fyrir börn

Tungumál: enska
powerpoint



**“It is best to eat poems” –
Þórarinn Eldjárn’s and Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry for children**

Bókagleypir (Bookgobbler), a character from one of Þórarinn Eldjárn’s poems, is notorious for eating books. The poem ends with the words: ‘poems are eaten best as food / but only those that are any good’. This statement, treated less literally, may be used to help us understand the discussion surrounding the aesthetic value of literature for children. Inadvertently, it addresses both the consumerist practices of mass culture and brings to our attention the question of evaluation. In the context of poetry, one can ask whether the poet has to compromise in order to reach their audience, and whether the resulting product is edible (i.e. good’).

It is difficult not to think of consumerism in relation to literature for children, as it seems impossible to separate such literature from its associated merchandising. A book is only one ingredient in the marketing mix, with the aim of catering for as wide a market as possible. Perhaps inevitably, books for children are labelled as ‘mass culture,’ where the entertainment and not the aesthetic value of the work are of primary importance. Some best-selling authors have not felt the need to compromise artistically or to “dumb down” their work, however, and have succeeded in reaching a wide audience with their poetry – still perceived as a difficult and elitist form of literature. Eldjárn’s and Duffy’s works prove that commercial success does not require the poetic equivalent of a Happy Meal.

Both writers are established authors of poetry and prose (Eldjárn) for adult readers, but works for children comprise a significant part of their oeuvre. One important aspect of their poetry is their interest in the commonplace and their revaluation of clichés. The frequently colloquial language employed by both poets is invariably questioned, taunted and played with, and both often resort to traditional narratives such as myth and folk tales and present them from a subversive, revisionist perspective. There is also a certain reinvention of poetic forms such as sonnet, dramatic monologue (Duffy) or *rímur* (Eldjárn). Essential ingredients of these revaluations – parody, burlesque, allusion and satire – can be viewed with Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque in mind. What is crucial, however, is that all of the aforementioned practices are not abandoned in the authors’ poetry for children which, in common with many contemporary children’s books, relies on what Barbara Well terms a ‘dual address’.

This is poetry that is not patronising or condescending. It works, primarily, through inventiveness with language, well-created characters, good story-telling and a stimulating combination of humour and sobriety. It delights in the world of the ordinary, and through a subversive use of language and imagery manages to unearth the extraordinary and the hilarious. In Eldjárn’s and Duffy’s poems the desire to educate seems secondary; and in its stead they propose a challenging game that often ventures into the realms of surrealism and the grotesque – both solid sources of humour. This humour often stems from the very use or conscious misuse of words and common phrases. Although we may trace here the influence of surrealism and Dadaist practices, the authors’ poetry is also indebted to the tradition of nonsense verse (Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear) while representing what Morag Styles describes as ‘refreshingly robust’ attitude characteristic of contemporary poetry for children.