Megan Swift’s monograph, *Picturing the Page: Illustrated Children’s Literature and Reading under Lenin and Stalin*, is a thorough exploration of the transformative role that illustrations played in children’s literature and reading in the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1940s. The author focuses on the visual aspects of fairy tales, children’s classics, and wartime picturebooks to examine how illustrations helped to reanalyse and radically revamp well-known texts, and, hence, the past, for the purposes of raising and educating the new Soviet child. The writing is engaging and is supported by ample unique visuals.

The book is part of an established debate on illustrated children’s books. It, however, pioneers a number of innovative conceptual approaches and involves a study of previously un(der)explored materials, which posits the monograph as a necessary and timely addition to the current studies of children’s literature and culture. Methodologically, it is set apart from the previous scholarship by examining multiple illustrated versions of the same work, when ‘new illustrations move fluidly through a fixed piece of work, accruing new meanings and associations for familiar texts as a result of the process’ (171), rather than presenting a chronological overview of the major artists of the period. Instead of tracing certain abstract themes (such as motherland or heroism of labour) in children’s book illustrations, the author examines concrete images (such as mother or peasant), which, as she maintains, became units of the new Soviet visual lexicon. The book distinguishes between illustrated children’s literature – such as a picturebook – ‘designed for and consumed by the child reader’ (8) and what the author terms ‘illustrated children’s reading’ – books that initially did not have children as their target audience, but which during the Soviet era became part of children’s cultural syllabus thanks to added illustrations. The monograph examines not only reading, but also illustration-viewing practices of child/adolescent readers and, to some extent, of their parents, who introduced pre-schoolers and children of the youngest age to printed books. The author explores the primary sources, such as the literature curriculum, illustrated school textbooks of the Stalinist period, children’s journals and newspapers, and embeds close readings of the verbal and visual texts in the cultural historical context of the era.

Structurally, the book is divided into three main parts devoted to the literary fairy tale, classical works of the nineteenth century, and war-time poetry, respectively. These three parts are framed by an introduction and a conclusion that trace a continuity between the past and the present of the Soviet-era illustrated children’s book: it mediated and reformatted the national past to create ‘a wishful image of the present’ (170). Each part consists of two chapters interconnected by one of the genres discussed.

In part 1, entitled ‘Fairy-Tale Nation’, the author explores how the old fairy tale was appropriated and reoriented in the 1920s–1930s to meet the needs of the Soviet child reader with the help of added illustrations. The chapters in part 1
present insightful case studies of two famous literary fairy tales from the tsarist era—The Tale of the Priest and His Worker Balda (1830) by Aleksandr Pushkin and Petr Ershov’s Little Humpbacked Horse (1834)—reimagined by Soviet illustrators for the purposes of creating ‘a new visual lexicon, connecting to important shifts in cultural policy and mediating the past to come in line with the priorities of the present’ (28). The author maintains that, despite early Soviet attempts to purge fairy tales of their magical elements, both tales not only preserved but also instrumentalised them to foreground equality, atheism, and the centrality of air flight in Stalinist culture through visual reinterpretation of their central heroes and themes.

Part 2, ‘The Afterlife of Russian Classics’, meticulously deals with various illustrated editions of classical literature appropriated for children’s and adolescents’ reading—Pushkin’s The Bronze Horseman (1837) and Anna Karenina (1877) by Leo Tolstoy—published on the wave of a large ‘state-sponsored revival of the heroic past’ (86). The two chapters of part 2 demonstrate the fundamental role of illustrations in the process of reconceptualising these classical works as part of the public school curriculum and children’s culture in general. The author uncovers mechanisms according to which new added visuals reshape cultural representational tropes: the former was refashioned from Modernist classic to Soviet classic by altering the shifting image of St Petersburg–Leningrad, for example; the latter crucially reanalysed the role of the mother from the one responsible to family and God to the one prioritising state or social interests.

Part 3, ‘War-Time Picture Books’, focuses on how ‘war-time picture books configured the 1920s as a native, shared past’ (132) for the dual audience of the child readers of the 1940s and their parents who grew up in the 1920s and thus formed the first generation of Soviet children. The author examines Vladimir Mayakovsky’s ‘Let Us Take the New Rifles’ (1927) and Samuil Marshak’s 1920s poem Mail (1927) and its 1944 sequel written during the Great Patriotic War. She effectively demonstrates how this literature successfully uplifted patriotic sentiment during the war years through the use of the themes and images from the 1920s.

The book’s conclusion reinforces the discussion of the unique role of book illustration during the Lenin and Stalin era and its continuing legacy reflected in the late-Soviet and Putin-era illustrated children’s literature. This brief overview supports the central claim of the book and presents the main critical implication of the work done: mediating the past remains the fundamental preoccupation in matters of shaping national identity and crafting the image of the present through a careful construction of the national past; the children’s illustrated book and the children’s illustrated readings remain in the avant-garde of these trends as never before.

Anastasia Kostetskaya https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9888-7660
University of Hawaii, Mānoa
DOI: 10.3366/ircl.2021.0420