

The Evergreen Snake and Gamiž

Imaginary and Magical Animals in Serbian Children's Fantasy Fiction

TIJANA TROPIN AND IVANA MIJIĆ NEMET

Slavic folklore contains a variety of beliefs concerning magical animals and other imaginary and liminal beings, their characteristics and properties. This heritage was adopted and used in the past by various children's authors who integrated these folklore motifs into their own work. Some recent authors, on the other hand, show a marked tendency to implement animals of their own invention in order to convey an ecological message, often employing a quasi-encyclopaedic approach (e. g. Uroš Petrović and Zoran Penevski). Others create imaginary animals in order to explore moral dilemmas and psychological depths in a form appropriate for children (e. g. Mina Todorović). When folklore heritage makes a reappearance, it sometimes takes on a comical function in a contemporary urban context (e. g. Ivana Nešić). In this paper we provide an overview and an analysis of fantastic animals and their heterogeneous origins and functions in contemporary Serbian fantasy written for children, presenting a condensed outline of the most recent developments. Our aim is to combine a traditional analysis of the literary fantastic and folklore elements with ecocriticism.

Introduction

The presence of nonhuman fauna as agents or characters in children's literature has attracted attention before, but seldom more than over the past decade. Even though animals »abound in literature across all ages and cultures« (McHugh 2006), to the extent that »their presence is hard to quantify and even harder to evaluate critically« (Ortiz Robles 2016, p. ix), it seems that animal characters »appear significantly more often in children's books than in mainstream books« (Nikolajeva 2010, p. 155). Possible reasons for the popularity of (nonhuman) animals in narratives for children range from biological (the mostly abandoned idea that children and animals share a special psychological connection [Freud 2014; Vuković 1996, p. 267]) and pedagogical (the notion that animal characters allow for difficult themes to be developed in a softer, fable-like way [Nikolajeva 2010, p. 156]), to the current assumption that cultural and historical ideas about children and animals are perpetuated through various practices and discourses, including children's literature (Hameršak 2015; Rudd 2009).

The fact that animal themes and motifs are among the most recognisable traits of Serbian children's literature is consistent with these ideas. Moreover, in recent decades, Serbian children's fantasy experienced a sudden flourishing, and the catalogue of fictional fauna expanded accordingly.¹ Its origins are varied: Serbian folklore contains an assortment of beliefs concerning magical animals and other imaginary and liminal beings, their characteristics and properties. This heritage is adopted and used by various children's authors

¹ This paper can be seen as a companion piece to our chapter »Fern Blossom and Lilibala: Magical

Plants in Serbian Children's Fantasy« (Tropin / Mijić Nemet 2021).

who integrate these folklore motifs into their own stories and fairy tales and, more recently, children's fantasy novels. Earlier authors use magical or fantastic animals as signals of the supernatural order and as symbols of higher ethical or religious values. More recent authors, however, show a marked tendency to employ animals of their own invention in order to convey an ecological message, often employing a quasi-encyclopaedic approach. Still others create imaginary beings in order to explore moral dilemmas and psychological depths in a form appropriate for children. When folklore heritage does reappear, it can take on a comical function in a contemporary urban context.

The corpus selected for the present study of imaginary and magical fauna in Serbian children's fantasy fiction comprises Aleksandar Vučo's short novel *Verina otkrića* [Vera's Discoveries]², first published in 1931, as a precursor of modern Serbian children's fantasy, Uroš Petrović's novel *Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka* [Aven and Badgerdog in the Land of Wook] first published in 2003, Mina Todorović's trilogy *Virovi* [Vortices] (2003–2016), Ivana Nešić's novels *Zelenbabini darovi* (2013) [The Greenmother's Gifts] and *Tajna nemuštog jezika* (2014) [The Secret of the Silent Language], and Zoran Penevski's hexalogy *Okean od papira* (2020) [The Paper Ocean]. So far, only Petrović's novel has been translated into English (2020), and our text follows that translation.

In this analysis, we adopt a hermeneutic approach and provide a close reading of the selected works, emphasising the representation of animal characters, especially their anthropomorphisation, and the relationship between human and animal characters. Regarding the theoretical framework, we turn primarily to children's fantasy studies and ecocriticism.

The presence of animals in the Serbian folklore tradition can be traced from the first records of oral literature to the present day, but anthropocentrism governed the manner of shaping these animal figures in Serbian folk poetry and tales. This is true of Serbian fairy tales from the folk tradition, where the living beings can be divided into three large groups: human beings (the hero/protagonist is always human), animals and supernatural beings.³ The differences between these three groups are based on the opposition human-nonhuman. A single character can belong to two or all three spheres successively, but the transition must be marked either by a magic ritual or a spatio-temporal boundary (e.g. the peahen from *Zlatna jabuka i devet paunica* [The Golden Apple-Tree and the Nine Peahens] transforms into a girl at midnight).

Animals in fairy tales from the folk tradition can belong both to the primary world and the supernatural sphere, and they can be presented both realistically and with a fantastic slant (these binaries do not always overlap, see Radulović [2009, p. 196]). Animal helpers in the ordinary world often have the power of speech and perform magic functions, while animals belonging to the supernatural sphere often also have distinctive physical traits (they are golden-coloured or, especially in the case of horses, winged). This blurs the line between ordinary and magical animals; more importantly, the gift of speech, which implies sentience, can also serve to subvert the opposition between human and nonhuman, a possibility that had not been explored before the advent of modern children's fantasy, since the absolute anthropocentrism of the fairy tale precluded it.

² Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the authors.

³ For the difference between fairy tales in the folk tradition and literary fairy tales (*Kunstmärchen*) in

that regard, see Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2009; for the demarkation between the spheres of human, animal and supernatural, see Radulović (2009, pp. 167–170).

Magical animals present in literary fairy tales are often difficult to distinguish from ordinary anthropomorphised animals of the fables: literary conventions shift and change over time, together with the presentation of ›natural‹ traits in animals. For instance, it could be argued that a *giganotosaurus* can plausibly be viewed as a magical animal if it appears, sentient and singing human songs, in interwar Belgrade (Vučo 2018). However, for the purposes of our typology, we exclude texts that depict existing animal species as sentient and/or verbal. Instead, we concentrate on imaginary animals, both those that originated in folklore and mythology and those that stem from the individual and modern literary imagination.

A precursor of modern fantasy: Aleksandar Vučo

The first imaginary animal included in this paper, Aleksandar Vučo's *Zimzelena zmija* (2018) [Evergreen Snake], does not belong to a long-established imaginary species, such as dragons. The Snake first appeared in Vučo's series of linked tales, *Verina otkrića* [Vera's Discoveries], which were published between April and July 1931 in *Politika*, the main Serbian daily newspaper of the time. The stories represent an intersection of everyday life, imagination and surrealist whimsy. In his depiction of the Evergreen Snake, Vučo refrains from a detailed description, depicting instead a bleak winter landscape where hungry animals fight over scant food and hunt each other, and repeatedly stating that the ancient Evergreen Snake is the cause of all that suffering, bringing desolation to the land by its very existence. The story also hints that the Snake could be defeated if all humans and all animals united. An adult reader, familiar with Vučo's communist views and his work within the Surrealist movement, will easily recognise the Snake as a metaphor for capitalism, but for Vučo's child readers, the Snake will most likely have remained an inexplicable obscure threat, hidden under leaves, in the grass or in the mud, while the fact it was evergreen established an equally inexplicable link with the floral kingdom.

Such indistinct, dreamlike horrors were soon abandoned when World War II commenced, and were replaced with the much more realistic horrors of war. The first post-war years, marked by an insistence on Socialist Realism (see Opačić 2019), offered no space for imaginary beasts in children's literature.⁴ Fantasy and fantastic elements returned slowly, at first in new editions of pre-war fairy tales written by various Serbian and Yugoslav authors.

The slow linear development of modern children's fantasy in Serbia came to an abrupt halt in the 1990s. The period was marked by ethnic wars, the breakup of Yugoslavia, a transition period and a long-lasting economic crisis. Under such conditions, Serbian children's literature retained some of its basic tendencies, but on the whole, it was profoundly changed both stylistically and thematically. During that decade, an important part of Serbian children's fiction turned to the distant past for inspiration: writers such as Slobodan Stanišić and Svetlana Velmar-Janković created (pseudo) historical fiction, while others transformed the material taken from oral fairy tales, folk poetry, legends and beliefs. The next author under discussion, however, represents a decidedly different tradition of fantasy.

4 For a succinct description of an impassioned polemic between Branko Ćopić and Radovan Zogović

about the presence of animals in children's literature see Majhut (2019, p. 59).

Eco-fiction: Uroš Petrović

Uroš Petrović's first novel, published in 2003, *Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka* (*Aven and Badgerdog in the Land of Wook*, 2020), is set entirely in a fantastic secondary world different from the reader's and author's chronotope and the real, empirical order of things. Petrović's approach to fantasy focuses on the design of specific ecosystems that include existing species of flora and fauna, but also imaginary plants and animals, which are not always easy to distinguish and which give the novel a special, almost »paradoxical realism« (Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2012a, p. 106). Most chapters start with descriptions of different habitats and communities, represented by a combination of black-and-white drawings and short pseudoscientific texts about individual animals or plants, imitating entries in old-fashioned encyclopaedias.

According to current critical reception, this novel is a work of eco-fiction, i.e. a text that actively deals with environmental issues (see Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2012b; Jocić 2014; Glavinić 2016). It is indeed justified to view it as such – after all, the plot of *Aven* commences with a dramatic disturbance of the natural balance on the Gondwana continent and develops with a gathering of various human and nonhuman communities in the struggle for its re-establishment. However, a careful reading reveals that Petrović's novel, although raising important environmental topics (primarily the issue of the environmental and social impacts of genetic engineering), essentially remains within the framework of anthropocentrism and does not problematise the boundaries between human and nonhuman, natural and artificial (for a more developed discussion, see Tropin/Mijić Nemet 2021).

Petrović populates his novel with both human and nonhuman animals, but he upholds a sharp divide between human and nonhuman. Human beings, as well as spaces associated with them, are positively connoted, mostly harmonious and balanced, while the world of nonhuman sentient species and wildlife ranges from harmless and pastoral to wild and inhospitable.⁵ Only the Land of the Wooks and their habitats are described as absolutely evil, desolate and ugly, which are at the same time attributes of the entire Wook species. There is a two-way influence here which confirms Lotman's observation that spatial models are carriers of non-spatial cultural meanings (see Lotman 1976) in the spatial code – »positive, negative or ambivalent properties of habitats coincide with the nature of the beings that inhabit them« (Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2014, p. 16). The Wooks shape their surroundings and are, in turn, shaped by them. In the world of the novel, that means they present a threat to all human communities and more broadly to all life on the Gondwana continent. The Wooks are obviously and heavily influenced by Tolkien's Orcs: they embody pure evil, lacking any rational motivation. In the novel, they are described exclusively as »bloodsuckers,« »vampires,« »killers,« »abominations,« »predators,« »vermin,« »huge fleas« and »horrible creatures.« The illustrations also depict them as aggressive, murderous, giant fleas or spiders, with black, hairy bodies, bloodshot eyes, prominent jaws and claws. The space inhabited by these beings is connoted extremely negatively and reflects their evil nature, which corresponds to the established way of presenting antagonists in fantasy literature (see Ekman 2013, pp. 194–215). Wooks live in an organised community, connected by the urge for

5 The depiction of the natural space as containing binary oppositions reflects the animist beliefs that all nature is living and that it can both help and harm humans. These beliefs are present in the majority of Petrović's opus, including one of his most recent

works, *Strahovita knjiga* [The Fearful Book]: »Sometimes nature decides to frighten us, and She does nothing without good reason and deep meaning.« (Petrović 2019, n.p.)

self-preservation, but without solidarity. They are oviparous and feed on the blood of other beings, a recognisably vampiric trait, »although in the world of Petrović's novel they are not demonic beings but intelligent parasites« (Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2012c, p. 114). They are also extremely intelligent creatures, with a developed language and warfare skills, and in terms of science they surpass all other inhabitants of the continent. They are able to interbreed various animals and create monstrous beings such as *beštija* (Bestia multinatom), *oberat* (Oberat bettongia) or *ampirat* (Ampiraya ratufa), and skilfully manipulate plants (e.g. planting poisonous fairy rings that cause warm-blooded creatures to lose consciousness and become easy prey). Petrović's criticism of the Wooks' genetic engineering as violent and disruptive can be interpreted as a condemnation of contemporary human abuse of science and technology (see Glavinić 2012, p. 69; Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2012c, p. 114), but also as a display of older fantasy's well-known antimodernist stance (for an extended discussion of the links between epic fantasy and antimodernism see Kravar 2010). In any case, the Wooks are portrayed as simplistic antagonists and largely reduced to their harmfulness. Aven's nonhuman helpers – the badgerdog Gord, Sip and Penvir Klo, as well as the entire species of »land whales« – are creatures with ambivalent features, anthropomorphic in varying degrees. The badgerdog Gord is a product of Wook genetic engineering, a vicious beast created, as his name indicates, as a badger-dog hybrid, but he is also Aven's faithful companion, and his origin is the only thing that distinguishes their friendship's dynamics from the usual »a boy and his dog« narratives. Sip is a being of light whose existence completely transcends the usual binaries of life forms and establishes another: the binary opposition between organic and non-organic sentience. During his fantastically long existence, Sip was usually devoted to his own selfish pleasures; however, the beginning of a friendship with Aven transforms him from a potentially dangerous creature into a crucial ally. Another sentient but not easily defined living being is Penvir Klo. Penvir's species »are not humans, and certainly not beasts« (Petrović 2012, p. 82). They are the oldest intelligent entities in Aven's universe, described as the pinnacle of evolution. This partially explains their views on the Wook invasion and their decision to remain aloof, without disturbing the natural balance of life on Gondwana.

Finally, Petrović presents the great land whales that live in the Grassy Ocean region: they are fascinating mammals who form an alliance with humans and oppose the Wooks. The land whales are the only imaginary species that Petrović characterises in emphatically positive terms, as creatures that symbolise an almost paradisiac innocence and purity. Unlike Sip and Penvir, and like the badgerdog, the whales are positioned firmly on the animal side of the human–animal divide: they are not overtly anthropomorphic, and they lack the power of speech. Yet this does not affect their roles in the narrative adversely, indicating that within the value framework of the novel, the nonhuman species are not ranked according to the degree of similarity to humans but rather according to their usefulness to the protagonists (as companions and helpers). Their existence points to the possibility of other and different living beings that span different branches and degrees of evolution, while remaining decidedly Other, clearly diverging from the humanistic notion of humanity as the centre of the universe. This utopian vision of an essentially nonhuman species contains some analogies with Philip Pullman's representation of the benevolent and balanced *mulefa* society in *The Amber Spyglass*. As Zoe Jaques states, »These stories offer potentially radical destabilizations of hierarchies of being which can be read in the light of posthumanism's interest in ontological mutability, while at the same time often containing that very subversion in ways that reinforce hegemonic codes of human dominion« (2015, p. 5).

Monstruous progeny: Mina Todorović

Mina Todorović's trilogy *Virovi* [Vortices], published in 2003–2016, represents both a different worldview and a different approach to fantasy fauna. The first part, *Vir svetova* [Vortex of the Worlds] (2003), shows her debt to Tolkien, including in its quest structure, its depiction of the secondary world and its typology of sentient beings, which include humans, elves, sorcerers (as a separate species) and witches, who are sorcerers who chose evil over good. However, this first novel in the series already contains some important points of divergence from Tolkien (for instance, the coexistence of many worlds is closer to C. S. Lewis and his *Narnia* books), and its sequels, published after a decade-long hiatus, show a marked improvement in originality and complexity. These invite a reading that would use Cohen's theory of the monstrous and his method of »reading cultures from the monsters they engender« (1996, p. 3). The human protagonists encounter a wide array of ordinary animals, which, for the most part, fulfil the roles of animal companions and helpers in traditional fairy tales and sometimes the role of the witch's familiar (cats, dogs, wolves and eagles). Todorović subverts the standard positioning of those animals, perhaps most tellingly in her depiction of the cats: in this secondary world, cats are called *kafelins*; humans and wizards attribute many positive characteristics to them and view them as borderline magical; however, most importantly, they are considered extinct. In another inversion of the animal companion tropes, the readers are offered snippets of the animals' own viewpoints and thus are able to perceive them as intelligent, independent actors, although the human protagonists are left in the dark in this regard. This device is more than a gimmick: it strengthens the sense that in Todorović's multiverse, everything is connected and alive and, moreover, everything is sentient at some level. During their quest, the human protagonists encounter and befriend various living creatures apart from the humanoid Pis people: or, an ancient, powerful and all-knowing mountain and a great force of good, represents the most radical example of Todorović's encompassing view of life in nature.

But the most interesting fantastic animals, and the most original representatives of imaginary fauna in Serbian children's fantasy in general, are Todorović's *rabr-agrafai*, who appear in the second book of the series, *Gamiž* (2012). Coincidentally, *Gamiž* (roughly, Creep or Creeper) is the name of an infant *rabr-agrafai* that the questing fellowship of protagonists discovers, captures and subsequently adopts (in a manner of speaking).

Initially, the *rabr-agrafai* are described as wicked predators: monstrously ugly, but very agile, strong and intelligent. They eat their prey alive because they feed simultaneously on their flesh and their sensations of fear and pain. In order to achieve that, they establish a telepathic link with their victim in a process described as »hooking.« The link also ensures that the victim dies at once if the *rabr-agrafai* is killed. The *rabr-agrafai* have no names, because to receive or give a name would mean giving the other person a measure of power over them; they do not use any first-person pronouns, rejecting even that basic form of individuation and self-acceptance (*Gamiž* was named by a member of the fellowship, and that act immediately established a two-way link between them). This description dovetails neatly both into Levanat-Peričić's morphology of the mythical monster and Cohen's monster theory. Levanat-Peričić, who links the monster's cannibalism with social isolation, stunted emotional growth and coldness, writes, »Their hunger is not animal, but demonic – they must hate in order to be able to devour« (2008, p. 542). Cohen calls the monster »the harbinger of category crisis,« stating that its appearance questions the established forms of binary thinking (1996, p. 6), and Todorović's use of the monster figure aligns with that thesis.

In a subversive twist, Todorović establishes strong parallels between the predator-prey and mother-child relationships within the *rabr-agrafai* species. The same predatory telepathic link is always established between a *rabr-agrafai* mother and her brood: within three years of hatching, one of the children must kill the mother, or the mother must kill them all. If they fail to do that, both parties will die (the father is usually slaughtered by the mother at some point after the mating or is used as living fodder for the babies). While Todorović intentionally calls attention to the improbable and self-destructive aspect of such a life cycle, she also determinedly works through its implications. In her interpretation and over the course of the second and third books, the *rabr-agrafai* gradually lose their monstrous aspect; instead, they become the image of a species doomed to slow extinction as an evolutionary dead end, creatures whose biological makeup makes it nearly, but not completely, impossible for them to feel compassion, friendship or even love. The vicious double bind between mother and child is clearly a metaphor for the dark side of motherhood and childrearing, rarely encountered in such a distilled form in Serbian children's literature. There is no stereotypical ›natural bond‹ between Gamiž and his mother, or rather, the existing bond is at the same time quite natural and entirely destructive.

The impasse is resolved, however, within the standard framework of children's literature. Although Gamiž has »hooked« the members of the fellowship in order to destroy them, their fraught relationship slowly transforms into cautious respect, and then friendship. Their quest to find Gamiž's mother and help him defeat her (after all, their lives also depend on the outcome) turns into a journey of self-discovery. As it turns out in the end, under proper circumstances and with adequate training, the *rabr-agrafai* are capable of lifting the link by themselves without dying. Establishing non-destructive relationships between individual *rabr-agrafai*, as well as slowly building trust between the animals and the humans, culminates in a particular name-giving: Gamiž's mother exchanges names with an ancient sorceress she is linked to, Ranaja, who names her »Ranaja's Other Half.« Apart from lifting the killing curse, this name-giving effectively destroys the boundary between human and animal, or human and monster: both have come to acknowledge and accept their kinship. That radical break with the established binaries of human and nonhuman, however, goes by almost unobserved within the classic quest structure of the novels.

Comic fantasy: Ivana Nešić

Less radical in her examination of these binaries is Ivana Nešić, who returns to the Serbian oral tradition and uses elements and patterns of traditional forms. Oral literature and Slavic mythology play a significant role in *Zelenbabini darovi* (2013) [Greenmother's Gifts] and *Tajna nemuštog jezika* (2014) [The Secret of the Silent Language], which follow the adventures of a seemingly ordinary boy named Mika. Mika is a quiet, polite child who suddenly realises that his own world, the everyday Serbia of the 1950s, is in fact inhabited by supernatural beings, demons and even gods. The author sources the basic plots of the novels from the rich treasury of oral heritage, but this is only a backdrop that she further develops freely, playing with genre matrices and imbuing them with warm humour. In both novels, animal characters appear in the roles of friends, helpers and opponents, and, given the degree of their anthropomorphisation and fantastic elements, they can be classified into two basic categories: anthropomorphised animals that are not magical in themselves but are visibly influenced by magic, and supernatural beings drawn from

myth and folklore, subsequently transformed. The former category includes, among others, a stone polar bear with a penchant for poetry and a young turtle that becomes the protagonist's helper and friend. In a comic reversal typical of Nešić, the ambitious and adventurous turtle is named Paun (Peacock), and his courageous efforts are rewarded with a magical embellishment of his shell.

The latter category includes demonic beings from Slavic folklore: the snakelike monster *ala* (Zelenbabini darovi) and the serpent king (*Tajna nemuštog jezika*). Their presentation remains within the framework of traditional folklore concepts, with the addition of a few comic details. Thus, the *ala* is depicted as a giant snow-white snake with large scaly wings, able to breathe fire and create hailstorms, in line with the oral tradition (see Tolstoj/Radenković 2001, pp. 559–561). The deviation from the original template consists of a slightly parodic treatment of her demonic, evil nature (as witnessed in her comical bickering with Mika), which however remains present and dangerous. The serpent king appears as an unwitting antagonist, insofar as he declares a surprised and unwilling Mika to be his future son-in-law. Nešić creates a conventional image of the serpent king as a huge snake with a crown adorned by precious stones and wearing an incongruous moustache (see Tolstoj/Radenković 2001, p. 212; their folklorist description is very similar to Nešić 2014, p. 53). But at the same time, he is a gentle father who strives to make his daughter happy, as well as a wise and ethical ruler.

But the central motif and narrative propellant of that novel is the silent language: the language of plants and animals, which humans can master under certain circumstances, usually as a gift (a widespread motif in Slavic folklore, see Tolstoj/Radenković (2001, p. 380)). Mika receives this gift of understanding animals, but instead of being overjoyed, the boy is overwhelmed by the distracting cacophony of animal voices, and he begs to be relieved of it: »There is nothing mystically supernatural in Mika's difficulties: they are the logical outcome of this fantastical premise. Moreover, the parodic slant in the description of the boy's troubles with boring and chatty animals does away with the exotic charm of the silent language's concept« (Tropin 2015, p. 30).

In Nešić's novels, the animal species are not divided into good and bad, and the human species is not given preferential treatment. Although animal characters are partly defined through human relationships and practices (family ties, names etc.), they are not valued merely according to their similarity and usefulness to humans, and their goals and desires are (mostly) not linked to humanity. Humans are not presented as innately superior; rather, Nešić problematises the ›natural‹ order in which human society and participation therein are recognised as the pinnacle of existence.

An abundance of animals: Zoran Penevski

The final entry in our overview offers a complete contrast to Nešić's interplay of traditional imaginary beings and contemporary humour. Zoran Penevski writes both adult realist fiction and children's fantasy. A trademark of his children's novels is long lists of imaginary species, akin to *Aven's* pseudo-encyclopaedic entries, and usually accompanied by Dušan Pavlič's quirky illustrations. His early children's novel *Budimir i retke vrste* (2013) [Budimir and the Rare Species] presents a protagonist whose single purpose in life is to collect and save the last living representatives of (fantastical) endangered animal and bird species.

That early effort was superseded and surpassed by Penevski's hexalogy *Okean od papira* [The Paper Ocean]. Published in 2020, these six slim volumes present a complex fantasy

plot set in an imaginary city, Petograd (Fivetown), whose inhabitants are divided into five boroughs, symbolised by five animals: a fish, a pig, a bear, an owl and a wolf. The books are structured around various nested narratives, which include a plethora of imaginary animals, both monstrous and comical: for instance, the protagonist Tarvin is offered a long guided tour in a museum of imaginary beings, or he is presented with a copy of the fictional almanac »Nothing or Monsters«. At the same time, Tarvin's friends and adversaries are described in terms of the animal patrons of their respective boroughs, possessing and displaying the stereotypical traits ascribed to these animals – pigs are voracious; wolves are cruel; the fish are taciturn and mysterious and so on. Dušan Pavlić's illustrations and graphic design are so prominent in this hexalogy, and their function so important, that any in-depth analysis would have to consider them an integral part of this work; unfortunately, that is beyond the scope of this article. For instance, each cover, except for the sixth and last, is linked visually to one of the animal patrons of the city (see Fig. 1).

An important trait of Penevski's hybrid beings is that most of them play no large part in the plot: Only a minority of them gain any importance over the course of the six books. Others are mostly used as part of the intricate and rich world-building, much like Petrović's catalogues of imaginary lifeforms. A typical example is the *morski kolopas* (roughly, sea wheel-shark), described as a spiny mollusc whose spines are made of paraffin wax, which makes it ideal for chandeliers in fishermen's houses (see Fig. 2).

The often-confusing cornucopia of animal symbolism, imaginary animals (as well as plants) and supernatural beings, however, revolves around a mysterious concept: the *Temeljitelj* (Grounder), which verges between a magic power and a possessing spirit. It turns out that the Grounder's special power is to lead invented species across the threshold dividing the imaginary and the real, gifting them with true existence. Such an ability, together with the evasive nature of the Grounder, combine into a potent symbol of the creative and elusive forces of imagination and offer intriguing pathways for further examination. The figure of *Temeljitelj* is a clear confirmation of Cohen's thesis, »The Monster polices the borders of the possible«: »To step outside this official geography is to risk attack [...] or (worse) to become monstrous oneself.« (1996, p. 12)

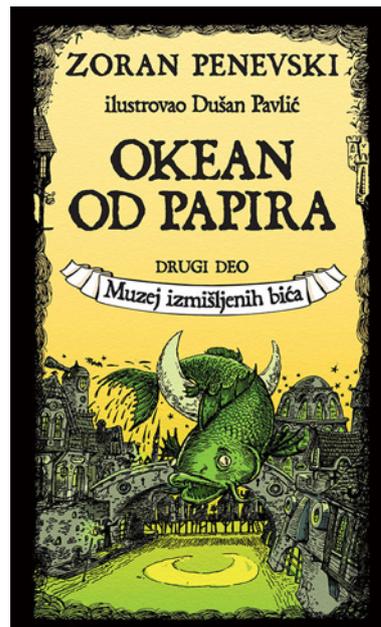


Fig. 1
Cover image by Dušan Pavlić for *Okean od papira vol. 2, Muzej izmišljenih bića* [Museum of Imaginary Beings] (Beograd: Laguna, 2020). Reprinted with the permission of Zoran Penevski

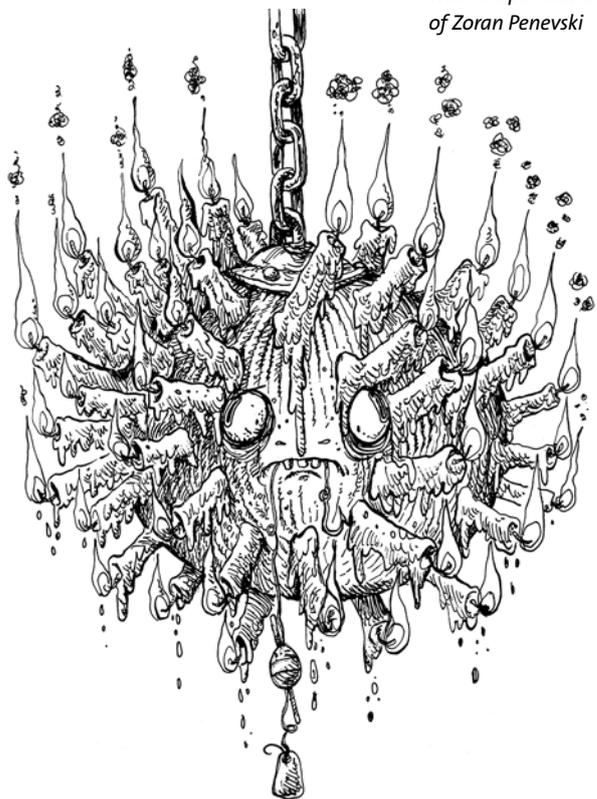


Fig. 2
Illustration by Dušan Pavlić from *Okean od papira vol. 2, Muzej izmišljenih bića* [Museum of Imaginary Beings] (Beograd: Laguna, 2020). Reprinted with the permission of Zoran Penevski

Conclusion

It would be unwise to draw any final conclusions in a field that has been changing so profoundly and rapidly over the past few decades. Serbian children's fantasy does not contain an explicit and radical ecopedagogy as championed by Gaard (2009); rather, it spontaneously reflects the gradual change of the collective mindframe, heightened environmental concerns and a stronger awareness of the fact that everything is connected. The most visible thematic shift is the way in which contemporary authors have distanced themselves from the folklore background, either through parody and subversion, by integrating the motifs and patterns of foreign fantasy traditions (primarily Tolkien's high fantasy) or by implementing postmodern techniques characteristic of adult literature. The dichotomies and oppositions between animals / monsters and humans are slowly taken apart. That trend can primarily be linked to the strengthening of ecocritical awareness and the (implicit) posthumanist tendencies over the past ten years (e.g. in Todorović's *Magma* [2016]). It is also evident that, after Petrović's *Wooks*, other nonhuman antagonists became more nuanced psychologically (especially in Todorović's work) and are usually presented as ontologically equal to humans (Nešić). If imaginary animals are denied the status of rational beings, their importance for the maintenance of the ecosystem is still emphasised (Penevski, Petrović). The complexity of motivation and characterisation has been facilitated by switching to a series format that has enabled longer texts covering a longer time span (Todorović, Nešić). The narratives of modern fantasy in Serbia thus mirror important shifts in modern consciousness: towards a reconsideration of tradition and its hierarchies, new perceptions of fractured and multiple identities and a break with established binary oppositions that determine so much of human attitudes towards nature.

Primary literature

- Nešić, Ivana (2013): *Zelenbabini darovi*. Beograd: Kreativni centar
- Nešić, Ivana (2014): *Tajna nemuštog jezika*. Beograd: Kreativni centar
- Penevski, Zoran (2013): *Budimir i retke vrste*. Beograd: Kreativni centar
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 a): *Okean od papira. Deo 1, Knjiga Moći*. Beograd: Laguna
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 b): *Okean od papira. Deo 2, Muzej izmišljenih bića*. Beograd: Laguna
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 c): *Okean od papira. Deo 3, Ključ katedrale*. Beograd: Laguna
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 d): *Okean od papira. Deo 4, Ostrvo u jajetu*. Beograd: Laguna
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 e): *Okean od papira. Deo 5, Uteha tame*. Beograd: Laguna
- Penevski, Zoran (2020 f): *Okean od papira. Deo 6, Litica i krug*. Beograd: Laguna
- Petrović, Uroš (2012): *Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka*. Beograd: Laguna
(first published in 2003)
- Petrović, Uroš (2019): *Strahovita knjiga*. Beograd: Laguna.
- Petrović, Uroš (2020): *Aven and Badgerdog in the Land of Wook*.
Transl. Patricia Andjelkovic. Beograd: Laguna
- Todorović, Mina D. (2003): *Vir svetova*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa
- Todorović, Mina D. (2012): *Gamiž*. Beograd: Everest Media
- Todorović, Mina D. (2016): *Magma*. Beograd: PortaLibris
- Vučo, Aleksandar (2018): *Verina otkrića*. In: *Zimzelena zmija*. Beograd:
Radio-Televizija Srbije, pp. 19–91. [Originally published in *Politika* in 1931]

Secondary literature

- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (Ed.). (1996). *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis
- Ekman, Stefan (2013): *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings*. Middletown
- Freud, Sigmund (2014): *Totem i Tabu: neke podudarnosti u duševnom životu divljaka i neurotičara*. Transl. Milica Simić. Beograd [*Totem und Tabu*, originally published 1913, Leipzig, Wien]
- Gaard, Greta (2009): *Children's Environmental Literature: From Ecocriticism to Ecopedagogy*. In: *Neohelicon*, Vol. 36, pp. 321–334
- Glavinić, Gordana (2012): *O fantastičnim romanima za decu Uroša Petrovića*. In: *Detinjstvo*, Vol. 38, Nos. 3–4, pp. 66–74
- Glavinić, Gordana (2016): *Ekološka svest u romanu Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka Uroša Petrovića*. In: *Detinjstvo*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 104–114
- Hameršak, Marijana (2015): *Središte ruba. Životinje i dječja književnost*. In: *Detinjstvo*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 29–39
- Jaques, Zoe (2015): *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. New York, London
- Jocić, Miloš (2014): *Pripovedač i prirodnjak (O ilustracijama, enciklopedijaštvu, ekofantastici, ali pre svega ilustracijama Uroša Petrovića u romanu Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka)*. In: *Detinjstvo*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 79–86
- Kravar, Zoran (2010): *Kad je svijet bio mlad*. Beograd
- Levanat-Peričić, Miranda (2008): *Morfologija mitskog čudovišta*. In: *Croatica et Slavica Iadertina*, No. 4, pp. 531–550
- Lotman, Jurij Mihajlovič (1976): *Struktura umetničkog teksta*. Transl. Novica Petković. Beograd
- Majhut, B. (2019): *Žanrovska struktura hrvatske dječje književnosti u desetljeću nakon Drugog svjetskog rata*. In: *Magistra Iadertina*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 51–73
- Nikolajeva, Maria (2010): *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. New York
- Opačić, Zorana (2019): *(Pre)oblikovanje detinjstva*. Beograd
- Ortiz Robles, Mario (2016): *Literature and Animal Studies*. London, New York
- Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana (2009): *Usmena i autorska bajka – nacrt za tipologiju odnosa*. In: Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana. *Usmeno u pisanom*. Beograd, pp. 9–28
- Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana (2012 a): *Od zaštićenog do zaštitnika. O nekim pitanjima tipologije fantastičnog romana za decu*. In: Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana. *Gospođi Alisinoj desnoj nozi*. Novi Sad, pp. 99–111
- Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana (2012 b): *Pogovor*. In: Petrović, Uroš. *Aven i jazopas u Zemlji Vauka*. Beograd, pp. 299–302
- Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana (2012 c): *Fantastični svet u stvaralaštvu Uroša Petrovića – između horora i humora*. In: Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana. *Gospođi Alisinoj desnoj nozi*. Novi Sad, pp. 113–125
- Pešikan-Ljuštanović, Ljiljana (2014): *Prostor u fantastičnom romanu za decu – nacrt tipologije na primerima iz savremene srpske proze*. In: Jovanović, Violeta / Rosić, Tiodor (eds.): *Književnost za decu u nauci i nastavi*. Jagodina, pp. 11–34
- Radulović, Nemanja (2009): *Slika sveta u srpskim narodnim bajkama*. Beograd
- Rudd, David (2009): *Animal and Object Stories*. In: Grenby, M. / Immel, Andrea (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*. Cambridge, pp. 242–257

- Tolstoj, Svetlana M. / Radenković, Ljubinko (eds.) (2001): Slovenska mitologija: enciklopedijski rečnik. Beograd
- Tropin, Tijana (2015): Uticaj fantastičnog elementa na strukturu romana za decu: *Zelenbabini darovi i Tajna nemuštog jezika*. In: *Detinjstvo*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 25–34
- Tropin, Tijana / Mijić Nemet, Ivana (2021): Fern Blossom and Lilibala: Magical Plants in Serbian Children's Fantasy Fiction. In: Duckworth, Melanie / Guanio-Uluru, Lykke (eds.): *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. New York, London, pp. 74–87
- Vuković, Novo (1996): *Uvod u književnost za djecu i omladinu*. Podgorica

Website

- McHugh, Susan (2006): One or Several Literary Animal Studies? <https://networks.h-net.org/node/16560/pages/32231/one-or-several-literary-animal-studies-susan-mchugh> [Accessed 14.03.2022]

Biographical Notes

Tijana Tropin, PhD, Research Associate, Institute for Literature and Arts, Belgrade.

She received her PhD from the Belgrade University, Faculty of Philology, with a thesis on the translation of children's literature. Areas of research: translation studies, children's literature, fantasy.

Ivana Mijić Nemet, PhD, Independent Researcher. She received her PhD from the

University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, with a thesis on contemporary Serbian children's fantasy fiction. Areas of research: children's literature, fantasy, popular literature and literary theory.