



Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-35: Beautiful Books, Terrible Times

By Julian Rothenstein

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- Sales Rank: #1389617 in Books
- Published on: 2013-10-01
- Released on: 2013-10-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 11.75" h x 7.75" w x 1.10" l, 2.60 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

When Stalin's great purges made writing dangerous, a group of avant garde artists turned their attention to children's books. Philip Pullman on a new collection that reveals a vigorous freedom in a time of repression At the trial of the three Pussy Riot performers in August 2012, one of the accused, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, made a closing statement in their defence. She spoke of Pussy Riot's admiration for those writers and artists who had suffered under Stalin's purges, and in particular for a group of avant garde poets and writers known as Oberiu. Two of the most prominent Oberiu members were Alexander Vvedensky and Daniil Kharms, both of whom were arrested, and died, during the Great Terror. Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-35: Beautiful Books, Terrible Times Vvedensky and Kharms had another thing in common. Finding their adult poetry impossible to publish, with its absurdist imagery and aesthetically radical approach, they turned to writing for children. In that field they could earn a living and work without too much interference from the authorities. They could also collaborate with equally avant garde visual artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, the designer of the famous unbuilt Monument to the Third International, and El Lissitzky, the suprematist painter, typographer, and graphic designer. Partly because of such collaborations, and partly because children's books provided a hiding place for a while, the early Soviet period was a miraculously rich time for children's books and their illustration. A new book, Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-1935 offers a glimpse into that astonishing world. The designer, Julian Rothenstein, and the writer of an essay in the book, Olga Budashevskaya, have produced something truly remarkable. Brilliant primary colours, simple geometrical shapes at first sight it looks like a textbook of suprematism, the movement that emerged from the intellectual ferment of pre-revolutionary Russia to express the supremacy of pure, artistic feeling above the mere depiction of objects. In the hands of Kazimir Malevich, for example, the great theoretician of suprematism, a black square expressed such feeling, and the white field on which it appeared was the void beyond all feeling. For the illustrator K Rudakov, in a children's book of 1927, a black square is still a black square, but with the addition of two bells underneath and a hook at the side for the handset, it becomes a telephone. In this picture it's being used by a monkey in red trousers and a black waistcoat, and it illustrates a poem by the great nonsense-poet of Russian children's literature, Kornei Chukovsky (1882-1969). The illustrations are the main point of Inside the Rainbow, and there are hundreds of them, brilliantly coloured, full of wit and ingenuity, breathtaking in their elegance of form and design. The book covers a period when artists and poets had the sort of freedom that let them produce work like this, but there was always an air of threat in the background. Chukovsky, who wrote about the animals on the telephone, was loved by generations of Russian children, but that didn't save him from criticism, such as this from the psychologist Lev Vygotsky in 1926: Chukovsky seems to proceed from the assumption that the sillier something is, the more understandable and the more entertaining it is for the child, and the more likely that it will be within the child's grasp ... In his babbling verse Chukovsky piles up nonsense on top of gibberish. Such literature only fosters silliness and foolishness in children, And the best of the writers and artists represented here appreciated this. Inside the Rainbow is an extraordinary compilation, a treasure-house, a monument to the free imagination and to a brief time when the avant garde and the playful were one and the same. --The Guardian Oct 11- 2013

Publication: A celebration of the golden era of Russian children's book design Posted by Rob Alderson, Monday 07 October 2013 A couple of weeks ago over on Creative Review, Jim Sutherland wrote a really interesting post about designers predilection for making children's books. He suggested it was a way to let one's visual imagination run wild in contrast with the daily grist of tightly prescribed identity work. But what perhaps Jim didn't explore was the importance of children's books in the long term; we can learn a lot about

a society by what they show to their youngsters. This point is illustrated perfectly in a new book by Julian Rothenstein and Olga Budashevskaya called Inside The Rainbow: Russian Children's Literature 1920-1935. It includes more than 250 terrific examples of book design from this period, where the artists' imaginations were allied with the rise of Suprematist and Futurist vernacular as well as certain socio-political pressures (although these were far less oppressive than in later Soviet years). It's a celebration of values not readily associated with Russian aesthetics colour, vibrancy and charm and a series of contemporary photographs which run throughout roots these titles in the real lives of their target readers. --ITSTHATNICE blog

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jackson Cabrera:

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Sam Richey:

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