

**Nikola von Merveldt**

# Rethinking Children's Literature History Through the Lens of East- German Non-Fiction

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## **Rethinking Children's Literature History Through the Lens of East-German Non-Fiction**

Schmideler, Sebastian, ed. *Wissensvermittlung in der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der DDR: Themen, Formen, Strukturen, Illustrationen*. 1., Aufl. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2017. Print. Epistemata - Würzburger wissenschaftliche Schriften.

Scholarly research into German non-fiction books for children and young adults has been intermittent and hesitant at best. Despite a few insightful articles published in journals and collected volumes, there have been no comprehensive surveys or attempts to write a history of informational children's literature in Germany pre- or post 1945 – West, East, or reunified.

Schmideler's edited volume gives hope that this is about to change. It is ambitious and inspiring, erudite and pathbreaking. Well-delimited by the forty years of the German Democratic Republic, the corpus and the cultural context remain concise enough to give the eighteen essays a clear framework and intellectual coherence. The volume brings together scholars from East and West Germany uniquely qualified to rethink and envision facets of a future history of East-German children's books history. Some can cast critical looks at their former contributions to the seminal publications on GDR children's literature – namely the *Handbook of Children's Literature: SOZ/GDR 1945-1990* (Metzler: 2006)<sup>i</sup> – and some can draw on material and insights from important collaborative research projects based in Leipzig. While all contributions are solidly based on intimate knowledge and close analysis of the corpus, some also take into consideration unpublished archival documents or information taken from interviews.

What sets this volume apart is the overall conception, which elevates it beyond the usual hodge-podge collection of more or less haphazardly assembled

articles. Even though it is the result of a 2016 conference in Chemnitz, it does not suffer from the common symptoms of conference proceedings: lack of coherence, inconsistent voice, or insufficient editorial care. Rather, the articles come together nicely, read like different chapters of a book, showing varying aspects of a complex subject matter. As Schmideler announces in the introduction, the articles here united function as important “building blocks toward a comprehensive future history of children’s literature”, a history, he insists, which does not filter out non-fiction literature (9). All articles rely on the premise that non-fiction books are integral part of the overall history of children’s literature and should be considered both as “literary witnesses and revealing documents for cultural history” (27). It is this dual approach – taking the books serious both as cultural artifacts and literary works of artistic ambition – which makes it so convincing and relevant far beyond the field of literary studies. In fact, non-fiction books are shown to have acute diagnostic potential – books that can shed special light on artistic trends, economic conditions, and perceptions of social reality.

Following the lead of recent scholarship, but mostly of current developments in the non-fiction production, the volume embraces a broad definition of non-fiction. Instead of reverting to apologetic attempts to clearly delineate and define the genre, Schmideler recognizes the genre’s very potential and research interest in its fluidity and hybridity. This openness is reflected in the corpus, which ranges from picture dictionaries and series, historical non-fiction and descriptive picturebooks to travel writings and historical narratives used as textbooks. The contributions cover the period from 1945 to the early 1990s and offer surveys, portraits, or close readings of individual works, representative and remarkable series, of notable authors and illustrators, or choose a more personal approach – such as Anne Preuß’s article about her uncle, the graphic artist Gerhard Preuß, and the interview with the editor of one of the most popular and enduring comic-book series, MOSAIK.

The volume is divided into five sections. It opens with two essays very much worth reading, which give orientation and lay the foundations (I. Foundations). Five further essays explore thematic avenues ranging from travel literature, literary utopias, economy, and environmental concerns in the second part (II. Themes). The third section presents close-reading case studies to take a closer look at the literary forms of individual works and detect generic patterns (III. Forms), while the fourth one focuses on hybrid forms of transmitting historical knowledge (IV. Structures). The last, regrettably very brief, section ends with two essays giving a sketch of illustration in GDR non-fiction children's books (V. Illustrations). This being said, many of the individual contributions do discuss illustrations.

What readers can take away from this collection is not only a deepened and rich understanding of East-German non-fiction children's literature specifically but also inspiration for how to approach histories of non-fiction children's literature in general. Many of the authors convincingly show that the popularization of knowledge did more than obey a pedagogical impulse: It was part and parcel of the socialist project and a programmatic, political mandate of the GDR. This explains, in part, the particularly rich production of informational literature for children in the GDR of nearly 3000 titles published over the forty years. But more importantly, this insight is fundamental to the theoretical understanding of non-fiction under the specific historical circumstances. Beyond taking into consideration the ideological context, several authors also show awareness of the less obvious technological and material restrictions particular to Soviet countries. Knowing, for example, that paper was a commodity hard to come by is valuable and preempts uninformed value judgements. Problems in paper quality called for creative compensation while paper shortages forced publishing houses to reduce the number of pages but in turn allowed them to invest more into the illustrations. Embedded in these contexts, the books do far more than just popularize specific areas of knowledge; viewed in this light, they also tell

exciting economic, social, and historical stories and prove to be valuable documents and privileged witnesses of their times.

This volume seems to mark a third phase in the scholarship of GDR non-fiction children's literature (even though this judgement should be left to specialists of GDR literature): following the sound, factual studies and foundational surveys particularly of Harri Günther in the late 1980s, the early post-1989 analyses were marked by ideological criticism both in the selection and interpretation of works. Now, with thirty years of distance to the socialist regime, the critical ideology readings give way to more nuanced interpretations guided by literary analysis and cultural studies, which underline the diversity and the complexity as well as the artistic merits of the works. Most essays could be qualified as thoughtfully revisionist in nature. If there is one thing to regret, it is that the scholarship the authors rely on remains largely German. Studies from former Soviet countries would surely hold relevant insights; and while Anglo-American scholarship may seem far removed, recent studies definitely have advanced the theoretical discourse on non-fiction children's literature. Finally, one cannot help but wonder how a greater awareness of gender issues, for example, were to enrich the stories told.

Nevertheless, Schmideler's edited volume is a milestone in non-fiction children's literature, relevant far beyond the field of East-German literature. Every scholar interested in non-fiction and in children's literature in general should consult it to see how a future inclusive history of children's literature could be conceptualized and written. Exemplary analyses and theoretical reflections come together in this book to offer a multi-faceted, stimulating, and hopefully pathbreaking approach to a still underestimated part of children's literature.

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<sup>i</sup> Steinlein, Rüdiger, Heidi Strobel, and Thomas Kramer, eds. *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: 'SBZ/DDR von 1945 bis 1990*, 2006. Print.