

## SLOVENIAN ILLUSTRATION And Then What Happens?

*The colourful world of illustration encourages a child's innate curiosity and teaches them a positive attitude towards the diversity of the world, where we can always find a pattern within the randomness and discover a common language.*

*'The whiteness of paper can be used to create so many different shades that the future cannot be unambiguous either.'*

*Samira Kentrić*

### And Then What Happens?

The title relates to a child's curiosity, the desire to turn the page and find out what happens next. More broadly, it asks us about where we are directing our common future, how books and illustrations can contribute to optimism and motivation for change.

The expert committee of the Slovenian Book Agency in cooperation with the Slovenian Center of Illustration presents the imaginative and stylistic variety of contemporary illustrators from Slovenia. The exhibition highlights the works of 44 award-winning original Slovenian authors working in the field of children's and young adult book illustration. With an additional 15 authors, the catalogue contains 59 authors of contemporary Slovenian illustration:

**Marta Bartolj / Vesna Benedetič / Suzi Bricelj / Matej de Cecco / Zvonko Čoh / Danijel Demšar / Jurij Devetak / Bojana Dimitrovski / Tina Dobrajc / Jure Engelsberger / Milan Erič / Jelka Godec Schmidt / Ančka Gošnik Godec / Miha Hančič / Ciril Horjak / Adriano Janežič / Marjanca Jemec Božič / Maja Kastelic / Dora Kaštrun / Samira Kentrić / Anka Kočevar / Tanja Komadina / Ana Košir / Maša Kozjek / David Krančan / Kristina Krhin / Tomaž Lavrič / Polona Lovšin / Izar Lunaček / Marjan Manček / Ana Maraž / Matija Medved / Ivan Mitrevski / Eva Mlinar / Manica K. Musil / Silvan Omerzu / Andreja Peklar / Maja Poljanc / Lila Prap / Tereza Prepadnik / Petra Preželj / Ana Razpotnik Donati / Jelka Reichman / Liana Saje Wang / Zoran Smiljanić / Alenka Sottler / Alenka Špacial / Damijan Stepančič / Hana Stupica / Katarina Šeme / Igor Šinkovec / Peter Škerl / Andrej Štular / Gorazd Vahen / Tina Volarič / Jaka Vukotič / Huiqin Wang / Ana Zavadlav / Maša P. Žmitek**

12 featured authors:

**Maja Kastelic / Polona Lovšin / Andreja Peklar / Lila Prap / Alenka Sottler / Damijan Stepančič / Hana Stupica / Igor Šinkovec / Peter Škerl / Huiqin Wang / Ana Zavadlav / Maša P. Žmitek**

### An Abundance of Variety

When, during the Slovenia: Guest of Honour project at the Frankfurt Book Fair, foreign journalists asked me what is specific to Slovenian literature, I often found myself at a loss for words because reflecting on the specifics of texts did not lead to any meaningful conclusions. A text is either good or not, to me, there is no national aspect in this as such. But when I started to think about books as a whole, it occurred to me that, to my mind, what stands out as specifically Slovenian is illustration.

Illustration has for decades had an important place in Slovenian fiction and educational books. Whether with extraordinary picture books, small board books, narrative picture books without words, educational books for teenagers, or even complex series of novels for adults – the illustration stands out. There have been foreign agents who have commented that the illustrations in our books are too complex, too artistic, not commercial enough; however, my response was always that they are not so for us. In Slovenia, we have grown up with such illustrations. All of us, publishers, illustrators and readers have developed our tastes and demands together, and for us all a good book needs to also contain good illustrations. Why should we settle for anything less?!

Wherever we are in the world, we tell stories – wherever we are in the world, we listen to and watch stories, we all do the same, but the shapes of the stories, the ways of telling them, and the ways of rendering them, are varied. Everyone sees the world through their own eyes, imagining and understanding it their own way,

because we all have different experiences in life and different imaginations. Slovenia is home to people with a vivid imagination, a lot of knowledge and persistence, which is why their illustrations can be so extraordinary and open doors to Slovenian stories abroad. Illustrations and images have a power that should not be overlooked, not bound by language, there is no need for a translation in order to understand them. In Slovenian books, illustrations are a kingdom of their own with many queens and kings, each enriching and conjuring up a world of images in their own way. At the exhibition in Bologna, we will open the door to our world for you to indulge in. And we'll see what happens then.

**Katja Stergar,**

*Director, Slovenian Book Agency*

### **Illustration in Slovenia**

It is often said in Slovenia that we are a nation of poets. It is a bit of an exaggeration, but there is also some truth to it. The Slovenian cultural space has always been surrounded and “endangered” by larger Romanic, Germanic, and Slavic cultures. Culture, and especially language, has been crucial for preserving our unique identity. It seems that this very situation made us cling to our art, literature, and, consequently, illustration. Especially after the Second World War, the state oversaw the establishment of publishing houses and also provided strong financial support for literary production. The largest publishing house was Mladinska Knjiga, and by lucky coincidence the first editor of its children's programmes was Dr Kristina Brenkova, an outstanding expert and artist. Her motto ‘only the best is good for children and we pick it out for them with tweezers, not a shovel’ is still a leading guiding principle in children's literature today. She collaborated with excellent writers and invited the best artists of the time to provide illustrations. These were always artistically mature and autonomous artists, constantly opening up the field of illustration to new styles.

This created a favourable setting for the development of a visual language in design and illustration, one that is still present today and produces excellent results. It firmly established the principle of high and self-evident quality, but the question ‘what is quality illustration’ remains open. The best works set the standard for quality during their own time, and new upcoming artists strive to reach and surpass them. A lot is happening in the field of illustration in Slovenia, certainly much more than is evident even from all the production channels of publishing houses and other media.

It is interesting that there is no feeling of envy or unfriendly competition between artists in this field. This artistic environment is unusually homogeneous, and I believe it is so because every author develops their own creative path without endangering others.

At international book fairs, we often hear praise about how many excellent and especially varied authors work in such a small literary market. This is the result of decades of conscious cultivation of an artistic field in which different aesthetics can coexist.

But we live in a time when not everything is so rosy. Like artistic and painting production globally, capital-driven pressures to produce cheaper products for quicker financial success are also evident in Slovenia. These pressures would have us halt the inventiveness of the creators and bow to some imaginary trends or “average customer”, though no one can really define what or who that is. Above all, they underestimate readers, which is why these attempts have been quite unsuccessful. The creativity and autonomy of artistic styles prove that high quality and originality are first-class economic categories and that this precisely is the recipe for long-term financial success.

The Slovenian market of two million people is not exactly awash with potential buyers of picture books, but many titles are still being reprinted after more than sixty years. A few remarkable ones exceed circulations of 150,000 and more, which, considering the size of the market, is undoubtedly a publishing phenomenon.

It is not unusual for adult readers to also buy children's books for themselves, simply because they are fine works of art. Often these are adults who were exposed to reading exceptional picture books in their childhood. Those of us professionally involved in publishing and the phenomenon of children's literature know how powerful a good book can be during a child's upbringing. As parents, children who were exposed to quality books in their childhood will buy their children not just new books, but also books that had left their mark on their own childhood. This principle is also evident when these parents become grandparents, reinforcing from generation to generation the awareness that really good children's books are a treasure worth cultivating.

What is decisive, however, is the awareness by buyers and readers that this is an important field of culture of a broader quality and significance. A field that has a positive effect on Slovenian self-confidence, enhancing the awareness that Slovenia is also home to top-quality creativity. That we participate confidently on the international literary scene and do not feel like a miniature cultural colony, where original Slovenian books would drown in a globalised *no name* flood.

The above could all be described as favourable conditions for the development of Slovenian illustration, but without strong personalities, excellent artists, creators, editors, this success would not have been possible. Without the energy, ambition, talent and perseverance of individuals, without mutual encouragement and inspiration, we would not be more than merely a small market. Instead, we are witnessing the successful sale of copyrights to other languages around the world.

We could say that people in Slovenia are spoiled by the quality of illustrated books, and we can be proud of it.

Pavle Učakar, former art editor at Mladinska Knjiga Publishing House

### **Is There Still Magic in the World?**

Are we even still looking for it? In the hectic individualism of everyday life, geared towards productivity and projects, it seems that magic is just another means of selling dreams to the gullible. A promise that seduces us and makes us postpone facing the truth.

It is as if the rite of passage into adulthood requires us to accept the world as it is, with all its injustices, illnesses, and the inevitability of climate change. Socrates' wisdom "know thyself" is increasingly turned into a demand to recognise individual identities, which once again leads us to put on blinkers so as not to worry too much about the bigger picture of the world. Concern for the community gives way to the right to develop and self-realise one's own personality, and individualism further facilitates the disintegration of the social fabric. Being together no longer represents a safety net for anyone – success apparently lies in self-discipline.

Artificial intelligence that guides and fulfills our desires has spread to our discipline and motivation. The algorithm surpasses the human capacity to remember. It plays with a universe of contents that we have carelessly added to the treasure trove of human existence, and it delivers shocking results. Soon there will be no reason to be motivated to do work that algorithms copy, reproduce, and combine better than we can.

### **Is the world we invent for children any different?**

Is it magical? Is the Little Match Girl, as depicted in the modern world by the self-assured brushstrokes of illustrator Polona Lovšin, a happy child? The only moments of happiness she seems to experience are under the influence of her own hypothermic delusions, while the world remains just as relentless... Alenka Sottler's incredibly innovative illustrations based on the lesser-known original version of Bambi are also a cruel reflection of a world in which the weaker, unequal members are prey. However, the story also presents hope, flirts with the self-organization among the endangered, offering the self-isolation of the weaker both from others and from their own kind as a last resort – isolation from all those who are gullible.

The fairy-tale world of Slovenian illustrators features a multitude of different experiences. The lively written word for children and young adults inspires a wealth of visually diverse, poetic styles that far exceed the expected narrative. The wonderful animal worlds of the globally renowned Lila Prap and the surgically precise Maša P. Žmitek bear witness to the astonishing qualities of mankind's predecessors and companions from other species.

In Anja Štefan's *Rabbit's House*, Hana Stupica's richly detailed drawing transforms into an abundance of animal heroes whose cooperation and cleverness assert their rights over those who are physically stronger. Gaja Kos' *Night Visit*, illustrated by Ana Zavavlav, an author who possesses an incredible range of styles, also contains no traces of helpless princesses. It prefers to celebrate the friendship between sloths and tapirs, who spontaneously and effortlessly maintain their own ways of existence while admiring their friends'.

Such a world is also possible.

The unusual perspectives of Peter Škerl in Peter Svetina's book *Bread Town* are even more surprising. A young future architect makes bridges and castles out of dough and moves in among them, the harbingers of his future architectural ventures. With the help of Huiqin Wang's lyrical watercolours, Milan Dekleva's *Little Alma on a Great Journey* only gets a true image of herself when the great endeavour of her life, a trip around

the world, is already behind her. Two inspiring figures from Slovenia's recent history, Jože Plečnik and Alma Karlin, have been brought to life for future generations through superb artistic expression.

An illustrator's son inspired the silent book *The Story of an Anchor*. With his confident stroke, artist Damijan Štepančič intertwines a ship anchor monument in the heart of Ljubljana, which piques the curiosity of local children, with the magical world of imagination, blurring the line between the two. It is just as likely for a girl to find a companion in the Moon, as presented in Andreja Peklar's stylised collages depicting their shared adventures, either while playing hide-and-seek or while travelling by boat. The same heavenly body also occupies the childhood imagination of Svit and Erik, the boys on a mission to find out what it is made of through Igor Šinkovec's tonally rich mixed technique in the book by Boštjan Gorenc. Cheese or white chocolate? You will have to taste it to find out.

Among the twelve highlighted illustrated stories, a truly happy ending is offered by the picture book by Maja Kastelic, a wonderful visual storyteller. In the tale *Adam and His Tuba* by Žiga X Gombač, she depicts Adam, a boy who prefers to play an instrument that is unfamiliar in his environment, which sets him apart from others. But in the inclusive community, they find the right place for them too.

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The colourful world of illustration encourages a child's innate curiosity and teaches them a positive attitude towards the diversity of the world, where we can always find a pattern within the randomness and discover a common language.

The literary heroes in the exhibition can step from their own story into the next one, into a different aesthetic and moral whole, into an as-yet-unknown series of adventures. New connections can also be found in the exhibition catalogue, where a part of the story resides on each page, and their sequence can be changed as desired. The format and aim of the catalogue do not allow us to see the entireties from which the illustrations are taken, but we can build this whole ourselves. A new, improvised, but no less convincing story emerges from the variety of original styles.

If we take this game seriously, if we follow the visions of the readers, listeners, and viewers of the illustrated worlds and do not wait for the future narrative to unfold in front of us, we can also learn to answer the question of what happens next. Alone and together – through intuition, imagination, and cooperation – we can find a suitable answer and steer our common story in the desired direction.

Samira Kentrić,  
illustrator and author

**For additional information:**

Petra Bališ, PR and Marketing Manager, Slovenia – Guest of Honour at Bologna Book Fair 2024

[petra@balis.si](mailto:petra@balis.si)

00386 41 779 653