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A TRUE STORY OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF STORIES BY BILJANA STANKOVSKA

(Or, about the quest for the wonders of reality)

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Abstract. This book, which was written exactly a decade ago, is read in one breath, and the pages in front of us easily change as we meet Lea and her immediate and extended family, with imaginary and real friends. However, long after the end of the last page, we are left with an undefined feeling of powerlessness, but also of a newly discovered force, contradictory feelings of what we have missed in the growth of our own children, but also what is within our reach, so tomorrow we can do it. To break away from the whirlpool of pulsating events and stop to find space to build and grow our own land of stories. The writer and poetess for children and adults, Biljana Stankovska, managed to convey all this to us in only a hundred pages.

Key words: storybook, fiction, Biljana Stankovska

Introduction

For this work, Biljana Stankovska received the prestigious award of the Writers' Association of Macedonia "Vanco Nikoleski", in 2012. As for the book, the author says that she tried to write a story about the daily life of a child, "but at the same time to cover a whole scale of events in which the real is so miraculous that it is close to the magical, and the fantasy is so ordinary that it is no different from the unusual "reality," Stankovska told Radio Free Europe. She adds that she wanted to weave the modern life of a child, because for him the computer is a tool that can reveal all the secrets of the world. Biljana Stankovska¹ is a great

¹ Biljana Stankovska was born on January 20 1951 in the village of Dubrovnica, Kriva Palanka region. She is an established poet, novelist, storyteller. Awarded both as an author for children and author for adults. Stankovska is a talented and dedicated writer, who has published twenty books so far, many of which have experienced success, numerous readings, but also awards. She graduated from the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. She works in the library "Tane Georgievski" in Kumanovo. She has dedicated her whole life to books and spends it among books. She has been a member of the Writers' Association of Macedonia since 1994. Stankovska is an honest storyteller, she says that it is her guide in creating new works: "Writing for children requires truth, a great commitment, patience and honesty. "We cannot play games, our readers will not forgive us if we lose their attention for a moment." She is the author of the books: "Who steals dreams" (novel for children), 2016; "When the winds subside" (novel), 2015; "Now everything is different" (collection of short stories), 2014; "A True Story of the Disappearance of Stories" (children's novel), 2011; Restoration of Light (poetry), 2009; "Imagine a wish" (novel), 2008; "Honey and the Stars" (drama trilogy), 2006; "Summer as Significant as Sunrise" (children's novel), 2002; Conversational Winds (novel), 2001; "Stories and stories for generations" (poetry for children),

connoisseur of the children's world, a writer who easily ignites the children's imagination. She literally grabs you by the hand on the first page and you run into the adventure and hover between the real and the imaginary until you complete the whole journey. This book got its sequel a few years ago in the novel "Who Steals Dreams". And about this book the author says "it is inspired by the dynamics of modern life, when computers and all electronics suppress our imagination and desire for creative expression." This book is also recognized and awarded. Namely, "Who steals dreams" received the traditional award "Struga Sunrise", which is awarded for a book for children and youth by a Macedonian author.

With the novel "A true story of the disappearance of stories" Stankovska is also represented in the reading editions for primary education, more precisely this book is an elective reading in the fourth grade. Her poetry and short stories are present in the anthology of Macedonian literature. It has been translated into Serbian, Bulgarian, English, Ukrainian and Chinese.

About the novel "A true story of the disappearance of stories"

The novel "A True Story of the Disappearance of Stories" consists of eleven stories through which Lea leads us, the little girl with an incredible fantasy, but also her parents, grandmother, cousins, as well as the whole atmosphere that constantly flows from ordinary/realistic to magical/ wonderful. This work of Stankovska is a typical example of what we pointed out at the beginning of this study, of the continuous interweaving / mixing of genres, or in other words, constantly walking along the thin line of the miraculous/realistic and the fantastic.

Stankovska undertakes this interference of genres in order to present the idea of the toll that modern living takes with its daily, banal obligations. The author especially focused on the topic of loneliness of children who often feel lonely or neglected by parents who, running after seemingly "important" responsibilities, forget about the children's need for mystification of everyday life. The older generations, grandparents are a substitute that gives this enjoyment to children.

The author begins to realize her idea through an initial presentation of the realistic framework for Lea's family living in Paris, France (this is not specified, but is hinted at with some scattered clues throughout the text). Through that realistic frame, in a direct way, through the characters, the author enables the penetration of the miracle in the work. From the very beginning of the novel, in the first story, by the main heroine Lea, the theme of the origin of the stories and their creation begins. Through father's narration (archaeologist by vocation, but with a huge potential for inventing/telling stories), we get acquainted with the Land of stories, which realizes the procedure "story by story": "Far, far south, between the seas and mountains is the Land of Tales. An unusual name for a country, right? But why would it be more unusual on behalf of another country ... Let's say ... Great Britain or South Africa. Long, long ago the Land of Tales was called the Land of Roads. And, so it was. "It was a crossroads of many roads that were of great importance to the inhabitants of the Land of the Mountains and the Land of the Seas." (Станковска, 2011:7). But at the same time, we are introduced to a universal truth: we can all be heroes of stories and everyone's life is a new different story. Thus, the mother and father from archaeologists become - prince and princess, adventurers, then ordinary mother and father, but also skilled storytellers. The father says of himself: "I can make a story out of this conversation. I can make a story out of your drawing ... I can retell your birthday in a story" (Станковска, 2011: 5).

In fact, in Lea's family, "dreaming awake" is quite common and almost an inevitable part in everyday life. After all, in Lea's family everyone is a storyteller. Not only her parents,

1999; *The Light Road* (poetry), 1996; *A Moment of Recreation* (poetry), 1995; *Captive Dream* (short stories), 1993; *"Light Sky"* (poetry for children), 1990; *"Limited Space"* (poetry), 1983.

but also her grandmother. They are so gifted that they can make a really interesting story out of everything. They enjoy storytelling as much as listening to stories. For them, the silk scarf with the colors of the rainbow is enough for them to feel miraculous: "Wow! As if we passed under a hurricane! "Miracles will happen to us now!" (Станковска, 2011: 11). Lea's lush fantasy is emphasized at the very beginning of the work when it seems to her that her drawings come to life and with the astonishment that appears in the character who, for the first time, realizes the penetration of the fantastic in the text. With that, the author indicates that the character of the heroine Lea is "hesitant": "Lea was startled. Poor coward, she thought, waving his hand over his face as if to disperse boring flies." (Станковска, 2011: 6).

Stankovska's book has an unusual title – "A true story of the disappearance of stories", which is not accidental at all. The story revolves around the disappearance of stories that parents have less and less time to tell their children. But that is why grandparents are here. In this novel, only Lea's grandmother is present; she is not named; she is simply "grandmother". While Lea lives in France with her family, her grandmother, together with the rest of the family (on her mother's side) lives in Macedonia, which is also not explicitly stated, but can be sensed from the information provided by the author. The country they originate from, but also from which life took them far away, Lea's father names as the Land of Tales. As early as in the second story we are given Lea's genealogy, about the aunt, uncle, cousins, beloved uncle, and especially about the grandmother, and with all of them Lea communicates through modern technology - computers / internet: "At the moment on the computer screen, Lea watched her aunt, grandmother, uncle, as if she was at home, Aquila if she was not in the yard and of course, her cousins - Matej and Luka" (Станковска, 2011: 14).

The action in the novel takes place in two locations: the first is in France, when relatives from Macedonia come to visit Lea's family, during the winter holidays, and during the second visit, during the summer holidays, Lea comes with her family to her cousins in Macedonia. Here the author suggests that times are changing. Adults have less and less time for themselves and their loved ones. They only do serious things and rarely laugh. They forget the small, ordinary things that bring pleasure and happiness, such as telling stories. Fortunately, there are people in this book who keep the stories. We find out how irresistible the grandmother's story is from Lea's friend Sara, who is enchanted by the grandmother's stories. One evening when she comes with her parents to visit Lea, she stays with the children and the grandmother at home, while the parents go to the theater. There she experiences an unusual evening of countless stories told by her dear grandmother. Sarah herself has grandmothers, but they have too many responsibilities and do not have time for stories. Numerous scientific studies indicate the positive presence of grandparents/elders and their role in the family. The question of the performance of the elderly in children's literature is addressed by one of the most famous theorists of this literature, Peter K. Smith, who in his study explains that little has been written so far about this relationship (Smith, 2005: 684-687). Although grandmothers in the 1950s and 1960's were even more authoritarian than mothers, today that attitude has changed and grandparents are more likely to play the role of helping children than disciplining them. And Smith agrees that sometimes in children's literature, the elderly are portrayed stereotypically, in the sense that sometimes grandmothers with their white hair and neglected appearance look like great-grandmothers, but fortunately that is starting to change.

Lea, like a real little dreamer, has some "supernatural" abilities, more precisely, she believes that she knows the "dumb language" or the language of animals. This can be seen in the second story when the two geographically distant families talk through the computer camera and Lea discovers that she understands the dog's speech, more precisely the dialogue between the dog Aquila and the pigeon Cvrki: "He seemed to say to her, "Little, stupid bird that was going to go south." The bird ducked on his shoulders, chirping angrily: "I'm not a stupid bird! You are an old, old and senile dog ... I'm a dove. A dove-b-b-b! Pigeons do not fly south!" (Станковска, 2011: 15). Then Lea thinks she can talk to them and that they, like some

of her rubber toys, are capable of impossible things. These experiences are not unique to Lea. Her cousins, Matej and Luka, are also a part of those.

During a visit to the country where Lea lives, most likely Paris in France, Luka meets an unusual lady with a big hat that was seen by their aunt and uncle, Lea's parents. She gives him a handful of magic sand, which he carries with him. But, because he was in his pants, and when they returned his mother washed them, Luka is disappointed and tells Matej about his sorrow. However, there are three magic beads that will continue the magic and ignite the children's imagination. Other unusual events follow in the book, about which, although not all family members witness them, they all seem to know and it seems as if everyone is keeping some big secret. The unreal, longing ambience is complemented by the indefinite name of the places: Land of the Oceans, Land of the Seas, Land of Tales, Mount St. John's, City of Light, City of Wrath. All places have descriptive names, their greatest features are said, and we as readers sense what they are about. All the unusual events witnessed by the children, testify to the existence of fiction in this work, which is very skillfully intertwined with fairy tales / miraculous events / elements, such as: knowledge of the language of animals and birds (silent language - folk fiction), the revival of the rubber lizard Gugi (Kolodiev fiction) with the help of the magic / magic sand (fairy-tale element), which is given to them by the unusual lady (and appropriate magic words are pronounced - "A-son-in-law"); which appears in the most unusual places, as well as its toy store disappearing and appearing (a fairy-tale element); Luka's dream in which under the influence of daily events, his toys come to life (oneiric fiction): "He dreamed of returning home and putting a grain of sand on all the objects in his room and they came to life ... So, everything in the room jumped, knocked, screamed, whispered, swayed, trembled ... (...) He was cheerful, he waved at the toys ... But until the moment when he noticed that they were growing, and growing, and making more and more noise. They started pushing off the shelf and falling: "And when the shelf started to roll over and break, only then did he realize the danger and what he could do but scream." (Станковска, 2011: 39). The life-giving of toys, as a motive, is known in children's literature. But in this case, the fantastic is built with the technique of nonsense magnification of the observed phenomenon, or in the words of Milan Crnković, "the unreal is in the exaggeration and in the anthropomorphic display of birds and objects." (Crnković, 1987: 90). It is interesting that in the case of Luka's dream, after its completion, the dreamer is completely aware that everything that happens is in the realm of the dream, more precisely in the realm of oneiric fiction.

Another fact that should be mentioned when interpreting this novel for children and youth by Biljana Stankovska is that while in the first part of the novel more attention is paid to the explanation of the fantastic-miraculous events and how they are intertwined with the reality in which children exist, in the second part of the book, the author turns to what really "threatens" the existence of miracles in reality - the disappearance of stories from everyday life, from the lives of children. It is caused by the grandmother moving away from home and the novelties in her social life, something that is not common for our environment, in which there are many prejudices in terms of appearance, activities and social life of the elderly. Beland and Mills also affirm the view that children's literature can influence cultural norms and attitudes that apply to the elderly. In the past, the elderly were seen as possessing knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual peace. Contrary to popular belief, older people, such as white-haired people who sit in rocking chairs, bake cakes, play ball with their grandchildren, or take part in some simple activities, do not make any major decisions, Beland and Mills point out that older people (grandparents) do not necessarily have to be very old and that their chronological age should not be a measure. They simply describe becoming a grandparent as a life transition caused by the arrival of another family member (Beland, Mills, 2001).

Talking about the activities of grandparents, one can make a distinction between the activities of grandparents and their social life. Namely, most of the authors who have written on this topic agree that most often in children's literature there is a stereotypical image of grandparents, as retirees who spend their days at home, dressed in comfortable, homely clothes, sometimes a little neglected, forgotten, but pleasant and full of understanding and

wise advice for the younger ones. They have joint activities with their grandchildren regardless of their age, and they always have positive emotions for their grandchildren. They are sometimes shown as passive or incompetent, but those examples are fewer (Barnum, 1977: 29).

Lea, Luka and Matej's grandmother are also seen in the novel primarily in a homely atmosphere, with activities related to caring for grandchildren, or in the kitchen where she prepares delicious meals or traditional specialties, especially during holidays. At the persuasion of her daughter, the grandmother decides to fill her free time with other activities: "In fact, everyone has long advised their grandmother "to join a club where her time will be fuller", but at that moment: "The rhythm of life in the house has changed" (Станковска, 2011: 49). This question, i.e., how much social life grandparents have, is also given great attention in science. Namely, Barnum's research shows that in most cases (books for children and young people) grandparents have divided roles. Grandmothers can often be found in the kitchen cooking, maintaining the house, and grandfathers usually work outside. The fact is that they rarely engage in activities outside the home: politics, clubs, concerts, or lectures. They are most often shown at home or visiting grandchildren, in a park or shop, and are rarely shown at work.

But soon, changes begin to be noticed everywhere, which slowly but surely enter everyday life. Although the grandchildren at first welcome the newly acquired freedom acquired with the greater absence of the grandmother, they soon notice that their home has lost its warmth, that everywhere it seems that everyone is starting to lack time for activities related to their loved ones, children, which also leads to the loss of family values. Everyone started turning to computers "the most powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing, most talkative machine in the world - the computer of the century" (Станковска, 2011: 52). The author here gives us a slightly exaggerated, but not so untrue picture of people obsessed with computers and the entertainment they offer, instead of direct human communication: "Their grandmother smiled and asked the guest if anyone was telling her stories. She said that she was little because she could not read, and that now no one tells stories, everyone either watches them on the computer or reads them to themselves" (Станковска, 2011: 41).

Speaking about the role of the elderly as educators, Muhammed Yusuf emphasized their role as educators for the physical health, but also for the cultural and mental health of grandchildren. (Yusuf, 2014:337-342). Namely, through the communication with the children that they realize and through the telling of stories, on the one hand they can help children in learning, and on the other hand they can introduce them to their ancestors, culture and religion. Caring for children by the elderly can mean a great benefit for families, in terms of greater financial stability and physical and emotional health, both for children and the elderly (Choi, Sprang, Eslinger, 2016). Ben-Nun points out other positive benefits for seniors from the relationship with grandchildren, such as the positive impact on their psychological health. Caring for children makes older people happier and they enjoy life more than ever. In this way, their mental health is maintained, especially as a way to overcome loneliness and depression (Ben-Nun, 2018). Well, Lea's grandmother will also appear as a savior of the stories when she notices that she is slowly starting to lose them, or rather to forget the stories. This frightens her a little because she does not know the reason for their disappearance. However, this bothers her quite briefly, as she concludes that "meaningless questions have no answer" (Станковска, 2011: 73). The grandmother is a woman devoted to the family, who raises her grandchildren with stories, who can make a story from anything and constantly makes up new ones. She has incredible patience for storytelling, her favorite part of the day is exactly falling asleep with her grandchildren with stories, because then all the fatigue goes away and only the love for children and imagination remains.

Ben-Nun emphasizes the role, especially of grandmothers, in educating and teaching grandchildren through reading or storytelling (Ben-Nun, 2018), and Beland and Mills devote an entire chapter to storytelling. In addition, they point out that this segment is of great importance for strengthening intergenerational family relations. We all have fond childhood

memories of being told stories by grandparents or reading them from a book. Storytelling or reading can greatly affect the lives of grandchildren. Their analysis emphasizes the importance of reading/telling stories, because by personalizing them, through them, the grandparents express their own lessons and experiences that in this way they pass on to the younger generations (Beland and Mills, 2001).

Together with their grandchildren, by solving riddles, but also by taking a trip to the library, they receive instructions from the wonderful lady with an unusual hat on how to save the stories. And the answer is in the books. And again, children should return to what is basic, which is the wisdom in books from which both the text and the illustrations began to fade, until they finally disappear. The adventures continue in the tenth story when with the help of the magic grains of sand (instrumentally miraculous!). From the real space behind the house, the children and the dog travel to the Land of Disappearance when they all witness a meeting with many fairy-tale characters in a fantastic setting of disbelief whose counterparts can easily be found in cartoons or in popular world literature for children and young people, such as: the fox lord, the old man who cannot sleep - the Seventy Zut (resemblance to the wizard of Oz from the Emerald City), his faithful companion and guardian, the serpent - Mrs. Bau (with her malice, but also wisdom, is an archetypal model / relic of folklore). There, in this wonderful land, children are given new puzzles to solve, but they also find out the exact location of Peter Pan, a long-ordered doll of Lea's mother that never reached her. There, in the wonderful Land of Tales, it is not at all strange that they understand the speech of the fox, the snake, their dog Aquila, the dove ... The last story tells us that Peter Pan finally finds his owners - Lea's parents, which symbolically marks the beginning of a new era, a time when old storybooks are being restored, renewed, and books in libraries have a new mission: they must find their way to children, to readers, so that stories do not disappear. Librarians will help in that, but also all those who will diligently browse the books, and then tell stories, will talk about the stories. Because the salvation of stories is not only in their mechanical memorization in a computer or dictaphone, but also in their constant interpretation. That is the great message of this interesting novel, with a primary realistic framework in which the fairy-tale-folklore elements penetrate.

Stories as well as memories are preserved if we tell them, if we remember them. There are whole worlds in the stories, and the intimate worlds of the people will be much brighter and richer if the stories live in them. The conclusion in this book is visible on the first page: there is a story in everything. Furthermore, the author only confirms why it is worth reading and creating stories, telling and writing. Because that is how we create our personal stories - memories, and in our stories we can be heroes. To win, to be loved and happy. And not only that - by preserving the stories we preserve and confirm our national identity.

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