



Marcin Szczygielski

*Polish Author Candidate for the
2020 Hans Christian Andersen Award*



Marcin Szczygielski (born 1972), is a Polish writer and graphic designer. Szczygielski is an author of theatrical plays, as well as of novels for adults and young people. Since December 2012 he has been a member of Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich (Polish Writers Association). His debut was *PL-BOY* (published in 2003), a fictional, humorous account of the editorial department of the Polish Playboy magazine that Szczygielski used to be the art director of. The novels that followed – *Wiosna PL-BOYa* (2004), *Nasturcje i cwoki* (2005), *Farfole namietnosci* (2006), *Berek* (2007), *Bierki* (2010), *Sanato* (2014) and *Bingo* (2015) established him as one of the most-read authors of popular literature in Poland. Published in 2011 *Poczet Krolowych Polskich* was claimed to be the most mature and most ambitious novel of Szczygielski. This elaborate, multigenerational family saga that portrays the contemporary Polish history through the lives of women of 4 generations, was nominated for the *Srebrny Kalamarz* Literary Prize.

A separate part of Marcin Szczygielski's literary output are books aimed towards younger readers. Each of them has received numerous awards and recognition awards in Polish, Austrian and German literary contests, whereas novels *Czarny Młyn* (*The Black Mill*), *Za niebieskimi drzwiami* (*Behind the Blue Door*), *Arka Czasu* (*Rafe and the Ark of Time*) and *Czarownica piętro niżej* (*The Witch Downstairs*) have been incorporated into the extracurricular reading list in Polish elementary schools.

Szczygielski's theatrical plays have been staged in the public and commercial theatres in Poland, Great Britain and Czech Republic.

MARCIN SZCZYGIELSKI: statement / overview

Joanna Żygowska

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

Although Marcin Szczygielski's debut was not in children's literature, his books for young people placed him among the most interesting fiction writers in Poland.

He received over twenty awards and distinctions in Poland and abroad. Four of his books were distinguished in The Book of the Year Contest organized by Polish Section of IBBY. In 2012, *Behind the Blue Door* was included in the IBBY Honour List. The author was also awarded first prize in the last three (out of four) editions of Astrid Lindgren's competition organized by ABC XXI All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation.

Szczygielski says that his imagination is heavily influenced by the classics of European children's literature, especially British fantasy fiction and the works of Lewis Carroll. Magic, supernatural events and characters are at the crux of the secondary worlds in his novels, starting with the first one, *Omega* (2009). Szczygielski's literary worlds are usually constructed around intensely experienced events. Whether historical (*Rafe and the Ark of Time* 2013, *The Theatre of Invisible Children* 2016) or contemporary (*Omega*), fantastic (series about Maya 2013-2016, *The Black Mill* 2010) or realistic (*Behind the Blue Door* 2010), they affect the outside world and the protagonists' perception of reality. They are connected with danger, risk, change, anomaly. They bring about transformations, after which the world can never be the same as before. However, the author is not a catastrophist. His protagonists are never passive, they bravely face the challenge.

Szczygielski draws his child characters' emotional and mental portraits with profound sensibility and accuracy and always emphasizes their otherness. Rafe, from *Rafe and the Ark of Time*, and Michał from *The Theatre of Invisible Children* are more mature than their age. Łukasz, from *Behind the Blue Door*, experiences things that no adult can understand, while in a coma. Omega shuns the company of her peers and despises her mother's expectations of her, whilst living her life on the Internet. Maya is a witch. But the most representative example of a child perceiving the world in her own unique way is Mela from *The Black Mill*. Born with a severe disability which made her unable to move or talk, she requires constant care. Mute and invisible, she's the only one that can communicate with the energy of the Black Mill and thereby save the world.

All child protagonists in Szczygielski's novels recognize the imperfections of the adult world. Omega is critical of and embarrassed by her mother who looks like an impersonation of a Barbie doll during the day, and at night, when nobody's looking, she becomes a miserable woman abandoned by her husband. Rafe reprimands a librarian not to call him "a little boy" and the books "little bookies". Maya pretends to believe in her parents' stories explaining where children come from in order to spare them embarrassment (*The Witch Downstairs*). Parents are often unavailable, either physically, mentally or emotionally. Parents' world and children's world hardly ever meet, they perceive the reality too differently. The only grown-ups actually able to communicate and thus understand child protagonists are usually very old. Childhood and senility are shown as very similar. Like in Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* both children and old people exist outside the normative, adult reality. That's why in Szczygielski's vision they usually perform as initiated and wise but in the same time extraordinary and odd: Maya's grauntie (granny and auntie) is an old witch who lives thanks to the magical flowers, and Omega's dead grandmother appears in the book as a zombie.

Szczygielski's secondary worlds are often closely linked to real locations, Warsaw in particular, and his works' unique quality stems from the way he describes them. Warsaw as a setting is especially important in *Rafe and the Ark of Time*, in which the reader is given a tour around "the District"—the Warsaw ghetto. In *Omega* there is an interesting mixture of different times and places. The author makes references to the bombardments of the city, the executions of the Jews during WWII, and the Warsaw Uprising. But he also features the city's contemporary landmarks like well-known squares and buildings, such as the Palace of Culture and Science. Similar mixture but of more comical nature appears in *The Curse of the Ninth Birthday*. Maya sets on a quest in search of a very special brick and has to look for clues of its whereabouts in the city, which this time is full of old tales and legends. Szczygielski's Warsaw is a city afflicted by war, destroyed and reconstructed, and therefore brimming with melancholy – but it's also magical, inhabited by legendary heroes, portrayed in a grotesque manner. This literary strategy brings to mind the works of China Miéville or Neil Gaiman and their fantastic visions of London.

Szczygielski has chosen fantasy fiction as his main field of creativity and explores it boldly. *Omega* – a postmodern novel of formation in which both cyberpunk spirit and Jungian archetypes can be traced, is followed by a horror like fairy tale, *Behind the Blue Door*. *The Black Mill* with its melancholy, terror and ecological message is accompanied by extremely funny detective series full of magical animals, plants and objects. Rafe's time journey taking him to the year 2013 and "back again" to the gloomy reality of Warsaw during

WWII appears both peculiar and delightful making *Rafe and the Ark of Time* one of the most original children's novels about Holocaust. But with the last book, published in 2016 Szczygielski leaves fantasy fiction to explore the time of his own childhood – complicated and gloomy moment of introduction of martial law in Poland.

The Theatre of Invisible Children begins with the story of Michał, a young boy who has lost his parents when he was a child. Here, the narration is slow-paced and focuses on giving a detailed description of life in an orphanage. In the second part, the story accelerates. Michał moves to a new institution, where he meets Sylwia who started her own theatre troupe and is working on a new performance. The premiere of the children's play is scheduled for 13 December 1981. This way, historical events very radically interfere with the children's plans and ruin their show. This story may be read as a double allegory—the young orphans, marginalized and rendered invisible, epitomize the Poles who had to live in the harsh times of the communist regime. But more generally they symbolize millions of people living today on the margins of the unfathomable reality they cannot relate to. In this light, Szczygielski becomes close to Korczak's philosophy of childhood and a child hero, who becomes an everyman hero – the most evocative symbol of humankind.

Interview with Marcin Szczygielski
(the interviewer, Tatiana Audycka-Szatrawska)
(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

Szczygielski's still writing.

If it wasn't for classical children's literature, Szczygielski wouldn't have become a writer. That's only partly true, because if it wasn't for his imagination, we wouldn't be able to evoke all the emotions that he incites in us with his stories. What is the question that he hears most frequently? "When is your next book coming out?"

I'm not sure if I like the feeling you get when you read good literature: the joy of unravelling the story, and the sadness of knowing that it will soon end. Should I read it in one sitting, or should I leave some for later? How do you make this moment last? Marcin Szczygielski, an acclaimed author of literature for young readers, answers this question.

- **When is your next book coming out? Will it be another book in the series about Maya's adventures?**

I'm about to go to my summerhouse near the sea, where most of my books were written. I want to try something new, write science fiction for older readers, who are at least fifteen. So, this time it won't be about Maya, although I plan to finish the fourth volume of the series about Grauntie and Mrs. Monter in the summer.

- **So, there's a big challenge ahead of you, as you usually write for a younger audience. Your protagonists are between nine to twelve years old. Like Maya from *The Witch Downstairs* and other books about her adventures, Omega, Rafe from *Rafe and the Ark of Time*, Łukasz from *Behind the Blue Door*, Michał from *The Theatre of Invisible Children*, and Iwo from *The Black Mill*.**

Perhaps it's because I understand the readers of this age the most? I know what I want to say about the protagonists who are at this age. I appreciate the moment when a child is old enough to suspect that the world is more than the house's walls, a playground, and a street. Also, it's the last moment before puberty sets in, when the hormones change your personality. When I was at that stage, I recognized new and baffling needs and desires arising in me. I felt frustration and sadness that they blocked my way to...the Moomin Valley. There's no sex in

Tove Jansson's books after all! I was convinced that puberty closes the gate into this magical world, and I'd never be a part of it again.

- **And you'll lose the magic?**

My faith in magic.

- **In *Omega* I read your letter to the reader, in which you write that you grew up reading Victorian novels. They shaped your sense of humor, literary taste, and sensibility.**

If it wasn't for these hundreds of books that my mother introduced to me, I probably would never have considered becoming a writer. As a kid I used to spend most of the time alone; my mom worked two shifts to support us. So, I would read all the time. When I think of my childhood, I see it as a wonderful, colorful time full of adventures. It's just that at least half of these beautiful memories are linked with the books that evoked these emotions in me. In a way, this was the time that shaped my personality. I was raised by the books.

- **When did you think about writing for the first time?**

In my childhood! I was motivated by the disappointment that I experienced when, half-way through a book, I'd start feeling a terrible sadness that it would end soon- and I might never find another book as good as this one. I didn't want to part with the story, the characters. I wanted more books like that, and if nobody writes them, then maybe I should do it? At our house, we might not have had enough money for ham or a color TV, but we had to have enough to buy books! I grew up convinced that a book is a sacred artefact that you cannot write on or cut. But back then I also thought that you have to be anointed to become a writer, that being a writer is the highest form of existence. So, I didn't take my dreams to become an author too seriously. Although when I was a kid, I made some attempts at writing. I wrote my first book when I was eight years old. It was twelve pages long and it was a story about samurais.

- **Did it survive till now?**

I gave it to my father who never throws things away, so it's probably somewhere in the house.

- **You had to come a long way to become a writer. Yet, you started with adult fiction.**

I never gave up my dream about writing, but at that time I was doing other things. I worked in an antique gallery, for TV, I designed interiors, magazines, and books. I worked as a graphic designer the longest, and then I felt that I achieved all I could achieve in this career path, so it was a good moment to try to write something...or give up on the dream. I wanted to start with a book for young readers because it seemed to be easier. It was 2001. I wrote two chapters and realized that I couldn't do it—I couldn't write for young readers if I wasn't even sure if I knew how. If the book turned out to be bad, it would do more harm than a bad book for adults. I know what I'm saying. When I was a child, I read several such books, without my mom's knowing about it, and I had to suffer for it. That's why my literary debut was in adult fiction.

- **And your debut novel became a bestseller! What about the idea for the children's book that you wanted to write? Did you use it?**

I used this idea over a decade later, in *The Witch Downstairs*, the first volume of Maya's adventures. This book was writing itself 40 years ago, when I was visiting my grandparents in Szczecin—I used to do that very holiday. My experiences of that time became an inspiration for the book. Grauntie is an idealized version of my grandmother, and Mrs. Monter lived downstairs, and she was bald too. There was Marek, who I used to hang out with, just like Maya, and just like in the book, each time that we met, there was a catastrophe. There was a garden in which I had a magical time. Fortunately, I have a good memory for emotions, atmosphere, details, and dialogues...It's my literary ammunition.

- **After *The Witch* came *The Butterfly Farm* and *The Curse of the Ninth Birthday*. You're planning to write two more.**

There need to be two more volumes in order to solve all the mysteries: Nina's and her lover's. The series about Maya is easier to write; I don't have to prepare so much before writing these stories, unlike with my other books. It's because Maya's world is within me. Do I know what

the next volumes will be about? Absolutely not! This story unveils itself, and I just follow it. That's why I don't know how it will end. Similarly, as I didn't know that Nina was hiding in the body of Foxie, the squirrel.

- **This series has a dual reader: a child and an adult. The latter one will enjoy discovering different intertextual references that you play with in your books. There are motifs from *The Secret Garden*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Romeo and Juliet*... have I missed anything?**

Terry Pratchett was my inspiration for creating the dangerous corner of the garden. This play of literary motifs is not accidental. There aren't many children, between the age of seven and eight who can read on their own. They need their parents' assistance. When I write children's books, I want them to be enjoyed by adults as well. When my mother was reading to me, as she would every day, I could tell when she was becoming engrossed in the story, and in turn, I also responded to it more strongly.

- **Is that why Sylwia from *The Theatre of Invisible Children* resembles Anne of Green Gables?**

Anne of Green Gables is equally important to me as the Moomin series. I read this novel when I was seven years old—it was the first book I read on my own. I picked it up haphazardly from my mother's bookshelf, and I couldn't have chosen better. I still remember it very clearly, and so it's possible that Sylwia has something in common with Anne. They are both orphans. Sylwia is an albino, Anne is a redhead. Their relationship with their parents is different, though. Anne misses them, while Sylwia is angry that they gave her away.

- ***The Theatre*... is different from other books you wrote so far. It's historical fiction. Even *The Ark of Time*, which is set in a Warsaw ghetto, has some fantastic elements.**

The Theatre was written for three reasons. The first was that I was accused of adding magical elements to all my stories for young readers. It's absurd, isn't it? When else should we believe in magic if not when we're eight or ten? Only then magic is equally real as death, love, goodness, and friendship...It makes childhood magical. The second reason was that I finally

wanted to write a story about the times of my childhood—the times of the Polish People's Republic, Solidarity, and martial law.

- **And the third reason?**

I was under the impression that there were very few books for young reads that talked about the times of Solidarity resistance movement in Poland. Nowadays, nine-year-olds mix up WW II, the Warsaw Uprising, and the martial law. For them it's remote history.

- **Many adults associate the martial law with that Sunday on which the TV station didn't air the *Teleranek* children's show.**

I also remember it this way. I was nine years old when the martial law was introduced. I spent a lot of time preparing to write this book. It turned out that there aren't many children's accounts recorded of that time. Thus, I was interviewing my friends and acquaintances who were children at that time as well. I used most of their memories in the book; for example, when Sylwia goes to Lublin, she puts a kitchen knife in her bag. It's based on my friend's story, who on the day when martial law was introduced, left the house with a knife in her bag, to save her grandmother living at the other end of the city.

- ***The Theatre* is set in an orphanage. It's a rather unusual setting for a children's book.**

There aren't many books for young readers that tackle this topic. This might be the reason why, when I was a child, I felt terrified at the thought of ending up in an orphanage. I was raised by my mother, who would often come home around midnight. When she was late, I was terribly afraid that something bad happened to her. This fear was very intense; I had nightmares. When I was working on *The Theatre*, I realized that the reality of an orphanage is a very apt metaphor of these times; that we, Polish people, were at that time like children from orphan homes—invisible and incapacitated.

- **The Theatre is divided into two parts: the first is set in “Young Forest” orphanage, and the second—in “Oak Forest” foster family home. It’s not accidental...**

The book’s structure reflects the 1970s. They were dull and arduous, but they brought order and the feeling of safety. Just like it is in “Young Forest.” When Solidarity enters the political scene, life gets faster and more colorful. This is when Michał moves to “Oak Forest,” and together with other children, he starts to create, make decisions for himself, and change the world. Then, the martial law is introduced...All those who dreamed of freedom become suppressed. Sylwia is one of the victims—she’s killed by a ZOMO militiaman, who’s also a boy she grew up with in an orphanage. Did he know what just happened? In these days very few people knew what they were doing and what they were involved in.

- ***The Ark of Time*, which talks about the Warsaw ghetto, also has a distinguishable historical setting.**

There were many things that inspired me to write this book. I just finished my novel for adults *Queens of Poland* that’s set before and during the war. When I was working on it, I met Stefania Godzieńska, who shared with me her memories of helping the children in the ghetto. She reminded me of Krystyna Żywulska’s book *Empty Water*, which is a shocking nonfiction book about Holocaust. This was when I felt that I had to write a children’s book about these times. To tell about the ghetto through the eyes of one person. This is when Rafe came to being.

- **Yet, the beginning of the books doesn’t make it clear that it’s set in a ghetto.**

It’s a deliberate trick. I wanted the readers to become engulfed in the story before they realize what they are actually reading. I didn’t want them to put this book away on the shelf.

- **Rafe escapes from the ghetto only to hide in a zoo. You were inspired by the story of Antonina Żabińska and her husband, who hid the Jews in the zoological garden.**

There are many references to real stories in *The Ark*. For example, the fact that Rafe got his hair bleached. Which could have ended tragically since his hair became unnaturally red and he could be easily spotted even from afar; plus, the bleach burned the skin on his head. However, the greatest challenge was to create a psychologically realistic and coherent child protagonist, who had to live in such degraded, terrible times. Before I started writing *The Ark*, I tried to find as much information about the accounts of Jewish children who survived Holocaust as I could. Instead of fishing for facts, I was focusing on the descriptions of the children's emotional reactions.

- **You send your protagonist into the journey in time. Weren't you afraid that this magical element will place the book in the fantasy section?**

I really wanted to have H.G.Wells's *The Time Machine* in it. In Wells's vision of humankind there are two races; the Morlocks have the power, so they can do as they please with the Eloi. A similar situation happened in the ghetto, which Rafe noticed and therefore started calling the Nazis the Morlocks. I also wanted this story to end with a journey in time. Rafe is transported to our times and survives. Here, magic introduces the element of a mystery. Although the ending stands in opposition to the historical truth, perhaps it will make the kids interested in history—not only in time traveling. Perhaps they will also want to know the truth about the Warsaw ghetto.

- ***The Ark of Time* was translated into German and Ukrainian. There's a film script based on it. Similar thing happened with *Behind the Blue Door*. *The Black Mill's* also waiting to be filmed. Both are horror stories.**

When I was writing *Behind the Blue Door*, I intended it to be an adventure story, but it ended up as a horror. As a kid I loved reading *Karolcia*. I also liked *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Five Children and It*, in which the protagonists traveled across parallel universes thanks to various amulets and artefacts. I remember how frustrated I was when I realized that I can't go on such adventures because I don't have a magical wardrobe at home. That's why in *Behind the Blue Door*, the key to a fantasy world is not a magical object, but knowledge. Łukasz must understand the system in order to be able to look behind the blue door. I was driving by the seaside, and suddenly I saw a group of children playing on a field that was separated from the highway with wire mesh. They were pulling a cart; somebody was sitting in it. In the

background, there were high voltage poles and the ruins of a former State Agricultural Farm. What were these kids doing there? How do they live in such a place that everybody forgot? And then I imagined a black windmill flying away, and I already had the whole story in my head.

- **One of the protagonist of *The Black Mill* is an autistic girl. Thanks to her, everything ends well.**

Mela is the one that tames the Black Mill which was devastating the village. She turns it into a means of transportation and sets off in search of her missing father. She's special; she thinks in an unconventional way and perceives space and time differently. Mela suffers from autism; she's different. But does it mean that our reality is better than hers?

- **In contrast to Mela, Omega is an ordinary girl. She doesn't have any magical skills. With *Omega* you decided to write for young readers again. That was your debut.**

My novels for adults were successful. I was happy about it, but I felt that people will soon label me as a writer of gay fiction, since I focused on the gay community in my most popular book. I didn't want to go down that path...So, *Omega* was my last resort. That was my last chance to try something else without giving up on writing. Omega was created as a counterpoise to Harry Potter. No magic! She's a regular girl who enters the computer world because she can't cope with her life. She has problems with expressing her emotions. She must learn how to express them, so she ends up in the middle of a computer game where she can practice her life skills. She must complete consecutive levels in order to confront her fears in regards to her home, her late grandmother, her missing father, religion, the system and the rules. It's only that she's not playing the game. She is the game.

- **When *Omega* came out, it was instantaneously showered with awards.**

When I finished writing *Omega*, I felt complete. But the book was published and...nothing. It was selling, but there wasn't much response from the readers or critics. Before that, every release of my books for adults was followed by reviews, but with *Omega* it wasn't happening. What was going on? Only when *The Black Mill* was awarded Grand Prix in Astrid Lindgren

literary competition, I appeared on the critics' radar. Later, *Omega* received four awards, including the title of The Book of the Year of Polish Section of IBBY. My other books also received numerous awards.

- **What does such a distinguished author do?**

Fortunately, awards do not put me to sleep; on the contrary, they encourage me even more. I know that I have to write all the time. My resolution is to complete two books a year. And the fact that my novels receive awards assures me that becoming a writer was a good choice.

MARCIN SZCZYGIELSKI: AWARDS AND HONORS
selection

Leo i Czerwony Automat (Leo and the Red Machine)

- Recognition Award in the Book of the Year Contest organized by the Polish section of IBBY, 2018.

Serce Neftydy (The Heart of Nephthys)

- Book of the Year Award in the Book of the Year Contest organized by the Polish section of IBBY, 2017.

Klątwa dziewiątych urodzin (The Curse of the Ninth Birthday)

- 1st Prize in the Literary Award of Warsaw 2017.
- Book of the Year Award in the Book of the Year Contest organized by the Polish section of IBBY, 2016.

Teatr Niewidzialnych Dzieci (The Theatre of Invisible Childre)

- Recognition Award in the Book of the Year Contest organized by the Polish section of IBBY, 2016.
- 1st Prize in the 4th Astrid Lindgren Literary Competition organized by ABC XXI All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation, category: novels for children aged 10-14, 2016.

Tuczarnia motyli (The Butterfly Farm)

- 1st Prize in Halina Skrobiszewska Children Literature Contest and incorporation into the Museum of Children's Books Treasure List, 2015.

Czarownica piętro niżej (The Witch Downstairs)

- Zielona Gąska (The Little Green Goose) 2013 Literary Prize awarded by Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński Foundation, 2014.

Arka Czasu (Rafe and the Ark of Time)

- Kinderbuchpreis 2015, Children Book of The Year in Austria, by Jury der Jungen Leser, 2015.
- 1st Prize in Halina Skrobiszewska Children Literature Contest and incorporation into the Museum of Children's Books Treasure List, 2014.

- Recognition award in the Book of the Year 2013 Literary Contest organized by the Polish section of IBBY, 2013.
- Grand Prix in the 3rd Astrid Lindgren Literary Competition organized by ABC XXI All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation, 2013.

Za niebieskimi drzwiami (Behind the Blue Door)

- Incorporation into the IBBY Honour List, 2012.
- 1st Prize awarded by the Professional Jury and Children's Jury recognition award in DONGA Literary Contest organized by the Polish Section of IBBY, 2011.
- 2nd Prize in Halina Skrobiszewska Children Literature Contest and incorporation into the Museum of Children's Books Treasure List, 2011.

Czarny Młyn (The Black Mill)

- Grand Prix in the Second Astrid Lindgren Literary Competition, organized by ABC XXI All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation, 2010.

Omega

- Book of the Year Award in the Book of the Year Contest organized by the Polish Section of IBBY, 2010;
- Recognition award in Halina Skrobiszewska Children Literature Contest and incorporation into the Museum of Children's Books Treasure List, 2010.
- Recognition award in the Most Beautiful Books of the Year Contest organized by the Polish Association of Book Publishers, 2009.

Marcin Szczygielski

Omega

Review by Hanna Diduszko

“Nowe Książki” 12/2009

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

“You’ve seen a lot, but you haven’t truly noticed anything”—this guiding observation was given to a twelve-year-old heroine, Joanna (aka Omega) by the official commentator of the Olympics of the Senses. The young novelist, working alongside an even younger illustrator, work together to create a cohesive and magical piece of work. The duo guides the reader through consecutive levels of a computer game play, by the exceptionally intelligent protagonist, Joanna. Or “Omega”, which she prefers to be called as it is her nickname on the Internet. As for many children in contemporary society, virtual reality is the cornerstone of her life. The greatest values of this novel stem from the author’s exploration of this phenomenon as a core theme. According to the book, the Internet is the place in which they gain real agency. As Omega claims, the Internet contains the truth without pretenses, since it’s the best place to exercise rational and logical thinking. The Internet reveals your true worth, even if you’re only twelve years old. It doesn’t force you to pretend that you’re someone else; like a sweet little girl being showered with Barbie dolls, whose image was created by her mother.

Joanna is pulled into a game that becomes terrifyingly real. Eventually, she turns into Omega and, as a player, is given several lives. The story, illustrated with rich images, has a powerful impact on its young readers because it speaks their language and talks about problems relevant to them, such as the longing for genuine emotions. The game that Omega is playing is cruel and hideous, as it reflects the protagonist’s perception of reality. Joanna doesn’t receive much attention or warmth in her home, and nobody tries to really get to know her. Efficiency is the only thing that matters for people around her, and as a result of being exposed to such a dreary reality, Joanna applies its rules in her life. That is, until she becomes Omega and rejects this system of values, as she realizes they stem from lies and illusions.

Szczygielski portrays his young protagonist convincingly. Similar to real children, she can put up with many circumstances, except when lies are told. In order to fight the falsity surrounding her, she uses logic, analysis, critical thinking, and her problem-solving skills. However, there's something missing...Omega doesn't know what it is, and there's no-one who can help her figure it out. She can only count on herself and a mysterious Child (whose gender is deliberately obscured), and who turns out to be a part of herself that she had rejected. Soon, Omega begins to realize that the world dominated solely by emotional coldness and rationality is wrong. In this respect, the author and the illustrator manage to create exceptionally evocative images to emphasize how repulsive this reality is. There are houses made of living flesh and an enormous pulsating heart; the imagery akin to that which can be found in traditional fairy tales, abundant in gory scenes, or in Victorian novels.

What makes Szczygielski's use of grotesque imagery unique is the fact that his secondary world, unlike the ones in fairy tales or Victorian novels, is overrun with modern technology. In the book, technology is the crucial factor that shapes people's identities and allows characters to defy natural laws. In Omega's world it's possible to scan the dead and store them in the computer's memory. Also, players can die and be restored to life to continue the game. Although such a pessimistic vision of the blurred lines that exist between the virtual world and reality may be seen as a critique of the way in which youth interact with technology. The author shies away from presenting technology as the source of evil. On the contrary, the book does not give easy answers but astonishes the reader with its complexity and unpredictability.

The protagonist's story is given an unexpected twist as well. Throughout the duration of the game, Omega becomes more mature and empathetic and in the end reunites with her mother and enters the real world. However, it turns out that, despite leaving the game world, she still has the ability to contact her grandmother, who assisted her in the game, through the Internet. Finally, in the Epilogue we learn that Omega "having read the exceptionally complicated blue link, gathers her courage and positions the mouse pointer over it," and responds to a call for help sent from the underworld. Thus, she triumphs over the indifference and fear, which is her greatest reward. Through Omega, the author shows that it's possible to find the truth—through rejection of falsity—but he does not say where to look for it.

Omega is exciting and engaging, just like a computer game that you can't stop playing. It's also clear that Szczygielski was inspired by film techniques, as his narration is

very cinematic. Although the novel's abundance of storylines might confuse the reader, it seems that the author's intention is not for the readers to understand everything that's happening in the story, but rather for them to participate in the adventures along with the characters. *Omega* offers a whole gamut of emotions: from anticipation and excitement to anxiety, shame, fear, and anger. There's drama, but with a pinch of comedy. The author aptly plays with language, for example by treating metaphors literally, which only adds to the overall grotesque and absurd humor in the story.

The book has many themes that the young readers may relate to. For instance, the educational theme introduced through the twin teachers, Ms. Dry and Ms. Wet, who represent the two faces of modern education: one that is overly rigid and formalized, and the other that focuses on students as individuals with their unique needs and potential. The symbolism behind these two characters becomes even clearer in the scene where Omega solves the problem of a liar's paradox in an unconventional way, which makes Ms. Dry angry and Ms. Wet happy. Another theme in the book is a bond shared across generations. It is represented by the bond that Omega develops with her late grandmother, who becomes a friendly zombie and helps her throughout the game. Moreover, the book's official dedication reads: "To our Grandmothers," which puts even stronger emphasis on the inter-generational theme.

The question arises: is *Omega* elitist, and if so, is it a bad thing? I don't think so. The author and the illustrator acknowledge readers coming from different backgrounds, but deliberately focus on and write for city children, who, like the protagonist, go to private schools and use laptops, scanners, pen drives, chargers, and other electronic gadgets. The setting of the novel resembles an urban location-based game which features Warsaw landmarks such as Bródno Cemetery, Constitution Square, and the Palace of Culture and Science. Despite its specific setting, *Omega* has a universal quality that will speak to readers of all ages and backgrounds; anyone who had to struggle with an uncertain situation alone, left to one's own devices, guided only by intuition will appreciate it. Even though Szczygielski does not give a ready recipe on how to deal with such situations, he offers his readers an amazing adventure and reassures that children, despite their young age, can be very perceptive, inquisitive, and relentless in their quest for the truth.

Marcin Szczygielski
Rafe and the Ark of Time
Review by Dorota Koman
“Nowe Książki” 12/2013
(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

“Life—the real Time Machine”

Those who read Marcin Szczygielski’s *Queens of Poland* closely, knew that they would have another opportunity to learn about the adventures of a Jewish boy with bleached hair. A boy who makes a brief appearance in the novel, as he’s being led out of the Warsaw ghetto by Stella, one of *Queens* secondary characters. In *Queens*, Szczygielski announces that in his next book he will tell the story of this boy, who is also described in Stefania Ney’s poem “David,” published in a collection *Ghetto’s Children* in 1946).

Thus, once again we accompany Stella, who leaves the ghetto holding a huge and ostentatious bouquet of blue hydrangeas, with Rafe at her side. This time, the scene of escape from the ghetto to save the boy is described through his own eyes. Rafe Mortys (formerly Rafe Grzywinski) introduces us to the District, his neighbors, and the story surrounding moving from Sienna to Chłodna Street. It’s the only world he knows. Even he’s surprised that he doesn’t seem to remember what his life was like before—as if he spent his whole life in the ghetto, fearing the Morlocks, as he call the Nazis after reading H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*.

Rafe and the Ark of Time is a book about memory (and forgetting), about things that happened THEN: Back THEN there was no war or this District... THEN people could take trips out of town... THEN is when my parents were still here, and we all lived together in Saska Kępa... This is only a story I have heard, as I cannot really remember that far back THEN” [captions in original]. THEN is also about the future: “I think about what I will end up doing in the future THEN – that I will become an inventor” says Rafe who prefers to think about the past than the future, although he tells us about the present and how he wants to escape it. Even if it involves Wells’s Time Machine (which he believes could change history).

It’s 1942, Rafe is a nine-year-old boy from the ghetto. He’s got a loving grandpa, who is a fiddler and a former philharmonic violinist, who’s now busking in the streets and bars in order to support himself and his grandson, whom he looks after as well as he can, making him soups “from nothing.” In order to save the boy, he sells his violin and arranges an escape plan

for him. Later in the story, Rafe returns to the ghetto for his grandpa, only to find his former home abandoned and empty. Which gives us another glimpse at the District after its destruction, the bestiality of the Nazis, and the indescribable fear of the Jews hiding in the ruins of the ghetto. *Rafe and the Ark of Time* is about love, commitment, friendship, and sacrifice.

When Rafe leaves the ghetto, he goes to Warsaw's zoological garden, where Emek and Lidka take care of him as he becomes sick. Emek, a raftsmen's son, is a bit older than Rafe. He's brilliantly portrayed as an honest but crafty fellow. Lidka, on the other hand, is Rafe's friend from when he lived on Chłodna Street; she's a brave girl from a fine home.

Characterisation "with swift thin lines" is one of Szczygielski's strengths. He's also very skillful at constructing storylines and producing evocative descriptions. Although the science fiction motifs seem to clash with the historically realistic narrative of *Rafe and the Ark*, they are the ingredient that makes the story unforgettable. For example, Rafe's journey in time to year 2013 and his perception of contemporary lifestyle of his peers, their clothes, behavior, and use of technology, brings in a new and interesting perspective. Readers won't be able to forget the scene in which a group of boys is kicking a loaf of bread. Still, Szczygielski is far from inserting moral judgements or didactic commentaries into Rafe's observations. It's enough for him to show the shock the starving hero experiences while looking at that scene...

Szczygielski artfully underpins solemn moments with a hint of comedy in his descriptions and dialogues. It's a difficult art—to find a balance between tragedy and comedy, which sometimes, in the context of overly dramatic scenes, becomes absurdity. Therefore, Szczygielski is able to tackle the themes that are difficult... sometimes even too difficult (or maybe too boring?) for young readers. For instance, the theme of identity. Rafe says, "This back THEN was... a time when it didn't matter where you came from." He also remembers that, "only my Grandma, his wife, was Jewish. And my Mum too, but... But me and Grandpa always put up a decorated tree at Christmas, and he then plays carols on his violin." It's easy to lose one's mind living in the world Rafe has to face, but fortunately, there are books. Does Rafe survive thanks to the Time Machine, or is it thanks to *The Time Machine*, his favorite book?

Rafe and the Ark of Time is also a beautiful story about the power of books. About a great value of reading. After all, the story starts with Rafe's trip to the library (during which we are introduced to the structure of the ghetto, with its different landmarks). Another telling fact is that Rafał calculates all the prices in relation to 5 zlotys—the library's monthly fee. By

the same token, the protagonist tries to understand the reality of war through parallels with his favorite science fiction book.

The author's sensibility and imagination, his historical knowledge, artful storytelling, and exceptional sensitivity to the rhythm of words place his novel among the best children's books about Holocaust to date.

Even though it may seem controversial that it's the second time that, among so many promising candidates, Marcin Szczygielski received Grand Prix in Astrid Lindgren's Literary Competition (the first one was awarded to his *The Black Mill*)—it should not be a surprise. *Rafe and the Ark of Time* has no equal. After all, it's a novel about the only Time Machine available to all of us—life.

Marcin Szczygielski

The Black Mill

Review by Jolanta Gajda-Zadworna

„Życie Warszawy” 24.03.2011

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

If battling windmills is anything like what was described by Marcin Szczygielski—if it can sweep you up in the whirlwind of adventure and drag you deep into the labyrinth of mystery — if, when you read the book, it gives you good energy instead of the feeling of pointlessness (like Don Quixote’s adventures), then I highly recommend it. Stand up and fight!

Szczygielski’s *The Black Mill* is a horror story with a positive message. It’s also a fantasy novel that artfully reflects everyday life. We are introduced to a typical group of kids: Justa, Matalka, Karol, Piotrek, and the main characters—eleven-year-old Iwo and his little sister Mela. They live in a village called the Mills. They are neighbors and good friends. The author depicts the complex relations they have with each other and their family. In the novel, adult characters are distinctive but also shown as weaker and more susceptible to evil influence than children.

The Black Mill artfully and gracefully expresses a positive message; it shows that tolerance can be a natural reaction. Iwo’s sister is not—as it seems to everyone else—disabled, but she has special abilities. Even if she needs special care. She needs to be carried and driven around in a cart, and talking with her involves unconventional ways of communication. But she has great gifts to offer in return. Mela’s otherness becomes the main theme of the novel. The author skillfully balances all the other themes as well with his great storytelling.

The setting of *The Black Mill* seems to be very dull. It’s a village located somewhere between Poznań and Warsaw, which was abandoned by the majority of its inhabitants. Next to it, there’s an old dead factory, fields soaked with toxic waste, and a busy highway. In this hostile environment, under the web of high voltage wires, there’s another important landmark — a burned windmill. It is unusual because it’s hexahedral. It was also built on an ancient foundation. Dead for ages, one day the Black Mill announces its revival with a torturous screeching. Its arms start moving and created a fatal whirlwind. In the mill’s vicinity, in its

sinister shadow, the village starts to change. This brings to mind a reversed version of Astrid Lindgren's *Noisy Village*, a twisted and deformed idyll. Szczygielski's characters, psychologically realistic and distinctive, are confronted with the secondary world that is unexpected, fantastic, and metamorphosed.

In this gradually escalating terrifying vision readers can find references to Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, but also to *The Magic Mill* by Alina and Jerzy Afanasjew (published by Dwie Siostry), as well as to aesthetics of anime and comics. The intertextual references are one of Szczygielski's strongest points, but the most important thing is the effect that his books have on his readers. Szczygielski's novels encourage a more positive, harmonious view of the world, which one can find among the chaos of the everyday by discovering stability rooted in one's values.

The *Black Mill*'s superb cover illustration was designed by Józef Wilkoń.

The novel received a Grand Prix and 1st prize in Astrid Lindgren Literary Competition, in the category of books for young readers, aged 10-14, organized by ABC XXI All of Poland Reads to Kids Foundation.

Marcin Szczygielski

The Curse of the Ninth Birthday

Review by Anna Ż.M. Wiśniewska-Grabarczyk

“Nowe Książki” 02/2017

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

“Fantastic discussion with literary canon.”

I’ve never looked for a needle in a haystack, but after reading *The Curse of the Ninth Birthday*, it seems to be childishly easy. You have to put away all other responsibilities, take at least a week off, and listen to the most absurd advice that people give you. It also helps to have the ability to turn back time, as Maya knows perfectly well.

Maya, the protagonist of the previous volumes in the series, *The Witch Downstairs* and *The Butterfly Farm*, will soon celebrate her ninth birthday. She could be preparing her birthday party if it wasn’t for the task that was given to her by two unexpected guests, Grauntie Pola and Lily Monter. They tell her about the curse of the ninth birthday that she’s subject to and about the antidote, which requires finding a special brick, which is somewhere in Warsaw old town, “the fourth to the left from the column, the seventh from the bottom.” This task seems to be impossible, but it’s only the first step in the quest for finding something, or rather someone, —the mysterious Nina (those who read the previous books in the series know that it’s yet another story about Maya’s attempt to solve the mystery of Nina’s disappearance).

The story accelerates from the very beginning, since Maya has only seven days to complete the quest (if you exclude all the time manipulations mentioned earlier). Similarly as in the previous two books, the narrative is dynamic, action fast, and the feeling of controlled chaos is intensified by vivid dialogues and the illustrations of Magda Wosik. Although the illustrations are not inextricably connected with the text, they perfectly resonate with the narrative. Most of them are very dynamic and crammed with people and objects, but it’s enough to zoom in to see that they don’t illustrate only one main plot but many smaller ones too. This change in optics is helpful in following the storyline. It feels nice to be carried away by lively narration and explore Warsaw. However, each of the characters that appear in the book, from the Golden Drake to Vistula Misery, tell their own version of their legend, and each of their stories may be seen as an introduction to another micro-journey.

Marcin Szczygielski has a knack for creating interesting fictional characters, thanks to his style of narration. His protagonists are unique and multidimensional. In regard to Maya's family, they are special not only due to their magical abilities to, for example, travel in a "self-slithering" rucksack, that "slid into the hallway like a fat but short earthworm."

Each member of the family is characterized by some eccentricities that they must live with, trying to function in so-called normal reality. Even if this normality becomes challenged by a catastrophic windstorm (the author seems to have a special predilection for anomalous weather conditions—his previous books feature rainstorms and blizzards). Despite events and characters which break away from the natural order of things, there are many aspects of Szczygielski's secondary world that reflect our world realistically. For instance, the fact that Maya's parents struggle to divide their time between work and their two daughters. Every character, even the ones possessing magical talents, is constructed in an image of an "ordinary" person, which accounts for the protagonists' three dimensionality and authenticity. Even secondary characters, like Eugenia Partridge, the lift operator swept away by a tornado, are unforgettable: "I've spent half of my life in the air. . . There's no reason to panic."). This is also true for human characters as well, as for the ones that enjoy a special ontological status. Szczygielski breathes life into the heroes of Warsaw legends, endowing them with new unorthodox features. Who would expect the dignified Mermaid of Warsaw to ask for... liposuction? Nobody was prepared for the Golden Duck either: "I'm the Golden Drake, not just any duck! You must be blind and brain dead not to see this!". Humor is the novel's *forte*, which is evident also in the descriptions of domestic scenes. Szczygielski writes that they would play Monopoly in the evening "but only until Mrs. Monter, who was losing from the very beginning, felt offended and locked herself in her bedroom."

Maya's house is the setting for many funny but also dramatic situations, from the attempt at destroying squirrel Foxie (Grauntie's eccentric pet) to a challenge between Maya's grounded father (who broke his leg) and her parachuting mother. Szczygielski's characters never viciously insult each other, however. Maya has a loving and supporting family, despite an occasional criticism on their part. For example, when Maya complains about not having anything to do, her mother says, "Intelligent people are never bored." Even Maya does not spare a biting remark to Mrs. Monter, who complains all the time, to which she says, "Just think how lucky you are to be a poor pensioner that can't afford anything."

The Curse of the Ninth Birthday is constructed like a detective novel in which the protagonists go on a series of microjourneys. Szczygielski has some practical guidelines not only for the seekers of bricks, but also for the travelers that want to learn how to pack light or

water (“You can put trillions of *candels* into a small, well isolated candelabrum”). He also asks fundamental philosophical questions, like how big is “Nothing” which is made from appearances.

It’s equally important to question the canonical versions of the legends featured in *The Curse*. If the Golden Drake assures that, “I’m me. I was born that way and I was supposed to be like that,” perhaps it’s best to meet midway between the traditional version of the tales and their numerous potential variations. We can understand true magic only when we realize “its power comes from the fact that it’s against logic.”

Marcin Szczygielski

The Curse of the Ninth Birthday

Review by Ewa Tenderenda-Ożóg

“Magazyn Literacki Książki” 12/2016

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

Szczygielski’s readers had to wait for two years for another volume of the adventures of Maya, the squirrel Foxi, Grauntie, and Mrs. Monter. The first volume of which (*The Witch Downstairs*) was published three years ago, and the second (*The Butterfly Farm*)—two years ago. Although it’s already the third book in the series, the author still surprises his readers with fresh ideas. He mixes reality with a pinch of legend, fantasy, suspense, and a spoonful of humor. The result is delicious!

The book is a fantastic read. Szczygielski delves into different regions, and it seems that only a young reader can catch up with this pace. The story revolves around a young heroine who’s under a curse. She has to find “the fourth to the left from the column, the seventh from the bottom” brick which after the war was transported from Szczecin to Warsaw in order to be used in reconstruction. If Maya doesn’t find the brick, on her ninth birthday she’ll forget all the supernatural things that she experienced and become an ordinary girl. Fortunately, Grauntie and Mrs. Monter come to her aid. Throughout their quest, they come across characters from Warsaw legends, like the Mermaid of Warsaw. Curiously enough, she doesn’t look anything like the popular image we know—she’s rather obese and wears a stained white T-shirt that reads “I love Warsaw.” What’s worse, she’s a hoarder and has a soft spot for snatching lunch boxes from the rural commuters to the capital city. She also can’t pronounce the letter “r.” There’s also Vistula Poverty that squeaks like a church mouse, emitting the aura of misery which discourages customers from visiting a certain luxurious shopping mall at the junction of Jerozolimska and Bracka Street. You can also read about enterprising Wars and Sawa as well as the Golden Drake ruling over Tamka Street. The author gives a new life to the legendary characters, with a more contemporary touch.

Szczygielski combines different ideas, architecture, and history with great virtuosity and uniqueness. I like this author for his effortless penmanship and great sense of humor. He knows how to amuse younger and older readers alike. *The Curse of the Ninth Birthday* offers crafty storyline, unforgettable characters, flowery language, and great illustrations by Magda

Wosik—all that published in a highly esthetic form, which is Bajka's signature mark. It's a real pleasure to read the book! The author announced that *The Curse of the Ninth Birthday* is the penultimate volume in the series. It's hard to believe. We're waiting in anticipation for another fantastic story.

Marcin Szczygielski

The Theatre of Invisible Children

Review by Ewa Gruda

The Museum of Children's Books reviews, 2016

(transl. Katarzyna Wasylak)

In 2016 Marcin Szczygielski's *The Theatre of Invisible Children* received first prize in the Astrid Lindgren literary competition, organized by the ABC XXI Foundation—All Poland Reads to Children. The book is among very few children's and YA novels set in the period preceding martial law in Poland which talks about the internal conflicts within the country.

On a surface level, *The Theatre of Invisible Children* is a realistic novel about an orphan protagonist, Michał, who, in an awkward, sometimes overly affected style (skillful stylization!), describes his stay in different orphanages: one that's run according to rigid rules of discipline, and the other that feels like home, with its closely-knit family-like community. However, Szczygielski's novel is much more complex than that, offering different layers of meaning to its readers. Those readers who are familiar with the historical reality of Poland in the early 1980s will find many references to the events from that period, and they can read Michał's adventures as a metaphor of Polish people's struggling to find themselves in a new communist reality—often paying a high price for it. One of the destructive consequences of communism in Poland was so called “inner emigration,” symbolized in the book by Michał's fantastic but also terrifying journey into interstellar space.

The introduction of the theatre and its magical atmosphere is another brilliant choice on the part of the author. In the book, the children, inspired by their new friend's talent for acting and playwrighting, prepare a play based on their own traumatic experiences in orphanages. It is 1981 at that time. The children often use words they heard from adults; for example, they title their play “Solidarity of the Invisibles, or Victory.” They plan the premiere for Sunday, December 13. That day is marked by many unexpected events, such as the arrest of the two orphanage housemistresses, the members of Solidarity trade union. The abandoned children try to comprehend the new reality around them, but they decide to perform anyway, oblivious to their show's political undertone. The performance takes place several days later, on one of Lublin's main squares. It incites a strong patriotic and liberationist sentiment in the

audience and turns into a silent and spontaneous manifestation. ZOMO special militia's intervention results in a tragedy.

Marcin Szczygielski proved again that he's not afraid of tackling challenging themes that may be difficult to confront by many adults. His novels do not cater to any specific age group of readers. Anyone can enjoy his book; anyone who retained a child's... or perhaps, more generally, human sensitivity.

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Za niebieskimi drzwiami (Behind the Blue Door)

Poland 2016

Director: Mariusz Palej

Producent: TFP Sp. z.o.o. Maciej Sowiński, Andrzej Papis

MARCIN SZCZYGIELSKI

5 titles submitted to the competition:

Arka czasu (Rafe and the Ark of Time)

Klątwa dziewiątych urodzin (The Curse of the Ninth Birthday)

Omega

Czarny Młyn (The Black Mill)

Teatr Niewidzialnych Dzieci (The Theatre of Invisible Children)