

MEXICAN ILLUSTRATION FOR CHILDREN'S PUBLICATIONS THE CASE OF EL ILUSTRADERO

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▲ Illustration from the book *O último conto* (The Last Story).

Not every drawing is for children, nor are all children's books illustrated. What makes a book suitable for children? Are there basic rules for illustrating for children?

Some authors reflect about their own poetics from the point of view of their creative activity, but above all it is critics, promoters, and specialists who decide today's canons for literature for children and young people. Many of them also decide what is pub-

lished and which titles are included in school curricula or end-of-year lists.

More than approaching this question by offering up some abstract recipe or what "should be," we should note that the expansion of the publishing market for children and young people means that many diverse proposals are made every day, and we can study each of their specificities, be surprised by their novelty, and also be bored with replications, copies, the hackneyed, and moralizing, empty discourses.

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▲ Poetry.

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What makes a book be a children's book? The topics, the images, the language used, the colors aimed at each age group, the readership? Seemingly this kind of analysis, which works just fine when applied to reading, kills the art of creation. It is by no means the same thing to take apart a watch to understand how it works and to follow the same rules to create a work of art. As they say, poetry is from heaven when you read it and from hell when you try to explain it. Because art does not have a single function, and there are no instruction manuals for mov-

ing people. The best art is universal, timeless. The best children's books are not only for children; they are for any reader.

The role of illustration in the world of children's books and of books in general has changed enormously in recent years. Illustration is a discourse that has always been at the service of text, subordinated and minor. But today it is undeniable that illustration is a discourse that increasingly asks less of the other discourses; that illustrators are complete artists—even though they always have been—, perhaps

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▲ *Don't Forget Me.*

today even more because the milieu recognizes them as such. For decades, people have created picture books without any text at all; in congresses and conferences, some illustrators are called “authors” without every one saying that they exclusively draw; adults consume illustrated books; and publishing houses put out picture books and graphic novels for the general public.

Mexico has a long tradition of illustration for children’s books, initially for textbooks, but also for books not used in schools. In the last two decades, illustration for children has taken on a very important role: we can say that, while not the only reason, the Children’s and Young Persons’ Book Fair, which this year is celebrating its thirty-seventh year, has been a determining factor in fostering this activity.

MY EXPERIENCE

Despite having studied Spanish-language literature, I had also painted from the time I was a child, and the

moment came when it was time to put my affinity for the graphic arts into practice. A girlfriend recommended I take an illustration diploma course called “Processes and Contexts,” still given today at the UNAM University House of the Book, coordinated by Guillermo de Gante and Enrique Torralba. I went with a portfolio full of paintings that weren’t illustrations and a resume that set me apart from my fellow students who had studied the arts or design. I will always be thankful to my first teachers for accepting me in a field that, starting out, was not mine, and which became my central passion, even today.

That year, Jorge Mendoza and Anabel Prado, two of my fellow students who had a studio called Triveroquio together with Mario Rosales, organized a stand at the Children and Young Persons’ book Fair (FILIU) at the National Center for the Arts. Since this quickly turned into a collective, a group, a guild, it needed a name, and we dubbed it El Ilustradero (The Illustration Place). Triveroquio invited Enrique Torralba and Cecilia Varela to the group. In my mind, I couldn’t belong because I wasn’t an illustrator. I was just start-

ing out. But in that milieu, I realized that we can all belong to illustration, in contrast with how people behave in literary circles. I offered them help on the editing side of things, and so Roxanna Erdman and I joined what would be the first organizing committee of El Ilustradero.

That first year there were 37 of us illustrators; we created a box of illustrated postcards, each of us contributing three images that would later be narrated by four writers—all women. We invited El Ilustradero members to take their personal products to the stand: dolls, T-shirts, fanzines, buttons, coloring books, reproductions. During the day, we held live drawing sessions. The professional illustrators sat at the stand and gave away their drawings to the children and visitors to the fair who asked for them.

The next year, we planned a publishing project to include unpublished illustrations. We made a book of predictions that we called *Destinario* (Recipient), which could tell your fortune through images and words. That year, the stand at the FILU was once again

accompanied by an exhibition, and we also went to the Guadalajara International Book Fair for the first time.

In 2009, our stand grew, as did the number of participants, who now came to more than 100 and were not limited to Mexico. We began to create networks that spread by way of book fairs and the Internet. That year, the director of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award offered us the chance to be part of the Mexican jury. The sphere of illustration was expanding rapidly internationally.

In 2010, as part of El Ilustradero, we decided to create our own prize for illustrators on this side of the world, because the viewpoint always seemed to be from Europe or the United States, from Japan or from Arab countries. But it wasn't clear what was going on in Latin America, and there was no vision from inside out, from our point of view.

The *Catálogo de ilustraciones de publicaciones infantiles y juveniles* (Catalogue of Illustrators for Children's and Young People's Publications) already ex-

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▲ *We, the Others.*

isted in Mexico, organized by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (today, the Ministry of Culture), as well as the “At the Edge of the Wind” Picture Book Prize, awarded by the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house. What we wanted to do was to generate an international tool for publishers and illustrators to put the Ibero-American identity on the map, enriching it over time, an idea that is united by the language and the culture, but can also be recognized in an image.

That is how the *Catálogo Iberoamérica ilustra* (Ibero-America Illustrates Catalogue) was born, the idea for which we presented at the SM Foundation and the Guadalajara International Book Fair. Since 2010, the three institutions have made it possible to compete for this prize free of charge; the eighth annual competition will take place at the end of this year. A

five-member jury is picked representing the entire region every year. Among the Mexicans who have won the prize are Santiago Solís and Santiago Robles, Adriana Quezada, Cecilia Rébora, and Juan Carlos Palomino.

On another note, over the last ten years, Mexico’s presence in the world of illustration has grown. Many people are aware of the Mexican market’s limited presence in the world. But certain publishing projects that are betting on Ibero-America, like La Caja de Cerillos, El Naranjo, Cidcli, Tecolote, Ideazapato, just to mention a few.

In addition, book fairs are opening up more and more spaces for the development of this profession with workshops and also with illustrators’ conferences, congresses, a salon for illustrators at the Guadalajara International Book Fair, and a solid program for

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JUAN CARLOS PALOMINO



▲ Illustration from the book, *Jaguar, Heart of the Mountain*.



▲ *What a Hurdle!*

professionals at the Children and Young Persons' Book Fair.

One exemplary case is the Mexican publishing house Petra Ediciones, headed by Peggy Espinosa, was honored as the best publishing house in Central and South America in 2014. The following year, the Guadalajara International Book Fair awarded the Merit for Publishing Award to the same company for its 25 years of activity. This made it the first children's book publisher to be given this award.

In the 10 years since its foundation, El Ilustradero has changed: only Jorge Mendoza, David Nieto and myself are left. Together, in addition, we started up an independent publishing house that we have dubbed Oink Ediciones; currently, we have the beginnings of a catalogue with ten books; all, of course, are illustrated.

Today, children's illustrations have won an increasingly solid place in the world of books. Illustrators conceive of themselves as complete authors. Publishing houses publish for child and young readers, but their books are beginning to be read by a broader audience. The quality of the work is better and better, although there are also more and more illustrators. Illustration is gaining ground in the world of books, and Mexico is beginning to be recognized internationally; it is devoutly to be wished that this contributes to the profession also being more highly valued domestically, as well as prompting more sales of rights, beyond book purchases; more domestic production of picture books; more places for new illustrators to be trained; and the permanence and consolidation of the programs, prizes, groups, associations, and spaces created to date. **MM**