

# ORAL STORIES OF CENTRAL CROATIA IN ZDENKO BAŠIĆ'S AUTHORIAL PICTURE BOOK

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## **Abstract**

*Zdenko Bašić's authorial picture books, Northwest Wind (2011)<sup>1</sup>, Moon Shadows (2013)<sup>2</sup>, and Moguti (2020)<sup>3</sup> focus on the themes of oral stories from Central Croatia, which the author interprets through a distinctive artistic literary and visual approach. Bašić's aim with these picture books is to preserve the memory of folk traditions that have been orally passed down through generations, encouraging younger generations to cherish the customs and culture of their grandparents. Starting from the theoretical determinants of the story as a type of oral literature, the research analyses Zdenko Bašić's authorial picture books with regard to the presence of characters from Croatian oral stories and with regard to the narrative levels and extent of the storyteller's participation in their verbal and visual discourses. By employing elements from Croatian folklore and Slavic mythology, Zdenko Bašić has crafted an imagined world within his stories, serving as a guide for younger generations in their efforts to preserve nature and the folk heritage of their homeland. Simultaneously, by incorporating motifs from nature, natural phenomena, and fairytale creatures from Croatian oral tradition, Bašić's analysed picture books serve as a medium through which he communicates with both children and adult audiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Croatian oral story, Slavic mythology, characters of oral stories, Zdenko Bašić, picture book*

<sup>1</sup> Original title: 'Sjeverozapadni vjetar'.

<sup>2</sup> Original title: 'Mjesečeve sjene'.

<sup>3</sup> Original title also: 'Moguti', which is the name of mythical beings from Turropolje.

## Introduction

Contemporary Croatian artist Zdenko Bašić commenced his artistic journey by illustrating books for both domestic and foreign authors. In 2011, he published an authorial picture book titled *Northwest Wind: About Elves and Elemental Beings from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica to the Samobor Hills*<sup>4</sup>. Following this, Bašić released two more authorial picture books with related themes: *Moon Shadows: About Witches and Tales of Nightly Hours from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica and the Samobor Region*<sup>5</sup> in 2013 and *Moguti: The Forgotten Tale of the Guardians of the Turropolje Meadows*<sup>6</sup> in 2020.

As evident from the subtitle, these picture books delve into the stories from the northwestern part of Medvednica and the Samobor region, as well as Turropolje, preserved through oral tradition within the author's family. According to Koraljka Jurčec Kos (2011), the illustrations in these picture books are thoughtfully crafted and contain numerous personal experiences intertwined with elements of oral tradition and Slavic mythology. In her words:

“Bašić's branchy characters, with their windswept long hair and blazing eyes, lurk like elves, bogeymen, intoxicatingly beautiful fairies from water wheels, water folk, water spirits... The simplicity of recognizing unique beings, illustrating tradition from spoken words and the silence of dear people, Zdenko Bašić managed to draw this for all of us here.” (Jurčec Kos 2011: 7).

The aim of the paper is to determine the presence of characters from Croatian oral stories of Central Croatia in the verbal and visual discourses of Zdenko Bašić's authorial picture books, with regard to the narrative levels and the extent of the storyteller's participation in them.

<sup>4</sup> Original title: 'Sjeverozapadni vjetar: O vilenjacima i elementarnim bićima sjeverozapadnog dijela Medvednice pa do Samoborskog gorja.'

<sup>5</sup> Original title: 'Mjesečeve sjene: O vješticama i pričama noćnih sati sjeverozapadnog dijela Medvednice i Samoborskog kraja.'

<sup>6</sup> Original title: 'Moguti: Zaboravljena priča čuvara turopoljskih lugova.'

## 1. Story as a Form of Oral Literature

The Croatian Encyclopaedia defines oral stories in the following way:

“In Croatian oral stories (...), historical and local peculiarities appear within internationally known narrative plots. Real historical figures emerge, intertwining the narrator’s real experiences with fiction drawn from the story. Real historical events are seen and interpreted through the lens of the folk storyteller, thereby creating a form of oral history. By fictionalizing local traditions, they imbue well-known places with spirituality and preserve the memory of the oldest history. The themes and motifs of Croatian mythical (demonological, mythological) traditions are partly international but also regionally diverse.” (CE 2024)

Stipe Botica interprets: “Croatian oral literature and folk tradition offer numerous examples of ancient Croatian pagan life. Even when merged with the Christian worldview, deeply present in Croatian life and customs, remnants from the old beliefs signify an important part of Croatian ethno-spirituality” (Botica 1993: 69). Within oral stories, remnants of various customs and rituals, enchantments, incantations, dark forces, traces of beliefs in the Moon, stars, the Sun, as well as in curses, fairies, fairy children, etc. are contained. There is no nation in the world without customs or beliefs, or some form of superstition based on imagined beings (Botica 1993; Đurić 2001; Zvonar 2014).

Aside from mythical beings, Croatian folk tradition holds significant themes concerning life and death, which can relate to both humans and nature, as both humans and nature are born, develop, grow, and ultimately perish. The connection between humans and nature is evident in the natural change of the seasons, whose sequence and the transformations they bring have greatly shaped the way of life and beliefs of people. Modern lifestyles jeopardize many folk tales and myths due to declining interest and a diminishing number of living narrators and interpreters of customs. This situation threatens to result in the disappearance and forgetting of these traditions due to new social circumstances (Botica 1993; Zvonar 2014).

### ***1.1. Oral history and children's literature***

Maja Bošković-Stulli wrote about folk tales<sup>7</sup> in contemporary culture and their position in relation to children as a readership: “Folk tales in their heyday were an exuberant form of oral creativity with an important artistic function in life, which is now gradually becoming a thing of the past; their characters and motifs inspired and still inspire literary creators in diverse and distinctive ways, and through them the stories live on in contemporary culture; for children, stories have preserved their original charm until today (...)” (Bošković-Stulli 1963: 26). About the beginnings of the publication of oral stories in Croatia, Marijana Hameršak wrote: “A small part of these stories<sup>8</sup> were fairy tales [which were almost all] marked as folk in the peritext (subtitle, notes, etc.)” (2011: 98). In 1879, Stojanović’s *Folk Tales* were published, which did not deviate significantly from the dominant production for children of that time, and whose primary goal was to educate young readers in the folk spirit. In 1888, Stjepan Basariček published *Folk tales* - a book that Štefka Batinić and Berislav Majhut point out as “one of the oldest examples of collaboration with a local author on the illustration of Croatian children’s literature” (Hameršak 2011: 147). Zdenko Bašić builds on this tradition with his picture books *Northwest Wind: About Elves and Elemental Beings from the Northwestern part of Medvednica and to the Samobor Hills* (2011), *Moon Shadows: About Witches and Tales of the Nightly hours from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica and the Samobor Region* (2013), and *Moguti: The Forgotten Tale of the Guardians of the Turopolje Meadows* (2020), intended for children but also for adult readers<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The term folk tale is used according to the terminology of Maja Bošković-Stulli, which the author applies in the book *Folk Tales* (1963), and the term story is used according to the terminology used in the book *Introduction to Children's Literature* by the authors Marijana Hameršak and Dubravka Zime, who use the term story alongside the term fairy tale and fantasy (2015: 234-263).

<sup>8</sup> The author refers to the stories published in the Croatian children’s magazine *Bosiljak* from 1864 to 1868 (Crnković 1978: 102).

<sup>9</sup> More recently, collections of stories based on the motifs of folk tales have been published by writer Sanja Lovrenčić: *Croatian Fairy Tales* (2009) with illustrations by Ivana Guljašević, and *Croatian Folk Fairy Tales* (2024) with illustrations by Branka Hollingsworth Nara.

## **2. *Northwest Wind: About Elves and Elemental Beings from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica to the Samobor Hills (2011)***

In the introductory part of the picture book *Northwest Wind: About Elves and Elemental Beings from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica to the Samobor Hills* (2011),

the extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator of verbal discourse introduces the reader to the story of the wind, which can be considered the central character as it narrates hypodiegetic tales about other characters appearing in the picture book (Bašić 2011: 5). These are mysterious beings from folk tradition, depicted in the visual discourse of the picture book<sup>10</sup>, living in darkness, hidden among the branches of trees and blades of grass, or in the light among flowers and people. These beings include fairies, elves, invisible little ones, fortune-tellers, bogeymen, sleep demons, dark ones, death riders, frost, little hunters, doom hounds, witches, water folk, demons, dwarves, and imps. In addition to characters from folk tradition, plants play a significant role in the concept of the picture book, specifically flowers growing in fields and meadows, such as snowdrops, saffron, spring snowflakes, flower bulbs, hellebores, primroses, hyacinths, lily of the valley, and four-leaf clover. These plants, besides being habitats for many mysterious beings, also possess special powers that can be a reward or punishment to humans (Bašić 2011; Marković 2017).

The stories found in the picture book have been passed down through generations, serving as a kind of guidance in people's lives. Whether connected to specific characters or related to particular days of the year when certain tasks in the fields needed to be done, or as expressions of gratitude towards mysterious beings and forces that help people feed their families during challenging times (Bašić 2011).

Nature and everything it brings with it is reflected in the illustrations. In addition to losing contact with our ancestors, the author believes that, faced with the hectic pace of modern life, we have lost contact with nature and the

<sup>10</sup> Cf.: "Double discourse is an essential feature of a picture book insofar as both its verbal (linguistic) and visual (pictorial) text participate in mediating the content. Understanding the picture book as a complete work necessarily depends not only on the individual contributions of the two communication channels, but also on the manner of their joint and mutual cooperation, and on the ways in which they involve the reader in the process of the construction of meaning" (Narančić Kovač 2015: 8).

Earth itself (Jurčec Kos 2011).

The first motifs that appear in the verbal and visual discourse of this picture book are the characters of the grandmother and the branchy little man. As the author notes, the little man represents a combination of the living and the non-living; due to its branches, it is very fragile, like a twig, just like nature. The motif of the grandmother symbolizes all those forgotten stories that have been orally passed down through generations (Mauro 2016).

In creating illustrations for the picture book *Northwest Wind*, Bašić employed computer graphics (Jurčec Kos 2011), and for some of the illustrations, he also used photographs, adding a dimension of authenticity. Bašić incorporates anthropomorphized flowers and other plants mentioned in the picture book into his illustrations, giving them characteristics of the extraordinary, unusual, and supernatural. Through these combinations of living and non-living motifs, as well as the real and the unreal, Bašić brings to readers the enchantment of nature that surrounds us. He encourages them to pay attention and listen carefully to find the little remaining magic of untouched nature in a world that humanity tends to forget and hurt (Bašić 2011).

In addition to the effort to preserve the stories told to him by his grandmothers through this picture book, Bašić employs the illustrations in the final part of *Northwest Wind* to alert the reader to the need to preserve oral traditions and nature. In visual discourse, the penultimate double page of the picture book depicts a peculiar being alongside a bellflower at the landfill. Opposite this scene is an illustration with machines and telephone poles, accompanied by the text in verbal discourse:

“And the forest hyacinths sing in the early dawn and invite the fairy folk and their song. That song is not somewhere far away in fairy tales, but right here beside you, perhaps just beyond this parking lot, there in the grove by the highway or behind that concrete building. And it hides beauty and secrets that anyone willing can still hear and see.” (Bašić 2011: 79).

The extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator concludes the picture book with a story about the arrival of a new, different world that has disturbed the fairy realm. Fairies began leaving their habitats, and with the departure of the last

fairy, all blessings to the land and the people living in those areas vanished. Along with the fairies, rewards for people's merits, kindness, and respect also disappeared (Bašić 2011). The story contains a kind of warning to the reader: in the courtyards of fairies and forests, silence and stillness have taken over, brought on by the northwest wind in its new onslaught:

“Loud noise spread across the world, fairy springs dried up, and abandoned waste is now in the forests. Here and there, some solitary being still sings softly about the days gone by, waiting for a new morning. It still sings about the beauty now hidden in the noise, about fragrant fields and vast oak forests that stood here, perhaps right here beneath this concrete, beneath this floor, beneath this shop, this shopping centre, this parking lot, this road... The last thing the wind said to me: Don't leave children only with memories.” (Bašić 2011: 79-80).

However, nothing man builds is eternal, and nature will remain in the same place even after man ceases to walk the Earth and dream until the moment it can come alive again. Bašić reminds us of this with the last words and illustrations in this picture book (2011).

### ***3. Moon Shadows: About Witches and Tales of Nightly Hours from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica and the Samobor Region (2013)***

The picture book *Moon Shadows: About Witches and Tales of Nightly Hours from the Northwestern Part of Medvednica and the Samobor Region* (2013) represents a continuation of Zdenko Bašić's efforts to preserve the oral stories of the northwest part of Medvednica and the Samobor region from being forgotten. Extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators of verbal and visual discourse address readers in the introduction, warning them of the seriousness with which they should devote themselves to the stories that follow. The narration is continued by an intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator who introduces the character of the Wind into the narration, who on the hypodiegetic level continues to narrate tales about the places which the moonlight does not reach at night, inhabited by many mysterious creatures that the reader could meet in the picture book *Northwest Wind*, such as

witches, demons, invisible little ones, and other beings that enjoy dwelling in darkness.

In the peritext, Lidija Bajuk introduces the reader to the motifs of the picture book<sup>11</sup>:

“Like a St. George’s gardener on animated headless pages, sow a magical seed that will bloom with yellow-lilac flowers and unlock the fairy doors for passage into a world where no one takes what is not given to them. Where a hurled apple drives away scavengers, buried treasure finds its sharer, a splashed ember dispels the curse, swirling laundry mounts the day, a pollen cloud rejuvenates the spirit. And finally, establish a blessed order in the fairy, fourth age of silence.” (2013).

The characters in the tales of the picture book *Moon Shadows* are mysterious beings that dwell in the night and darkness, hidden from the rest of the world. Among the central characters are witches or sorceresses, which remind the narrator of his childhood spent in nature, simultaneously recalling family stories – legends about an unusual ancestor whom Zdenko Bašić referred to as an “aunt” and who, according to family tradition, was a witch<sup>12</sup>.

Other beings, according to tradition, also appear in the dead of night and prey on unsuspecting passersby who are unfamiliar with the legends or have not yet encountered beings such as doom hounds, death riders, demons, little spirits, dragons, and others (Bašić 2013).

In addition to witches, a recurring motif in the picture book is the motif of the Moon. All the beings in this picture book live under the cover of night, beneath the Moon and its shadows that hide them from curious or frightened gazes. Although the Moon motif is not present in every illustration of the picture book, the combination of colours and shades used by Bašić suggests to the reader the prevailing nocturnal atmosphere of the stories

<sup>11</sup> The term peritext refers to elements present in the work such as the title of the book, chapter title, author’s name, preface, dedication, epigraph, and notes (Grdešić, 2015: 111, according to Genette, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> According to popular belief, a witch is a woman, rarely a man, with supernatural powers that she uses exclusively to harm people, animals, and plants. (Hrvatska enciklopedija, online edition. Lexicographic Institute Miroslav Krleža, 2013 – 2024. Accessed on 7/4/2024 <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/vjestica>).

(Bašić 2013).

In the visual layer, Bašić has depicted the world of witches – sorceresses who, according to tradition, could be encountered in small towns and villages, by including illustrations of signs indicating their presence in the region, their relationship with other mysterious beings in the long cold nights, and ultimately, by illustrating the appearance of witches, who are often hidden behind black scarves. The illustrations also include walnut trees under whose canopies witches used to hide and perform their rituals (Bašić 2013).

The visual layer of this picture book also contains visually stylized pages from old books as a kind of hypodiegetic stories, such as excerpts from old Kajkavian dictionaries and other valuable ethnographic material, enriching the illustrations with a dimension of patina and archaism. In illustrations, the passage of time is depicted with clock motifs, as well as the motifs of everyday calendars and lunar phase calendars, associated with the activities of witches, but also by referring to those days in the year that celebrate Christian holidays, such as St. George's Day and others (Bašić 2013).

The extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator concludes the nocturnal tale of Moon Shadows by offering an answer to the question:

“How to recognize a witch – the evil one from the good one – the wise sorceress? (...) Those who are wise will have only what they can create themselves, what is naturally given to them. And although it may be invisible and inconspicuous to everyone when such a witch leaves the world, she departs in peace because her treasure is rooted in a spirit and wisdom that do not perish with the body.” (Bašić 2013: 105).

#### ***4. Moguti: The Forgotten Tale of the Guardians of the Turopolje Meadows (2020)***

The picture book *Moguti: The Forgotten Tale of the Guardians of the Turopolje Meadows* was published in 2020 as a result of the author's collaboration with the Turopolje Museum and the Perunfest event.

According to scientific research, alongside the centuries-old tradition of Christianity in Croatia, many beliefs in the supernatural and the forces of nature, which are observed and worshipped, have persisted in the folk culture (Novak 2007; Matijašić 2020). To maintain a certain balance in nature,

humans must appease them, as was believed to be the case with the moguti. According to folk traditions in the Turopolje region, the moguti are protectors of villages and places, not known to everyone but acknowledged to exist, watching over the village. The duality of the moguti's nature is reflected in their relationship with the villagers, as the moguti "give but also take, reward, and punish," depending on people's attitudes towards them (Vrkić 1995; Matijašić 2020: 4).

In folk tales, the moguti are also mentioned as the children of the god Perun, the supreme deity in Slavic mythology. Perun was the god of thunder, who brought light and fire to humans, followed by thunderstorms. Due to his benevolence, he was considered the god of the earth and people, always wishing well to humanity as a great benefactor. Since Perun was the god of thunder, and the moguti were considered his children, it can be inferred that the moguti, in the course of their internal struggles, brought thunderstorms to showcase their strength (Balog 2011; Sučić 2013; Bašić 2020).

The story of the moguti is narrated by extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators of verbal and visual discourse. In addition to the moguti, the central motif of the picture book is the oak tree, specifically the pedunculate oak, which has been considered the sacred tree of the ancient Slavic god Perun and the home of his children, the moguti. Oak wood has been historically and is still used for constructing various buildings such as houses and churches, as well as crafting tools, weapons, and furniture. Therefore, on the initial pages of the picture book, its author Zdenko Bašić combines knowledge about the forgotten churches and estate homes in Turopolje that had been constructed from oak wood. For travellers wishing to follow the paths of the moguti, a map of the remains of these properties is provided, still surviving despite unfavourable conditions (Matijašić 2020).

The illustrations include motifs from Slavic mythology, such as modernized depictions of the Slavic gods, the brothers Perun and Veles (Jurčec Kos 2020).

Bašić used a combined technique that involves photography, models, and costumed dolls, digital drawing, as well as acrylic and watercolour for the finishing touches (Car 2020).

Included in the picture book are hypodiegetic verbal-visual parts of documentary texts framed with painted antique picture frames or printed on backgrounds of different colours, etc. According to the author, the theme

of the picture book *Moguti* is also close to his heart because of the memory of his grandmothers and his grandfather, who was a carpenter and through whom he forged a childhood bond with oak. Therefore, Bašić added a father figure as an element of self-portrait to the visual layer of the picture book, and the figure of a boy who represents his son, thereby exploring his own roots (Car 2020).

Extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators of verbal and visual discourse on the last pages of the picture book invite the reader to return to nature and live in unity with it, just as the moguti did from ancient times – as the guardians of people and the forests in which they lived and breathed as one being:

“Whatever we may think about the forgotten tales of old times, we must still wonder if we will see another centuries-old oak in the time remaining when we grow up, or if it will become a memory (...). Will the children who come after us still know the oaks our grandmothers loyally guarded, with the moguti planting acorns to renew ancient forests every year? Perhaps the games played under the trees were livelier when the moguti watched over the children from the trunks than the games played now, when forests stand empty and distant. Coloured only by digital reality and explanations that arrive through wires and impulses which shape and count the time standing before us.” (Bašić 2020: 33-35).

## 5. Conclusion

Zdenko Bašić’s authorial picture books, *Northwest Wind*, *Moon Shadows* and *Moguti* rely on the oral stories and folk tradition of the northwest part of Medvednica, Samobor, and Turopolje, including motifs from Slavic mythology, which were narrated to the author by his grandmothers during his childhood (Bajuk 2011). The tales alternate between extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of narration in verbal and visual discourses, which also include some hypodiegetic tales about characters from folklore, such as fairies, elves, witches, and the moguti. The peritexts of these picture books include prefaces with critical reviews and texts by Lidija Bajuk, Koraljka Jurčec Kos, and Josipa Matijašić, as

well as glossaries explaining words and symbols in the final part of the picture books.

The purpose of Bašić's picture books is not only to bring cultural heritage and ancestral culture closer to contemporary readers but also to encourage them to preserve the natural environment. Faced with a hectic way of life and technological progress, humans present a great danger to the little remaining untouched nature hidden from human sight. Zdenko Bašić calls on the reader to become aware and take control of their actions, to return to the nature from which they originated, and ultimately, to try to leave future generations with not only memories but also something worth preserving. The goal of these picture books is to preserve folk traditions and heritage and encourage younger generations to cherish the customs and culture of their grandparents, as Zdenko Bašić does with his picture books.

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## **USMENE PRIČE SREDIŠNJE HRVATSKE U AUTORSKIM SLIKOVNICAMA ZDENKA BAŠIĆA**

### **Sažetak**

*Autorske slikovnice Zdenka Bašića Sjeverozapadni vjetar (2011), Mjesečeve sjene (2013) i Moguti (2020) tematiziraju motive usmenih priča Središnje Hrvatske, koje autor interpretira osebujnim umjetničkim književno-likovnim pristupom. Bašićev je cilj ovim slikovnicama sačuvati sjećanje na narodne predaje prenošene generacijama usmenim putem te potaknuti mlađe naraštaje da njeguju običaje i kulturu svojim baka i djedova. Polazeći od teorijskih odrednica priče kao vrste usmene književnosti, istraživanjem se analiziraju autorske slikovnice Zdenka Bašića s obzirom na prisutnost likova hrvatskih usmenih priča u navedenim slikovnicama, te s obzirom na pripovjedne razine i opseg sudjelovanja pripovjedača u njihovim verbalnim i vizualnim diskursima. Koristeći elemente hrvatskih narodnih predaja i slavenske mitologije, Zdenko Bašić je u svojim pričama kreirao zamišljeni svijet koji mlađim generacijama može biti putokaz u težnji za očuvanjem prirode i narodne baštine svoje domovine. Ujedno, uključivanjem motiva prirode i prirodnih pojava, te bajkovitih bića hrvatske usmene predaje, analizirane slikovnice poslužile su Zdenku Bašiću kao medij pomoću kojeg se istovremeno obraća dječjoj čitateljskoj publici kao i odraslim čitateljima.*

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** *hrvatska usmena priča, slavenska mitologija, likovi usmenih priča, Zdenko Bašić, slikovnica*