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The Capital of Youth

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Polityka magazine and Polish Radio One

How do books end up on your reading lists? Back during my childhood and youth in communist-era Poland, such a question would have seemed irrelevant. Although I never experienced the harshest times of Stalinism and Gomułka, I did vividly experience the so-called "shortage economy," which also meant that far fewer books for young people were published than today and they were hard to come by. I simply read whatever the friendly bookseller at the local bookstore kindly set aside for me, or what I could find in my school library's collection, which then seemed enormous. Things changed only once I went to university and was able to tap into the academic libraries. There I would wander between the

shelves, often struggling to find a title even if I knew its call number. In my first month of university studies, I genuinely feared I would get lost in there, to be found someday as a fossil.

There were many reasons for the shortage of books for teens in Poland in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Besides censorship, there was poverty, and quite simply a lack of paper and ink. I once had a chance to discuss this years ago with Ewa Kuryluk, a distinguished painter and writer who sometimes illustrated children's books in back in the communist era. I fondly remembered her old drawings, which had used only two colors – black and red. Today, editions from the 1970s are often considered rare finds and fetch exorbi-

Katarzyna Karpowicz,
Lody na patyku
(Ice-cream on a Stick),
2021, oil on canvas,
50×50 mm



KATARZYNA KARPOWICZ

tant prices in online auctions. When conversing with Ewa I dared to ask her directly: “Why did you decide to use only two colors to illustrate a novel for children? Nowadays, it’d be unthinkable. Today’s young-adult literature and children’s books from Scandinavian countries, Japanese comics, and our home-grown Polish youth literature are all so excessively colorful. Pink, fuchsia, neon yellow – it’s enough to make your eyeballs ache.” Ewa just smiled and said, “I just didn’t have other colors to choose from. Either the book could be black-and-white, or I could add red, because that was the only ink available.”

Today, by contrast, we live in an era of abundance; too many books are published, so each of us has to develop our own methods of selection. Sometimes, books come to me by chance. For instance, if I stay at a guesthouse with a shelf of bedtime readings. In recent years, online algorithms have started suggesting new literature. My favorite reviewers and cultural activists are also sources of information on new releases. Besides that, I also follow a few people whose opinions I value.

Recently, for instance, through various channels I have come across numerous books in which the protagonists had a tragic youth. In the reportage book *Welewetka* by the excellent author Stasia Budzisz (a Polish and Russian philology graduate), we get a description of historical catastrophes that befell her family, the families of their neighbors, and broadly – the Kashubians living around Hel, Chojnice, Kościerzyna, Gdańsk, and Darłowo. Most of her Kashubian ancestors described in the book certainly did not have an “idyllic and angelic” childhood or a carefree youth. Their lives were overshadowed by Operation Tannenberg, service in the German army, forced expulsions by the Germans, crimes by the Red Army, and then mass executions in Piaśnica. Those few who survived had to endure communist propaganda. Recent years have seen hatred directed at their Wehrmacht grandfathers. Meanwhile, in the novel *Koniec*, debutting prose writer Marta Hermanowicz constructs the character of Malwina, an exceptionally sensitive girl who sees the wartime memories of her grandmother in her dreams, hence she lives simultaneously in two realities: the Eastern Borderlands and Siberia in the 1940s, and the Poland of the 1990s – a period that is getting increasingly harshly judged by the generation born in the 1980s.

So we now have a plethora of readings on the traumas of our ancestors and the inheritance of these traumas by us – the generation of grandchildren. Must we, therefore, conclusively take off the rose-colored glasses and strip youth of its romantic, nostalgic idyllicness? In all this arithmetic of traumas, this debate over who had the worse childhood (kids running around the courtyards of the grey apartment blocks of the communist era, or children deprived of care



TERESA KLUSZCZYŃSKA

by hard-working parents in turbo-capitalism?), it’s not very well seen to share any *good* memories of one’s youth.

But what I remember best from that period are matters of love. All those so-called first times, including the one involving sexual initiation. Youthful loves were for me what they are meant to be like. I entered them free of prejudices, fears, and stereotypes. In high school, I met a great guy; he impressed me because he studied at an excellent Warsaw high school, in a class with a biology-chemistry profile. He was exotic in that sense because I didn’t know the first thing about chemistry. Moreover, I found his family incredibly attractive.

I grew up with my father; he with his mother. She ran the house alone, was beautiful and resourceful, a dentist with her own practice, a *bourgeoise* in the good sense of the word. She impressed me greatly as an entrepreneurial woman and at the same time created a wonderful home atmosphere – warm and open. And she was also a provider of food, a feeder – to this day, when I slice tomatoes, her salads and sandwiches spring to mind. From youth, probably my fondest memories are of precisely this sort – I entered relationships naïvely back then.

Recently, six close friends from university and I went on a four-day yoga trip together. After university, we all spread out around the world – one now lives in Bavaria, another in Paris, the third in Australia, two in California. We hadn’t seen each other for over a decade, but the bonds we formed in youth are still strong. These are the kind of resources we can truly draw on for years to come. ■

Teresa Kluszczyńska,
Karuzela (Carousel),
2024, acrylic on canvas,
80×80 cm