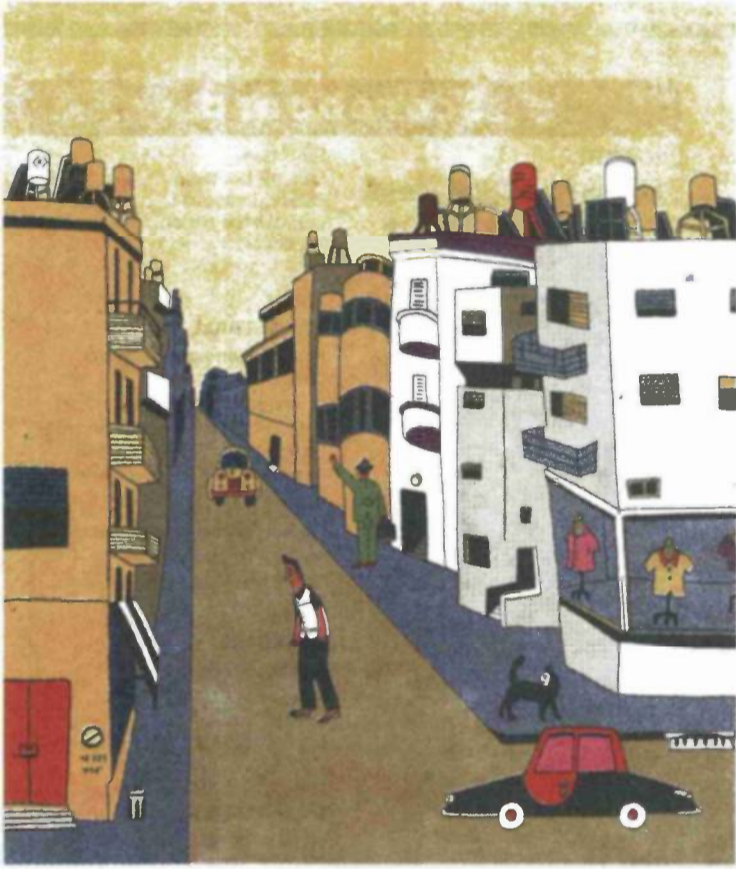


Drawing conclusions

Illustrations in children's books – the subject of a symposium this week – continue to reflect social and other developments that are part of Israel's contemporary reality



From Rutu Modan's "Mermaid in the Bathtub."

By Tamar Rotem

Two small elephants lived on Hess Street. Their names were 'Once Was' and 'Once Wasn't' and they lived next door to each other. These characteristic opening lines – witty and spare, but nonetheless rich in meaning – are the unmistakable work of writer Nurit Zarchi. For the cover of her book "Once Was and Once Wasn't," illustrator David Polonsky has drawn two elephants: one blue and one yellow, peering out of windows, with an illuminated sign that bears a genuine Tel Aviv address: 2 Hess Street.

This street, complete with buildings and people, is, paradoxically, a very real presence in this work by an author known for flights of fancy. The illustration of a concrete landscape that accompanies her words reflects the polarity inherent in her writing: between the familiar and the imagined, between home and the outside world. It also reflects how the writer incessantly crosses borders.

Zarchi is "the darling of illustrators," according to Merav Saloman, head of the illustration track in the visual communications department of Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, because she conducts a dialogue with them that embodies the tension between reality and imagination. It is this subject, among others, that Zarchi will discuss at the illustrators' con-

ference at Bezalel on Wednesday, as part of a panel discussion on "How to draw a street."

"The question is asked whether illustrations in children's books must show where we live or imaginary places," Zarchi says. "The same questions arise in writing: Will a description of our neighborhood get in the way of imagination? Does fantasy put too much distance between us and where we live?"

Zarchi recalls her first trip abroad, camping in Scandinavia. "At night we heard a strange sound. We got out of the tent and saw there was a waterfall nearby. I then understood that Selma Lagerlof (Swedish author of "Nils Holgersson") did not invent the landscape in her books, and that literature must also exceed the borders of reality. On the other hand, urbanization has created a kind of distortion, because all cities are similar to each other and look the same in illustrations."

According to Orna Granot, associate curator of illustrated children's books at the Israel Museum, who is also participating in the conference, "Nurit Zarchi is a master at balancing not only fantasy and reality, but inner and outer landscapes." If in Zarchi's work the street represents the realistic side of fantasy, many other books written in recent years depict urban reality as it is, adds Granot: "After all, illustrators, like writers, describe what they see outside their windows."

Thus, Batya Kolton often

draws the Bauhaus-style balconies of Tel Aviv (for example, in Zarchi's "Goodbye, Antarctica"). In Avirama Golan's "Gali's Soap Bubbles," Lena Goberman has drawn realistic-looking windows and porches. For Shira Geffen's "The Heart-Shaped Leaf," David Polonsky drew patterned floor tiles characteristic of Tel Aviv homes.

"There is something very local and Israeli in these depictions," Granot says. "Windows with shutters that are raised and lowered, for example. You won't see those illustrated in foreign books."

Closed-in porches, antennas and air conditioners all star in Israeli children's literature these days. "Children like concrete details," illustrator Michal Bonano asserts. "It would be strange to draw European houses in an Israeli book."

She adds that the technique of using photography as an aid in illustrations adds a concrete dimension to drawings of streets. Before illustrating Maya Savir's "Ilan and the Missing Thought," Bonano wandered around Tel Aviv with her photographer partner, creating a route upon which she based her work – that taken by the protagonist Ilan, as he ponders and walks.

Bonano, a very urban illustrator, points out that the Israeli street, as opposed to the European one, is characterized by disorder and visual "noise."

"Jerusalem clearly reflects something more embellished and kitschy – the curves and so-called 'Jerusalem stone,'" Bonano explains. "Tel Aviv streets are the archetypal ones for many illustrators, perhaps because the Bauhaus style has cleaner lines which are easier to draw, in comparison with stone which is clumsier. Or perhaps because most illustrators live in Tel Aviv."

Although Bonano herself lives in Jerusalem, she admits she still prefers to draw Tel Aviv. In contrast, when it comes to more veteran illustrators from Jerusalem, like Yossi Abulafia, Noam Nadav and Michel Kishka – the Jerusalem-style street prevails.

When comparing classic Hebrew children's books to newer ones, from the point of view of

illustrations, one can see a dramatic transition from rural to urban landscapes, from childhoods spent in the country to childhoods in the city. Once the landscapes were pastoral, Granot explains, citing the books "Where is Pluto?" "Hot Corn," "Come to Me, Sweet Butterfly" and "Night Will Come." Bonano notes that illustrations in older children's literature were minimalist (except for those of Nahum Guttman).

Social issues have always figured prominently in children's books illustrations, says Salomon of Bezalel. The move from a puritanical, socialist society to one of abundance is typified, for example, by the appearance of privately owned cars, instead of the public buses of the past.

Hanna Livnat, head of the Yemima Center for the Study and Teaching of Children's Literature at Beit Berl College, points out that the building in the classic "Apartment for Rent," by Lea Goldberg, "stands between a vineyard and fields."

For his part, illustrator Dani Kerman captures with precision the urban experience of neighbors who keep their windows open in "It's Me!" written by Yehuda Atlas.

Changes that have taken place over the years in familial relations are also evident in children's books. Mother works – and "Dad Runs away with the Circus," in the book by Etgar Keret, illustrated by Rutu Modan. Meir Shalev named his popular work, illustrated by Yossi Abulafia, "My Father Always Embarrasses Me."

"The didactic, nationalist picture has gradually turned into an individual one. Now it reflects a process of withdrawal, each one into his home; there is tension between inner and outer space and between public expanses and private ones," Salomon says.

This is also the case in "Mermaid in the Bathtub" by Nurit Zarchi and Rutu Modan; the hero, Mr. Whatsay – who is afraid of what the neighbors will say – lets a mermaid into his home and is fearful of her, but when she disappears, he sets out to find her again.

The vantage point portrayed