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### The Truth in Fiction: A Discussion of Educational Agency and Hierarchical Truth in Children's Literature

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**The Truth in Fiction: A Discussion of Educational Agency and Hierarchical Truth in  
Children's Literature**

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**Abstract**

I wrote and created *With Wings and Words*, a children's picture book based off of interview material gathered about the 1989 Velvet Revolution, in order to demonstrate the inherent multiplicity of truth around historical events and break down the construction of a "national" truth by placing personal narratives and interpretations in conversation with each other. These narratives, while present and available in the Czech Republic, are important to display and discuss in order to avoid the oversimplification of events or erasure of the emotional complexities they cause. After consulting with various relevant Czech children's books, I completed interviews and used this material to create two fictional narratives about the 1989 Revolution, one occurring in Prague and the other occurring in Vyškov. These stories were illustrated and formatted into a reversible children's book. With the final product, children and readers of all ages will be able to explore the personal truths of two very different protagonists and get to consider for themselves the way that history and truth interact. This book will serve as an introduction into the hierarchy of truth that is established between individual and societal truths and will allow readers to consider the ambiguity in truth and how the creation of a national narrative may limit the truths that are easily available for consumption. As children are especially impressionable to national or "traditional" historical truths, book such as *With Wings and Words* can allow them to begin to have agency in their own understanding of the world and demonstrate that everyone has a right to tell their story.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank everyone that made this project possible. To Adéla Knapová, thank you for the tea and the conversation and the constant inspiration. I left every conversation with you feeling excited and grounded, and your balance of creativity and practicality was incredibly necessary. To Sarah Brock, thank you for handling all of my constant questions with grace and a smile. To Pavla and the rest of my host family, thank you for making me smile, making me eat, and making sure I got enough sleep. The emotional support I got from truly having a home here was incredibly necessary throughout this process. Thank you Professor Thomas Roberts at Smith College for cheering me on from afar and being as excited about this project as I was. And thank you to Smith College for making me the student and person that I am. I would not have been able to do this without any of you.

### **Introduction**

In 1989, the Velvet Revolution began in Prague and led to the liberation of the Czech people from under the Communist Soviet regime and the establishment of a democratic government. Before I came to Prague, I assumed it was as simple as that. However, the entire Czechoslovakian population did not live in Prague; they didn't participate in protests or demonstrations, and they had limited means of knowing what was even happening. Throughout my time in Prague, I have been fascinated by the ambiguity of truth, a concept that is commonly considered decidedly unambiguous. As my classmates and I learned about the complex political and social history of the Czech Republic, we were often reminded by our professor Peter Sokol to consider the narrator and the perspective of these historical exhibits or texts. Professor Sokol's attention to these details inspired me to start thinking about the idea of national truth, and after our panel session about the events of 1989, I decided I wanted to explore further and break down the idea of the "common Czech narrative" by using stories and situations from one event in Czech history to place the traditional and the untraditional in the same context. After all, history is always more complicated than it first appears.

Therefore, my objective for this project was to create a reversible children's book inspired by two interviews done with people who were children during the 1989 Revolution and their experiences and reflections on the event. My goal was not to place one narrative in favor of another, nor to show all sides of the event, but more so to put narratives in conversation with each other as a representation of multiple perspectives and truths and to encourage critical thinking about how we perceive truth for ourselves. As I began exploring various stories and experiences of 1989, I recognized that these "alternative" narratives that perhaps subvert or

simply complicate the traditional, national narrative are available; the justification for my particular project is in the format. I feel strongly that the purpose of having multiple perspectives and multiple truths located in the same object will allow for a deeper understanding of the complexity of the concept of truth. Furthermore, as a educational tool serving as an introduction to the inherent multiplicity of truth to children, one book containing two stories allows for information to be consumed in a controlled manner. Hopefully, the simultaneous consumption of different narratives will allows for children to begin to widen their perspectives on the interpretation of historical truth and begin to understand how everyone is entitled to their story.

### **Context**

Before I began to write my own picture book about the events of 1989, I felt that it was important to educate myself on what had already been written about the subject and how Czech writers were interacting with historical information in their own children's literature. After meeting with Martina Moravcová, I studied the following three books carefully, both as inspiration for my own work and academically informative material. I feel that before the process of any creative work, it is crucial to understand the field in which you are entering. Especially for this project, one so focused on truth and narrative and ambiguity, I felt that it was important to consume and consider as many relevant Czech children's books as possible, to have the best comprehension of how the insider perspective was being reflected. Obviously, there are many, many more Czech children's books that I could have read and studied to inform my work. However, the following three felt the most relevant to me and had the biggest impact on my final work.

## Literature Review

*Pižďuchové /The Pizh'duks* by Václav Havel

A children's fairy tale written by Václav Havel, this printing of *The Pizh'duks* has the unique format of being a reversible children's book. One side is the Czech text, and the other side is the English translation. Therefore, this book became an important reference point for me for the practicalities of formatting a reversible book. It was incredibly helpful during the layout and formatting stages of both text and illustrations because it allowed me a physical representation of what I was trying to accomplish. I had not seen very many reversible children's books before, so it was beneficial for me to see what had been done and how so that I could have a better understanding of what I was trying to do and how it was relevant.

*Zed'* by Petr Sís

Translated to "The Wall", this book by Petr Sís is an autobiographical account of his childhood growing up behind the Iron Curtain and under Communist rule. While the time frame of this book is skewed towards the years under Communism rather than its fall, as my book will be, it was a big inspiration stylistically. I also felt that it was important to understand what children's books already exist that are centered around Communism and the Velvet Revolution so that I could better understand where my book might fit and what I would be bringing into this framework that had not been said or done before. Sís focuses on freedom and what this means, a concept that came up in very different ways in both interviews, so it was extremely beneficial for me to see how one author's interpretation of this context and events could be reflected and communicated through a children's book.

*Three Golden Keys* by Petr Sís

Another Petr Sís book, *Three Golden Keys* is written as a letter to his daughter about Prague and includes lots of historical and traditional elements of Czech culture. Sís is Czech-born but currently lives in and is a citizen of the United States. This book does a beautiful job of expressing the complexity of his relationship to his home country, its history, and his family. I referred to this book quite a bit when writing my story inspired by Knapová's interview because I was struggling on how to write a children's book that is not entirely happy. This book was a great example of how to skillfully intertwine history, folklore, hope, and sadness in a way that I aspired to replicate in my own final product.

**Methods**

My first step of creating my book was to conduct the interviews in order to gather material from which I would write the stories. My first interview was with Adéla Knapová, who also served as my advisor for this project. Knapová grew up in Vyškov, a military town in Southern Moravia, and we spoke at length about how her experiences differed because of her geographical location. Knapová specifically described her happiness at her childhood and the shocking and challenging realization in 1989 that her world was not as perfect as she had once thought (A. Knapová, personal communication, November 15, 2019). My next interview was with Daniel Rejchrt, the son of a dissident and a Prague native. Rejchrt also described a happy and pleasant childhood but one with a constant awareness and acknowledgement of the Communist lies and influence. His experience of 1989 was one of complete liberation and opportunity (D. Rejchrt, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Once I had completed



these interviews, I began crafting and drafting the two stories that I would include in my final picture book.

To further inform me, I met with Martina Moravcová, a specialist in Czech children's literature and the Head of Humanities at Arcibiskupské Gymnázium in Prague. Moravcová brought me multiple children's books that she felt may help me visualize my final project and inspire me in both content and illustrations (M. Moravcová, personal communication, November 21, 2019). I used these books to help me finalize a format and general layout of my book as well as organize my interview material into potentially usable or unusable content. I then sorted the material to create a general plot line of both stories that I felt best put the narratives in conversation and highlighted both specific similarities and differences in Knapová and Rejchrt's experiences (Appendix B).

After writing both stories, I was able to begin creating storyboards and image plans for the illustrations. Originally, I was planning on working with an illustrator, but due to timing, this option was not feasible. Therefore, I decided to illustrate the piece myself. I also consulted with Martina Trchová about illustrative styles and final formatting for printing. As I illustrated, I began formatting the book using an online software that allowed me to create a final print-worthy PDF. My focus for illustration was to create simple yet evocative symbols that captured the tangibility of abstract emotional concepts. I decided to illustrate everything in black and white except for one image in both stories as a way of thinking about the assumption of black and white truth. I then submitted the PDF of *With Wings and Words* (Appendix C) to Adela Schovanová get a final version printed and bound.

Throughout all of the creative process of making my final book, I also was constantly considering and trying to better understand the context and higher purpose for this book.

Through many conversations with my advisor, Adéla Knapová, as well as consultations of Czech children's books and personal conversations with other contacts, I strove to keep in mind the larger purpose of this project: not just to create a book but to create something that was created with the intention of representing multiple truths and that could be used to inspire children to think about different stories having different meanings when placed in a variety of larger contexts.

### **Ethics**

Perhaps the largest ethical consideration when beginning this project was that of only using two interviews and two perspectives while attempting to create a commentary on the multiplicity of truth. I fully recognize that this event and every historical event will have boundless interpretations and truths that were experienced; however, I think it is important to remember that the goal of this project is not to represent these issues or this event holistically or to even show the "opposite" sides of interpretation. The two stories that I created were influenced by two interviews that I felt were unique perspectives and that both possessed elements of conforming to the traditional historical narrative and moments of challenging it. I recognize that this project could be done with many more stories and narratives. I chose to work with two as a representation of this multiplicity, not a definition of it, and to simply introduce the idea of variety within truth and history. This project is not meant to be used as an authority on the events and perspectives on 1989. The stories are simply a vessel to consider the language used

when describing historical events and the implications of the creation of a historical common narrative.

Also, as the goal of the project is to try and eliminate a right/wrong interaction with specific narratives, I was careful to present these perspectives as equally as possible, to accurately represent their truth to various people. I did not want my opinions to influence the written or visual representation that I gave these stories in the final product. The goal is to allow children the agency and understanding to consider multiple perspectives, not to convince them that one narrative is wrong and another is right. My personal bias must be considered in my work but not reflected in the product. I worked to counter any potential bias in the written or visual work by planning on how both stories would be weighed and represented equally through plans and outlines of both the stories and illustrations. By laying out how information in each story would be balanced, I not only created a more cohesive final product where children will be allowed the flexibility to notice the differences and similarities themselves, I also avoided any potential favoring of a story or narrative that I preferred over another (Appendix B).

One other ethical consideration was the use of interview material in my creative work. I strove to be as considerate as possible in both the interview process and the handling of the interview material as I crafted my own stories. I feel that this is a process of balance and consideration. I stressed to both Knapová and Rejchrt that they would not be represented biographically in the final product and that my work would be fictionalized; these are personal accounts and stories and without explicit permission, anonymity is important to maintain. However, the purpose of the project is individual truth versus societal truth. In this way, it felt ethically relevant to maintain the integrity of the stories and narratives that I was told in the

language and interpretation of the interviewee. If I were to fictionalize too much or misrepresent a narrative in my final work, I would feel as though I would be influencing the personal truth that is being conveyed. Therefore, it was a delicate process of trusting my artistic intentions while also constantly considering and reconsidering the implications of how I was both breaking down and building up a fictional narrative from a real one. In a way, I was my own test subject, as the considerations here, of what is true or false or intimate or public, are exactly what I wish to inspire in the readers of my book as they too can consider the narratives in relation to each other and in relation to themselves.

### **Presentation of Results and Analysis**

With the creation of *With Wings and Words*, I feel that the original purpose of the project was completed. The final project is both a reflection and a conversation on personal experience in conjunction with national experiences in a way that provokes both internal and external reflections on history and truth. A large consideration in my creative work was the balance of strict definitions and freedom to think; obviously, I was inspired by real stories for my work and sought to represent them on the page. However, I also felt that it was important for this book to truly promote agency in children and to have them be able to interpret and find their own meaning. One of the ways that I sought to accomplish this was within my illustrations. The choice of simple black and white illustrations was in some ways a practical one, but I also felt that it allowed the most imagination and agency for the reader. Again, it was a balancing act of how to visually represent the story that was being told but not confine the reader in any specific visual manner. When consulting with Petr Sís' work, I decided quite quickly that the large and

detailed illustrations that he used served an incredibly specific purpose. They truly transported the reader in a fully formed world with detail and interaction (Sís, 2007). However, with fluidity and ambiguity being central focuses for this project, I did not feel compelled to create a complete world. Instead, my work is represented in purposefully fractured images but ones that are rooted in objects and in sights, in the tangible components of our own world. As discussed with my advisor, hopefully the simplicity of the images will allow children to gain their own insight and interpretation and seek out their own personal truth within these two narratives. I also included some images that are repeated in both stories. Much like the written similarities that I planned (Appendix B), I wanted to have a sense of balance in the images. Therefore, I chose to use some of the same images in both pieces but in different contexts. I also feel that this choice grounds the work into a set time and place that again reinforces the idea that one event can occur and everyone can react their own way.

In advisor meetings with Knapová, we discussed how to ground two such different narratives in a way that would make them comprehensible and compactable. Obviously, the subject matter of the revolution is present in both, but Knapová discussed how she feels that the biggest difference in their narratives is in their physical or geographical location. To her, the events of the revolution were only seen on a TV screen and were not experienced until after the fact; this contributed dramatically to the feelings of uncertainty throughout her community at the time and is relevant to her personal experience with the revolution as well. She didn't know there was anything to revolt about, so it was not only learning about the actual revolution that shocked her, it was all of the years of misinformation, lies, and facades as well (Knapová, 2016). When considering this discussion, I realized that as an outsider and an American, the national narrative

of the Czech Republic in 1989 is absolutely Prague-centric. Knapová confirmed this, saying the events, too, were limited to Prague and other big cities and it left a huge percentage of the country's population with no comprehension of what was happening or what it would mean. Geographic location is something I had not considered before when thinking about the creation of national truths, but as I considered American history, I could see this pattern again and again. I feel that this dichotomy is often countered with arguments centered around phrases such as "cultural hubs", "educated populations", or "available resources", but I think it is incredibly important to consider the privilege of being geographically located in a place that gets to define a national narrative. My solution to this is, I feel, represented in my book; it is not about placing one narrative over another or shifting this "truth center" to a different location. Rather it is about acknowledging the existence of other truths and perspectives and allow for a discourse to get an authentic feel of a nation's truth instead of a curated one.

Another important subject of conversation and further analysis was this idea of stability within truth. This concept was incredibly difficult to represent within the written or visual work of *With Wings and Words* and I do feel that it takes another level of emotional maturity and acknowledgement to truly understand. When interviewing Rejchrt, I noticed that throughout his timeline, his narrative moved from unstable to stable. Due to the position of his father, he grew up with a hyperawareness of the "games" that people had to play around him. He didn't feel as though he had to participate, and it is important to note that he could afford not to, but there was certainly a difference between the "traditional" Czech narrative of navigating life under Communism and Rejchrt's own experience. After the revolution, Rejchrt describes feeling a total sense of liberation. For him, his community moved from unstable to stable because society now

matched the moral and historical truths that he had been taught since he was a child from his father (Rejchrt, 2019). For Knapová, who grew up unaware of the political and social complications of Communism, the revolution was a rapid shift from stable to unstable. While she fully recognizes, then and now, that the revolution was a good thing for the country and for her own opportunities, she still struggled emotionally with the concept of the revolution and what it meant for her own life (Knapová, 2019). Again, I think it is important to consider privilege here and what it means to be in a space where the new national or social truth matches with your own personal truth. Both Rejchrt and Knapová fully recognize the benefits of the revolution and the opportunities in their own lives that they would not have had without it; however, their initial emotional reactions to the event were completely different. It is in truth's nature to be emotionally complex and sometimes even counterintuitive. Yet again, it is important to not discount someone's truth or narrative simply because their emotional reaction does not match your own. Rejchrt even said in his interview when discussing how history classes changed after the revolution, "You don't have to re-learn everything, you have to listen to a different interpretation, which is good" (Rejchrt 2019).

Both of these examples lead us to a larger concept and perhaps one that is most central to my work overall: the concept of the hierarchy of truth. First discussed with Knapová in one of our advisor meetings, this idea has become fundamental to the context of my work. The background of any national truth is the declaration of that truth as a society because some form of collective truth is paramount to social order functioning. However, national truths aren't permanent, as Knapova can testify, and there is the added complication that just because a declaration of collective truth occurred does not mean that everyone actually agrees with it. In

these two interviews, we get examples of both scenarios: where societal and personal truth align (such as Knapová under Communism) and where they don't (such as Rejchrt under Communism). Underlying in every interaction between an individual and a society is the relative alignment of the individual's personal truth with the accepted societal or national truth at the time. Truth is fluid; we can see that after the fall of Communism, Knapová has a transition period of her personal truth to where it aligns with societal truth again. And everything here is a gross simplification of the complexities of truth in general. What is important is that truth functions differently in this hierarchical structure and again, societal or national truth has consequences on individuals. As it shifts, you may find yourself in a more or less favorable position from where you started.

Many of these ideas couldn't be fully represented in *With Wings and Words* but I don't think that matters. After all, *With Wings and Words* was designed to function within these concepts, not define them. Children may not have the capacity to understand the theories around the privilege of truth, but they can understand doing something that you don't want to do because an authority figure says you have to. I feel that children's books are not meant to inform, at least that wasn't my intention with this project. Instead, I wanted to rely on children's natural inclination to ask questions and be curious as a way to encourage these ideas and to begin to establish the concept that both stories can be correct, even if they disagree with each other. I feel that this is especially important in relation to historical events. Because history has much more of an alignment with and reliance on national or social truth, personal perspectives and narratives are more easily erased or ignored. Also, to clarify, this book is not serving to convince children that there is no right or wrong answer. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion on what is their



truth. *With Wings and Words* simply serves as the conversation starter, and it is a conversation that is born out of conflict. As long as there is recognition of the multiplicity and ambiguity of truth, the hierarchy between national and personal truth can be better understood.

As I stated above, I feel that children's literature is perhaps one of the best places to begin to confront these ideas of language, truth, and history. The medium itself is a simplification, a supersaturation of emotional reactions and stories. As I crafted my own work, I had to leave out lots and lots of relevant material. Some of the most compelling portions of the interviews never made it to the page. However, what is present in the final product is voice, narrative, and personal truth. And that truth is not always happy. Narrative and truth are emotionally complex, but after consulting with books such as *Three Golden Keys*, it's clear that great children's literature is not contingent on overwhelming happiness, especially when discussing topics such as freedom and liberation (Sís 2001). This process has shown me how to create balance within a story without losing authenticity and that these deep emotional truths are sometimes best represented with something entirely ordinary, like a girl walking home from school (Appendix C). After all, you cannot have truth without authenticity, and this authenticity can sometimes be painful or confusing or incredibly unclear. The idea of a story is obvious in the world of a child, and a conversation about personal stories and personal truths seems obvious to begin in this phase of curiosity, questioning, and possibility. *With Wings and Words* is the story of a revolution and its people, but the revolution was witnessed not experienced. Therefore, we begin to understand the way these tangible objects of our daily life begin to shift and be reinterpreted with a shift of societal truth. What is left is ourselves and who we become, a transformation of ourselves in the continuous search for truth.

### Conclusion

In my brief and limited investigation into Czech children's literature, I did not manage to find a book that fulfills the niche need that inspired me to create *With Wings and Words*. However, that does not mean that such a book does not exist. But I feel that the cultural and literary significance of my work would not be diminished by such a fact. After all, the intent of this project was to reveal the multiplicity of truth. More narratives within this context means more truths and more ways to inspire children to reconsider their own truth. I know those narratives exist, and I would love to have time and resources to explore them further. Originally, when I was planning this project, I was considering focusing on a different historical event: the German expulsion from the Sudeten regions of Czechoslovakia after World War II. I ultimately decided on the 1989 revolution instead, but I would love to be able to continue or inspire others to continue to use this format to place differing perspectives in conversation. I use the word "differing" here because I feel it is important to show that these perspectives are not contradictory or conflicting. I feel that too often, when discussing history, we box it in the same ways that we think about truth: black and white, right and wrong, villain and victim. Here is a literary opportunity to reveal perspectives that are not included in this dichotomy, and there are boundless ways to continue this project further.

I feel that is important to note here, and perhaps this is evidence to my own point, but all of these theories are incredibly abstract. I want to qualify all of my analysis here by stating that after my research and my creative process, these ideas have become my own personal truth. This paper and my accompanying book are both opportunities for you to consider your own. What is

important here is the consequences of language and narrative in context. I am incredibly proud of the work that I have done here and feel that it was a successful attempt to balance ambiguity with reality. *With Wings and Words* is a piece of fiction that is used to confront the ideas of truth, but I don't think that these two qualities are contradictory. There are always elements of truth in fiction, even if it's the author's own personal truth. *With Wings and Words* is an attempt to use fiction as a conversation between multiple truths, revealing to the reader the narratives of the world around them, seen or unseen. Language is paramount to our ability to communicate our truths and to contextualize them for ourselves. These stories as they are are reflections on the revolution of 1989, and I feel that they have worth as simply that. What I can hope for this work moving forward is a consideration of the truth within fiction and how we are continuously informed and encouraged to look within ourselves by reading and consuming the narratives of others. The more we can understand each other's truths, the more we can understand the collective voices that define societal truth and begin to hold a place at the table for those that are not currently present. As Rejchrt reminded us, it is not re-learning, rather reinterpreting what we have been told and taught. And what better way to begin this than by telling you a story.

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**Appendix A:**Interview Questions

A note: as both interviews were going to be used primarily for data collection and inspiration for stories, many of my questions shifted slightly during the conversation in order to dive deeper on certain aspects that I felt lent themselves to story-telling. However, both interviews followed a general framework inspired by the questions below.

1. Can you tell me a bit about your life in the months leading up to the revolution of 1989?  
-Ask for descriptions of daily life, school life, family, social interactions, discussion and understanding of politics (if any)
2. Can you describe your experiences during the revolution? What was your understanding of what was happening?
3. How did your life change after the revolution? What were your emotional reactions to those changes?
4. Looking back, how would you characterize this period in your life in a few short words?  
- Dominating emotions, concrete details, particularly pivotal moments
5. Can you describe one scene where you fully comprehended the way your life or potentially the larger community/country had changed?
6. Do you remember anything about the way you perceived the future at the time? Did that change after the revolution?  
- Goals/dreams/aspirations, emotional feelings towards the future, outlook and abilities

**Appendix B:**Story Outlines

A note: these story outlines were used in the planning process of my book. They are incomplete and a draft form of the final stories. This chart was used to create parallel structure and some repeated themes in both stories to better create a more unified final product.

PRAGUE	VYŠKOV
Boy grows up with dissident father	Girl grows up in “normal” family
Interaction with communism - secret police	Interaction with communism - tanks in streets
Has a great childhood - friends don’t care about father’s dissidence	Has a great childhood - friends don’t care about military or national background
Knows that all of this is a lie, doesn’t need to play the game	—
Revolution: listened to it on radio, feelings of uncertainty	Revolution: watched it on TV, feelings of uncertainty
—	Learned that all of this was a lie and understands that it was all a game
Scene in Letná: feelings of liberation and collective freedom	Scene with teacher: feelings of disillusionment and individual anger
Wearing tricolore to school: more and more people join	Wearing tricolore to school: more and more children move away
Allowed to study in high school and university	Allowed to study in high school and university
Prague becomes loud and free	Vyškov becomes...
Boy becomes...	Girl becomes...