

## Call for abstracts

International Conference

June 13-14, 2024

# Sport in Children's Literature: Another Look at Bodies in Motion?

*International Conference, organised by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France / Centre National de la Littérature pour la Jeunesse and the Research Center C3S "Culture, Sport, Santé, Société" of the Université de Franche-Comté, in partnership with the Médiathèque Marguerite-Duras of the City of Paris*

The aim of the "Sport in Children's Literature: Another Look at Bodies in Motion?" conference is to gain a better understanding of the representations of sport, physical activity, and bodies in motion found in numerous publications for children and the youth (children's books, novels, documentaries, comic books, manga, children's magazines, tales, video games, etc.). Jointly organised by the Centre national de la littérature pour la jeunesse (CNLJ) and researchers from the "Culture, Sport, Santé, Société" research centre (UR 4660) of the Université de Franche-Comté, this event wishes to analyse the many facets of sport which, in different forms, has become a regular theme in literature and cultural productions designed for the younger generation. The study of these media from a historical perspective is an opportunity to contribute to the renewal of analyses relating to physical activity representations, and to expand, in a general way, the understanding of sport by highlighting other points of view than those usually shared.

## Summary

Nowadays, sporting news - often competitive, spectacular or professional - is widely covered by the media, offering a simplistic view of sports that is solely considered through the prism of performance. On-screen, in print or online, still or moving images often impose a standardised representation of sport and bodies in motion on their various audiences. However, the vision which conforms to the ideal of competitive sport, and which is massively widespread in different media (in the written press, on television, etc.), is not the only existing one. There are many other ways of portraying sport that convey a broader view of this cultural phenomenon. They highlight the variability of forms of sporting practice (educational, competitive, recreational, playful, hygienic, festive, etc.) and allow audiences to grasp the cultural and symbolic diversity of bodily practices.

## Of Sporting Bodies in Children's Literature?

Through their leisure activities and the various educational institutions they attend, children and teenagers are exposed to a wide range of representations of sport daily. The textbooks they come across in their classrooms and the various cultural productions (literature, films, video games, etc.) they are exposed to are all discourses on sports that contribute to the construct of their representations of physical activities. Over the past several decades, countless iconic characters – human or anthropomorphic animals – have practised sport in a more or less academic way in the course of their adventures : Martine, Caroline, Harry Potter, Mortelle Adèle, Tom-Tom et Nana, Astérix et Obélix, Ariol, etc. Are the stories of these famous characters, like those of other less-known heroines and heroes, another mirror identically reflecting the common, mainstream representations of the sporting phenomenon ? While some works do convey this portrayal of the sporting spectacle, a quick look at many productions for the youth (children's press and magazines, tales, novels, children's books and documentaries, comic books, manga, etc.) leads to question this statement.

Today, sport is an unavoidable part of mass culture. Its representation in children's literature, through fiction and documentaries, certainly resonates with several high-profile events, whether it is the Football World Cup in Qatar in December 2022, the organisation of the Rugby World Cup in France in 2023 or the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris 2024. Indeed, as France prepares to host these major international events, sport is more and more at the centre of the media, cultural and scientific attention. Events such as the "J'ai pas dit "Partez!" exhibition organised in 2022 at the André François Centre in Margny-lès-Compiègne on representations of sport in children's literature, and the forthcoming issue of the Cahiers Robinson journal focusing on "representations of sport in literature and culture for children and the youth", testify this renewed interest in the portrayal of sport in productions aimed at children and teenagers.

## Physical Practices through the Prism of Children's Literature

The meaning given to the word "sport" should not be misleading. Some authors do emphasise the competitive dimensions of sport or identify specific criteria to characterise it. However, to understand how children's literature looks at sports, we need to go beyond a restrictive definition that focuses solely on institutionalised confrontation and the quest for performance. This is why the reference to a "broader meaning" in which sport would refer to "any type of physical activity carried out for recreational, hygienic or competitive purposes and within a minimum regulatory framework" is relevant to consider. While it would be pointless to retrace the historiographical debates which exist on the origins of sport or its definition, there are many different ways of looking at sport, just as there are many different ways of practising it. Therefore the portrayal of young characters who are learning how to ride a bike, like little Suzanne in the book entitled *Au bout du monde et sans tomber* or the very popular T'choupi, is no less interesting than the stories of these fast fictional champions like Bernard Filbert, in the novel *Piège sur le Tour de France*, or Alfonsina Strada, the "queen of the bicycle" who took part in many cycle races in the early decades of the 20th century. Furthermore, other physical practices, such as artistic ones (dance, circus, etc.), children's games, traditional games or, to use Pierre Parlebas' classification, "ludomotor" activities, i.e. those "during which the motor action of the participants is relevant" can form part of the corpus studied with their specific features and the different uses of the body that they imply.

For several years, researchers in the humanities and social sciences (history, sociology, anthropology, information and communication sciences, literature, etc.), whether their studies fall within the field of sports studies or not, have been examining the representations of physical activities and bodily practices in children's literature from children's books to novels, comic books, children's magazines, manga, etc. In their work, rather than taking sport as a common, self-evident, historically immutable fact, they analyse its representations for the youth as authentic social constructions. However, these representations circulate from one medium to another. Like the children's books by Canadian authors P. Bourgeois and B. Clark devoted to the character of Franklin the turtle, which have become a successful television series, and Babar, Jean de Brunhoff's hero which has been adapted for the small screen, many examples show this link between children's literature and animation. Although it will primarily focus on works of children's literature, this conference will also be an opportunity to study how these representations of sportspeople resonate with each other from a transmedia perspective, by linking print and audiovisual publications: video games, cartoons, etc. The proposed multidisciplinary approach will enable participants to analyse bodies of work from different genres and media, without focusing solely on the contemporary period or French-language productions, and inevitably taking into account the historical and international nature of cultural creations for the youth. As a result, the debates will also focus on the circulation of representations of bodies in motion, considered in their social dimension, from the production to the reception of cultural works considered from multiple complementary thematic angles.

## Analysing other ways of looking at bodies in motion

The singular voice of children's literature and the various cultural productions associated with it provide an opportunity to explore other ways of looking at sport, to the extent that it may very well contribute to a renewed approach to this cultural phenomenon. Indeed, the discourses shaped in these works are not necessarily produced by sports specialists, revealing other perceptions of bodies in motion than those usually studied. These views are generally produced by adults (illustrators, authors, publishers, etc.) for specific audiences : children and the youth in general. Therefore, it seems essential to study what a society chooses to show about sports and bodily practices to the younger generations, and deconstruct the imaginary images it creates, revealing its myths and beliefs. For example, children's and teenagers' libraries or bedrooms usually include works portraying sporting bodies of various morphologies and physical conditions. These books feature characters who are either puny or muscular, trained or unskilled, clumsy or nimble, athletic or sedentary, exhausted or tireless, vigorous or injured, and so on. These representations need to be questioned all the more as they convey knowledge, standards, values, models and culture to young readers, whether deliberately or not, explicitly or not. However, the latter must not be regarded as passive beings.

All in all, to what extent does children's literature help to reproduce stereotyped representations or create counter-representations of sport ? Indeed, while the representations constructed by children's literature carry in many respects the widely disseminated sporting canons and stereotypes, on the contrary, its authors can adapt sporting codes, divert them, define them differently, play with them, and even transgress them. Their representations of games and bodily leisure activities are all the more interesting in that they are likely to reveal a different view on sport and body in motion from the one relayed by productions influenced by competition and the quest for a spectacular performance. Those dimensions are not absent from children's literature, but the broader vision of sport they offer allows the readers to take a step back and consider other body cultures that take us to places other than stadiums. In these cases, from Super-rabbit Simon who doesn't want to go swimming in Stephanie Blake's book to the Quidditch competitions at Hogwarts, Naruto's training to become a ninja or Gaston Lagaffe's extravagant inventions and sporting clumsiness, doesn't children's literature offer a singular, specific view of physical activities ? Wouldn't the representations produced for the youth allow the emergence of other ways of looking at sport and other views on bodily practices ?

The papers and discussions featured at this conference will look at how children's literature does or does not help to create other ways of understanding the education of the body, how it is put into movement, competition and performance, Olympism, gender, race, and societies' relation to time, nature, health, and so on. The list is far from exhaustive, and proposals to explore other aspects of bodily activities are welcome.

## Event Organisers

Bergonzi Agnès - BnF/CNLJ

Descamps Yann - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Gaillard Romain - BnF/CNLJ

Meyer Virginie- BnF/CNLJ

Planche Marine - BnF/CNLJ

Profillet Lucas - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Vivier Christian - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Voisin Nicolas - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

## Scientific Committee

Bergonzi Agnès - BnF/CNLJ

Descamps Yann - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Gaillard Romain - BnF/CNLJ

Gaiotti Florence - Laboratoire Textes et Cultures (UR 4028), Université d'Artois

Hamaide-Jager Eléonore - Laboratoire Textes et Cultures (UR 4028), Université d'Artois

Huggins Mike - Institute of the Arts, University of Cumbria

Lévêque Mathilde - Pléiade (UR 7338), Université Sorbonne Paris Nord

Meyer Virginie- BnF/CNLJ

Planche Marine - BnF/CNLJ

Profillet Lucas - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Vivier Christian - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

Voisin Nicolas - Laboratoire C3S (UR 4660), Université de Franche Comté

## Submission Guidelines and Deadlines

The conference will take place on 13 and 14 June 2024. The conference will be held on Thursday 13 June in the Petit auditorium of the BnF and on Friday 14 June at the médiathèque Marguerite Duras (Paris).

Papers are welcome in French and English.

Travel and accommodation expenses for speakers will not be covered by the event organisers.

Deadline for proposals : **20 November 2023**.

Authors should send their proposal to the following email addresses: [lucas.profillet@univ-fcomte.fr](mailto:lucas.profillet@univ-fcomte.fr) and [virginie.meyer@bnf.fr](mailto:virginie.meyer@bnf.fr)

Proposals for papers including the title of the paper, an abstract (approximately 500 words), 5 keywords, and a few bibliographical references, should be accompanied by a short presentation (bio-bibliography) of the authors mentioning the institutional affiliation, e-mail address and phone number.

The document, in pdf format, should be named after the first person submitting the proposal in the following format: Surname\_Firstname.pdf

Notification of acceptance by the Scientific Committee: December 2023.

To extend the reflections and exchanges generated by this conference, publication prospects will be considered in a scientific journal yet to be determined.