Children's Literature in Romania

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The domain labeled "children's literature" poses problems in terms of both its definition and historical evolution. The literary histories and panoramas dealing with this particular subject suggest extremely variable timeframes.[1] While several of them trace its origins back to ancient literary works such as Aesop's *Fables*, several others trace its modern roots in the seventeenth century, when John Amos Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1657), penned in German, was translated into several European languages, and English philosopher John Locke put forth a theory of the educational process in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). However, the establishment of children's literature as a major literary genre took place in the nineteenth century in the Western world, at a time when publishing became cheaper, facilitating thus the access of masses to prints (books, magazines, brochures).

As I anticipated, the difficulty of pinpointing its exact time of birth stems from the difficulty of defining and delimiting children's literature. Is it a genre, one similar to romance or crime fiction? Or is it a hypergenre that incorporates and adapts a series of genres and subgenres for a juvenile readership? Is it, then, merely a type of literature addressed particularly to children or, on the contrary, as Jacqueline Rose suggested in her 1984 *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, is it just a form that is illegible to children, a form that incorporates the fantasies of the actual adults who write this type of literature (though there are also works penned by children)?

However, this paper does not set out to shed light on these particular aspects. My aim, a humbler one, is to outline the historical development of the morphology of the domain labelled children's literature—not necessarily under this exact label—in Romania. The concept I work with is largely retroactive: my endeavor focuses on the concept's present meaning and academic significance—the interest shown by academics to this topic is fairly recent—in order to look for and identify the "symptoms" of its development throughout Romania's history.

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1. The Nineteenth Century: Beginnings

When does children's literature begin in Romania? There is no clear answer, due to the referent's mobility. For instance, owing to the way they were taught in school, several nineteenth century canonical writers—Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890), M. Eminescu (1850–1889), I. L. Caragiale (1852–1912)—have been transformed into authors for children through the manipulation (selection and recontextualization) of a series of their works—for instance Eminescu's epic poem *The Third Letter* or Caragiale's short stories—which had not been intended for such an audience.

The easiest way for the ones trying to identify a proto-literature for children in Romania is to look for it in folk books,[2] highly spectacular narrative religious and lay writings that circulated in manuscript in the Romanian Principalities throughout the sixteenth century, and fairytales, whose oral transmission began to be set in print during the nineteenth century by printers or folklorists such as Petre Ispirescu (1830–1887). Fairytales, especially the fantastic ones, are in fact the main ingredient of Romanian children's literature and continue even to this day to be either a creative or a parodic source of inspiration.

The most important role in the birth of a proper children's literature was played by the so-called "great classics" of the Junimea (The Youth) group in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a time when modern Romania became a nation state following the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), when its independence was recognized. As a matter of fact, the group's leader, literary critic and Conservative Party member Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917), is directly involved in the educational system as he serves as minister of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction between 1874 and 1876, in which capacity he proposes a series of measures.[3] M. Eminescu, the so-called "national poet" of Romania, who, between 1877 and 1883, was a journalist with *Timpul* (The Times) newspaper, the official platform of the Conservative Party, addresses more than once matters pertaining to education. He engages in various polemics with *Românul* (The Romanian), the Liberal Party's official newspaper—the enemy of the conservatives, which favored a more technical view of the knowledge that should be acquired in primary school. For instance, the liberals suggested that students be taught agronomy rather than "poems and moral stories." As a matter of fact, in a mainly agrarian country, where the majority of pupils were the sons of peasants, the proposition was highly pragmatic. However, Eminescu was against such a pragmatic approach. In July 1880, he pleaded in favor of the humanities, taught in keeping with a nationalistic view, suggesting that "a primer intended for the primary school" ought to be

> *a book that contains descriptions of the country, detailed accounts of its past, depictions of the country's great figures, pieces of folk literature and arts . . . it instills in thousands of people the same love for the past of their land; it transforms, as suggested, a large mass of individuals living on the same piece of land into a nation that builds a country.*[4]

Eminescu also commented on Ispirescu's fairy tale collections. Though he admitted that they were not original in terms of narrative content (the "matter"), as they could be re-

duced to "a certain number of prototypes" whose origins could be found in Scandinavia, Germany and "some other places"—even a hero like Păcală, a seemingly local figure, has its roots in "Andersen's *Fairy Tales* and several other sources"—Eminescu praised the fairy tales for their language and the adaptations to the local specificity:

> *What is most original in them is the way they are told, that particular Romanian language that dresses them up, the particular changes that are in keeping with the local specificity, with our spirit and traditions.*[5]

As a matter of fact, Eminescu himself, a late Romantic writer, was an important collector of fairy tales. He also wrote a literary fairy tale, *Făt-Frumos din lacrimă* (Prince Charming of the Tear), which, although constructed along the lines of the Romantic tradition, moved away stylistically from the simple everyday language, as it was bookish and overwritten. Another writer of the Junimea group who also wrote fairy tales was I. Slavici. Conversely, I. L. Caragiale only penned a parody, *Făt-Frumos cu moţ în frunte* (Prince Charming with a quiff), which lampooned the fashion of literary fairy tales. However, much more important is the contribution of Ion Creangă. His *Amintiri din copilărie* (Childhood memories) contains many highly expressive and, at the same time, documentary pages on the stern learning process to which children were subjected during mid-nineteenth century, in an educational system that was mainly controlled by the Orthodox Church.[6] Himself a priest for a while, only to be defrocked afterwards due to a series of eccentric gestures, Creangă penned primers and several short stories and fairy tales which, alongside *Childhood Memories*, became part of the Romanian children's literature canon.

2. The Interwar Period: Explorations

AT THE time when Romania was developing into a modern and secular state, the first half of the twentieth century and especially the interwar period witnesses the professionalization of the domain through authors such as Emil Gârleanu (1878–1914), I. Al. Brătescu-Voineşti (1868–1946), Elena Farago (1878–1954), or Otilia Cazimir (1894–1967). These authors produce a variety of works in terms of genre and subgenre, from short stories that feature animals (Gârleanu), through naturalistic moral stories (Brătescu-Voineşti), to poems that seem to have been written with the aim of being included into primers (Farago, Cazimir). Apart from these rather didactic writers, several canonical authors are also drawn to the field—Tudor Arghezi included the poem "Cântec de adormit Mitzura" (A song to put Mitzura to sleep) in his 1927 collection *Cuvinte potrivite* (Fitting words), while Mihail Sadoveanu published short stories such as *Dumbrava minunată* (The enchanted grove, 1926). A popular novelist such as Cezar Petrescu publishes *Fram, ursul polar* (Fram, the polar bear, 1931), one the best-sellers of Romanian children's literature, which tells the story of a bear, a circus celebrity, that feels nostalgic about his homeplace and thus returns to the North Pole during an expedition only to discover that he can no longer adapt to the "amoral" struggle for sur-

vival specific to the "wilderness" and therefore wants to go back to human civilization. The prolific Petrescu plans an entire series titled *Cărţi pentru copii* (Books for children), which is merely a part of his ambitious Balzac-inspired project titled *Cronica românească a veacului XX* (The Romanian chronicle of the twentieth century). In addition to those, there are a series of publications dedicated to comic strips—*Dimineaţa copiilor* (The children's morning), *Universul copiilor* (The children's universe)—which build on local characters such as Haplea, Păcală and others and are based on scripts by Moş Nae (Nicolae Batzaria) with drawings by Constantin Jiquidi, Ary Murnu, or Charles Benedek.[7]

The interwar period also witnesses the first attempts to provide a theory of the phenomenon. One of the earliest such attempts is undertaken by Izabela Sadoveanu in her 1930 article "Literatura copiilor" (Children's literature).[8] Aware of the insufficiently developed local and international research on the subject, Izabela Sadoveanu draws on a series of Anglo-American sources, on the basis of which she presents and interprets the results of several surveys of reading preferences in terms of children's literature. Her article approaches gender differences in terms of reading preferences from an evolutionist perspective:

> *girls read a lot more poems, fantastic and sentimental stories, than boys. Boys are more interested in adventures, struggle and courage, especially if it involves some form of competition and mystery. The themes that girls like are taken from the everyday life of households and boarding schools, of families and groups of young and lively girls. This is the reason why* ***Little Women*** *is enjoyed by so many. Girls are more interested in domestic animals, while boys prefer the wild ones. . . . G. Stanley Hall explains this preference through atavism, suggesting that men were once primitive hunters, while women dealt with the domestication of animals that were supposed to serve man.*

Furthermore, the article analyzes the negative consequences for the development of children of a literature intended for the masses that consists of works that "have neither informative nor literary value":

> *These types of works stir up children's desire for adventure, they falsify their representation of life and the real world and pose a real threat to their development, but, most importantly, they are detrimental to their literary education.*

This argument would become dominant after 1948, during the years of socialist realism.

The topic of children's literature was also addressed by mainstream literary critics such as E. Lovinescu, in his *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* (History of contemporary Romanian literature, 1926–1929). In the volume dedicated to poetry, *Evoluţia poeziei lirice* (The evolution of lyrical poetry, 1927), Lovinescu comments on works such as Emanoil Bucuţa's *Cântece de leagăn* (Nursery rhymes) or Emil Dorian's *Cântece pentru Lelioara* (Songs for Lelioara), which he places under the sign of the "miniature," superimposing thus the young age of the children to whom the collections are dedicated to onto the poems' rhetoric and literary value, about which the critic is rather skeptical. The attention shown by Lovinescu to this type of literature is rather unusual and it there-

fore attracts the irony of G. Călinescu, his younger rival, who criticizes him for having a "feminine" temperament for the simple fact that he addressed this type of works: "Mr. Lovinescu is a feminine who takes part, along with the poet, in the thrills of birth."[9] In the book dedicated to prose, *Evoluţia "prozei literare"* (The evolution of "literary prose," 1928), Lovinescu discusses the literature about children—and at least partially—for children contained by the first book, *Hotarul nestatornic* (The fickle border, 1925) of Ionel Teodoreanu's highly successful series *La Medeleni* (At the Medeleni). Lovinescu observes that, given the undeveloped personality of children, they cannot be the subject of larger narrative constructions and they are much more suited for short stories. On behalf of the readers, the critic, using a slightly ironic tone, declares himself to be the victim of the numerous pages in which Ionel Teodoreanu let his children-characters express themselves through a series of inconsequential actions. In the updated and abridged 1937 version of his *History*, Lovinescu would suggest a correlation between the theme of childhood and a pre-modernist phase of literature, a "patriarchal," idyllic phase that essentially has no literary value.

3. Communism: Accelerated and Controlled Development

Communism (1948–1989) is the golden age of Romanian children's literature, a golden age that British literature experienced in the nineteenth century. Owing to ideological reasons, the communist Romanian state invests massively in the cultural infrastructure, thus imposing its control and ideological agenda. The genres of popular literature are privileged, be they science-fiction, detective fiction, or adventure fiction. The attitude of communism towards all these is one of ambivalence: on the one hand, it oversees and suppresses the "gratuitous" attempts at "sensationalist fiction," in which it identifies the symptoms of dehumanizing capitalist regimes, whereas, on the other, it stimulates through a controlled allocation of funds the development of genres desired and enjoyed by the masses, at the same time using its infrastructure in order to deliver its propaganda.[10]

As of 1948, the year when the communist regime was officially established in Romania, the communist action starts by removing all capitalist elements. During the first years of communism, a large number of articles criticize the decadent nature of mass market literature of the old regime, be it comic strips, thrillers, detective novels or children's literature.[11]

Once these problems are resolved, even if only partially, communism moves forward towards the development of children's literature. Peak effervescence was reached during the 1950s, following the discussions in the USSR, initiated after the Second Congress of Soviet Writers of December 1954, on the topic of the literature "for children and the youth"—this category is still operational within the Union of Romanian Writers and it is an institutional creation of communism, dating back to 1949. Following this date,

numerous articles are printed in Romania and numerous debates are initiated, covered by newspapers such as *Scânteia tineretului* (The Spark of the Youth).

The topic is of so much interest that even G. Călinescu, the most important literary critic of the time, addresses it on several occasions. In his 1958 article "Jules Verne şi literatura pentru copii" (Jules Verne and children's literature), he suggests that children's literature should address an adult readership too, should be accessible to the masses and have a rational and non-mystical character: "What is of importance is the triumph of man."[12] The aspect addressed by G. Călinescu implicitly as well as explicitly has to do with one of the interdictions imposed on children's literature during the first years of communism, when socialist realism, which is the de facto dominant ideology until the first half of the 1960s, reached the highest level of dogmatism. It concerns the mistrust which had been hitherto shown towards the fantastic genre, which was considered to be mystical and moving away from realism. This mistrust was shown even to fairy tales, that is, to an important part of children's literature, in which fantastic elements played an important role. The fantastic would be rehabilitated only after Stalin's death and, in fact, only during the 1960s. The fantastic fairy tales, however, would be rehabilitated much earlier and collected in books such as *Basme* (Fairy tales, 1953) and *Basmele omului* (The fairy tales of man, 1958) by Vladimir Colin (1921–1991), or *În ţara legendelor* (In the land of legends, 1956) by Alexandru Mitru. These stories emphasize the class struggle between the heroes and other oppressive elements, magical (dragons) or non-magical (rich people, boyars, kings).

Among the most important authors of the 1950s are the prolific writers Octav Pancu-Iaşi (1929–1975) and Gica Iuteş (1925–2018). However, the bestsellers of the time are *Toate pânzele sus!* (Make all sail!, 1954) by Radu Tudoran and *Cireşarii* (Teenagers from the cherry neighborhood, 1956) by Constantin Chiriţă. *Make All Sail!* is an adventure novel with pirates in the style of Robert Louis Stevenson that depicts the adventures of a schooner during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Conversely, *Teenagers from the Cherry Neighborhood*—the first book of a series of five—is set in the contemporary communist society, focusing on a group of pupils from a small provincial town who explore caves, fight off groups of fascists and criminals, track treasures or solve detective mysteries. Their commercial success notwithstanding—as they were reprinted several times to this day—at the moment of their publication these novels faced ideological criticism, which shows the extent of the regime's ambiguity in relation to adventure fiction, including the one intended for children and the youth. Commenting, in 1958 in the newspaper *Scânteia tineretului*, on *Castelul fetei în alb* (The castle of the girl in white), the second book in the *Cireşarii* series, N. Velea argues that

> *It would have been appropriate . . . for the writer to insist more on the sense of collectivity and the pioneer ethics of the teenagers. The book would have thus acquired a marked up-to-date character, while the young readers, apart from thrilling adventures, would have found in it the allure of a novel which depicts your own thoughts and preoccupations.*

With regard to the quantitative aspect of the efforts undertaken by the communist regime towards the development of children's literature, the magazine Cartea (The Book) noted in the 1956 article "După 12 ani..." (Twelve years later…):

> *The Youth Press incessantly prints thousands and thousands of richly illustrated books for children. 727 titles, totaling 16,746,988 copies, have been printed from 1 January 1949 until 1 April 1956.*[13]

Over time, children's literature manages to gain partial autonomy in relation to ideological requirements, though it continues to be exposed to them until the fall of communism in 1989, and becomes more diverse. The Youth Publishing House, whose tasks are transferred at the end of the 1960s to the Ion Creangă Publishing House and to the Albatross Publishing House, publishes poetry collections, historical fiction, science-fiction novels and stories, adventure fiction set in contemporaneity, among many others. Simultaneously, a great number of translated works are being published. A moment of great importance is the publication of Catinca Ralea's translation of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit by the Ion Creangă Publishing House in 1975, with drawings by Livia Rusz.

Furthermore, there is also a subversive current flowing through the children's book industry during communism. During the 1950s, authors such as Gellu Naum or Nina Cassian, who before communism had been writing in the surrealist or modernist style, which was at this point deemed decadent, find refuge in children's literature, which was considered to be less risky. During the 1980s, a book intended for children by Ana Blandiana, Întâmplări de pe strada mea (Occurrences on my street), is withdrawn from the market as the censorship apparatus identified in it allusions to Nicolae Ceauşescu, the leader of communist Romania, and the poet is therefore banned. Following the fall of communism, Blandiana, a rather privileged figure of the regime, would claim the status of a dissident, one which she had never had as a matter of fact.

4. Post-Communism: The Age of Cloning

FOLLOWING 1989, the children's book industry suffers, together with the entire book industry, from fractured balance—attentively managed during communism, in keeping with the protectionist policies—between local production and translations. The main publishing houses experience the shockwave produced by the entrance of ex-communist Romania into the neoliberal global market: while Ion Creangă Publishing House goes bankrupt, Albatross Publishing House changes its line of business. Their role is taken over by private publishing houses, such as Nemira Publishing, which, although centered on the science-fiction genre, during the 1990s creates a children's book series titled "Paganel." However, it would take the international commercial success of the Harry Potter series, which was also translated into Romanian, to incentivize the global growth of the children's literature market in order for the local book indus-

try to become interested, as of the year 2000, in this niche. Publishing houses such as Corint, Humanitas, Art, or Nemira start to invest in this sector. The majority of the titles published during that period are initially translations. However, the 2010s saw a boom in local production. The "Junior" collection of Polirom Publishing House, albeit dominated by translations, features many more Romanian writers, such as Veronica D. Niculescu, Flavius Ardelean, Diana Geacăr, and Dan Lungu. The titles are marketed in a much more specialized way than during communism; childhood and adolescence—generic labels during communism—are broken down into more specific age groups (2–5 years, 11–12 years and so on), although more general age groups are introduced too, such as Young Adult. However, along with the quantitative and qualitative development of the Romanian children's book industry, the general impression is that the majority of Romanian writers clone and adapt successful Western titles or genres, in much the same way as the Romanian authors of the 1950s cloned Soviet literature. However, unlike in the 1950s, contemporary children's literature has not managed to offer books that enjoy the same critical acclaim that *Make All Sail!* or *Teenagers from the Cherry Neighborhood* gained during communism.

Although there are several authors specialized in children's literature, most of them are writers established within the mainstream who approach in a more or less opportunistic fashion a profitable niche. Nevertheless, there are versatile authors who achieve peak performance both in mainstream fiction as well as in children's literature. An example would be Lavinia Braniştе, who, in parallel to the novels and short story collections that focus on the social, economic and sentimental dynamics of the 30–40 age group in contemporary Romania, established herself as the most important writer of children's literature, first and foremost through the four books of the "Rostogol" series, illustrated by young artist Andrei Măceşanu: *Rostogol merge acasă* (Rostogol returns home, 2016), *Rostogol păzeşte pepenii* (Rostogol guards the watermelons, 2017), *Rostogol şi vulcanii noroioşi* (Rostogol and the mud volcanoes, 2018) şi *Rostogol iluzionist* (Rostogol, the magician, 2021). The series depicts the adventures of a piglet and his friends of other species, which reference recognizable social classes and groups as well as phenomena peculiar to post-communist Romania, ranging from the migration of the workforce to themes such as ecology.

Conclusions

The evolution of children's literature in Romania is suggestive for a series of correlations between a literary genre or hypergenre and the general economic, political, ideological parameters. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the Romanian state was "invented" and its educational system was still in a rudimentary shape and dependent on the Orthodox Church, the main form of children's literature is the archaic one of the fairy tales. Along with the economic development of the first half of the twentieth century and the development of the educational infrastructure, a relatively professional children's literature begins to develop, though the

theoretical interest in it remains low. It is only following the establishment of communism and the state's massive—and ideologically-interested—investment in the cultural and educational domain that a rich children's literature develops. In the beginning it is highly influenced by the socialist realist ideology, but a relative autonomy and complexity would be reached over time. The fall of communism in 1989 and the connection of Romania to global neoliberalism produce an initial crisis, followed by a reinvention and even a boom in the children's book industry. Nevertheless, apart from a few exceptions, the local production continues to be a clone of Western bestsellers, which are not only translated, but also doubled through imitation/adaptation to the local specificity.

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Notes

1. See M. O. Grenby, *Children's Literature*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2008); John Stephens et al., eds., *The Routledge Companion to International Children's Literature* (London–New York: Routledge, 2018); Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (London etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella, *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2019).
2. Gheorghe Chivu, "Cărţi populare," in *Dicţionarul general al literaturii române*, gen. ed. Eugen Simion, 2nd rev., enl. and updated edition, vol. 2, *C* (Bucharest: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2016), 225–229.
3. Titu Maiorescu, *Opere*, vol. 3, *Discursuri parlamentare*, edited, foreword, notes and bibliography by D. Vatamaniuc, introduction by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Fundaţia Naţională pentru Ştiinţă şi Artă; Univers Enciclopedic, 2006), 254–280.
4. M. Eminescu, *Opere*, vol. 4, *Publicistică*, edited by D. Vatamaniuc, foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2000), 1496–1499.
5. Eminescu, 4: 1333–1346.
6. Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (London–New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).
7. Dodo Niţă and Alexandru Ciubotariu, *Istoria benzilor desenate româneşti 1891–2010*, foreword by Adrian Cioroianu (Bucharest: Vellant, 2010).
8. Izabela Sadoveanu, "Literatura copiilor," *Adevărul literar şi artistic* (Bucharest) 11, 477 (1930), in *Cărţi şi idei: Pagini de critică literară*, vol. 2, edited and foreword by Margareta Feraru (Bucharest: Fundaţia Naţională pentru Ştiinţă şi Artă, Academia Română, Institutul de Istorie şi Teorie Literară "G. Călinescu," 2002), 16–20.
9. G. Călinescu, "Eugen Lovinescu," *Gândirea* (Bucharest) 7, 12 (1927): 354.
10. Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane 1990–2020* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2021). For science-fiction, see Ştefan Baghiu, "The Functions of Socialist Realism: Translation of Genre Fiction in Communist Romania," *Primerjalna književnost* 42, 1 (2019): 119–132.

11. See, for instance, Andrei Băleanu, "Maculatura otrăvită a vechii 'literaturi pentru tineret' trebuie să dispară!," *Tănărul muncitor* (Bucharest) 2, 76 (1948). On the blacklist indicated by Băleanu were *Moş Nae* by Nicolae Batzaria, *Păcală* by Petre Dulfu, *The Legends of the Holy Grail*, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books, and novels by obscure Romanian commercial writers such as D. Ionescu-Morel or Nicolae G. Rădulescu-Niger.
12. G. Călinescu, *Opere: Publicistică*, vol. 9 *(1958–1959)* edition coordinated by Nicolae Mecu, text edited, notes and commentaries by Alexandra Ciocârlie, Alexandru Farcaş, Nicolae Mecu, Pavel Ţugui, and Daciana Vlădoiu, foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română, Fundaţia Naţională pentru Ştiinţă şi Artă, 2010), 527.
13. "După 12 ani...," *Cartea* (Bucharest) 1, 1 (1956).

Abstract

Children's Literature in Romania

The present paper traces the evolution of children's literature in Romania from the nineteenth century to the present day. It suggests the existence of four phases that are associated with the political and ideological evolution of the Romanian state. The first stage begins in the second half of the nineteenth century, in correlation with the emergence of the independent Romanian state. A period of consolidation follows in the interwar period, mirroring the effective modernization of the state. The communist period sees the boom of children's literature, produced by massive, ideologically controlled state investments in literature. Finally, the fall of communism in 1989 and the connection of Romania to global neoliberalism produce an initial crisis, followed by a reinvention and even a new boom in the children's book industry.

Keywords

Romanian literary history, children's literature, genre, fairytales, communism