



## Achieving a Shared Understanding of Life

### Artists' reflections on their constructions of the past and the self in traumatic and nostalgic autobiographical picturebooks

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#### ABSTRACT

When sharing the own life story through a picturebook, artists are expected to be influenced by several factors: their motive for creating an autobiographical picturebook, the construction of their past self and present self through the interplay of text and image, and social, historical and cultural factors and the flow of time between the past and the present. Creators of autobiographical picturebooks may, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect on how these factors have influenced the construction of their life narrative. This article analyzes Peter Sís's *The wall* (2007) and Ed Young's *The house Baba built* (2011). In both autobiographical picturebooks, the 'hand of the artist' cannot be overlooked. The artistic choices show how Sís's book is based on traumatic memories of his childhood experiences, whereas Young's book is a nostalgic reflection on his safe and happy childhood. Both artists have been influenced by the social context of their past, but they differ in reflecting on these influences. Sís does not inform the reader about how the book is created or about what led him to making certain choices. Young, on the other hand, reflects explicitly on his process of remembering and creating the book. This article shows how such explicit reflection affects the relation between the life narrator and the reader. Because 'autobiographical truth' can be understood as an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader, ideally leading to a shared understanding of the meaning of a life, the narrator's explicit reflection on the factors influencing the construction of the life story may ease this 'shared understanding'. As the books discussed here are examples of 'crossover picturebooks', future research

may discover whether a shared understanding of life is achieved alike for adult and younger readers.

### ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

Wie zijn levensverhaal in prentenboekvorm vertelt, wordt door diverse factoren beïnvloed: door de motieven voor het maken van zo'n autobiografisch prentenboek, door de constructie van het 'vroegere' en 'huidige zelf' in een samenspel van tekst en beeld, en door sociale, historische en culturele factoren en het verstrijken van de tijd tussen het verleden en het heden. Op de invloed van deze factoren kunnen makers van autobiografische prentenboeken in meerdere of mindere mate reflecteren. In dit artikel worden *The wall* (2007) van Peter Sís en *The house Baba built* (2011) van Ed Young geanalyseerd. In beide boeken is 'de hand van de maker' onmiskenbaar. De artistieke keuzes die zijn gemaakt laten zien dat het boek van Sís is gebaseerd op traumatische herinneringen aan gebeurtenissen in zijn jeugd, terwijl Youngs boek een nostalgische terugblik is op een veilige en gelukkige kindertijd. Ze zijn beiden beïnvloed door de sociale context van hun verleden, maar ze verschillen in de mate waarin ze daarop reflecteren. Sís geeft de lezer geen informatie over hoe hij het boek heeft gecreëerd en over waarom hij bepaalde keuzes heeft gemaakt. Young, daarentegen, reflecteert expliciet op zijn herinneringsproces en op het maken van het boek. Dit artikel laat zien dat zulke openlijke reflectie de relatie tussen de verteller en de lezer beïnvloedt. 'Autobiographical truth' kan namelijk worden opgevat als een intersubjectieve uitwisseling tussen de verteller en de lezer, wat idealiter leidt tot een gedeeld begrip van de betekenis van het leven van de verteller. Openlijke reflectie op wat de constructie van het levensverhaal heeft beïnvloed, kan dit 'gedeelde begrip' vergemakkelijken. Aangezien de besproken boeken voorbeelden zijn van 'crossover' prentenboeken, kan toekomstig onderzoek uitwijzen of dit 'gedeelde begrip van iemands leven' op dezelfde wijze tot stand komt voor volwassen en jongere lezers.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, life writing, picturebook, memory, self, trauma, nostalgia

## INTRODUCTION: LIFE NARRATIVES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Though 'life writing' (Eakin 2004) may not be a genre that is usually associated with the field of books for young people, children's literature is equally as able to convey life stories as are texts which are mainly aimed at an adult audience. Since children's literature conveys all sorts of

knowledge to an audience of young readers (Hunt 1990; Stephens 1992; Reynolds 2007), life writing in children's literature can convey what is remembered by individuals in a particular society, and how it is remembered (Smith & Watson 2010). Examples of life writing in children's literature are Roald Dahl's *Boy* (1984) and *Going solo* (1986), Johanna Reiss's *The upstairs room* (1990), Bart Moeyaert's *Broere* ('Brothers', 2000), and, more recently, Sherman Alexie's *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian* (2007) and Jacqueline Wilson's *Jackie Daydream* (2007) and *My secret diary* (2009). In these books, adult authors tell about their (childhood) memories to an intended audience of child readers.<sup>1</sup> All of these examples are predominantly textual books, though the cartoons by Ellen Forney in Sherman Alexie's book, for instance, strongly contribute to the story. Whereas life writing in text has been the object of children's literature studies (Van Lierop 1997; Lathey 1999; Davis 2003, 2006; Kokkola 2003), much less attention has been paid to multimodal life writing in children's literature, that is: life writing through both text and images. Articles by Lathey (2003) and Kümmerling-Meibauer (2010) are two of the few exceptions.

The genre in children's literature in which text and images come together, is the genre of picturebooks. A picturebook is characterized by its innovative combination of the semiotic codes of text and image. Following Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), I adopt the spelling 'picturebook' instead of 'picture book'. Whereas the latter refers in their opinion to books with pictures – in which the story is still understandable if the pictures are left out – the genuine picturebook creates a story not just through text, but through the ways textual and visual elements work together (Sipe 1998).<sup>2</sup> I refer to this collaboration with the term 'interplay' of text and image.

This article addresses the act of life writing in two recent autobiographical picturebooks, *The wall* by Peter Sís (2007) and *The house Baba built* by Ed Young (2011). First, the question will be addressed why authors would choose to share their life stories in the public space and why these two particular artists chose to do this. Second, it is clear that the artists who tell their own life story in these picturebooks, must have created younger versions of themselves as 'child characters' in their stories. It will be analyzed how the 'present self' (the adult artist) and the 'past self' (the child protagonist in the story)<sup>3</sup> relate to each other and how they are shaped through the interplay of text and image. Third, it is assumed that the presentation of the past and the self is influenced by social, historical and cultural factors and the flow of time between then and now. This article will show whether or not Peter Sís and Ed Young reflect on what influenced them in sharing their life narratives in the particular ways they do.

Finally, the article reflects on what this means for a ‘shared understanding of life’ between the artist and the readers of the picturebook.

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

### Traumatic and nostalgic life stories

Traditionally, the main motive for creating a life narrative has been the exploration of self-consciousness (Gusdorf 1956), although it is not limited to the contemporary self-consciousness: a life narrator is likely to reflect not only on the current self, but also on the past self and its development toward the current self. Lathey (1999) states: ‘Autobiography is a natural site for [...] exploration of the younger self’ (19). In addition to this rather general motive of exploring the self, in children’s literature we can discern more specific motivations for telling one’s own life story (Ghesquière 2009, 37), which can roughly be divided into two categories.

First, the experience of a traumatic event may lead to sharing this personal story in public, for instance having experienced a war or genocide, disability or illness, discrimination and racism, the loss of a loved one, and so on. Such a traumatic or misery life narrative (a term derived from Rothe 2011) can firstly function as therapeutic intervention in order to cope with the event(s) that happened (‘scriptotherapy’; Henke, in Smith & Watson 2010, 29) and second, it is a way to honor and respect other victims or people who experience the same. Moreover, it can contribute to the preservation of the collective memory and it can simultaneously warn for repetition in the future, for instance regarding collective traumas such as the Holocaust, Apartheid, and 9/11. Fourth, a traumatic life narrative can represent the voices of others and can therefore become a powerful act of resistance against an established order (Beard 2010; for examples, see Sommer 1988); and finally, it may show readers a counter story, opposite to what is usually presented to them – think of personal experiences of ill or disabled persons (see Frank 2004) or ethnic minority groups (see Gullestad 2004).

Leibovici (2007) describes trauma as ‘a wound, a deprivation caused by an event’ (3, my translation). The trauma itself only arises as a response to the event. The event itself is not experienced as traumatic, but the response to it and all memories of it indeed are experienced as such. Coping with a trauma therefore means reliving it (Leibovici 2007). In children’s literature studies, ‘discussions of trauma have largely focused on the Holocaust and have taken a psychological approach’ (Capshaw Smith 2005, 115). Related to Holocaust literature for children, Joosen and Vloeberghs (2008) notice that in children’s literature usually a message of

hope is conveyed and possibilities for change and improvement are elaborated. Complete skepticism and disillusion are avoided. We may expect to find this in trauma life writing for children as well. Capshaw Smith (2005) further notes that, generally speaking and acknowledging the risk of oversimplifying the matter, ‘constructions of children’s responses to trauma (whether in books or in popular culture) generally adhere to two poles’ (115). On the one hand, ‘because children are imagined as innocent, they are figured almost iconographically as the ultimate victims of trauma, those who require above all else adult protection and guidance’ (ibid.). On the other hand, they are also depicted as ‘those who can offer adults spiritual advice in how to triumph over pain through simple, honest, essential values like love, trust, hope, and perseverance’ (ibid.).

The second type of motive for writing a life narrative would be ‘nostalgia’, a term composed from the Greek ‘nostos’ (‘returning home’), and ‘algia’ (‘longing’; Boym 2001, xiii). This longing may go hand in hand with feelings of dissatisfaction concerning the present individual life and society. Hutcheon (1998) points out that nostalgia may not actually refer to ‘returning home’, but rather depends on ‘the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power’ (19–20). In this sense, nostalgia is characterized by projecting present longings on the past. It may be understood as a sentimental longing for a *fictionalized* past (Urban 2007), because ‘the present lacks the simplicity, the values, the opportunities – a set of indeterminate qualities that make the past so desirable’ (325). Bonnett (2010) takes a quite different position in stating that nostalgia was historically used for radical and positive purposes.

Nostalgia clearly is a ‘traveling concept’ (Bal 2002), to which various meanings can be allocated. In relation to life writing in children’s literature, nostalgia may be the author’s reason for recreating the memories of his childhood on the pages of a (picture)book. In line with this, a nostalgic longing to the personal past may go hand in hand with the desire to make a testament for or bring a tribute to the people, the atmosphere and the events in one’s childhood.

### The constructed past

Up to this point, remembering seems a fairly active process; the motives for life narratives elaborated above seem to imply that the life narrator has full control over what is remembered and, above all, how these memories are used to create a narrative. An objective recalling of the past, however, is considered impossible.

First of all, we simply lack the cognitive ability to remember every detail of what we have experienced. Second, our memories are always altered by our subconscious, as Freud has argued (De Bloois & Peeren 2010). Especially in case of traumatic events, psychiatry learns that it is not uncommon that the remembering of some experiences is suppressed and that one has no conscious memories of these events. Third, Smith and Watson (2010) argue that remembering is never truly individual, autonomous and objective. What we remember and what not, and how we remember it, is determined by several factors beyond ourselves. Not only are the personal memories and sources of memory (like photographs, objects and family stories) of life narrators shaped by social, cultural, historical, situational and political influences, they also make use of public sources that are affected by these influences, such as documents or recordings of historical events. The act of personal remembering, Smith and Watson conclude, is therefore always social and collective: life narratives are ‘records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time, and in their relation to their own ever-moving pasts’ (30). In this respect, Rosenfield (1988) states convincingly: ‘Every context will alter the nature of what is recalled’ (in Eakin 1999, 19).

Smith and Watson (2010) emphasize that ‘memory’ and ‘experience’ are not the same: experience, they state, is mediated through memory and language and is therefore already ‘an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present’ (31). Gusdorf (1956) already stated that an autobiography is never an objective reproduction of the past. Rather, it retraces a development over time and ‘it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality’ (in Broughton 2007, 85). An autobiography, thus, is first and foremost an interpretation of the past. The past as it is presented in a personal life narrative, then, is not completely, accurately and objectively the past *as it has been* in former times. In a life narrative, the past is therefore not *reconstructed* but rather *constructed*. It strongly relates to the present time and to the period in between, in which the memories have been influenced and altered.

This, of course, cannot be seen apart from the person who has formed the experiences of the past and remembers them: the ‘self’ of the one creating the life narrative. Currently, autobiographical criticism no longer holds on to notions of a sovereign, coherent self as once assumed by Gusdorf (1956) and Olney (1972). Ever since (post-)structuralist perspectives on literature originated, it is widely accepted that social forces and semiotic codes shape a text. The life narrator therefore is therefore no longer seen as a unique, unchanging self (Lathey 1999): he or she has no full, conscious control over the narrative that is created. Eakin (1999) speaks in this context about ‘the myth of autonomy’ (43) and takes this

argumentation even a step further, by stating that we have what he calls a 'narrative identity'. This term refers to the idea that someone who currently creates the own life story, has already been influenced and formed by this narration, because we can only speak of ourselves in narrative terms. The story is not created on the moment the life narrator sits down and starts to write or draw; rather, it has been gradually formed during life and has constantly been reformed by new experiences.

### The past self and the present self

Nevertheless, there is, naturally, someone telling the story of the own life. In life narratives in children's literature, the creators usually tell about the period when they were a child or a young adult (as in, for instance, all the examples mentioned in the introduction of this article). In these cases, there is someone who creates the story in the present time, as well as there is a younger version of this person who appears as a character in the narrative. I will refer to these entities as the 'present self' (the life narrator *creating* the story) and the 'past self' (the child character *in* the story). These two selves may seem separate entities when reading a life narrative, but we should keep in mind that it is a rather pragmatic distinction: in reality, the present self and the past self blend or melt into each other and they have no clear boundaries. Together, they form the concept of *self*, which is most certainly not a united, fixed entity. In this article, the concept refers to the 'conceptual self' (Neisser 1988), which can best be seen as a fluid and indeed narrative-based concept (cfr. Eakin 1999) that changes during life, enabling us to reflect on our thoughts, feelings, actions, social interactions, bodies, and so on.

As the self changes over time, the past self and the present self most likely do not resemble each other at all. Both selves consist of multiple identities, which are also changing over time. Identities are socially constructed and are partly based on continuums between two poles: girl-boy, child-adult, homosexual-heterosexual, and so on. Identities are productions which are always in process (Hall 1994; in Smith & Watson 2010). This implies that the present self (the adult life narrator) may have completely different identities than the past self (the child character in the story). Nevertheless, we still are able to recognize someone as a specific person, no matter how much he or she changes during his or her life – we could think of Michael Jackson's identity changes as an excellent example. Precisely the life narrative is essential here: only by having knowledge of one's life story, we can identify two apparently completely different persons – the child and the adult – as one and the same person. The life narrative, then, is the glue that sticks the various identities together in

the form of one single self. When accepting the claim that the creator of a (picture)book is telling the own life narrative, the reader is able to identify the present self and past self as referring to the same person. The reader thus assumes the child character in the narrative is not fictional, but rather a character representing the life narrator when he or she was young.

As was mentioned, the distinction between a past self and a present self is a quite artificial one: the past self and the present self have a complex relationship with each other. Past identities have shaped and may still shape present identities. The present self, therefore, is in a sense the result of the past self. Yet at the same time, the present self reflects in retrospect on the past self and creates the past self in the narrative. In this context, Usher (1998) states that both the past time and the self are ‘decentered’, which means that the life narrator reflects on both from another time and place and as another human being. What is left out in Usher’s argumentation, however, is the fact that the self and the past are socially constructed concepts. Van Lierop (1997) does make a distinction between the individual and the social context, relating this to four layers of time in autobiographical narratives: ‘the time then and now of the individual, and the time then and now of the social context’ (410). This flow of time – and thus the changing social context – influences our notion of self. We do not have a notion of self in bits and pieces, but rather think of ourselves in time: we create an evolving narrative on which our notion of self is based.

In short, the act of creating a life narrative by an adult narrator belongs, as Eakin (1999) notes, to a continuous, lifelong trajectory of self-narration, which starts during childhood on the moment language evokes. Concepts of self, narrative, time and social context are strongly interwoven and constantly influence each other. A life story is therefore also no longer seen as the ‘master narrative’ serving a sovereign, autonomous self, but rather as a constructed story based on the narrative that is unwittingly formed and shaped during one’s life. This article will show to which extent the creators of the analyzed books reflect on how their life stories have been influenced, shaped and constructed by the factors mentioned here.

## CORPUS AND METHOD

### Analyzing life narratives in ‘crossover’ picturebooks

Based on the topics introduced above, *The wall* by Peter Sís (2007; see Figure 1) and *The house Baba built* by Ed Young (2011; see Figure 2) will



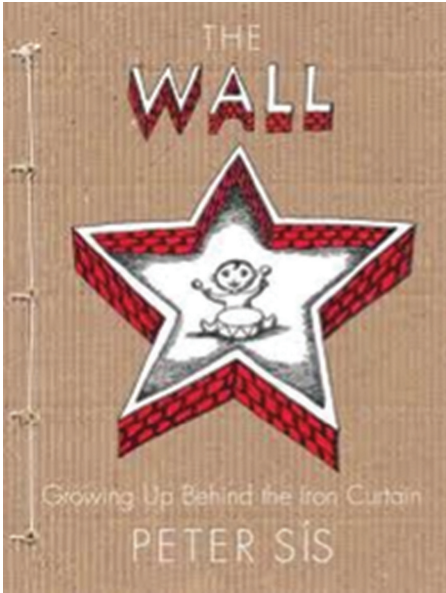


Figure 1: Front cover of *The wall*.

be analyzed. Peter Sís was born in Czechoslovakia in 1949 and grew up in Prague during the Cold War. He is an award winning artist of children's books, which include *Komodo!* (1993), *Tibet through the red box* (1998) and, recently, *The conference of birds* (2011). His awards include a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Award, a Caldecott Honor Award and, in 2012, the Hans Christian Andersen Award for illustration (Vidor 2012). In *The wall*, a picturebook containing 56 pages, he describes and shows his childhood in the communist Eastern side of the Iron Curtain.

Ed Young (1931) was born in Tianjin, China, and grew up in Shanghai. He has illustrated more than eighty books for children and has also written the text himself for various books. He was awarded the Caldecott Medal for *Lon Po Po* (1989) and was nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1992 and 2000. In *The house Baba built*, he tells the story of his childhood in Shanghai during the Japanese invasion, which was a result of the Second World War. This book, containing 48 pages, is a fold-out picturebook with full-color double spreads that are filled with photographs, drawings and collage techniques.

Neither of these books are 'typical' picturebooks aimed at young children (Nodelman 1988). These books will not be found in Kindergarten or first and second grade classrooms. Perhaps they are even more likely

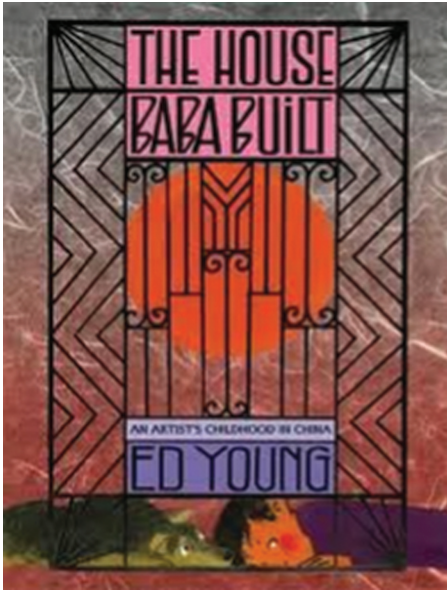


Figure 2: Front cover of *The house Baba built*.

to be found on the adult shelves in bookstores. What, then, can be said about the intended audience of these books? As Scott (2005) states, picturebooks often can be enjoyed by a dual audience. Nikolajeva (2005) distinguishes two ways of addressing the adult versus the child reader: as a double address, when the author speaks to the adult reader over the child's head and therefore does not completely respect the child reader, and as a dual (or equal) address, when the child and adult reader are addressed on the same level, each in their own right (263). Dual address acknowledges that a story has different levels of interpretation: an adult and a younger reader may interpret the story differently and may therefore have a different, but equally valuable reading experience.

Both *The wall* and *The house Baba built* can be read by adults as well as (somewhat older) children – they are, in Beckett's (2012) terms, 'crossover picturebooks'. Other well-known examples of this type of picturebooks are books by Shaun Tan, such as *The lost thing* (2000) and *The arrival* (2006). Nevertheless, and especially in case of trauma life writing in picturebooks, we may expect that an author – consciously or subconsciously – adapts the representation of these memories to the younger reading audience. We indeed have seen that literature for children often conveys

a message of hope and possibilities for change and improvement, and that scepticism and disillusion are avoided (Joosen & Vloeberghs 2008).

In the analysis of these two books, attention will be paid to three main themes. First, the motive for creating the picturebook will be analyzed. Is the book an account of events that are remembered as traumatic, and how, then, do the text and image together convey the sense of misery? Is the expression of trauma adapted to what is regarded as suitable for young readers? On the other hand, does the picturebook signal towards a nostalgic motive, and how do text and image together establish this? And if the motive is indeed nostalgic, does this mean the life narrative functions as testament for or a tribute to the people, the atmosphere and the events in the author's childhood?

Second, it will be analyzed how the present self and the past self are constructed in the book. Which identities (past identities, present identities, and identities shared by both selves) are established to construct the present self and the past self, and how is this done by the interplay of text and image? Are these identities (partly) determined by social and historical circumstances? The relation between the past self (the child protagonist) and the present self (the adult narrator) is explored: to which extent does the present self give the reader access to the consciousness of the past self? For instance, whose voice is telling the story (Nikolajeva 2002) and which point of view (Doonan 1993) is taken – the present self's or the past self's?

Finally, the analysis focuses on whether Sís and Young reflect on how they have created their life stories in the form of a picturebook and on what has influenced their memories of the past. As we have seen, memories of the past are not neutral or objective, but are shaped by many factors such as the social contexts then and now, and the flow of time. The analysis therefore concentrates on whether the artists comment explicitly on the process of remembering, either in the story itself or in the paratexts. Do Sís and Young acknowledge that the personal past cannot be recalled precisely as it has been? Do they reflect on the fact that their adult perspective may be rather different of how they experienced particular events when they were young? In the conclusion, we will see what all this means for achieving a shared understanding of their life with an audience of both child and adult readers.

### **The interplay of text and image**

In the analysis of the topics mentioned above, the overarching question is how text and images work together to construct the own life story of the picturebook's creator. This collaboration, or interplay, is what

characterizes a picturebook. It may very well be that, for instance, the images take the point of view (Doonan 1993) of the present self, whereas the text takes the past self as focalization. The interplay of text and image, thus, may convey the two selves in it in a rather different way than a purely textual life narrative could do.

The analysis of the interplay of text and image is based on Sipe's (1998) 'transmediation theory'. When reading a picturebook, Sipe assumes that readers subconsciously go through a process of transmediation. Based on semiotic theories, he states that we use separate cognitive structures for decoding texts and images. In this way, an interpretation of the text in a picturebook is formed, as well as an interpretation of the image. The process of transmediation refers to going back and forward between both interpretations. Subsequently, the interpretation of the text is adjusted based on the interpretation of the image, and vice versa. In this way, readers come to one single meaning of the story. As an example, Sipe analyzes Maurice Sendak's children's literature classic *Where the wild things are* (1963). On the spread where Max encounters the 'wild things', the text states: 'they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth [...]'. Interpreting the text may lead us to thinking that Max encounters truly scary and dangerous monsters. Interpreting the image above the text, however, may lead us to thinking otherwise: the image shows the 'wild things', although they indeed have sharp teeth and claws, to be round, fluffy and smiling. Not only do they look somewhat like stuffed animals, their postures and facial expressions also express a wait-and-see behaviour, as if they are scared of Max, who stands in his boat sturdily, with an angry and intimidating look on his face. The interpretations of text and image, thus, may lead the reader to one adjusted, overarching interpretation of both: maybe the monsters aren't that scary and threatening after all.

In this article, the picturebooks by Sís and Young are analyzed by consciously paying close attention to the process of transmediation. This enables seeing in which ways the words and images work together in *The wall* and *The house Baba built*, which results in showing how the interplay of text and image conveys the life story of the artist.

## ANALYSIS OF *THE WALL* (SÍS 2007) AND *THE HOUSE BABA BUILT* (YOUNG 2011)

### Motives for creating the books

In the afterword of *The wall*, Peter Sís mentions: '[...] since I have always drawn everything, I have tried to draw my life'.<sup>4</sup> Drawing is clearly essential

for him. Quantitatively, the images indeed dominate the book; the words in the book are there to support the drawings. Sís leaves no doubt to tell the story of his own youth in *The wall*. Evidence for this can be found in paratexts, such as the afterword that was just mentioned, but also the introduction, which states: 'I was born at the beginning of it all, on the Red side – the Communist side – of the Iron Curtain'. The introduction is signed with the initials 'P.S.' At the end of the book, on the inside of the loose cover, there is a short biography of Peter Sís, accompanied by small photographs, showing that he indeed grew up in Czechoslovakia and stating that 'he and his sister were Young Pioneers during the Cold War'.

The most important theme in *The wall* is growing up under difficult circumstances: the historical context influences the thoughts and actions of young Peter. His childhood has been strongly influenced by the suppression of a totalitarian regime. The book, capturing the era of the Cold War, can be roughly divided into three parts, marked by three spreads with diary entries: 1954 – 1963, which was 'a time of brainwashing', 1965 – spring 1968, a period characterized by the Iron Curtain opening up and Western influences coming into the Eastern Bloc, leading to the Prague Spring, and August 1968 – 1977, in which the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and the Soviet regime was reinstalled in its most powerful form. After 1977, the book jumps to 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell and Eastern countries eventually freed themselves of communist influences. In the afterword, Peter Sís tells about the intermediate period to which is not referred in the story: in 1984, he was in the United States and refused to return to Czechoslovakia when he was called back.

A close reading of the book reveals that Sís's motive for creating *The wall* is based on the events he has experienced during his youth, which he remembers as traumatic events (Leibovici 2007). At the end of the afterword, he explicitly tells why he created the book:

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'Now when my American family goes to visit my Czech family in the colorful city of Prague, it is hard to convince them it was ever a dark place full of fear, suspicion, and lies. I find it difficult to explain my childhood; it's hard to put it into words, and since I have always drawn everything, I have tried to draw my life – before America – for them'.

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Signs of fear, implied threat and misery can be found throughout the book. The word 'compulsory', for example, is constantly repeated in sentences in which Sís gives historical information about the regime. Visually, this is strengthened by pig-like figures on almost every page, which symbolize the Soviet officials spying on the Czechoslovakian citizens. The threat of a nuclear war is depicted by showing Peter and his classmates hiding under their desks. When Czechoslovakia is invaded in 1968, Sís

applies the image of a highly stylized tank and an allusion on Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. These artistic choices show us that his memories of fear, threat and misery have developed into traumatic memories. Over the years, his youth behind the Iron Curtain has become a period of trauma for Peter Sís.

Another spread that clearly conveys feelings of misery, is the one on which Peter is depicted as a young boy, with a large red thinking cloud above his head (see Figure 3). The 'communist red' is used throughout the book and refers on this spread to the communist views penetrating Peter's thoughts. In the thinking cloud, we indeed see Lenin, Stalin and other Soviet rulers: Lenin with a gun in his hand, and Stalin with his left hand deformed into the barrels of cannons and with medals on his chest, on which little children are depicted. By the process of transmediation (Sipe 1998) we reinterpret the image in terms of the text. The text namely shows that Peter is already aware of the fact that he is influenced and intimidated by the Soviet officials, though brainwashing is usually a process one is not aware of. Interpreting his facial expression leads us to thinking that his awareness of the suppressed position of the Czechoslovakians makes him feel depressed and dejected. All of these elements,

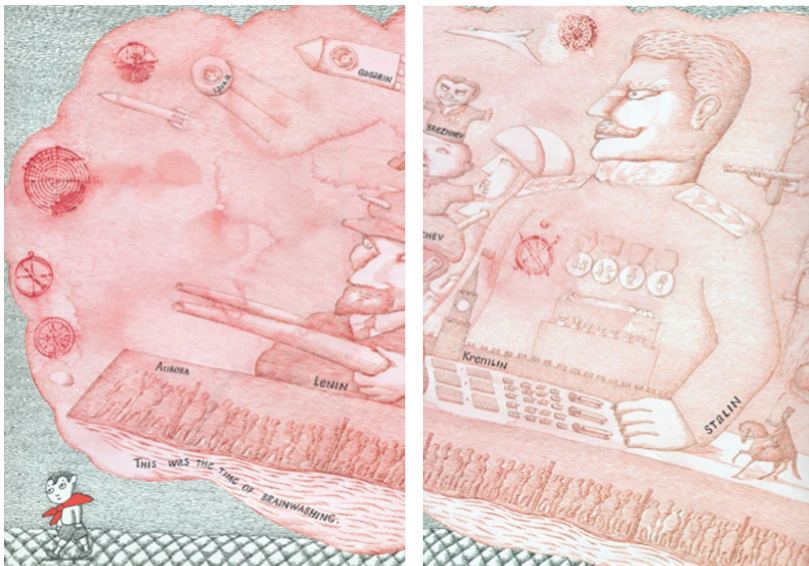


Figure 3: Double spread of young Peter with a red thinking cloud above his head (Sís 2007).

combined with the use of red, black and white, create a threatening, sober, mirthless atmosphere.

Thinking of a possible – conscious or subconscious – adaptation of traumatic memories to a young(er) public of readers, the question arises whether the experiences of trauma are perhaps adjusted or even abated in *The wall*. In terms of content, this is not the case: the clearest example is the image of Jan Palach setting himself on fire as an act of protest against the Soviet regime (see Figure 4). Sís has chosen not to palliate such terrible events. On the other hand, we might say that the abstracted form of the images causes the book to be somewhat more suitable for younger readers: applying a fairly stylized drawing is less insinuating than, for instance, including one of the horrific photographs of the actual event. Nevertheless, it is clear that *The wall* shows the past world in all its complexity and misery, and that the events Sís experienced are hardly adjusted to what might or might not be ‘suitable’ for younger readers.

This does not mean that everything in Peter Sís’s youth has been miserable. There are elements in the book which could, at the first sight, be interpreted as ‘nostalgic’, such as the feelings of happiness conveyed through bright, flower-power colors towards and during the Prague spring (see Figure 5). Taking a close look reveals, however, that this does not convey an idyllic, happy view on growing up in a time of war: rather,

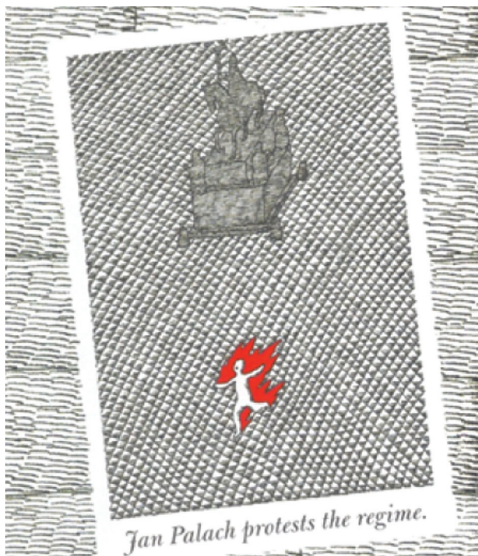


Figure 4: Drawing of Jan Palach setting himself on fire (Sís 2007).



Figure 5: Half of the spread showing the Prague Spring (Sís 2007).

the use of these colors is a sign of resistance and escapism. For example, Peter and his friends are shown to paint the wall again and again in rich, joyful colors, which is clearly an act of protest; the Soviet officials are constantly repainting it in white. The use of bright colors like blue, yellow and green – symbolizing Western influences, feelings of hope, and acts of protest – strongly contrasts with the dominating black, white and red in the book. This contrast emphasizes that true freedom is out of reach for Peter and his friends. In short, the world is certainly not presented as intact and idyllic, but is shown in all its threat, darkness and complexity. Even the colorful elements in *The wall* that seem to reflect feelings of nostalgia at the first sight, are based on feelings of misery.

As Peter Sís does, Ed Young also clearly tells the story of his own youth in *The house Baba built*. A paratext shows this: ‘This [...] is the story of one of our most beloved children’s book illustrators and the house his *baba* built’ (italics in original). Remarkably, the title page inside the book however states: ‘text as told to Libby Koponen’. The author’s note at the end



of the book explains this: as Ed Young struggled to create the book, his editor suggested 'inviting author Libby Koponen to help shape the book'. Koponen, however, seems to have had a supporting background role, as the term 'author's note' and the initials 'E.Y.' on this page suggest, as well as the absence of her name on the cover. Her presence as co-author, then, does not derogate this story in being Ed Young's life narrative.

The book won the 2012 Norman A. Sugarman Children's Biography Award, an award given biennially to honor excellence in the field of biography for children (Cleveland Public Library 2012). The book indeed touches upon the genre of biography: the title already suggests that Young is also telling the life story of his father. *The house Baba built* is a 'collective' life story of the family that is kept safe by *Baba* during the years of the Second World War, because he built a house with this particular purpose. The time line at the end of the book mentions important years in *Baba's* life, such as his graduations, his marriage, the birth of his five children and the building of the house, thereby supporting the idea that this book is not only Ed Young's youth autobiography, but also his father's biography.

In the author's note and in the acknowledgments, Young indicates that he has created this book as a tribute to his father. He thereby explicitly states a motive for creating the book. Even though he 'felt an urge to paint and describe [the bygone days, *M.S.*] for future generations', *The house Baba built* is not a misery life narrative: the book does not warn these 'future generations' for the consequences of war, but is rather full of happy childhood memories, with very little misery in it. Compared to *The wall*, war functions more like a background theme in *The house Baba built*. The main theme in the book is family life. Whenever any reference to the war is made, it is immediately emphasized that the family is safe in the house and that war is not frightening them, as, for example, in this extract: 'One day I saw two fighter planes far, far away swooping and circling around each other [...]. It was exciting, but less real than the pictures in the stories *Baba* read us'. The image strengthens this: the page has a warm yellow background, and we see a cut-out photograph of the children, relaxed and laughing. The planes are depicted above their heads, but very small and far away (see Figure 6). The same goes for the description of a bombardment, at the end of the book. The collage shows Shanghai in dark colors and the fierce lines of bombing planes, and we see the Young children hiding with their heads covered. The spread does have a threatening atmosphere, but the text immediately reduces this threat: '[...] the bombs [...] didn't frighten me anyway. I knew nothing could happen to us within those walls, in the house *Baba* built'. The fact that almost exclusively happy childhood memories are included in *The*

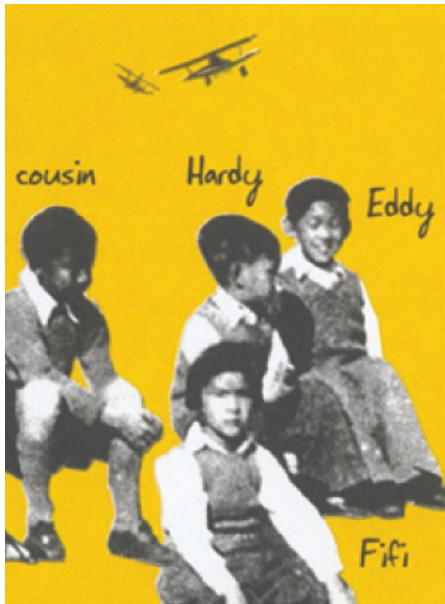


Figure 6: Collage of the Young children with war planes far away (Young 2011).

*house Baba built*, implies Ed Young has had a nostalgic motive for creating this book. He remembers swimming in the pool, roller-skating on the roof, sliding down the banister of the stairs, having a picnic – all in the warm nest his parents created, with the company of his brothers, sisters, cousins and friends. The focus on the family’s love and affection and on the important role of Young’s father in his youth, shows us that the concept of nostalgia is used here to bring a tribute to the happy childhood with a loving and caring family, despite the presence of the Second World War.

The very local, domestic setting also directs towards a nostalgic motive for creating the book. All of Ed Young’s childhood memories relate to the house in which he grew up. In the story itself, the clause ‘the house Baba built’ is mentioned literally up to nine times, in sentences like: ‘I turned a rocking chair into a horse. It squeaked and thumped along the floors, leaving tracks in the house Baba built’, ‘it was our favorite place in the house Baba built’ and ‘we danced the conga [...] through the whole downstairs of the house Baba built’. The images actually show the house to the reader, on a collage spread at the beginning and as an

architectural floor plan at the end. Thus, by combining text and image into one interpretation, as Sipe (1998) suggests, the reader gets the most complete view of what the house looked like in Ed Young's childhood. Whereas the text in principle is enough to understand the described events, the images play the largest role in conveying the setting and the atmosphere. Would Ed Young not have included family photographs, maps and a floorplan of his father's house, the book would not convey personal memories in the powerful way as it does now. The interplay of text and image fully conveys the local, safe, warm setting, and therefore also the signals of nostalgia.

A third sign of nostalgia is the characterization of Ed Young's father as almost a romantic character. He is depicted as a wise, protective man who would do anything for his family, but also as cheerful and funny: 'Baba charmed the guests with his stories and teasing until even the shiest and most stoic couldn't stop laughing'. The way Young characterizes his father is of course consistent with the purpose bringing a tribute to his father by creating the book. Young even gives the last word of the story to his father, by a reproduction of a letter 'Baba' wrote in 1963, (see Figure 7). The letter – which emphasizes the importance of relationships with others in the life of the Young family – characterizes him as a wise, sensible man:



Figure 7: Drawing of Ed Young's father writing the letter (Young 2011).

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‘Dear children,  
 ... You may put down as rule No. 1 that life is not rich not real unless you partake life with your fellow man. A successful life and a happy life is one as measured by how much you have accomplished for others and not as measured by how much you’ve done for yourself. Love Dad’.

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In the images, nostalgia lies in the use of the many photographs. Young tries to depict his childhood family life as complete as possible, by using a large number of (adaptations of) family photographs. Reading the book is as browsing through an artistic family album – and our only reason to create family albums would be to go back to when we were young, to see our parents and siblings again, to relive the days of our childhood. In *The house Baba built*, then, the motive of nostalgia is obvious. Even though there’s a war going on, the world is presented to the reader as a safe and intact world, in which fun is important but family values and helping others are the greatest goods.

### The past self and the present self

In *The wall*, Peter Sís identifies his self mainly in two ways. First, he identifies his past self and present self both as an artist. For the past self, this is done by depicting him drawing all the time and by the constant textual reference to the act of drawing, for instance: ‘He drew tanks. He drew wars’, and: ‘But he had to draw. Sharing his dreams gave him hope’. For his present self, his identity as an artist is emphasized in the afterword: ‘It’s hard to put it [his past experiences, *M.S.*] into words, and since I have always drawn everything, I have tried to draw my life [...]’. The first and the last image of the book clearly show this identity shared by the past self and the present self. In the beginning, we see a baby with a red pencil in his hand, accompanied by the text: ‘As long as he could remember, he had loved to draw’. In the end, the page next to the afterword shows Peter Sís as an older man, in the same pose as the baby on the first image of the book, still with a pencil in his hand, accompanied by the subscription: ‘As long as he can remember, he will continue to draw’. Both text and image show here how the identity of being an artist is essential for Peter Sís’s self. Drawing was his only way to be free when he was young, as was already pointed out above, but is also the only way to truly express his feelings about the past now he is an adult. The importance of drawing in his life as a means of protest, escapism and later on ‘scriptotherapy’ (though ‘artistic therapy’ would be a more suitable term for a multimodal book), is again an indication that the childhood trauma has been the impetus for creating the book as an adult. Peter Sís’s identity of an artist, thus, is strongly interwoven with the motive to create *The wall*.

Second, and also clearly related to the motive for creating the book, Peter Sís identifies himself as a victim of the historical circumstances and as a (secret) protester against it, trying to escape the Soviet regime. Sís visually emphasizes the opposition between the beastlike Soviet suppressors and the civilized oppressed citizens: he identifies with the latter group, and strongly disidentifies with the Soviet officials. In identifying himself as one of the oppressed, Sís emphasizes the development of his past self: from an unquestioning, brainwashed young boy, he grows into a teenager who does question the Communist system and is inspired by the little bits of information, art and music that come from the West into the East. In the afterword, the resistant, self-conscious identity of the present self is emphasized, referring to the fact that Sís decided to stay in the United States when he was called back to Prague in 1984: '[...] but after a lifetime of being brainwashed, it was not an easy decision. I was afraid I might never see my family again. I thought the Soviets would be in power forever'.

As was mentioned before, the past self and the present self are only artificially separated; they do strongly relate to each other. In *The wall*, the connection between the past self and the present self is shown through the use of a remarkable literary technique. Peter Sís tells his personal story (which is told in the text at the bottom of the pages) in the third person, referring to his past self as 'he'. Only in the introduction and the afterword, the reader 'hears' the voice of his present self speaking for himself, using 'I'. It is as if Peter Sís's present self keeps a certain distance from his past self, or at least from the past experiences that have shaped him. This implies that Peter Sís expresses a fragmented identity: after all, he is a Czechoslovakian who decided not to return to his homeland but to stay in the United States, the country he was always told being 'the most capitalistic and decadent of all' (diary entry of November 1962).

Because Sís tells his personal story in the third person, the reader barely gets access to the consciousness of the child protagonist. Some of his feelings are expressed to the reader by an explicit detour of the adult narrator. For example, when Sís's past self starts to doubt the Soviet principles, the adult narrator simply mentions: 'Then he found out there were things he wasn't told' and 'Slowly he started to question'. The reader is not textually involved in any way in feeling those doubts. Visually, however, Peter's feelings of doubt and distrust are expressed, by means of the large red thinking cloud that was mentioned earlier.

The diary entries, on the other hand, do provide a textual inside glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of young Peter. As the dates of these diary fragments show, they are written by Peter Sís's past self and are therefore historically authentic. The use of diary fragments is very

different from the usual retrospective autobiographical writing, because the elements of retrospect and recalling are reduced. The diary fragments are indeed written in the past by the past self, giving an exact representation of how the past self thought and wrote in that time. However, the present self still interferes: as an adult narrator, Peter Sís has selected certain fragments and must have translated them into English. We do hear the voice of the past self, but what this voice tells us is also to a certain extent determined by the present self. This again shows us that the past self and the present self cannot be regarded apart from each other, even when it seems the past self is directly speaking to the reader.

In the images, the past self of Peter Sís is recognizably depicted. The reader takes the point of view of the present self, remembering how his past self acted in former times. The black-and-white images of the past self do not resemble Peter Sís's childhood photographs, which are included on the diary spreads and on the inside of the back cover. Nevertheless, Sís has depicted his past self in a very recognizable way, because of a characterizing lock of hair on his forehead. We can therefore identify the past self easily on almost every image. The images never take the child protagonist's point of view. What we do see, are his dreams and fantasies, which happens particularly towards the end of the book when Peter fantasizes about the most innovative ways to escape the Eastern Block.

The development of the past self (into, eventually, the present self) is innovatively symbolized in a visual detail on the spreads with diary fragments, which all three show a head with a brain on the left upper side (see Figure 8). The first brain, related to diary fragments in the period 1954 – 1963, is depicted in red, effectively symbolizing the Communist brainwashing that Peter experienced. The second brain, representing 1965 – 1968, is variously colored and symbolizes Western influences on Peter's thinking: he starts to think for himself in this period and the various

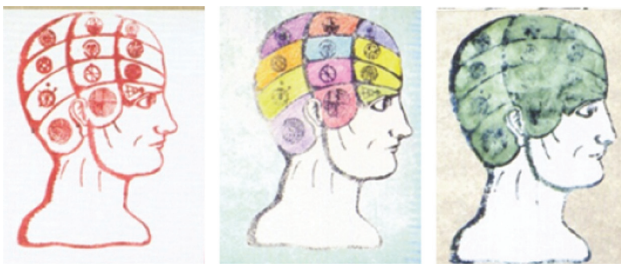


Figure 8: Visual details of the diary spreads: brains in various colors (Sís 2007).

colors seem to reflect both joy and happiness, but also the fact that he is confronted with many new views on his life and the society he lives in. The last brain, related to the dark period of 1969 – 1977, is sober green, symbolizing that Peter now is mature in his thinking, but not naively happy since the Soviet suppression is worse than ever before. The brain has a single color again, which can be interpreted as a signal of the Western free thinking to have become the standard in Peter Sís's life: the various new views that came to him in the former period, have merged into one single, 'Western' point of view Peter Sís has adopted. Comparing this last image with the text in the afterword, we can conclude that they 'match' each other: in the text, Peter Sís indeed shows to have adopted a Western view on the world and that he even has been living in the United States for years now. The last brain and the afterword, thus, are an excellent example of how text and image together show how the past self merges into the present self, but it also shows that the present self has created the past self – it is, after all, the adult Peter Sís who decided to include the brains in this way in the diary spreads.

In *The house Baba built*, Ed Young identifies his past self first and foremost as a son and brother, in short: as a member of his family. Often the voice is a 'collective' one, using the plural form and representing Young and his siblings or even his complete family: 'we saw them next time at diner', 'the Lings came to us', 'we made paper origami boxes'. We may interpret this as an indication of how important family is in the collective Chinese society, as opposed to Western society. On the second spread of the book, there is a chalk drawing of the five Young children, like a family portrait, with their names and short characterizations. Ed Young characterizes himself as 'a dreamer, quiet and shy'. His shy character is elaborated later on in the story: 'With strangers, my tongue wouldn't work properly, and my words got jumbled. I was already shy – being tongue-tied made it worse. So I remained silent'. Furthermore, he identifies his past self as a creative boy, by repeatedly emphasizing that he liked to draw as a child, which is depicted in the scene where he tries to draw a cowboy (see Figure 9). In this, his identity as an artist is already shown.

Ed Young identifies his present self mainly in the paratexts. In the foreword, the author's note and the acknowledgments, he all refers to his father:

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'As Baba said, "Crisis does carry a blessing within its curse." It's up to us to find it' (foreword).

'But I hope Baba is in agreement with me that it [this book, *M.S.*] has all turned out well' (author's note).

'This bridge from past to future, my tribute to my father, is finally realized' (acknowledgments).

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*Figure 9: Drawing of Ed Young's childhood attempts to draw a cowboy (Young 2011).*

These extracts show how Ed Young as an adult still strongly identifies himself as a family member and as a son. This idea is strengthened by the photograph of Ed's daughters on the page of the afterword: family is important to him, and being a father himself, he is grateful for his own father keeping him and his siblings safe during the war. Apart from the identity of a son and family member, Ed Young identifies his present self also strongly as an artist. In contrast with Peter Sís, Ed Young states his profession explicitly in the subtitle of his book: 'An artist's childhood in China'. Being a family member and an artist, then, are identities that are shared by the past self and present self.

As the Second World War is not the main theme in the book, historical events do not influence Ed Young's established identities that much. Rather, the main theme of the book – family life – is in line with Young's identity as a son and a brother, as a family member. In this book, the collective identity of a family is more central than the historical circumstances influencing their lives. In comparison with Peter Sís, who does hardly refer to his family at all – he only mentions the fear of never seeing his family again in the afterword – Ed Young's identity is not truly individual but is strongly interwoven with his family's collective identity.

The present self of Ed Young grants the reader quite some access to the consciousness of his past self, in contrast to Peter Sís. Repeatedly, the



reader can imagine how Ed thought and felt as a young boy, for instance in the example of his shyness given above. Some other examples are: ‘I looked at my drawing and felt very frustrated’, ‘I loved and looked up to Sonny’, and ‘[...] I thought about how many of her people’s homes in Germany had been devoured by the war as well’. Many of Ed’s thoughts and feelings are related to other people. This again shows how important ‘collectiveness’ must have been in constructing his identity. By the use of the autonomous monologue (Nikolajeva 2002), readers do get access to what young Ed thinks and feels. In this telling mode in fiction, it is difficult to distinguish who precisely is telling the story; the narrator or the character. In case of a life narrative, we know it is the present self, the adult narrator, who is telling. The use of the autonomous monologue functions here in giving the past self its own voice.

The images in *The house Baba built* may be quite hard to interpret in relation to the constructed self. This is because the images vary highly in their degree of abstractedness. There are many photographs in the book, either freestanding or as part of a collage, and there are drawings that resemble photographs, but there are also more sketchy drawings and characters depicted by the highly stylized use of paper in a collage technique (see Figure 10). Ed Young constructs his past self and his relatives, thus, in various visual ways. Most of the time, it is as if the present self is looking back on (adaptations of) photographs. In these cases, the past self is clearly portrayed through the eyes of the present self. At other moments, it is not clear whether we are looking through the eyes of the present or past self. For example, when the text states: ‘The first time we visited the Ling family, the boys ran upstairs’, we see a collage technique which depicts boys running upstairs (see Figure 11). The picture shows what the past self has seen in that time. However, it is always the present self who has created the images. Therefore, it is impossible to decide whose point of view is taken here. This clearly shows how interwoven the past self and the present self can be in an autobiographical picturebook.

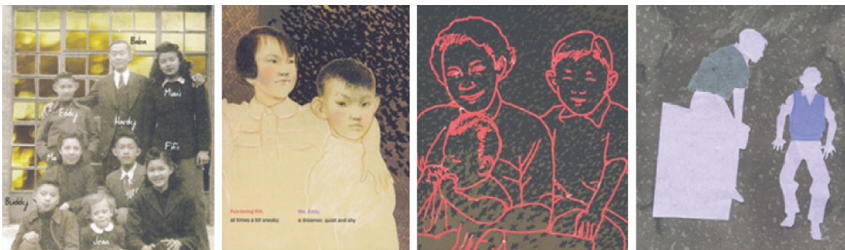


Figure 10: Various types of images showing Ed Young’s family members (Young 2011).

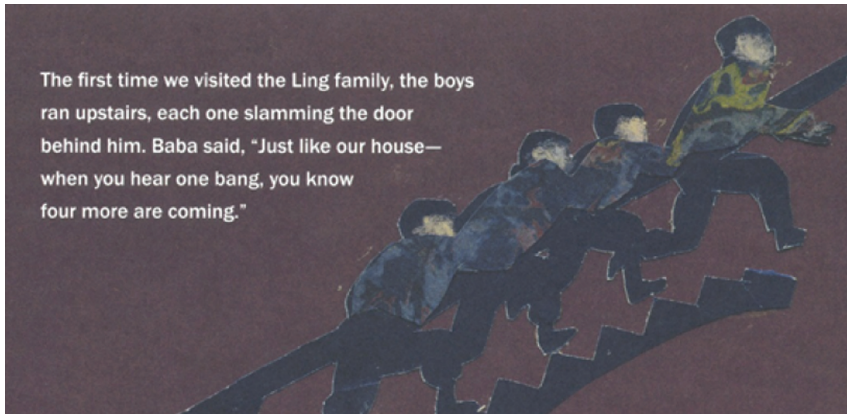


Figure 11: Collage showing the boys running upstairs (Young 2011).

#### Reflections on remembering the past and creating the book

The analyses of the motive for creating *The wall* and of the past self and present self of Peter Sís have shown how strongly the artist has been influenced by the socio-historical context in which he grew up. During his youth, Peter Sís's world was characterized by oppositions between East and West, between suppression and freedom, between despair and hope. His view on the world is influenced by the separation between Eastern and Western Europe, by the suppression and brainwashing by the Soviet regime, and by his stay in the United States, as he explains in the afterword. In short, Peter Sís's life story has been strongly shaped by global events that happened when he grew up, and this has influenced the way in which he presents the world to the reader of *The wall*.

His traumatic experiences seem to have led Peter Sís to present his past in a somewhat dichotomous and unsubtle way, in particular when it comes to the 'good' and 'bad' side. This is shown in particular in one of the last images, on which the two sides of the Iron Curtain are characterized: the upper part is colored in bright orange and is covered in words like 'freedom', 'virtue', 'honor', 'equality', 'respect' and 'wisdom', whereas the lower part is depicted in shades of grey and dark blue and shows terms like 'stupidity', 'injustice', 'terror' and 'fear' (see Figure 12). Reality, of course, is not that dichotomous but is rather more complex.<sup>5</sup> Sís does however not reflect on the way his presentation of the past has been influenced by the events he experienced as a child and teenager.

Neither does Sís reflect on the process of remembering he went through, or on how his memories were evoked before and during the



Figure 12: Part of the spread showing the oppositions between East and West (Sís 2007).

creation of the book. The reader is not told what triggered him to bring his life story into the public sphere at this particular moment of his adult life. Sís neither informs the reader about how he has constructed *The wall*; we do not know, for instance, how he has selected and adapted the diary fragments that were preserved from his youth. The reader of *The wall* is mainly left in the dark about how the process of remembering has unfolded. Because Sís does not reflect in any way on the process of remembering in order to create this book, he ignores the fact that memories of past experiences and the experiences themselves are not identical.

Most readers who simply go along in the story will not be aware of the fact that remembering is such a complex process. For them, Sís's lack of reflection on the process of remembering will not affect the story at all. However, some of the more critical (adult) readers may be more skeptical. They may notice the 'constructedness' of the story, for instance in the selection of the diary fragments, but do not feel fully informed due to the fact that they know nothing about how Peter Sís actually constructed his life story, why he did it in this particular way and how the documents included in the book have helped him doing it.

Unlike Peter Sís in *The wall*, Ed Young reflects extensively on the process of remembering he went through in order to create *The house Baba built*. In the afterword, he tells about himself and one of his sisters going

back to their childhood house in Shanghai in 1990, which ‘triggered long-forgotten memories’. He then started to put images in his journal. In 2002, he took his children to Shanghai. Since his sister had passed away, Ed Young mentions: ‘I found myself quite alone in recalling those bygone days and felt an urge to paint and describe them for future generations’. He has been strongly influenced by his father, his family and his close surroundings; in short, by people around him and by local events, in contrast to the global events that shaped Peter Sís’s story. The Second World War has had some influence on Ed Young’s childhood, but merely in a positive way, since it led Young’s father to building the house in which Ed has had a happy childhood. Whereas Sís in his book shows two sides of his past – the suppressed East and the free West – in a quite dichotomous way, Young only shows his own, local view, thereby presenting his childhood in a less complex way than Sís does.

The author’s note explains to the reader that putting memories in a picturebook was not easy for Ed Young. He describes how he made two attempts before his editor suggested to ask the help of author Libby Koponen. In his next statement, Young explicitly acknowledges that it is impossible to precisely recreate reality as it was in the past:

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‘Gradually and unbelievably, the book took shape. Meanwhile, I also learned to come to terms with the limits of human effort in re-creating reality – any human creation, no matter its completeness or point of view, is at best a mere fragment of life itself’.

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In *The house Baba built*, there are many elements that may have supported Ed Young’s process of remembering, like (parts of) family photographs, drawings which highly resemble portrait photographs, and the representation of the letter ‘Baba’ wrote to his children in 1963, combined with stamps and a drawing of Ed Young’s father writing the letter (as was shown in Figure 7). This means that Ed Young has applied many historically authentic documents to shape the book, though we should notice that they are, as Peter Sís’s diary fragments, selected by the present self of the artist.

The next spread, the afterword, shows two pictures of the house itself, two pictures of the house’s metal fencing with curly details – in which we recognize the cover of the book – and two maps: an old looking map of Shanghai, and a 2010 Google Maps image, which shows the exact location of the house. These visual elements ‘prove’ to reader that the house indeed existed and still exists. The next page contains textual support for the process of remembering, by the time line with birth years of Ed Young and his siblings, and other important events that are described in the story. The time line and the author’s note next to it can be folded out

and reveal two large, pencil drawn floorplans of the house. The author's note indicates that Ed Young indeed really needed all of these elements to support his memories and to create the book. He describes the process of creating the book as:

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'[...] an eternal series of struggles: first to reconstruct the three-story house without an existing blueprint of my father's original floor plans, and then to find and collect lost photographs and old maps of Shanghai, all from friends and relatives'.

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Moreover, this quotation shows that Young has based his story not only on his own memories, but that he also draws on supporting elements provided by others. In this sense, not only the story *in* the book is a collective one, but also the creation *of* the book clearly has been a collective process.

Ed Young, in sum, reflects as an artist extensively on the process he went through. He exemplifies his use of photographs, maps and the floor plan, partly provided by others. He thereby acknowledges that, even with the use of all this material from the past, it is impossible to recreate that past exactly as he experienced it as a child.

### CONCLUSION: A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE?

Both Peter Sís and Ed Young practice the genre of life writing in a particular form: the picturebook. Due to their multimodality, picturebooks tell their stories through an often profound interplay of text and image. Usually, picturebooks are associated with an audience of young children (Nodelman 1988). The two picturebooks analyzed here, however, are not: they are rather complex in theme (*The wall*), in the number of characters (*The house Baba built*) and in the complex ways text and image take over each other's roles and fill in each other's gaps (*The wall*). These books therefore are characterized pre-eminently as 'crossover picturebooks' (Beckett 2012): they cross the borders between multimodal literature intended for somewhat older children or teenagers, and multimodal literature intended for adults.

Both books clearly refer to the past outer-textual reality. They do so in a highly artistic way, for instance in Peter Sís's black-and-white, almost storyboard-like images, and in Ed Young's collage techniques and fold-out pages. Both books, on the other hand, also refer directly to the reality of the past, by including diary entries, photographs and childhood drawings (in *The wall*) and family photographs, maps, floorplans, and a letter (in *The house Baba built*). In the form of the books, we constantly see the 'hand of the artist', or what I call the 'present self': the life stories are constructed by the adult artists, who have recreated themselves as

characters in the books. Their current artistic choices have led to the particular form of the book. Sís and Young decided to include photographs or diary entries, they chose the specific words to tell about the Cold War being nearby or the Second World War being far away; in short, they constructed the world as they remember it, using pencil, paint and paper, collage techniques, photographs, chalk drawings, and so on.

These choices have led Peter Sís to create a book with an overall dark, sober, threatening atmosphere. The colorful joy and happiness is overpowered by the use of black-and-white and red symbolizing the Soviet regime. Ed Young, on the other hand, created a colorful, dynamic book, full of family characters and domestic activities, with a happy, joyful and safe atmosphere. The artistic choices of the creators, thus, have been effective in conveying the main theme of their books and their motives for creating them: Peter Sís's traumatic memories of his childhood experiences versus Ed Young's nostalgic reflection on his safe and happy childhood.

In presenting their personal past, both artists have clearly been influenced by the social context of their past (Van Lierop 1997). This is inherent to the genre. It is therefore not only interesting to see *what* has influenced their construction of the past, but above all, whether and how they *reflect* on these influences. As we have seen, Peter Sís does reflect on his motive for creating *The wall*. He, however, does not inform the reader in any way about how he has created the book and what has led him to making certain choices. Readers are not made aware of Sís's process of remembering and of the fact that the actual events and the memories of these events are not completely similar. Ed Young, on the other hand, does reflect intensively on the processes of remembering and creating the book. In the afterword, he takes the reader along in his artistic struggle and he reflects on the autobiographical book being a mere 're-creation' and 'fragment' of the past reality.

This difference between both books does not, of course, say anything about their artistic or literary quality. Neither has it to do with what is 'true' and 'false' in a book. It does say something, however, about the act of life writing and the relation between the creator and the reader. Smith and Watson (2010) argue that 'autobiographical truth' can be understood as an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader, which ideally leads to a shared understanding of the meaning of a life. Based on the analysis of *The wall* and *The house Baba built*, we might conclude that this 'exchange' and 'shared understanding' are eased by the narrator reflecting explicitly on the processes of remembering and creating the book. Indeed, by explaining how memories are evoked, how certain documents are deployed for story telling, and which social factors have impeded or at least influenced an 'objective' remembering, the

artist openly shows to the reader what is his personal ‘truth’ and how this notion of truth has been established in the book. In these two books, Ed Young does so, whereas Peter Sís does not.

Let us finally return once more to the genre of the picturebook and its intended audience. As was mentioned, the books analyzed here can be characterized as crossover picturebooks. Adult readers, who have more reading and life experience, may be aware of the notion of autobiographical truth, and may notice and appreciate the artist’s attempts to reflect on the construction of the past and the way the book is created. When reading a book in which this does not happen, they may even have feelings of uncertainty and doubt, wondering what exactly has led the artist to presenting the past in this particular way. For younger readers, on the other hand, these considerations may not come into play. As it is difficult for them to identify with an adult looking back on the past of years and years ago, they may pay little or no attention to issues of reflecting on the impossibility of objective remembering and the influence of social and historical factors on the process of constructing the past in a picturebook. In terms of readership, however, these books may invite adults and children to a shared reading experience. If *The wall* and *The house Baba built* are read together by a child and an adult, it is still likely that they interpret these books (partly) in different ways, but the books are also likely to trigger valuable discussions on issues of family, war, loss, childhood, growing up and remembering the past.

These, of course, are all assumptions; the only way to vouch them is to have open conversations with child, teenage and adult readers of these kind of books, which would be a suggestion for future reader-oriented research on life writing picture books. The textual and visual analytical approach taken in this article, has shown that the two autobiographical picturebooks discussed here represent a unique genre of their own within the field of life writing, due to the particular interplay of text and image. Through this often complex and profound interplay, the artist shapes the personal past in order to achieve a shared understanding of the life with a public of both younger and adult readers.

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Marloes Schrijvers (1989) obtained her Master's degree in Children's Literature with honours at Tilburg University, The Netherlands. This article is based on her master thesis *Life writing through text and image in children's literature* (2013). After graduating with honours from the post-master's programme for teaching Dutch in secondary education (Tilburg University, 2014), she started a PhD at the University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on how new ways of teaching literature

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## NOTES

- 1 These books have at least partly an intended audience of child readers. Dahl's autobiographical books, for example, are read by a dual audience (Scott 1999) of both children and adults.
- 2 Sipe (1998) does use the term 'picturebook' instead of 'picturebook'.
- 3 The terms 'present self' and 'past self' are essential in this article. They will be discussed profoundly later on in the article.
- 4 Page numbers of quotations are not indicated since both picturebooks do not contain any page numbers.
- 5 Indeed, when I presented another paper on *The wall* in Bratislava, Slovakia (September 2013), some of the Slovakian attendees, who had experienced the Cold War themselves, mentioned to feel offended by Sís's representation of the past. In their opinion, his representation was 'incorrect' or 'too simplistic' – which again demonstrates how strongly the past is subject to individual interpretation.