Children's Literature 15 (1987): 19-36

# *Doing Violence to Conventions: The Work of Ilse-Margret Vogel*

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A friend tells me of her distress with *The Don't Be Scared Book*, the first of Ilse-Margret Vogel's many fine books for children: "Before I read it to my four-year-old she wasn't scared of anything, and now she's scared of *everything*. And *I* thought that book was so cute!" Paradoxically, this apparently unassuming book is both cute and unsettling. Like much of Vogel's work, it seems ordinary but actually does violence to many unspoken conventions of children's literature—sometimes by presenting real acts of violence in unexpected contexts.

Children's literature tends to be conservative in both form and content. Its most frequent message is acceptance of one's lot, its stories usually have formulaic plots with happy endings, and its descriptions of violence are limited to strictly defined circumstances: in the right kind of story, at the right moment, to the right characters. What can happen to a villain at the end of a fairy tale cannot happen to a hero in the middle of a family comedy; indeed, what happens in any specific kind of children's story does not usually happen in other kinds. These conventions are so characteristic of children's literature that many four-year-olds have already learned to expect them.

*The Don't Be Scared Book* defies such expectations, primarily by mixing up the conventions. Like another unsettling children's fantasy, *Alice in Wonderland*, it focuses on the violent emotions of creatures we might conventionally expect to be gentle; despite Vogel's gently whimsical illustrations of them, a ghost is "angry," a cucumber "fierce." Alice encounters anarchic nonsense in the safe confines of a dream; Vogel more disturbingly combines fantasy with ordinary reality, so that the children find an antelope in their bathtub and a witch in their living room.[1] Nor is that the only way *The Don't Be Scared Book* combines qualities usually found in different kinds of children's stories. Its humorous depiction of two endlessly timid children does indeed make it "cute," for that word usually signals our delight in childish inadequacy; but Vogel defies our expectations of cute books by realistically demanding that these children

deal with their fears—a demand we usually associate with more realistic books in which inadequacy is anything but adorable and must be expunged. Instead of merely expecting adults to keep them safe—the limiting message of much of children's literature—these children must themselves declare an adult kind of authority over disruptive forces.[2] They must calm rude octopi and bossy trolls and tell a lion playing ball that "it is much too late / And his fun will have to wait." Even more unsettling, they must realize that it is not just the world out there that is prone to anarchy; they must also cope with their own potential for craziness: "And if you see a crazy face / In a mirror some dark place / DON'T BE SCARED! / It's silly if you turn and run, / 'Cause it's you—you know—just having fun!"

Vogel's difficulty in finding an editor willing to publish *The Don't Be Scared Book* isn't surprising; the changes various editors suggested would have made the book more recognizably like other children's books—either cuter with colorful pictures, or more therapeutic with realistic situations.[3] But Vogel was right to insist on leaving the book as it was; for *The Don't Be Scared Book* evokes a world more convincingly (and more painfully) like life itself than is the world of most children's books.

Like *The Don't Be Scared Book*, each of the six books Vogel based on her childhood memories appears to be conventional—charmingly nostalgic, placid, even cute. Each describes a theoretically safe world of pampered children; but each shows that safety intruded upon both from within and without, in ways that upset conventions and imply a serious questioning of conventional ideas about childhood.

*Dodo Every Day* is the least disturbing of these books. Like many children's books in which a child's problems are solved by a wise adult, its major thrust is to confirm the comfort and security of adult authority. But there are unsettling suggestions that the wise adult here, the grandmother Dodo, is not all powerful. Not only must the child educate her grandmother out of an unreasonable fear of garden snakes, but when the child feels remorse for throwing a rock at her cat after she sees it carrying a bleeding mouse in its mouth, Dodo has no solution but to tell her to forgive herself; the urge to strike out is an undeniable fact about the cat, about the child, about life in general. Despite its gentleness, then, *Dodo Every Day* differs from other gently protective children's books in which the household pets have no bloodlust, the children do not lash out, and the wise, all-protective adults are without flaw.

More obvious difficulties enter the equally gentle world of *The Rainbow Dress and Other Tollush Tales*; Tollush's father is dead and her mother is poor. Looking down during an imaginary flight in a rocking chair, Mother tells Tollush, "See how the country around our village looks. A cluster of lights here, a few single lights there. Darkness in between" (26). The response to that knowledge of darkness, which for Tollush is "sometimes scary" (24), is even more unsettling—not more light, which is simply not available, but the acceptance of darkness, for "the darker it gets, the more the stars will sparkle" (28).

Here as in *Dodo Every Day*, it is not just adult protection that keeps away the darkness. Both child and adult need and offer comfort, and both provide it in the same way: by using their imaginations to transform reality. Just as Dodo helps her granddaughter escape boredom by suggesting she pretend to be tiny and take a stroll through the objects on a table, Mother makes Tollush a "rainbow dress" from parts of unwearable old ones and deals with a lack of candles by taking Tollush on the imaginary flight in her rocking chair. Without anything in her sandwich but salt, Tollush offers such tantalizing descriptions of the sandwich that her friends want it and it tastes better to her; and she transforms the dead leaves of autumn into a beautiful frame to surround a picture of her dead father that she has found in an attic filled with broken and discarded objects. Vogel's own pictures for this book duplicate this process of transformation. Although they all have borders, the border of the first picture of each story is severe and constricting, usually made of bare branches with their twigs lopped off; as each story describes an imaginative transformation of bleak reality, the borders of succeeding pictures grow foliage or become festooned with decorations, and they seem more protective than constricting. These borders suggest what is distinctive about *The Rainbow Dress*; rather than merely describing the world as imaginatively transformed by an adult author's comfort-seeking and safety-making eyes, it shows how its characters, young and old alike, perform just that act for themselves. It transcends its genre by commenting on it.

Despite that significant difference, however, *The Rainbow Dress* still fits well within the conventions of comforting nostalgia; Vogel's four books about a child named Inge do not. Although all four contain gently nostalgic pictures and portray a comfortable childhood in a secure and loving home, they do violence to conventions by describ-

ing violent acts and emotions that happen to the "wrong" characters in the wrong settings at the wrong times; Vogel's autobiographical facts constantly break through the barriers of conventional story patterns. Furthermore, these books are centrally about the ways in which they ignore conventions, for those disruptions mirror their main concern: the confusing relationships between constriction and security, freedom and anarchy.

Commentators often suggest that one major purpose of children's books is to bolster their readers' self-images by showing how child characters bolster their own; Inge's self-image is anything but bolstered at the beginning of *My Twin Sister Erika* when her twin sister announces "I will be you" (1). Inge says, "By now I was so angry, I couldn't keep track of who was who and who was allowed to say what" (6). Such uncertainty is experienced not just by twins, but by many children young enough to be always learning and therefore always changing, always becoming somebody different; yet it is an aspect of childhood few children's books acknowledge. It is Erika's right to take the name and the personality she chooses because she is half an hour older than Inge. Inge is at the bottom of the usual childhood hierarchy of age: Erika will play with her only when she cannot play with Magda, the older girl next door (and Magda, we are told in *Farewell, Aunt Isabell*, will play with the twins only when she cannot play with Maria, "who lived on the other side of Magda's garden and who was a year older than Magda" [25–26]). Much of *My Twin Sister Erika* chillingly describes Inge's attempts to win the favor of her supposed superiors and the ugly ways in which they take advantage of her desire for friendship. Inge says, "After all, it was better to pick berries for Magda than not be close to her at all" (17); but Erika takes credit for the berries. Inge also lends Magda her favorite doll for a week, and when Magda cruelly cuts off the doll's hair, Inge holds back her tears, only to hear that she is Magda's best friend "sometimes" (23).

*My Sister Erika* powerfully evokes the politics of domination as they inevitably express themselves in the lives of even well-loved and protected children. In contrast to most children's books, the oppressors are not evil villains from outside the home, not uncomprehending adults, not even the mean-spirited school bullies who tend to be the only oppressive children in more conventional books. Inge's oppressors can persecute her not because they are evil but because Inge allows them to do so. And she allows this because

she understands that her own significance depends on being acknowledged by beings whom she sees as superior to herself. Because her identity depends on their valuing her, her need for them creates the conditions of her oppression. Inge's problem of separating herself from her twin makes her need for self-definition, and therefore, her encouragement of her oppressors, particularly pressing; but anyone who knows childhood will recognize the paradoxical connection between the need for self-identity and the encouragement of oppression.

In fact, *My Twin Sister Erika* centers on the realization that, although a sense of self is essential, it is never won without cost. After a number of chapters detailing grim but relatively inconsequential events in the daily lives of children, readers must simply expect more of the same for the remaining fifteen or so pages. Instead, Erika suddenly takes sick and dies. This is death as it happens often in real life but rarely in children's fiction—apparently unrelated to the events preceding it.[4]

But that is the point here—and Vogel does relate the death to what has gone before, so that the novel expresses the randomness of life by means of the order of carefully wrought fiction. Inge has never been "one" before—although, ironically, just before Erika's death the twins have a moment of togetherness, and Inge concludes, "It felt so good to feel as one" (41); as soon as she sees her identity confusion with Erika as a positive "oneness," she becomes "one" in a different way. This total oneness is so new and confusing that Inge asks herself, "Would I look dead or would Erika look alive? I had to find out" (45); she slips into bed next to the dead Erika's body, and concludes she is "alone and alive." What bothers Inge is that she has what she always thought she wanted; Erika's death makes her a separate being, without competition and presumably without confusion about her identity. All the dolls are hers, everything is hers; she announces to Magda, "It's me . . . Me. And from now on it will be always only me. Me, your best friend" (48). Even so, Inge is confused; unused to her new separateness, she wonders if she might be Erika, and if Inge is the one who is dead (45).

Not surprisingly, then, Inge begins to worry about her responsibility for the death. Earlier, when Erika had interrupted what is provocatively called a "wonderful twosomeness with Magda" (13), Inge had wished her dead. Now her mother must persuade Inge that her wish for oneness was not what killed Erika, that what one

wants has little to do with what one gets. Paradoxically, then, the only source of comfort is not faith in a meaningful order or in egocentric wish-fulfillment, but acknowledgment of the lack of centrality of one's self and of the randomness of reality.

In *My Twin Sister Erika*, Vogel again reveals the limitations of more conventional children's books by combining two sorts of experience that rarely come together in children's fiction. The death of a sister is the sort of event reserved for a less nostalgic and less charming sort of children's book—the "problem" novel, which usually begins with the problem, focuses on it throughout, and ends with its solution. But nostalgic novels and problem novels misrepresent and minimize, for the everyday world of young children is not always charming or devoid of pain, and problems rarely occur as separable and uncharacteristic intrusions into otherwise perfect lives.

In *Farewell, Aunt Isabell*, Erika has not yet died, and there is little evidence of conflict between the twins; but the apparent cosiness is even more fragile: it dissipates as soon as Aunt Isabell enters the book, having come home from a mental institution, and tells the twins that their shoes are "shit-yellow" (4). Although real children inevitably hear (and use) such language, it never appears in the sanitary utopia of conventional children's literature. Vogel defies conventions here even more significantly by once more combining elements of different sorts of children's books; this time, her usual gentle nostalgia collides with a consideration of madness.

A surprising number of children's books explore madness, but they do so in a carefully controlled way. Nonsense, for instance, is a form of madness, an upsetting of the expectations of common sense; and children's books as diverse as Dr. Seuss's *Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* center on intrusions of uncontrolled anarchy into orderly situations. Such books offer imaginative escape for children who might feel constricted by the rules of behavior and limiting explanations of reality that adults impose on them.

But these books are always either fantasy or hyperbolic adventure; in the conservative world of children's literature, madness and anarchy are clearly beyond the pale of normal reality, and reality has the same boundaries as a writer's definition of normalcy. Indeed, such books are safe escapes only so long as they make it clear that ordinary reality is not mad or anarchic—only so long as a reader remembers they are fantasies.[5] As its effect on my friend's daughter

suggests, *The Don't Be Scared Book* might not offer that safety. As a children's book about actual rather than imaginary madness, *Farewell, Aunt Isabell* clearly lacks it.

For adult readers, and for the adult characters in the novel, there is little to laugh at in Isabell's madness. But Vogel cleverly shows that Inge and Erika respond to their aunt's behavior as readers are expected to respond to the fantastical events of *The Don't Be Scared Book*. What is horrifyingly insane to the adults confuses the children only because it is the behavior of an adult; had Isabell been a child like themselves, Vogel makes clear, her actions would make perfectly good sense to them. Isabell would be playing, or imagining, or having fun—the usual explanations for nonsense or anarchy in children's books. Aunt Isabell's madness almost always manifests itself in the forms of children's play. She imagines trips to exotic places. She escapes from the confinement the other adults impose on her to the meadow, where she can be free to do as she pleases, and she uses her freedom to playact, often in games that imply an investigation of acceptable behavior—just as the children's games of house making and doll parenting do. She pretends a marriage to the brook in the meadow; and she lies in the brook and plays at being dead, much as Inge lay down beside her dead sister in *My Twin Sister Erika* and tried to imagine how it felt to be dead.

But since Isabell is not a child, her madness is not just playing but a real dislocation that forces Inge and Erika to consider important issues. She makes them consider the meaning of play when she frightens them by pretending to be dead and when she plays the nonsense game of putting her apron on backward and trying to walk down the stairs backward. Although that makes the twins laugh, their laughter turns hollow when Isabell falls and horrifically keeps on laughing, so that they can no longer separate the fun of games from the pain and confusion of madness. As a result, they must consider what laughter means:

> "But Aunt Isabell didn't stop laughing," Erika said meekly.
> "So much the better," Magda said. "The more laughter, the happier Aunt Isabell was."
> "You didn't *hear* that laughter," I interrupted. "It was scary."
> "Nonsense," Magda declared. "You are too little and too dumb to understand. Laughter is laughter." [27]

But it is Magda who does not understand, who is the innocent

here—as she discovers herself, when Aunt Isabell accuses her of killing her imaginary bridegroom, hits her, and calls her a "sharp-fanged monster" (32). The children must realize that imagination is not so one-sidedly joyous and creative as it is often shown to be in more conventional children's books.

The nature of love is also confusing. The twins' mother and grandmother keep insisting that Aunt Isabell will be cured if she feels loved, but one of Isabell's first comments is a response to the question of whether or not she likes the twins: " 'No, no, no!' Isabell screamed and raising her voice even more, she added, 'I LOVE them!' " (5). Inge rightly asks, "And do you want to be loved like *that*?" (5).

But the main source of confusion for the twins and the central irony of the book is the suggestion that Aunt Isabell's "madness" may be caused by other adults—that she is made mad by their repressive attempts to stop her from being mad. She often tells the twins that her confinement makes her crazy: "All they do is watch me. They would like to put a chain around my neck. Only with you two can I dance and sing and go for walks. Everybody else locks me up" (38). Not only does Isabell enjoy her time with the twins, they come to enjoy their time with her. They have a "wonderful afternoon" (18) in the meadow, for instance, and it is after such wonderful occasions that the adults are most upset and confine Isabell. So the children must consider the implications of both childlike behavior—is it not just fun but crazy?—and adult ideas—is what they call crazy just good fun? Even more confusing, they must act like adults in response to Isabell's childlike behavior. When Isabell refuses to come out of a well, Inge must descend into the well to coax her out. Afterward, the adults are so involved with Aunt Isabell that Erika must comfort Inge and herself by climbing into Inge's bed and saying, "Don't you cry, my little one" (49).

Vogel's pictures in *Farewell, Aunt Isabell* cleverly support its thematic ambiguity. Despite their atmosphere of charming gentleness, there are bars in almost every picture (indeed, Vogel's use of bars and stair-rails and fences throughout her work implies her fascination with questions of security and constraint). The frontispiece shows Aunt Isabell behind bars that separate her from a border of leaves. As Aunt Isabell falls down the stairs in the foreground, the railings behind her separate her from the twins and Mother in the background (24). When the twins talk to Magda, the bars of the

fence divide her from them (35). At the train station, the twins and Isabell stand before the bars of a fence (39). Even at the end, Isabell's stretcher in the background is behind the bars of the gazebo in which the children sit in the foreground (51). Throughout, it is hard to tell who is behind bars—the constricting adults or the protected children, the insane person or those who would keep her from her freedom.

One picture in *Farewell, Aunt Isabell* implies a different ambiguity, this time about twinship. As they first meet Aunt Isabell, Erika and Inge are at the upper left background, their arms around each other, looking almost as if they are joined at the side; they are strangely mirrored by Aunt Isabell and Nurse Amelia at the lower right, similarly joined at the side (3). Not only is it hard to see a physical difference between the insane Aunt Isabell and her sane protectress, but the way the two groupings mirror each other suggests a further confusion; perhaps the twins, too, are mad in some way? Or at least have the potential for madness?

Such mirroring appears everywhere in Vogel's illustrations for her work, which constantly imply contrasts between apparently similar objects and people and similarities between supposedly different ones.[6] In *My Twin Sister Erika*, for instance, the pictures of the twins in the first part of the book show their similar figures placed against different backgrounds that imply discontinuity and disruption; we see one twin against a square painting on the left half of a picture, the other against a round mirror on the right—an arrangement emphasized by the appearance in the foreground of a doll against a square chair on the left, and another doll against a rounded cradle on the right (4). But later in the book, as Inge and Erica begin to work together, we see them both standing in front of the same painting while each holds a similarly rectangular object (26).

Although *My Summer Brother* describes a time after Erika's death, its pictures are also filled with twinnings and oppositions; but here the focus is on mother and daughter rather than sister and sister. Every element of the picture showing Inge standing in the doorway in the background and watching her mother give her "secret smile" to the mirror in the foreground is twinned; there is an oval mirror to the left of both the mother and Inge, a perpendicular line separating the mirrors from both of them, even a similar bending of elbows. The difference is that Inge stands against darkness, while her mother sits against light—and Mother surveys herself in delight,

"I found Mother sitting in front of her vanity table, smiling at herself in the mirror." Illustrations from *My Summer Brother* reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. Copyright © 1981 by Ilse-Margret Vogel.

"Mother stood motionless. Her long loose hair caught the moonlight so that her silhouette was brimmed by light."

while Inge watches her mother in horror. A later picture is a dark inverted twin of this one. This time, Inge is in the foreground against a light background, the square shape of her bed, again looking in dismay at her mother, who is in the dark background, now looking not at herself but out a window; she, too, is framed by a square shape, but now we see Mother's back instead of her front and cannot know her expression.

These pictures sum up the central dilemma in this book; if Inge earlier had to compete with Erika for Magda's attention, she must now compete with Mother for the attentions of Dieter, the young man who has moved in next door—and with Dieter for her mother's

attention. That competition is the most unsettling fact about this book. *My Summer Brother* allows sexual desire to intrude into the theoretically asexual paradise of childhood, in two forms rarely even implied by most children's books.

First, there is Inge's attraction to Dieter. She first sees him standing behind the iron fence that separates his house from hers—bars that, as always in Vogel's work, both protect and constrain her. Vogel emphasizes his intrusion into Inge's space; he "pushed his right hand through the iron bars" (3); after she tells him of her dead sister, he "reached through the fence and stroked [her] hair" (6), and when she cries, "he pushed a big white handkerchief through the fence" (7). Inge's response to this intrusion is an unacknowledged but obvious sexual awakening: when her mother arrives on the scene, she narrates, "I shook Mother's hand off my shoulder and walked over closer to the fence, hoping Dieter would stroke my hair again" (7–8).

Inge's passion for Dieter gives rise to the second intrusion of sexuality into her life: a jealousy of her mother's relationship with Dieter that forces her to acknowledge her mother's sexuality. Entering her mother's room unexpectedly, Inge sees Mother smile at her image in the mirror in an unusual way: "I was hot. Inside and out. . . . I wanted to think about the two different smiles. One of them I knew. The other was a mystery to me" (38). The mystery is sexuality; Inge finds the same smile in a picture of her mother that she finds when, looking at the objects in her mother's jewelry box, "I had the urge to empty the box completely, down to its blue velvet bottom" (41). Under the velvet she finds a photo of her mother with "a faint hint of the mysterious smile. . . . The woman in the photo I did not know and did not like" (41–42). By repeating the image several times, Vogel emphasizes the significance of that discovery of a frightening sexuality at the bottom of a box of desirable objects. When Inge eats all the raspberries in a box Dieter has sent to her mother, she finds a poem at the bottom; significantly, it is in a language she does not understand, and she does not want her mother to have it. Later, Inge eats a bowl of delicious soup and discovers a picture at the bottom, "a boy and girl dancing" (50). The ending of the book is foreshadowed by the fact that, in Dieter's bowl, there is no picture; but when Inge asks to finish her mother's bowl out of curiosity, she finds a girl's face, a face which, Dieter says, looks like Inge—not like her mother. One wonders if the girl's smile is a

"mysterious" one; it might well be, for when Dieter says the girl looks like her, Inge blushes and reaches for his hand under the table; he puts it on the table and says, "We have nothing to hide" (51).

That sexuality is the upsetting reality hidden under pleasing emotions is the central theme of this book. When Dieter first arrives, he calls Inge a princess (4); she imagines her relationship with him as being like that of princes and princesses in fairy tales. But the threat of his and her mother's growing interest in each other makes the underpinnings of that sort of romance clear. Sent to bed after having danced with Dieter, Inge repeats her mother's earlier action of staring at herself in the mirror, "and practiced tilting [her] head gracefully from one side to another" (71). Then begins a series of descents that echo her earlier descents to the bottoms of boxes. She cannot "reach down far enough" to unbutton her dress; she goes down the stairs, only to see her mother smiling "her mysterious smile" at Dieter (71). Unwatched, she sips some punch that inebriates her and then returns to her room, where she upsets a candle as she falls asleep. As the next chapter begins, Inge awakens four days later in a hospital bed with bandaged arms, after having been rescued from "the burning room" (75).

That symbolic-sounding place is the bottom of the ultimate Pandora's box, Inge's main discovery of pain and disorder at the end of pleasure. Like Erika's death, it is an unsettling intrusion into a relatively peaceful atmosphere. We tend to allow such intrusions into children's books only within the framework of a powerful morality that explains disaster as the result of bad conduct. But Vogel did not kill off Erika to teach Inge and those who read about her to be always nice to their sisters, and she does not burn Inge's arms to teach her and those who read about her that an interest in sexuality is not for her as a child. Although Inge's grandmother does try to teach her that, she refuses to learn it: " 'But there are other things that grownups share. You will find out later.' 'I want to know now,' I insisted" (82). When her grandmother refuses to say, Inge decides to keep silent about her mother and Dieter and her own interest in mysterious smiles: "I wanted to blurt it all out, but something kept me from doing so. . . . I felt there were things that I could not put into words" (82). So Inge is left not with the innocence adults might hope for, but with a child's unspoken knowledge of theoretically adult emotions. The last paragraph of the book reveals that she still retains her own sexual interest: "I closed my eyes, and soon I was

walking hand in hand with Dieter through dream-meadows, fields and woods" (86). That Inge should not only know of sexual desire but experience it does violence to the conventions of children's literature; this book suggests that a childlike interest in fairy-tale romance is inherently sexual in the same way that *Farewell, Aunt Isabell* suggests that a childlike delight in anarchy is a flirtation with madness.

Nevertheless, nothing illicit actually does happen here, as Vogel makes clear in a characteristic series of twinnings. When Inge enters her mother's room and finds her at her mirror, the scene parallels an earlier one in which she entered the housekeeper's room, heard a record about "love and parting, heartbreak and hope" (32), and learned of the housekeeper's many "fiancés." This is tawdry licentiousness, compared to which Mother's poetic flirtation seems innocent and idyllic. There is a similar twinning of Dieter to the bellhop at the hotel, who claims to be an artist (as does Dieter) because he made a poster and who asks Inge for a dance (as Dieter does). The bellhop indulges in a playful flirtation with Inge that parallels Dieter's and suggests its superficiality; but we understand how Dieter's behavior transcends mere thoughtless teasing when we read the letter near the end of the book in which, after so unsettling both Inge and her mother, he ironically says of her mother, "And in long talks with her I found comfort and order in a world that sometimes bewildered me" (80–81). The irony is that Inge, Dieter, and Mother have flirted with danger and caused disorder out of a need for some order in their already disrupted lives; all three must realize (as Inge realized earlier in *My Twin Sister Erika*) that it is less painful to accept randomness than to try to escape it.

Vogel's books not only include twinnings but also tend to twin each other, to echo each other in ways that provide contrapuntal meaning. The relationship between Inge and Erika in *My Twin Sister Erika* parallels not only the relationship between Inge and her mother in *My Summer Brother* but also, we might suspect, the disturbing relationship between Mother and her sister Isabell in *Farewell, Aunt Isabell. Tikhon* offers the most obvious of these parallels; it is a twin of *My Summer Brother.*

Like Dieter, Tikhon is a male older than Inge whose presence disturbs the order of family life; but Dieter reaches in to Inge by thrusting his hand through the fence, while Tikhon, who is being kept safe from the authorities who would imprison him, stretches his

hand out to her through the cellar window of her own house.[7] The reversal suggests how Dieter arouses Inge's passion whereas Tikhon requires her compassion; ironically, Mother allows Dieter's relationship with Inge because she is blind to the possibility of passion and she thinks Inge needs compassion, yet she fears Tikhon enough to be blind to the possibility of compassion.

As it happens, Dieter makes Inge's life more confusing, not less, and Tikhon turns out to be a healing presence who repairs rather than disrupts. Dieter offers Mother poems in a foreign language that Inge finds infuriatingly incomprehensible; Tikhon tries to teach Inge the language that he speaks. Dieter takes Inge to the top of a larch tree, where she feels pleasantly close to him and happily distant from her mother; Tikhon climbs the same larch tree as Inge, but not when she is in it, and he nails sticks to it so she can climb higher than she could before. Whereas Dieter carries Inge across the brook in his arms and awakens her passion for him, Tikhon builds a bridge so that she can cross the brook by herself.

In these ways, *Tikhon* balances *My Summer Brother*, which deals so unsettlingly with the danger to girls (and their mothers) of strange males. At the beginning of *Tikhon*, Mother tells Inge never to talk to strangers: "Mother said that terrible men abducted children and *slaughtered* them" (4). And Tikhon does abduct Inge; but we are not to agree with the housekeeper of *My Summer Brother*, who says, when Inge enters her room and asks about Dieter's poem, " 'Foreign is not good' " (33). When Inge enters Tikhon's room, she finds, not something foreign, but a perfect miniature version of her own house that he has been building for her. Tikhon himself is a foreigner but a good man, and his abduction of Inge is accounted for by his goodness. He builds a sleigh for her and then takes her off to the top of a mountain that reminds him of his own home, partially out of a childlike homesickness, partially to give her the childlike thrill of the long ride down. When Dieter accompanies Mother and Inge to the mountains, a party at an inn gets Inge into trouble that cuts short the trip. Although Inge and Tikhon also visit an inn on their trip to the mountain, it is Tikhon, not Inge, who gets too drunk. Inge must rescue him rather than being in trouble herself; whereas Dieter causes Inge trouble by arousing her adult emotions, Tikhon causes her both trouble and pleasure by indulging her childish pleasures and by himself acting like a child. Finally, the trip is interrupted in both cases, in *My Summer Brother* by a fire that ends the child Inge's

"The icon on the table sparkled. Tikhon knelt down before it and said a Russian prayer." Illustration from *Tikhon* reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. Copyright © 1984 by Ilse-Margret Vogel.

flirtation with adult sexual desire, and in *Tikhon* by the police ending the adult Tikhon's indulgence in childlike pleasures.

In the miniature version of the family's house Tikhon builds for Inge, he replaces her actual room with one like those "in fairy-tale books, inhabited by princesses and queens. Was this what Tikhon wished for me?" (79). When Dieter called Inge a princess, he aroused upsettingly unfairytale-like feelings in her; Tikhon offers Inge, who has behaved so maturely toward him, a version of her childlike fantasies. The difference is summed up in a picture—we see Inge standing in the doorway as she stood in the doorway of her mother's room, again discovering an adult involved in a private activity, but this time she sees, rather than a revelation of sexual interest, Tikhon kneeling at prayer.

*Tikhon* moves in the opposite direction from *My Summer Brother*,

away from an awakening of awareness and a desire to experience adult feelings and toward an appreciation for the innocence and security of childhood and childlike activities. Yet Inge learns something adult from that, too: from Tikhon, a childlike being who so needs to be home, she learns the important balance to her own wish to grow up—the joys of being childlike and secure. Like Aunt Isabell, Tikhon cannot bear to be barred—and also like Aunt Isabell, it is his childlike need to feel free from bars that makes him do childlike things and that forces Inge to learn how to protect him. The difference is that Isabell equates home with prison, Tikhon home with freedom; so his lust for his own home teaches Inge to value hers.

In some ways, *Tikhon* is more conventional than Vogel's earlier books. But its reassurances about the pleasurable security of being childlike are not won without cost or mature understanding: Inge must act like an adult in order to allow Tikhon his innocence. Vogel does not lie to children in order to keep them innocent; she forces them to see past innocence in order that they might understand what in childhood is worth treasuring.

A demand for such understanding is rare in children's books; but I suspect it can be found in all the best ones—in fantasies like Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* as well as in realistic novels like Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* and in fictional memoirs like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books and these books by Ilse-Margret Vogel. By disturbing the conventions that limit most children's literature with a realistic and upsetting randomness that demands deeper understanding and deeper awareness, Vogel and these other rule-breaking children's writers reveal much about the limitations of more usual children's books, which, paradoxically, do violence to their readers by ignoring or by downplaying the significance of real violence—by describing disruption only in circumstances that imply it is morally explicable, or by pretending that innocence is just another name for ignorance and avoiding the painful randomness of reality altogether.

In offering children such false visions of reality, we do them far more harm than we might by being honest. Children deprived of fictional mirrors of their own sexual or violent feelings must feel like unique perverts. Worse, children who know only of "good" and read only books that describe the world as utopia are surely the ones who will most easily be confused (or even abused) by the flawed, merely

human beings they will inevitably encounter, sometimes even in their own homes—sometimes, like Inge, even in their own mirrors.

Given the prevalence of dangerously protective attitudes toward children in all aspects of contemporary life, and particularly in children's literature, the sometimes painful truthfulness of a writer like Ilse-Margret Vogel is rare and laudable. In her accurate records of a child's life, Vogel reveals far more of the truth than we usually show children in children's literature. Perhaps more important, her novels and her pictures are both well-crafted enough and wise enough to make her revelations of painful truths anything but a painful experience for readers, whether they are cynical adults or innocent children.

*Notes*

1. Of course, Vogel is not alone in describing fantasy intrusions into ordinary settings, although *The Don't Be Scared Book* is certainly an early example of what has since become a popular pattern. What is interesting is how often it is just such books that most surprise adults by disturbing children. Another obvious example is Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat,* which bothered my own young children even though they were not bothered by apparently similar books like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are.* But *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Don't Be Scared Book* are different from *Where the Wild Things Are* in two important ways. First, both allow the fantasy action to take place on what ought to be safe turf, an ordinary child's ordinary home; but Sendak's Max goes somewhere else, and thus the child can keep the safety of home in reserve as an alternative. Second, neither Vogel nor Dr. Seuss suggests, as Sendak does, that the fantasy is just that—an imagining of their child characters; thus it seems like a real intrusion of anarchy into an undeniably real place that ought to be safe from such intrusions.

2. Consider, for instance, the many stories about fuzzy animals that wish to explore the big world away from home and quickly learn their need for the safety and security of parental protection, the many versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" that end with a little girl acknowledging that her mother knew best and she should not have trusted her own innocent desire to wander off the path, and the many stories in which a childish inexperience and inability to handle complex situations is praised as cuteness.

3. Indeed, many of the not particularly distinguished picture books that Vogel herself produced after her first success with *The Don't Be Scared Book* and before the remarkable autobiographical works of the last decade suggest that she had come to understand the conservatism of children's publishing; in comparison with the work that follows, these books are surprisingly conventional. While *1 Is No Fun but 20 Is Plenty!* has some absurd charm, it also has the rigid structure expected of a counting book. *1, 2, 3, Juggle with Me* is an even more conventional counting book in which animals in the expectable human clothing reach the expectable conclusion that "when you all play together / You CAN juggle ten." *Daisy Dog's Wake-Up Book* and *The Bear in the Boat* suffer from conventional cuteness: they describe characters meant to be endearing for their inadequacies in unthreatening and mildly amusing situations. Only a little more interesting is *Hello, Henry,* in which two boys both named Henry

(forerunners of the many mirrored characters in Vogel's work) become friends in a supermarket; while this book displays some of the imaginative anarchy Vogel is capable of, her depiction of one Henry as white and the other as black conveys a now conventional and obvious message about brotherhood. These books are neither particularly interesting nor particularly awful: their obvious morality, their gently unthreatening situations, and their delight in childish inadequacy merely make them representative of what children's books too often are.

4. Another exception is another unconventional children's book, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, in which the main character's friend unexpectedly dies toward the end of the book.

5. While Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* makes chilling claims to realism, it is unlike *Farewell, Aunt Isabell* in that the disordered world it describes might in fact be just a fantasy.

6. Even the gentle pictures of *Dodo Every Day* are beset by doubleness. When the child is sad, her doll slumped over her arm is echoed by the curved droops of peel from the apple Dodo holds (4); later, Dodo's arm around the child echoes the child's arm around a doll (7). Another picture shows a large vase with foliage beside a small one (10); the foreground of another shows a small figure of a woman on the table that echoes the figure of Dodo in the background (21). Another picture shows Uncle Karl slumped in pleasure holding an angular book beside the child slumped in despair holding an angular picture; the picture portrays a cat, and a real cat in the background looks out of an angular window (19). Although such doublings create a sense of unified order, the twinning of discordant elements implies subtle confusions under the comforting charm—a consciousness of the confusing relationships between order and constriction that Vogel's texts also imply. It is interesting that, just before a candle sets her room on fire in *My Summer Brother*, the intoxicated Inge sees it "doubled and tripled in front of my eyes. Beautiful!" (73).

7. Both actions are reminiscent of the scene in *My Twin Sister Erika* in which Inge thrusts her doll through the fence as she offers it to Magda.

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