



Tomi Ungerer: A Life of Contrasts

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[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[190](#) [2]

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Brian Alderson assesses Ungerer's career as a picture book creator.

Tomi Ungerer, innovative picture book creator and the winner of the 1998 Hans Christian Andersen Award is surprisingly little known these days in the UK. Considered anti-establishment in the 1970s for his often radical picture book making, Ungerer can sometimes confound his audience with works of sentimental charm, highlighting as Brian Alderson puts it, 'the extreme contrasts endemic to the whole Ungerer oeuvre' if not his life *tout court*?. Here **Brian Alderson** reflects on Ungerer's life and distinctive contribution to picture book art.

There was consternation among the anti-authoritarian comrades of the **Jugend + Literatur** faction in the Germany of 1976. What had become of Tomi, one of their *Fahnenträger*, bearing the banner of a cheerful defiance of picture-book conventions? How come that he had defected to the ranks of the bourgeoisie with his recently published illustrations for **Das Grosse Liederbuch** (Zürich: Diogenes, 1976), a collection of much-loved German ballads and folk- or near-folk-songs? Shunning the opportunity for a satiric attack on a Romantic pastoralism that obscured the social ills of the backward times whence the songs derived, he mirrored the sort of sentiment for a wholesome country life that had been promoted not least by the propagandists of the Third Reich. Happy, well-clad children danced ring-a-ring o'-roses, wanderers took their way through delectable landscapes, and, while there was no lack of sportiveness, or even funerary gloom, it was all charmingly done.

Just as hard to bear was publisher Diogenes' commercial exploitation of the book. **Jugend + Literatur** (Jan. 1976) ran a barely disguised critical account of **Das Grosse Liederbuch**'s pre-publication press-releases and of the variant editions of the book about to be published. There was to be a main trade edition, published in their exact words 'for the upper middle class'; a bibliophile's supplement: **Freut euch des Lebens** ('Go on and Enjoy Life' ? 101 studies and sketches for the book with an afterword by the artist); and a tiny, mini-paperback for children (for 'lower class people' as **J+L** has it), 72 pages, plus a lot of advertisements, illustrated with line adaptations of the original watercolours. 'Hélas', said the editor in his March edition, Tomi has suddenly become acceptable to the moral adjudicators of his Alsatian homeland, where in his youth he had been condemned as both perverse and subversive. (And all that occurred two years before the artist's fine, but profoundly 'traditional' illustrations for the two volumes of Johanna Spyri's **Heidi** came out. I know not what Dr Künnemann had to say about that.)

Whatever the disappointments perceived in **Das Grosse Liederbuch**, which **J+L** admitted as being a handsome volume, their expression goes some way to highlighting the extreme contrasts endemic to the whole Ungerer oeuvre ? if not his life *tout court*. (Entertainingly just such a contrast occurs with a *fourth* addendum to the Song Book series. It looks as though the critics of **J+L** did not know of a privately printed **Hopp Hopp Hopp** which Ungerer's friend and agent, Daniel Keel published in Zürich in 1975. This is a volume of pencil sketches closely related to the finished artwork for several of the folk song illustrations but marvellously satirised. What is Mama doing to that baby, smiling so blissfully in its

cradle for the 'Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf' lullaby? And the baker has left his flour-bin in 'Backe, backe, Kuchen' to attend to the lady leaning over the table and rolling out the pastry. (She looks to be enjoying the interruption.)

The importance of drawing

As is most tellingly shown in **Tomi**, Ungerer's illustrated account of his early life, contrast upon contrast swept through his Alsatian childhood. Born the youngest in a close-knit family he felt particularly the loss of his father when he was three. A few years later came the War when Alsations, who were part of the French nation, but spoke a near-German dialect of their own, found themselves first more or less on the eastern front, but then, having been overrun, a sort of province of Germany. Tomi's schooling was now undertaken in German (including learning to write in the 'Sütterlin' script, a bumpitty German cursive favoured by the Führer). No wonder that, with a return to French rules and customs at the end of the War, his sense of stability was badly fractured.

Through all this, drawing remained an assurance for his self-realisation, but only with his journey to the United States in 1956 did that turn to self-fulfilment. He arrived with sixty dollars in his pocket and, by good fortune, found himself directed to the office of Ursula Nordstrom the (then and now?) celebrated editor of children's books for Messrs Harper. She not only had an eye for the potential of new work but also a tenacity in shaping it and, within a relatively short time, Ungerer's first book was in her list. This almost self-effacingly funny picture book introduces us to the Mellops family: six pigs dwelling sedately in a nice house 'Mother, Father, and their four offspring. Mr Mellops is inspired by his reading to build an aircraft in the back garden, which alas crashes for want of enough fuel and while he and the boys brew up a substitute (their ever practical father manufacturing some schnapps from a home-made distillery built on the spot) young Casimir goes hunting for food and is kidnapped by a Red Indian. Tied to a totem pole as a subject for target practice he and the pole are fortunately rescued by the revived and re-flown aircraft and the family return home to be regaled with cream cake by their solicitous Mama.

That callow synopsis does no justice either to Ungerer's text (which, presumably, he wrote himself since a later German edition is translated by another hand) or to his plain, unadorned drawing wiry lines with pale colour overlays in light blue and a sort of piggy pink. But **The Mellops Go Flying** proved to be the first of five books about the family and its indomitable paterfamilias and these preserve elements established right at the start: ambitious adventures 'drilling for oil, for instance, or deep-sea diving' frustrations and failures, but always a happy return to Mama and her spectacular cakes. Furthermore, in a neat touch, the Mellops' offspring have their individual drawn characteristics: Ferdinand always chewing a flower stalk (even when spelunking) or Felix always presented viewed from behind so that we know more of his braces than his face.

These delicious books came out at intervals between 1957 and 1963, interspersed with what was a more loosely presented sequence of picture tales featuring animals with a penchant for assisting the humans alongside whom they exist. The best-known is probably the one who put in an appearance almost immediately after the flying Mellops: **CriCTOR**, a boa constrictor who is despatched in a circular box to be a companion to Madame Louise Bodot, a present from her son who is studying reptiles in Africa. As has been often noted, CriCTOR may have a literary relationship with Babar, the little elephant 'Madame Bodot knits him a woollen jumper and settles him down in an elongated bed' but he lives to become an honoured local resident. His curvaceous form helps his adoptive friend to teach children their letters; he helps boy scouts learn their knots; and he even saves Madame Bodot from a burglar.

Dramatic use of colour

CriCTOR is the least adventurous, and hence the most 'credible' (or least absurd) of these companionable beasts, who include a kangaroo with wings, an immensely energetic octopus, and a gallant vulture. But, in terms of the artist's own development, perhaps the most significant is **Rufus**, the silliest of the lot, but the one where Ungerer (like the bat who is the story's subject) discovers Colour. Hitherto, his children's books had held to the pastel overlays first seen in the Mellops saga, but now, in 1961, coloured inks take over. Whole spreads are given coloured washes 'black or dark blue' on which coloured images are superimposed, and elsewhere as Rufus swoops into daylight, paint is sloshed around in a way not encountered before.

Well ? not encountered, that is, in his book illustrations. But from about 1958 (dating Ungerer's work is fraught with problems) his chief activity, and one for which he was far more widely-known, was as a poster designer. It was a graphic form for which both his skills and his temperament were ideally suited and over at least twenty years he must have produced hundreds of examples, either as straight advertisements, commissioned from individual companies such as Lysol and Cantreze Pantyhose, or, more significantly, as acts of political aggression. His fame among the radicals of Germany may well stem from the ferocious graphics that he produced against the Vietnam war, for instance, or for the establishment of racial equality, and it was through such work that he displayed his capacity for the dramatic use of colour. Indeed, his commitment to the centuries-old role of artist as social critic, had led him also to George Grosz-like assaults on the social mores of his adopted country through the medium of caricature. While it is difficult now to observe the full impact of his poster-work, the ferocity of his cartooning is preserved in print in a run of volumes such as the critical miscellany **America**, or the raging sequence of **The Party**, set in Long Island's Gatsby-land, or the eye-boggling **Fornicon** on the commercial conversion of sexual love into a mechanical process.

Harbouring so ambivalent a response to the American way of life, it is hardly surprising that in 1971 Ungerer and his third wife, Yvonne, departed New York for a wilderness farm on the coast of Nova Scotia. But the ten years or so that lay between **Rufus** and that leave-taking saw the emergence, amid all the wild graphics, of the half dozen or so books which sanction his place in the pantheon of picture book art and upon which his receipt of the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1986 probably depended. (To say which is not to neglect what may be seen as secondary work: the two dozen or so books done in collaboration with other authors where his support so often matches the needs of a given text: the frenzied depictions of the wizardly setting for Barbara Hazen's **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**, or the fruitful association with William Cole in a succession of comic joke and rhyme books.)

The colour techniques inspired by **Rufus** were replicated soon after in two wordless books that played with the shape of snails and shoes: **snail, where are you?** and **one, two, where's my shoe?** , but the use of dark, full-page washes, with colour superimposed, figured most significantly in the first of his 'big' picture books, **The Three Robbers** (apparently first published in Germany in 1961). It brought a spookiness to this tale of redemption in which the orphaned Tiffany, stolen by the robbers from her carriage, persuades them to apply their ill-gotten gains to a life of charity. It's a corny enough plot, owing everything to the artistry of its execution and the preserved mystery of the three robbers hidden forever under their tall hats. And a similar story-line is employed in **Zeralda's Ogre** of 1967 where the rapacious villain is reformed by little Zeralda's skills as a gourmet cook, but now with a display of spirited pictorialism. The simple text serves principally as an excuse for illustrative high jinks, entertaining the reader with details of varying relevance, or no relevance at all: children hiding from the ogre in cellars, Zeralda roasting a pig on the king's highway, roast chicken with neat red shoes on its protruding legs.

These are the sort of dodges that give so much life to the more varied texts that followed: **Moon Man** (1967), **The Hat** (1970), and **The Beast of Monsieur Racine** (1971), which, to my mind, mark a culmination to Ungerer's originality as a picture book artist. Less often cited though is the experimental **I Am Papa Snap and these are my Favorite No-Such Stories** ?whipped up, drawn, and dramatized? by the author in 1971. There are sixteen of these little incidents set down in texts that are themselves treasurable (?Bunny Bunson Brittle goes fishing. / He has no permit / Who cares? / There are no fish.?) and their near surreal humour is matched by colour drawings that evoke high admiration both for their composition across the spreads and the serious attention given to the detail of their anything but serious scenes. The book was done as the Ungerers were on the point of departure for Nova Scotia and although it had one or two successors, not least the **Song Book** and the controversial **No Kiss for Mother** (1973) ? a cat-family story, founded upon Ungerer's own dislike of being kissed by his often over-demonstrative Mama (but with some stunning grey wash drawings of home and school-life among the cats), a twenty-year career in picture books was effectively at an end.

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The Nova Scotia years are recorded in a memoir, **Far Out is Never Far Enough** published in 1983. If the contrasts in Ungerer's New York life are plain to see (the phases of the children's books set against the turmoil of the graphic work, the transitions from plain line and colour to gay impastos ? to say nothing of three marriages) then that between the City

and the Wilderness was an altogether more fundamental matter. **Far Out** is a kind of *kommentiertes Tagebuch*, a diary with running commentary, whose prose – so precise in its delineations of landscape, weather, the toils of farm-life, the lost souls of the adjacent communities – is perfectly enhanced by the accompanying sketches and more finished illustrations. But after five years or so, ‘fed up with the bloody carnival’, Tomi and Yvonne moved on, back to Europe, to a farm in Southern Ireland where they have remained.

These have been years less of creative work than of the honours that flowed from it – not just the Andersen award, but a Legion d'Honneur and a National Prize for Graphic Arts in France, an appointment by the European Council as Ambassador for Childhood and Education (whatever that means), and much else. But of greatest interest is his donation to Strasbourg, the city of his birth, of a massive archive, now of over 8000 original drawings, together with attendant documentation and 6000 items from his wide-ranging collection of children's toys and games.

These form the main holding of an Ungerer Museum at the Villa Grenier (praised as one of the ten best such in Europe) but in 1975, at the time when the gift was made, a huge celebratory exhibition was organised in Paris, whose subsequent journey to England met with a sad but comical reception. It opened in (of all places) Leicester, where a presiding official appeared somewhat inebriated and where neither he nor most of the local populace had a clue about the artist to whom they were giving house-room. Later the show went as an open exhibition to the Festival Hall in London where the section that in Paris had been ‘*interdit aux enfants*’ gave great offence to the feminist brigade. In a tiny riot (by today's standards) the sisterhood achieved closure of that portion of the show.

One can hardly argue from that event the disappearance of Tomi Ungerer from British consciousness, but very little of his subsequent work is known in this country. Some five picture books, mostly from Diogenes have found no translators, while the only other one to be published, the wordless guide to a skittish athleticism among amphibians, **The Joy of Frogs** (Souvenir Press, 1984) was perhaps unsuitable for review in so polite a journal as **Books for Keeps**. But now, on the brink of Tomi's eightieth birthday, a welcome change has occurred. The Phaidon Press – a rather different company now from its distinguished predecessor – are in the process of bringing Tomi back into print with a distinction all their own. In a reprint programme which is being carried out with careful attention to all aspects of printing and design, they have already given us excellent editions of **The Three Robbers**, **Moon Man**, **Adelaide, the Flying Kangaroo**, and a handsomely revised and expanded edition of **Far Out Isn't Far Enough**, while last year they published the first edition in English of **Otto** which had first been published by Diogenes in 1999. Sub-titled ‘the autobiography of a teddy bear’, it allows Otto to reprise in his own story a glimpse of the tribulations of Europe's twentieth century catastrophe. There is a degree of coolness and dignity in the illustrations as befits Otto's recollections, but no loss of intensity or of the customary comic asides. After all, Tomi the Alsatian was there.

The Books

The following list supplies details of Tomi Ungerer titles reissued by Phaidon:

The Three Robbers, 978 0 7148 4877 8, £9.95

Moon Man, 978 0 7148 5598 1, £9.95

Adelaide, the Flying Kangaroo, 978 0 7148 6083 1, £8.95

Otto, 978 0 7148 5766 4, £9.95

Far Out Isn't Far Enough, 978 0 7148 6077 0, £19.95

Other Ungerer titles may be available from Amazon or Abe Books.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

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