



A review of
**Johnny Breadless:
A Pacifist Fairy Tale**

B.C. Kennedy

Paul Vaillant-Couturier's *Jean sans Pain*, illustrated by Jean Picart le Doux and published in 1921, was written for children so they 'might know more about social injustice and the people and forces that produced wars'. Vaillant-Couturier did not believe in mincing his words or lying to children, and this extraordinary, revolutionary book, a pacifist fairy tale, was to have an influence on European writers as it paved the way for many progressive books for children, for example as seen in the Soviet Biedermeier period.¹

Johnny Breadless: A Pacifist Fairy Tale is an adapted translation by Jack Zipes, Professor Emeritus (University of Minnesota) of German, comparative literature, and cultural studies. This book is based on Vaillant-Couturier's reworking of *Jean sans Pain* that was republished in 1933. This time illustrated by Jean Lurcat, whose expressionist, satirical abstract images reveal a godless world in which the bitter struggle to bring about peace and harmony must continue, this later edition omits some of the original religious motifs, and is overall more strident, didactic and revolutionary than the 1921 edition. Zipes suggests that these changes reflect Vaillant-Couturier's own transformation, which made him more strident in fighting for socialism, especially after the devastating effects of the Great Depression in 1929 throughout Europe, and the rising danger of fascism in Italy, Spain, Germany and France throughout the 1930s.

This is a short story; the book is 104 pages long and divided into four sections. Zipes' preface of only one paragraph introduces the historical context in which the book was written. Vaillant-Couturier (1892-1937) enlisted to fight for France in 1914 at the start of the First World War. Serving initially in the infantry, he was a participant in the brutal war of the trenches and soon realised that the basic value of thousands of young men and women like himself was to protect and serve the ruling classes. It was during this time that he began writing critical articles for various newspapers and magazines. After the war, in which he had been wounded many times, he became one of the founding members of the newly formed French Communist Party.

Gramarye: The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy,
Winter 2021, Issue 20

The next two sections, which make up most of the book, are first Zipes' English translation followed by the original French text and illustrations. While other reviewers have suggested that the English and French texts should be on facing pages, I prefer the current format since it uses two different editions.

Set in the north of France in 1917 during the First World War, the story takes place on Christmas Eve. Vaillant-Couturier was one of the French soldiers who celebrated 'The Christmas Truce', a series of widespread unofficial ceasefires along the Western Front around Christmas 1914.

For ten-year-old Johnny Breadless, Christmas Eve is the antithesis of 'the night when many children received beautiful gifts beneath a tree decorated with candles, strings of coins, barley sugar, candy and dolls'; his father had never returned from the war and, as his mother lay dying from a lung disease, 'the priest and the owner of the house counted all the money they could find hidden in the stove and under the bed to pay for the rent and a special mass'. Weeping, Johnny Breadless leaves and walks towards the village which had been largely destroyed by the war. From here the tale moves from the realistic to the fantastical: Johnny meets an anthropomorphic rabbit, who promises to make him smile, and twenty partridges, who become his mode of transport. This tale of anthropomorphic animals speaking on Christmas Eve may have derived from an ancient European legend that claims on the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve, animals gain the power of speech.

Rabbit explains to Johnny that the wild animals decided to 'choose a son of the people who had never killed and to reveal some marvellous things to him', for people who 'work need to learn to be strong and free'. He is then taken by the animals on a journey. His first stop is at a factory, and it is here with its 'disgusting odours' and 'hundreds of machines' that Johnny finally sees the workers 'dripping with so much sweat and so grey' that he initially confused them with the machines. Focusing on Marie, who resembles his father and coughs like his mother, Johnny asks Rabbit what the workers had done to deserve this. 'Nothing', Rabbit responds, 'they are just poor and it was under conditions like this that your mother and many other mothers became sick ... and when they become old, they are thrown out of the factory without bread and a roof over their heads.' This is, Rabbit tells Johnny, 'the life waiting for the poor children'.

Rabbit next takes Johnny to a beautiful golden mansion filled with flowers, wonderful food and wine. However, the ladies and gentlemen here resemble toads, jackasses, lizards and the like because they represent the factory bosses, generals, and bishops that prey on the poor. Running away when he is discovered, Johnny is overwhelmed by noise as 'if the earth was exploding' and finds himself 'in the black and stinking trenches where nothing appeared to be able to live' at the front lines of the war. 'Cold and freezing', he sees 'terrible and ugly things,' such as rotting

corpses entangled in barbed wire. This is a place where bullets, bombs and missiles also have voices. Johnny asks Rabbit how much longer the war will last; 'miles and miles and years and years', Rabbit replies.

Encircled by the partridges and Rabbit to keep him warm, the vision changes and Rabbit promises Johnny that a ceasefire on both sides will occur at midnight. Climbing out of the trench, he sees soldiers from opposing sides embrace each other and exchange food as if 'a song arose from the two sides'. 'What if all the poor people and the soldiers in the world got along like this evening?' Johnny asks the soldiers. 'Well, then that would change everything', they reply. It is the first time in his life that Johnny smiles.

The story ends with the line, 'Whoever does not work should not eat', a fitting moral summary for a story that challenges the exploitation of the poor by the rich. The penultimate section of the book contains the original French version, followed by Zipes' afterword, 'Paul Vaillant-Couturier's "War" against War', in which more biographical detail of the author may be found. This is particularly useful as there is limited information to be found on the internet. In addition, Zipes makes a compelling argument that Johnny Breadless should be read as a pacifist fairy tale, and indeed, his suggestion that this story deserves re-examination and revitalisation in contemporary times is a compelling one. In light of the political, social and economic challenges our world is currently experiencing, I believe that Johnny Breadless provides not only an excellent introduction to the writings of Vaillant-Couturier but is as relevant today as when it was first written.

Author: Paul Vaillant-Couturier. Translator: Jack Zipes.

Publisher: Little Mole & Honey Bear Press (2019), 106pp.

B.C. Kennedy

Notes

1. *Hans Christian Anderson in Russia*, ed. by Mads Sohl Jessen, Marina Balina, Ben Hellman, and Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2020), 280.