Interplay between the specific and the universal is characteristic of the EU, as is the struggle to attain a balance between locality and universality, difference and homogeneity. Contemporary European children’s literature often reflects this, by positioning the child in the middle of this field of tension and envisioning children as catalysts that will make this balance attainable (Panaou, 2009: 169-171).

Frank Schimmelfennig observes that EU’s collective identity is based mainly on political culture and is kept “thin” enough “to be compatible with various ethnic or cultural identities, a pluralist authority structure, and different varieties of democratic political systems and market economies” (2001: 174). In the same spirit, Article F of the Treaty on European Union affirms: “The Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States” (qtd. in Schimmelfennig, 2001: 174). This ensures a balance between identification with the European community on the one hand, and protection of nation-states, national and ethnic identities and traditions on the other.

The struggle between homogeneity and difference that is so characteristic of European communal identity is expressed in the five European picturebooks analyzed here, as a negotiation of identity. Identity, or the self, is not taken for granted by the anthropomorphised animal-protagonists. In this sense, all five heroes are to an extent actively and diversely constructed social selves: they view the self not just as something we are, but as an object we actively construct and live by, taking up or resisting the varied ways in which others perceive their identity.

We approach the five narratives in a comparative manner. Koelb and Noakes describe Comparative Literature in general as “less a set of practices [...] and more a shared perspective that sees literary activity as involved in a complex web of cultural relations” (1988: 11). This description applies to Comparative Children’s Literature to such an extent, that some Children’s Literature scholars practice it without even realizing the comparative nature of their work. We are consciously applying a comparative approach here, as we belong to the international community of scholars, authors, educators, and librarians who agree that what happens in one ‘national literature’ can no longer be studied in isolation from what takes place in the rest of the
world. For Arjun Appadurai, the central characteristic of global cultural processes is “the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference”:

Thus the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular. (2001: 100)

Comparative Children’s Literature is clearly the most appropriate tool to explore children’s literature within this global context; children’s literature within, and as active part of, the global and local tensions between sameness and difference.

The present discussion compares and discusses five picturebooks from five different EU member states, which were initially collected for the purposes of the European Picture Book Collection II (www.epbcii.org). EPBC II is a project carried out with the support of the European Community and the Lifelong Learning Programme. Building on the experiences from the first EPBC, a collection of 65 European picturebooks from all 27 member states was compiled. In many cases, more than one book was collected from a country, so that as many ethnic, linguistic and religious groups as possible were represented. The following five European EPBC II picturebooks are discussed in this chapter:

1. *Kraai* [Crow] by Leo Timmers, from Belgium;
2. *Elmer* by David McKee, from the UK;
3. *Różowy prosiaczek* [Pink piglet] by Brykczyński, Olech, and Ignerska, from Poland;
4. *Härra Linnu lugu* [Mister Bird’s Story] by Piret Raud, from Estonia;
5. *A Cebra Camila* [Camilla the Zebra] by Marisa Núñez and Óscar Villán, from Spain.

The European struggle between the specific and the universal, or difference and homogeneity, is played out in these books in terms of identity/self-formation. This is expressed as a negotiation of national, ethnic or racial identity, which is not taken for granted by the anthropomorphised animal-protagonists of these stories: In *Kraai* a crow does not want to be black anymore; in *Elmer* a multicoloured elephant wants to be grey like all other elephants are; in *Różowy prosiaczek* a piglet explores other options besides being pink; in *Härra Linnu lugu* a bird defies its “bird-ness”
trying on the shapes, forms, and lifestyles of different creatures and objects; and in *A Cebra Camila* a young zebra loses and regains seven of her stripes (a part of her stripy “zebra-ness”).

What these creatures seem to have in common, is a tendency to consider identity and “the self” as fluid rather than solid; not fixed, but subject to change; and as something that one chooses rather than being born into. The processes in which the main characters engage in order to form a sense of identity or self are of particular interest here. In these texts, the concept of self (who we are; who we want to be; who we can be) is socially negotiated and constructed between the individual and the community and/or between the child and adult caregivers. Taking into account the fact that these European stories were authored, illustrated and mediated to children by adults, one may reach useful conclusions regarding the manners in which adults channel the child’s self-/identity- formation towards specific directions.

Social Psychology has described three main concepts of the self: the transcendental self; the social self; and the actively and diversely constructed social self. The concept of the transcendental self was born during the 18th century from the European Enlightenment. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) explain that this was a view of the self “as an idealized, abstract platform from which concepts and judgments emanated,” thus “the self transcended society, standing prior to, apart from, and philosophically above the everyday hubbub of life” (2000: 4).

A completely different perception of the self, the social self, was described two centuries later. In 1902, Cooley asserted that we come to view ourselves in the “looking glass” of social participation (Cooley, 1964); we develop a sense of who we are through the manner in which others respond to us. Mead later suggested that:

> The individual experiences himself as [an object], not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other members of the same social group... [The individual] becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him... it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience. (1934: 138-140)

In the postmodern era, this concept of a social self has been challenged; the social looking glass, Hazelrigg (1989) claims, is turning into a “wilderness of mirrors” (qtd. in Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 9). “Filled to capacity, and then some, by the
ever-increasing demands of life in a consumption-oriented, media-driven world, the self was still there, but it was overwhelmed by the legion of voices clamoring for attention, deluged by endless sources of identity” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 9). Other theorists even supported the dissolution of the social self: “Some said that contemporary life and its instantaneous electronically mediated images had simply blown the social self away, leaving in its wake only myriad signs of itself swirling about where substantiality once resided” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 9).

As an answer to these claims, a different concept of the social self was formulated; the concept of an actively and diversely constructed social self: The self, not just as something we are, but as an object we actively construct and live by. Holstein and Gubrium offer “an alternate vision of a more actively formulated social self,” which they describe as “a social construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life” (2000: 10). As Taylor (1989) has identified, humans are “self-interpreting animals,” and self-interpretation involves both social input and individual interpretive work. This means that we are not passively formed by others, by society; we also construct or narrate ourselves, simultaneously indicating to others who and what we are. It should be stressed, however, that the possibilities for self-interpretation are not infinite; they are rather limited by the specific culture, circumstances, and institutions within which the self functions. In fact, it has been claimed that the postmodern individual develops multiple selves which enable her/him to function in diverse circumstances and social organisations (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 13). Thus, the postmodern self is both an actively and diversely constructed social self.

The social part of the self is present in all five picturebooks to be discussed. Elmer’s self/identity, for instance, is defined in comparison with the rest of the herd. All the elephants are grey; “All, that is, except Elmer. Elmer was different. Elmer was patchwork.” Had Elmer lived alone, then there would be no other elephants to compare himself with and recognize his difference. He defines himself as “an elephant” based on the characteristics he shares with the rest of the herd, and he also realizes that he is different because of his different colours. Moreover, his other central characteristic, his love for fun, is also defined through his social interaction with the rest of the herd: “It was Elmer who kept the elephants happy. Sometimes he joked with the other elephants, sometimes they joked with him.”
Leo Timmers’ Crow also has a social self. He constantly strives to get accepted by others, conforming to and even internalizing their concepts of himself. This is what happens when he tries to approach a happy group of young birds:

They were scared to death when Crow suddenly appeared beside them! With pounding hearts, they flew away in all directions. At a safe distance, they started chirping again. “Black!” Finch squeaked. “He’s pitch-black from top to toe.” “Not even a touch of color,” Parakeet gaggled. “He’s not to be trusted.” “Brrr,” Chickadee shivered. “Must be a mean creature.” Crow heard everything. Never before had he felt so black. “I’m a creep,” he moaned. “A scarecrow of tar and feathers.”

The phrase “Never before had he felt so black” summarizes our argument; he has always been black, but the emphasis placed by other birds on this characteristic (out of the many one could focus on) makes colour an important part of his sense of self. His internalizing of the negative connotations attributed by others to his “blackness” is, of course, highly problematic.

In the picturebook from Poland, Pink Piglet has a social self that he challenges from the start. He challenges the very fact that his identity and self seems to be something imposed or projected on him by the animals that surround him (including his parents) rather than his own personal choice. The following excerpt is illustrating:

- I MUST do something about it! said Pink Piglet one morning as he looked at his reflection in a puddle.
- About what? asked his mother.
- About my boring pink colour! said Pink Piglet, stirring the puddle with his pink trotter.

The last sentence here manages, through a clever choice of words, both to describe the identity “stirring” desired by Piglet and the difficulty of the task, as his pink trotter is part of his unchangingly pink body. Clearly, Piglet wishes to become an actively constructed self, rejecting the total control of others over his identity:
Mother Pig was surprised: - But you’re the most handsome pink piglet in the world! [...]  
- Yes, that’s what everyone tells me the whole time... all I hear is: Good morning, Pink Piglet. How are you, Pink Piglet? Oh what a gorgeous pink piglet. I’m fed up with it! I need to do some thinking.  
- Thinking about what? asked Mother Pig.  
- About whether I want to even BE pink and why no one ever asked me!

When he storms out to take a walk and do his thinking, his mother advises him: “Well don’t get your pink trotters dirty.” Evidently, mother could merely say “Don’t get your trotters dirty”; she insists on the trotters’ colour to remind him of his naturally/bodily pink colour.

In the Estonian picture book, Mister Bird is yet another animal-protagonist who feels entrapped in his socially constructed self at the beginning of the story. It is notable that the narration first introduces us to the community of birds that Mr Bird inhabits and then immediately presents the protagonist’s wish to become something different than a stereotypical bird:

In a large forest there lived Mister Bird along with all the other birds. His friends were happy with their lives. They were all extremely hardworking and had fancy nests that they were continually making even fancier. In their spare time they came together to sing in the choir, and rehearse for the Great Song Festival. But Mister Bird didn’t care about nest building, and he didn’t care about singing, and he didn’t even like song festivals. It was all so boring and ordinary.

Since part of the Estonian national identity is the Estonians’ love for music, and since Estonia is famous for a real “Great Song Festival,” the story seems to mildly allude to an Estonian challenging his national identity. In any case, here one finds again a socially constructed identity in the form of how birds are expected to be in this world, and a protagonist who asserts that he should have a choice:

“I wish things were somehow different,” he told his friends. “I want to see the world and experience life. If I want to know what it feels like to be something else, such as a tiny pink pillow, I should be able to try it.”
Finally, in the picture book from Spain, Camilla the Zebra disobeys her mother and leaves home with no suspenders on; thus, the wind blows away seven of her stripes, altering her identity/self that seems to partly reside in her stripy image. Unlike the rest of the characters in these picturebooks, Zebra only indirectly challenges her “zebra-ness,” and seems quite upset when she actually loses part of it.

These stories are infatuated with skin (or fur and feather) colour; the reasons for this are multiple: To begin with, colour is the most obvious trait in relation to race, and all these stories explore issues that deal with race, difference and diversity. The other reason for this focus, might simply have to do with the picturebook being an intensely visual medium; it thus depends on colour and line in order to communicate the narrative. It should be noted, however, that the extreme focus on this single visual trait of colour does bring the danger of essentializing quite close. The only picturebook of the five that is not characterized by this infatuation with colour is Härra Linnu lugu [Mister Bird's Story]; instead, the story seems to focus on the different lifestyle of each self adopted by Mr Bird.

All animal-protagonists, with the exception of Zebra, take direct action to modify their socially constructed self. Elmer uses berries to paint himself grey. On his way back to the herd, no one recognizes him as “Elmer, the patchwork elephant”:

When he had finished, Elmer looked like any other elephant. After that Elmer set off back to the herd. On the way, he passed the other animals again. This time each one said to him: “Good morning, elephant.” And each time Elmer smiled and said: “Good morning,” pleased that he wasn’t recognised.

Similarly, Crow also paints himself in colours other than his native black, “changing” consecutively into a finch, a parakeet, and a chickadee (the kinds of birds he wants to befriend). Piglet does try to change colour, asking (with no success) each animal he meets if he can take on their colour. In contrast, Mr Bird does succeed in taking on other animals’ or objects’ colours, shapes, and lifestyles, becoming consecutively a pillow, a hedgehog, a snowman, a carrot, and a fox.

In one degree or another, then, the protagonists’ social selves are actively and diversely constructed. In all books, the self is shaped both through social interaction and individual “interpretive work.” It has already been explained earlier in the discussion (Taylor; 1989) that humans (and the animals in these stories clearly
represent humans) are “self-interpreting animals,” combining social input and individual interpretive work. Four out of the five protagonists are not passively formed by society; they also actively construct themselves. We should note, however, that these four characters engage in “self-interpreting” or “self-forming” action that is socially determined: they imitate other animals and objects they meet. As supported earlier, the possibilities for self-interpretation are not infinite; they are rather limited by the specific culture, circumstances, and institutions within which the self functions.

The fifth character, Camilla the Zebra (Figure 1), is the most passive self-interpreting character of the five, as she does not like change to begin with, and then passively accepts the influence of others to fill in the gap. One should note here, that Camilla is also the only female character out of the five; thus her passivity may reflect relevant gender stereotypes. The young zebra is literally constructed by others, as diverse creatures--such as a snake, a snail, a rainbow, and a spider--attach to her body seven diverse stripes, in replacement to the ones that were blown off by the wind. Her body language and expressions communicate passivity.

![Figure 1](image)

From *A Cebra Camila* (2009), ©Marisa Núñez, Óscar Villán, and Kalandraka Editora

Interestingly enough, Camilla is also the only character out of the five who retains her changed body in the end. When she returns home, her mother accepts her changed body/self and even contributes the last stripe out of her own mane. Through this change she does not lose her “natural, initial zebra-ness”; the stripes she has lost are merely substituted, change functioning more or less as a return to her initial identity.

The other four characters, on the other hand, do not keep their altered bodies/selves/identities in the end. Elmer decides that being like any other elephant is
boring, so he first reveals himself by making a joke and then his grey colour is washed off by the rain. Crow also washes back into his black colour; his tears wash of the paint, when he cries for being rejected by the other birds. Piglet never changes, as either the other animals deny him access to their colour or he himself decides (before trying it on) that he wouldn’t be happy in that colour. Mr Bird does try on diverse lifestyles, and selves, but finds out that they are only temporarily satisfying. For instance, he changes into a carrot, but when a hungry hare comes into the picture, Mr Bird doesn’t like being a carrot anymore; he chooses to turn into a fox:

“It’s not so great to live in fear of being eaten,” Mister Bird thought. “What if I tried being someone that frightens everyone else? Someone like Fox!” He extended his tail and made a Fox’s voice and Hare made a hasty escape.

Mr Bird finally meets an attractive Miss Birdie and decides that he does like “birdish” things after all; things like singing in the choir with Miss Birdie, building nests with Miss Birdie, and having a family with Miss Birdie. The rest of the birds even make him the conductor of the choir because he has seen the world and experienced life. As we are informed by the images on the last pages of the book, Mr Bird eventually builds a nest, gets married, and has children. So, even though Mr Bird is the closest to a postmodern, actively and diversely constructed social self (he tries on multiple and extremely diverse selves throughout the story), he eventually returns to the self that has been biologically and socially prescribed for him. The “experimental phase” he goes through, is however appreciated as a useful experience.

In the end, Pink Piglet also happily embraces his pink colour, after seeing himself in and through the eyes of a chameleon:

- What a handsome pink Chameleon! Pink Piglet had just remembered the name of the animal that can change the colour of its skin.
- What a handsome Pink Piglet! Pink Piglet cheered up for the first time that day – suddenly being pink wasn’t so bad.

It is noteworthy that in all books family, friends and community are against the protagonists’ changing. They all seem to favor a stable and coherent self, who adheres to what they consider “normal.”
The book titles and covers images (Figure 2) seem to agree with this idea.

Figure 2

Cover of *A Cebra Camila*, ©Marisa Núñez, Óscar Villán, and Kalandraka Editora

Titles of both original and English versions focus on the protagonist’s name/identity, four of the names containing the characteristic that is under challenge: “stripy zebra-ness” in *Camilla the Zebra*; “bird-ness” in *Mr Bird’s Story*; “piggish pink-ness” in *Pink Piglet*; and “black crow-ness” in *Crow*. *Elmer*’s title is the exception; the Greek edition, however, includes his central characteristic in the title [Elmer the Multicoloured Elephant]. The fact that these trates are included in the titles and in the covers may seem to solidify them, implying the impossibility of the protagonist becoming something other than a multicoloured elephant, a black crow, a pink piglet, a nest-building and singing bird, or a striped zebra. To enhance this impression, four out of the five covers host an overblown image of the protagonist’s “normal” body, while the fifth cover presents multiple smaller images of a very pink Pink Piglet. To be accurate, some cover images do hint on the hero’s wish to change. On the cover of the Belgian picturebook, for instance, Crow is depicted dipping his wing in a bucket of blue paint, while on their covers Mr Bird turns his back to a bird’s nest and Pink Piglet is surrounded my numerous objects and animals in all other colours of the rainbow.

The endings also seem to argue in favor of preserving the central/essential characteristic of each character. Crow’s blackness is considered useful by the three little birds and thus gets accepted in the end. Ironically, the others think Crow has scared away the multicoloured “monsters” Crow resembled when he painted himself:
“Are they gone?” Chickadee squeaked.
“Gone?” Crow stammered. “Who?”
“That hideous chickadee, that scary parakeet and that creepy finch, of course!”
they screamed with one voice.
“Err ... yes, they are,” Crow nodded.
“They are gone and they will never come back.”
“I knew it!” Finch sang. “You have scared them away with your burly black beak and your dark feathers.”
“Hurray!” Parakeet cheered. “Crow has saved us!”

Two important issues may be highlighted in this discussion. The first is that Crow desides he will not try on other, multicoloured selves/identities anymore: “They are gone and they will never come back.” The second important point is the different, more positive, phrasing now used to describe Crow’s blackness by “society” (the three little birds Crow tries to befriend): “You have scared them away with your burly black beak and your dark feathers.” Being strong and dark is no longer considered a “bad” thing; on the contrary. As others view his blackness differently and accept it, Crow embraces it as well, gladly internalising his “revised” black self: “Crow glittered with pride. He was so proud he didn’t dare to tell his new friends what had really happened. He would tell them later. Maybe ...”

Piglet never changes colour in the story; however, he also accepts his “normal” colour and his pinkness is explicitly celebrated by his family in the end:

At home there was a pink birthday cake with pink icing and pink candles. And there were presents wrapped in pink paper - it was Pink Piglet’s birthday party! They listened to Pink Piglet’s story and then sang Happy Birthday. Father Pig threw him up in the air and squeaked: - Hurrah for Pink Piglet!

Piglet’s return to his “true colour” is only mental, as, never having changed colour, he embraces a more positive view of his pinkness and feels happy about it.

Elmer literally and metaphorically returns to his “true colours” in the end, a turn of events that highly satisfies the elephant society:
The elephants still laughed as Elmer was washed back to normal. “Oh Elmer,” gasped an old elephant. You’ve played some good jokes, but this has been the biggest laugh of all. It didn’t take you long to show your true colours.”

Elmer is washed back to “normal,” as he returns to his “true colours” by both turning multicoloured again and becoming his old, funny and joyful self. The elephants decide to celebrate the occasion by establishing a yearly event:

“We must celebrate this day every year,” said another. “This will be Elmer’s Day. All elephants must decorate themselves and Elmer will decorate himself elephant colour.”

*Elmer* is the most internationally celebrated out of the five picturebooks discussed in this chapter; its journey into the world facilitated by the fact that it was originally published in English. Numerous kindergarten teachers around the world bring *Elmer* into their classrooms to celebrate diversity and multiculturalism. More than multiculturalism, however, the story seems to celebrate “essentialism”: staying true to one’s “true” self/colours and by extention to native/racial/ethnic/national identity. In the end, the story allows Elmer and the rest of the elephants to “decorate” themselves and pretend to be someone else once a year, but the rest of the time they are expected to “be themselves,” having a stable, concrete, “natural” identity.

To conclude, the European struggle between the specific and the universal, between difference and homogeneity, is played out in these books. If we had to decide which category of the two is privileged, we would observe that two stories (Crow and Elmer) end with the characters’ accepting their “otherness”/difference, whereas two other stories (Mister Bird and Pink Piglet) conclude with the characters’ embracing homogeneity (the characteristics they share with all birds or pigs). Once again, Camilla the Zebra may be placed somewhere in the middle, as she wants to look like all other zebras, but the diverse stripes she is given make her a somewhat different zebra.

As mentioned, this struggle between homogeneity and difference is expressed in these picturebooks as a negotiation of national, ethnic or racial identity, which is not taken for granted by the anthropomorphised animal-protagonists. In this sense, all five heroes are to an extent *actively and diversely constructed social selves*: they view
the self not just as something we are, but as an object we actively construct and live by, taking up or resisting the varied ways in which others perceive their identity.

But, even though these stories do take one step towards a postmodern *actively and diversely constructed social self*, by recognising its social and at the same instance self-interpretive and diverse constructenss, they stay short of sanctioning radical active changes of the self. Their protagonists, and perhaps child-readers as well, do get to play with self-formation and identity, but eventually they do not get to choose “who” or “how” they want to be in the world. The following conclusions may easily be used to describe the five endings: “Once a black crow, always a black crow;” “Once a bird, always a bird;” etc. Even though the rest of the plot in each of these stories may encourage fluidity, experimentation and unconformity regarding the process of self-/identity- formation, the ending seems to encourage child-readers to “*stay true to who they really are*” rather than “*becoming who they really want to be*.”

Children’s literature has an important socializing function. This function seems to mean for adult authors, illustrators and other mediators that it is their responsibility to guide children’s identity-formation towards a specific direction, the preservation of social/racial/national identity, rather than opening to them limitless possibilities for actively and diversely constructed selves. While the five European picturebooks analyzed seem to position their protagonists and readers diversely in relation to difference and homogeneity, they agree on the need for a child to embrace her/his biologically and socially predetermined self/identity. Does the child really “get to choose” then? Or is it inevitable that the adults involved in the production of children’s books will always strive to control the child-reader’s construct of the self, fixing it to what they, and the society within which they function, consider ideal or appropriate? What will happen when societies finally begin to realize that in the postmodern era we live in, the ideal or most appropriate self is an actively and diversely constructed social self?

**Bibliography**


