Chapter Eight
Understanding the Matchstick Man
Aesthetic and Narrative Properties of a Hybrid Picturebook Character

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The notion of literary character is very important in modern narratology, not only with respect to literature for adults (Jannidis 2009, Margolin 2007, Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010), but also with respect to children’s literature (Nikolajeva 2002). From the many aspects that could be analyzed here, this chapter targets the fact that children may identify with a certain literary character. Identification is in itself a complex cognitive notion, yet there appear to be textual clues that support identification, for instance: (1) “sympathy with a character who is similar to the reader”; (2) “empathy for a character who is in a particular situation”; and (3) “attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader” (Jannidis 2009, 24). The degree to which a child reader’s identification with a literary character is possible depends on further conditions, such as (4) the ability to take over a certain perspective of the literary character (based on its characterisation); (5) the affective relation to the character that may be induced by a number of factors, some possibly of a rather idiosyncratic nature; and (6) the evaluation of the respective character, which is in turn dependent on a set of individual attitudes and preferences, as well as on world knowledge (including historical, social, and cultural knowledge) (Jannidis 2009, 24–25). Learning “to care about literary characters”, as Vermeule (2010) puts it, is of prime relevance for literacy acquisition, and it is obvious that children’s literature plays a seminal role in this process.
Children's literature is special in that it displays a range of characters that are usually not found in literature written for adults. For instance, in children's literature, animals, vehicles or toys appear as literary characters. How these characters act in the storyworld, how they invite identification, how they are involved in the story, and how children can grasp their seemingly abstract narrative properties, are questions that are, to our knowledge, seldom asked and not thoroughly investigated on a theoretical and cognitive level (with the notable exception of Kuznets 1994, and Nikolajeva 2002).

As a type of children's literature targeted at pre-school children, narrative picturebooks are special in that they provide pictorial information that stands in a certain relation to the narrative text. Therefore, pictorial information may influence all of the aforementioned aspects (1)–(6). For instance, the huge success of Wilbert Awdry's *Thomas the Tank Engine* series (1946ff.) certainly has to do with the representation of the facial expression of a character who oscillates between a real engine and a toy engine.

In this chapter, we will focus on a special type of character to be found mainly in picturebooks, namely the matchstick man. As far as we know, this type of literary character, marginal as it may seem at first sight, has never been explored in detail; therefore we assume that the matchstick man, as a type of literary character, is not well understood. For this reason, we start with a short survey of the matchstick man's prototypical traits.

First, the matchstick man is a character who shares some properties with the human body: the matchstick man has a torso, two legs, two arms, and a head. In its minimal form, all of these body parts—except the head—are represented in the form of lines. Second, the matchstick man has some similarities with other figures that consist of lines and circles. But in contrast to matchstick men, the torsos of these figures are depicted as round circles instead of single black lines. In German, this type of figure is called "Kugelmännchen" ('little spherical man'), a term which has no counterpart in English. Because of the apparent similarity, we consider this figure as a variant of the matchstick man. Third, the matchstick man has no particular sex, no particular age, and usually no proper name. It is just called "little man" or "matchstick man". Another feature of the matchstick man is that its typical color is black. Exceptions to this rule are white matchstick men depicted on blackboards. Fourth, in comparison to presentations of humans, matchstick men are usually tiny. And finally, they have various physical abilities comparable to humans, that is, they can stand, sit, run, and climb. However, we do not know much about their cognitive abilities, for instance their ability to think, their language, and their emotions. This does not imply that they cannot have these properties, however, they are typically not attributed to them.

Since the matchstick man is neither human, nor animal, supernatural creature, object (i.e., a toy or vehicle), or abstract entity, it is by no means easy to put it into more common categories of literary characters. Therefore, the matchstick man is a hybrid character, oscillating between a human-like and a very artificial or abstract character. Why would such a character be offered to very young child readers? What are the aesthetic and narrative qualities making it attractive as a picturebook character? Does its apparent "flatness" invite the child reader to identify with it? Drawing on insights from art history and narratology, some (preliminary) answers will be given in what follows.

Matchstick Men in Art History

Matchstick man-like drawings not only appear in prehistoric caves, but also in pictograms, such as road signs and ads, and even in paintings directed towards an adult audience. An early example is the famous Renaissance painting by Giovanni Francesco Caroto "Boy with Drawing" from 1520 that depicts a boy who gazes at the viewer and proudly holds a sheet of paper with a matchstick man-like drawing in his right hand. This painting is a striking example of how artists generally assess the drawing capacities of children: quite imperfect and naive, but also imaginative and not restricted to painterly rules. This painting obviously refers to the observation that matchstick man-like figures emerge in drawings created by preschool children. Children's drawings as a serious object of study appear in the era of Enlightenment, together with an early appreciation of the child's soul and mind. And modern pedagogical manifestoes from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century pivoted on the mutual relationship between pedagogical and psychological concepts of childhood and children's creativity and imaginative power.

This connection was picked up by twentieth-century avant-garde artists such as Jean Dubuffet, Lyonel Feininger, Keith Haring, Wassily Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso (Fineberg 1997). They refer to children's drawings as one of their main inspirations, citing in particular the matchstick man who appears in several of their paintings and drawings. The German painter Paul Klee, for instance, was mainly influenced by the drawings of his son Felix, whose matchstick man-like figures reappear in Klee's art. The British painter Lawrence Stephen Lowry, who showed a deep interest in the industrial districts of England during the early twentieth century, is best known for urban landscapes peopled with human figures often referred to as "matchstick men" (Howard 1999). The German artist A.R. Penck created drawings of matchstick men since the 1970s, which he called "Standart-Bilder" ('standart pictures'), a blend from *Standard* and *art*. This notion refers—according to Penck—to an art movement that mostly uses simple and archaic symbols, such as traffic signs, matchstick men, and trademarks, which can be grasped immediately. In an ironic contrast to the matchstick man's sexlessness, Penck attributes sex markers to his own matchstick men (Schweinebraden 2007). It is no accident, then, that the figure of the matchstick man became quite prominent in picturebooks in the 1920s and later. Picturebook artists, who were influenced by avant-garde movements, such as Expressionism and New Realism, notably
head, trunk and limbs in a more or less symmetrical position (Cox 1993, 56). Views of human figures from behind or in profile appear later, when children are aged six years or older. In addition, as research on the emotional conception of children as young as four years has shown, upward pointing arms and outstretched legs are non-verbal cues associated with happiness and dynamics (Boone and Cunningham 1998).

Even these simple drawings demonstrate, according to Ernst Gombrich’s (1974) theory of picture making, that children need a sort of pictorial schema or construction formula to draw objects. Schemata are essential for picture making, since they support the modification and moulding of the real things in order to create an image or drawing that does not exactly copy the thing’s real appearance, but merely suggests its appearance to the viewer. When they are five years old, children attempt to insert more details into their drawings, such as eyes, lashes, nostrils, hair, glasses, jewelry, buttons, and clothes, although the human figure is still composed of simple shapes, of ovals, circles, triangles, and rectangles (Davis 1983; Golomb 2011, 38). These pictures reveal that they are graphic models developed by children to present their mental images. It is still unclear whether or not children discover the pictorial potential of shapes and lines for themselves in the course of scribbling and drawing, or whether they learn it from parents, teachers, peers, and joint looking at pictures in picturebooks. What is also striking is the observation that free drawings of older children, aged nine to ten years and older, also gradually become more conventional in style. Cartoon figures and comic-strip figures are now drawn regularly (Thomas and Sills 1990, 39). In conclusion, drawing styles typical for earlier stages often persist even when more sophisticated strategies have been attained.

This digression into research on child drawing exemplifies that the matchstick man shows up early in children’s drawings. For this reason, an author or illustrator can presuppose children’s familiarity with it, assuming that they will recognize a matchstick man when they see one. This reveals the unique feature of the matchstick man: It is the only literary character that is definitely related to children’s drawings, thus establishing a connection between picturebook art and the young child’s creativity. While adults usually take it for granted that children’s literature often confronts children with new aesthetic, literary, and narrative experiences, the matchstick man as a character demonstrates that it might also happen the other way round. In this specific case, illustrators seem to acknowledge the young child’s imaginative and creative activity by introducing a character that emanates from the child’s imagination and emerges in children’s drawings.

Matchstick Men in Picturebooks

Interestingly, globals and tadpoles do not appear in picturebooks for children at all, while matchstick men and spherical men do. It seems, though, that the latter types are considered as reduced representations of human figures, whereas globals and tadpoles are obviously regarded as preliminary versions of the human body, which do not exactly match common ideas about the depiction of human figures. In any case, regarding the appearance of matchstick men in picturebooks, we can distinguish two categories, namely first-order matchstick man and second-order matchstick man. Matchstick men that act as protagonists belong to the first category, while drawings of matchstick men on depicted walls, blackboards, papers, etc., fit in the second category. As for the latter category, these illustrations always indicate that the respective drawings of matchstick men were created by children. They serve as an illustration of childlike drawing abilities and often have a humorous or mocking effect, as can be clearly seen in the images included in Paul Hennings’ First Things (1947) and Salvador Bartolozzi’s Pinocchio y la Reina Comina (Pinocchio and the Queen Comina, 1928). Hennings’ photo book, which presents single items from the young child’s surroundings, displays a blackboard with a funny matchstick man. Bartolozzi’s book contains an illustration that depicts the humpy-dumpy-like Chapete, who is Pinocchio’s antagonist. Chapete is jealous of Pinocchio’s achievements and popularity; therefore, he attempts to make fun of him by drawing a matchstick man-like picture of Pinocchio on a wall. Other picturebooks, such as Shaun Tan’s The Arrival (2007), use the matchstick man-drawing to stress a close relationship between child and parents; in this case, the child’s drawing is picked up by the father as a reminiscence of his little daughter, whom he must leave behind.

Many picturebooks have just one illustration with a second-order matchstick man. Therefore, the matchstick man is neither protagonist nor essential part of the story. But there are other children’s books where the second-order matchstick man plays an important role. A case in point is the Norwegian children’s book Trollkrittet (The Magic Chalk, 1949) by Zinker Hopp, where a boy finds a chalk with magical power. When he draws a matchstick man on a wall, this figure comes alive, leaves the wall, and accompanies the boy during his adventures. Since the boy felt lonesome in the beginning and longed for a friend, it is left open whether the matchstick man emerges from the boy’s imagination or is an autonomous being coming alive due to the magical chalk. Comparable to this book is the German children’s book Jakob und der Strichmann (Jakob and the Matchstick Man, 1987), in which the boy Jakob draws a matchstick man on the wall of his bedroom. The matchstick man talks to Jakob, demanding to get ears, hair, pants, a jacket, playthings, and a tandem. At night Jakob is awakened by the matchstick man who invites him to make a night tour on the tandem together. On a forest glade they meet other matchstick men who complain about their incomplete outlook. Initially, they elect Jakob’s matchstick man as their new king, but after a quarrel, Jakob and his matchstick man leave the clearance and ride back to their home, where Jakob falls asleep in his bed. These two examples demonstrate that there exists a transition between first-order matchstick man and second-order matchstick
man, since the second-order matchstick man turns into a first-order matchstick man when it comes alive and functions as protagonist of the story.

More prominent in picturebooks is the first-order matchstick man: one does not know exactly when matchstick men as protagonists cropped up in picturebooks for the first time, but—as previously indicated—the topic was prominent during the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, precursors can be found in older picturebooks, such as Heinrich Hoffmann's Struwwelpeter (Sleevynly Peter, 1845). In "The Story of the Soup-Kaspar", the boy Kaspar, who stubbornly refuses to eat his soup, becomes thinner from day to day, until his body merely consists of a thin line, causing his fatal death. Since Kaspar dies within the course of five days, which does not seem to be very reasonable, the humorous character of both text and illustration is quite obvious. Nevertheless, this story does not show a matchstick man as protagonist, but just a boy who turns into a matchstick man because of his refusal to eat his soup.

Our quest for typical picturebooks displaying matchstick men as protagonist results in the detection of several picturebooks from different countries (France, Germany, Italy, and the US) from the 1920s until the present. Although most of these picturebooks present fictional, even fantastic stories, some illustrated science books for children also use matchstick men, who often adopt the functions of funny "teachers".

In what follows, we will concentrate on three German picturebooks: Das Männchen (The Little Man, 1926), written and illustrated by Conny Meissen, Bill und Bällchen (Bill and Little Ball, 1934), written and illustrated by Susanne Ehmcke, and Der Strichmann (The Matchstick Man, 1948), with a text by Hedwig Strahl and illustrations by Dorothea Geifes. These picturebooks have never been translated into other languages and the artists fell into oblivion for several reasons, even in Germany. Nevertheless, Conny Meissen and Susanne Ehmcke received wide acclaim as modernist illustrator, their works being now considered as innovative contributions to German picturebook art in the 1920s and 1930s (Linsmann 2010). It is no wonder then that both artists, who were mainly influenced by New Realism, experimented with new illustration styles and topics.

The texts in these three picturebooks are poems. Two picturebooks start with the typical fairy-tale phrase "Once upon a time...", thus referring to the fantastic character of the protagonists. The main protagonists are also mentioned in the title, either called "matchstick man" or "little man". In Ehmcke's book, the matchstick man-like character is a toy called "little ball". In this case the title also mentions a proper name, Bill, the owner of the ball.

To begin with, Conny Meissen's picturebook seems to be one of the earliest examples that display a matchstick man-like figure as the main protagonist. This work was popular enough to inspire a sequel, Das Männchen und der Zauberer (The Little Man and the Wizard), published one year later. Das Männchen tells the story of a little man who always gets in mischief because of his curiosity. Due to his tiny size he is able to crawl into coffeepots, snail houses, and inkpots. He annoys mice by pulling their tails, and he is sometimes scolded by his mother because of his thoughtless behavior. When balancing on the edge of a cup, he perceives a golden coin inside. In order to fetch the coin, he causes the cup's tilting. Blotted with broken pieces of porcelain,
he runs to the doctor who vets the little man, but keeps the golden coin as payment for his service.

The book presents figures and objects in a more or less minimalist style; the contours are emphasized by a black outline, the color scheme is restricted to the primary colors red, blue, and yellow, and the secondary colors green and brown. We do not see a very detailed setting; quite the contrary, the figures and objects are depicted against a single-colored background. This negative space draws the viewer's attention to the main protagonist and his adventures. The figures do not have proper names; they are either characterized by their size (little man), their kinship (mother) or profession (doctor). Moreover, the little man is distinguished from the other human figures in several respects. Although he has a round head with two eyes, nostrils, a mouth and some fuzzy hairs, and a body shaped like an oval, colored in green and yellow (which indicate clothes like a shirt and trousers), his legs and arms are depicted as black lines with smaller black lines as fingers and toes. Strikingly, the other figures have a more detailed body, clothed with skirts, pants and jackets, and furnished with round arms and legs.

Susanne Ehmcke's *Bill und Bällchen* is about the young boy Bill, who plays with a ball on the street by bouncing it against a wall. When Bill addresses the ball, the toy comes alive and changes its appearance. The ball turns into a head with two dots for the eyes and a half-moon for the smiling mouth, while the crossing lines that separate the ball's various colors from each other simulate a nose. The body consists of striped trousers with ragged legs, whereas the arms and legs appear as thick black lines, with five tiny lines for hands and vertical lines for feet. Since Bill asks the ball where it comes from, the ball promises to show Bill a magic garden under the condition that Bill keeps silent and does not speak at all. The magic garden, which is guarded by a toy soldier, is populated with toys, such as balls—similar to Bill's ball, but quite smaller—teddy bears, wooden horses, and dolls. On a boat trip Bill tickles a big crocodile, which threatens to devour him. Therefore, Bill forgets his vow and cries out loud. In the same moment he hears a loud bang, everything gets dark and Bill is sitting again on the gutter, with the ball on his lap, and rubbing his nose. The ball has changed into its usual form, without limbs and body, and it remains open to the reader whether the story is just a fantasy emerging from the boy's imagination, or whether the adventures in toyland really happened.

What distinguishes Ehmcke's picturebook is the combination of human and non-human characters, as is shown in the image which presents three different characters: the boy Bill, the animated ball that is depicted in a matchstick-like manner, and a toy soldier who guards the entrance to toyland. While the soldier's stiff position makes it not quite clear whether he is alive or not, Bill and the ball are apparently alive, judging from their agitation and facial expressions. Hence, this illustration obviously plays with the viewer's expectation, inasmuch as two different perspectives on toys are represented: toys as inanimate objects and toys as non-human characters.

The picturebook *Der Strichmann* is distinct from the previous books in that it depicts a holistic fictional world populated by matchstick men and matchstick animals. The main protagonist is drawn with a circle for the head, a black vertical line for the trunk and four lines for arms and legs. Therefore, this picturebook presents the prototypical matchstick man. The feet consist of a small horizontal line, while the hands are depicted as small circles with five short lines for fingers. The facial features consist of two small circles for the eyes, one even smaller circle for the nose, a small line for the mouth, and two red dots for cheeks. Three short lines on top of the head stand for hair. The matchstick man is shown in a prototypical position, in front view with outstretched limbs. It keeps this position on the first page, but changes it during the subsequent images where it is shown in profile, from behind, and in
different movements. The first page consists of a sequence of four pictures in which the matchstick man gets green trousers and a red hat, and thus is ascribed a male sex.

In the subsequent pictures he is marching with a stick and a valise to a village called "Honolunifee", a blend made up from Honolulu and Fee ('fairy'). The guidepost indicates that this village is still 800 kilometers away. When he finally arrives in this village, he starts to build a house nearby a lake. Since he gets hungry, he builds a raft, catches a fish, which is not depicted in a matchstick man-like manner, and eats it for dinner. Since he feels lonesome, he marries a matchstick woman, clothed in a red skirt and a green hat. Her female sex is additionally stressed by the eyelashes and the curly hair (in one image she also wears a handbag). They have three matchstick children, one boy and two girls, who like to play with matchstick rabbits and matchstick deer on the meadow. When they make a walk into the forest, the family is accompanied by a matchstick dog. The story ends with a night scene. The family is lying asleep in their home, while the last image shows the village in moonlight.

When comparing the depiction of the main characters in these picturebooks, it is obvious that only Der Strichmann presents a prototypical matchstick man, while Das Männlein shows a typical spherical man. By contrast, Bill und Bällchen displays a character that presents a mixture of both types, since the depiction of the trunk waivers between line and circle. In any case, the representation of matchstick men as protagonists of picturebooks is quite unusual for the viewer. This unusualness is often stressed by the combination of matchstick man figures with human figures that are drawn in more detail and have more realistic shapes. These findings call for an explanation. Why have the illustrators chosen this strange combination, or even the strategy to invent a whole universe populated by matchstick men and matchstick animals? Do they intend to challenge the child audience on an aesthetic, cognitive, and/or emotional level?

Aesthetic and Narrative Properties of the Matchstick Man

In order to answer these questions, we need to take a further look at the specific aesthetic and narrative properties of the matchstick man as a literary character. Let us start from an observation by Nikolajeva/Scott (2001) on characterization in picturebooks:

( ... ) it is clear that picturebooks allow little room for thorough characterization in the conventional sense. We may generally observe that picturebooks tend to be plot-oriented rather than character-oriented. Further, the plot is often too limited to allow much development, which means that most characters are static rather than dynamic, and flat rather than round. (82)

While this analysis is convincing at first sight and seems to fit the previous sketches of the three picturebooks under discussion, we would like to add more detail to the overall picture. Let us begin with a short discussion of the apparent flatness of the matchstick man.

The distinction between flat and round characters goes back to Forster (1985, 67) who points out that flat characters "are constructed round a single idea or quality", while round characters are "more highly organized" (75) and are "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (78). When adopting this distinction for children's literature in general and picturebooks in particular, one has to be careful with respect to the cognitive abilities of the child reader. To put it simply: The benchmark for a three-year-old is not Pippi Longstocking, let alone Alice in Wonderland, but rather, Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar (1969) or Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are (1963). With this restriction in mind, we conceive of the matchstick man as being simultaneously a flat character (being constructed around a single quality), as well as a round character (at least with respect to its capability to surprise the child reader).

The unique qualities of the matchstick man that contribute to its flatness are, firstly, its anonymity or generic personality, and secondly, its bodily incompleteness. Let us consider these qualities in more detail. As has been shown in the foregoing discussion, relevant information that contributes to the matchstick man's identification and characterization, such as proper name,
age, profession, gender, and origin, is usually missing. This means, in turn, that
the child reader may enrich the flat personality of the matchstick man on her
own, thereby possibly drawing on clues from the pictures or the text.

That enrichment is needed in characterization is also true with respect
to seemingly flat characters elsewhere in literature. While a round character
may leave no space for additional enrichments by the reader, flat characters
encourage enrichment. Moreover, many literary protagonists show traits of
both flat and round characters. The point is, then, that picturebooks with
matchstick man characters build on the presupposition that even the young-
est readers are able to enrich these characters.

As for the incompleteness of the matchstick man, the child reader needs an
idea of what a full-blown literary character and its depiction would look like.
In order to understand the substance of a character in a story, the reader must
have acquired a concept of person, which is mostly characterized by ideas of
agency, identity, and mental life (Vermeule 2010, 23). These wider aspects of
personhood may be out of reach for the child reader, yet one could strongly
suspect that a three-year-old child reader knows that a matchstick-man is far
from being a complete person.

When it comes to "round" properties of the matchstick man, we observe
that it is capable of surprising the child reader. There is a sharp contrast
between the matchstick man's incompleteness on the one hand and its strik-
ing physical and cognitive abilities on the other hand. Despite its incomple-
teness, the matchstick man is able to move around, has physiological needs,
such as eating, drinking, and going to sleep, and shows emotional expression,
for instance feeling sad, excited, happy, or scared. This contrast or incongru-
ence yields funny and humorous effects.

We have argued that the matchstick man is a flat as well as a round char-
acter. In this sense, it is a hybrid character. Its hybridity is also evident when
considering the taxonomy of literary characters, like the one proposed by
Nikolajeva and Scott (2001, 81–115) and Nikolajeva (2002, 125–127). As these
authors point out, characters in children's literature may be human or nonhu-
man. As for the nonhuman characters, Nikolajeva (2002) proposes another
distinction between animals, supernatural creatures, objects, such as toys and
machines, and abstract entities, such as colors and letters.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{l|c|c}
\hline
character type & human characters & nonhuman characters \\
\hline
animals & supernatural creatures & objects & abstract entities \\
\hline
- & - & - & - \\
\hline
toys... & colors, letters... & cars, trains... & dolls... \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Characters in Picturebooks}
\end{table}

It goes without saying that the appearance of nonhuman characters needs an
explanation. In particular, what is the special narrative or aesthetic potential
of these characters? According to Nikolajeva (2002, 125), "children's
novels and especially picturebooks abound in clothed and humanized ani-
mals, living toys, supernatural creatures (witches, ghosts), as well as personi-
fied objects and machines, such as cars or trains". While it is plausible that
these picturebook characters are somehow related to the human reader, for
instance, mirroring the reader's ecological, social, and emotional situation,
it is also feasible to assume that each of these different characters has its own
and very special narrative and aesthetic potential. Each nonhuman character
challenges certain assumptions of the child of what the "normal" world looks
like, thus introducing the concept of fictional space, where persons and things
may be quite different from the real world experienced by the child.

The question arises, then, why picturebooks apparently show more nonhu-
man characters than children's novels. Nikolajeva's (2002, 125) basic tenet is
that "animals, toys, baby witches, and animated objects are always disguises
for a child". While this conclusion seems to be correct for some cases, we argue
that it is not appropriate across the board for several reasons: First, in a fic-
tional world that displays, for instance, toys and talking animals or machines,
some toys and animals are depicted as child characters, while others are pre-
sented as adult characters. A prominent example is \textit{Thomas the Tank Engine},
where the main character Thomas apparently behaves like a child, while the
other tank engines exhibit an adult-like demeanor. Second, while nonhuman
characters may act like children, as for instance the character "little blue" in
\textit{Little Blue and Little Yellow} by Leo Lionni (1959), they nevertheless have quali-
ties that a child definitely does not have and vice versa, and the child reader is
supposed to know that.

When considering the matchstick man, it may be asked whether it belongs to
the class of human or nonhuman characters. In order to get a clearer pic-
ture of the functional qualities of the matchstick man, its essential status as
character should be elaborated. A matchstick man is a depiction of a human
character, but without the latter's typical traits. Instead, it exhibits abstract
qualities that are shared by nonhuman characters. However, it is neither an
animal nor a supernatural creature, that is, it does belong to the every-day
world in a way. In addition, it is not an object, at least not a three-dimensional
material object.

However, the matchstick man is an object in the sense that it is the prod-

tect of a drawing act. As such it gains an abstract quality in that its particular
make-up (color, configurations of lines, etc.) is foregrounded. Noticeably, this
make-up plays no role in more or less realistic depictions of human char-
acters—the difference being the child's knowledge that human characters are
the product of artists, while matchstick men are a potential product of chil-
dren. Therefore, one might assume that the matchstick man deserves a place
of its own in the above taxonomy. Since the matchstick man emerges very
order to symbolize other emotions and conditions, such as being sad, feeling hungry, sleeping, or concentration at work. These facial expressions are mediated by the depiction of the eyes and mouth, sometimes additionally emphasized by eyebrows. It is then up to the viewer to decipher the meanings of the rather abstract depictions of facial expressions, which demands certain knowledge of schemata and abstract signs. In cognitive psychology, this strategy is characterized by "emotional settings" or "emotional scripts" that rely on certain encoded emotions; that is, a common knowledge exists about the representation of emotions such as anger, jealousy, joy, or sadness in facial expression, gesture, posture, and language. In addition, the reader has to be attuned to the visual and textual cues that are associated with the depiction and representation of specific emotions. This is especially the case with characters such as the matchstick man, since relevant information that contributes to its identification and characterization, such as proper name, age, profession, gender, and origin, are missing. Nevertheless, as we argue, children are able to empathize with matchstick man characters in picturebooks because they recognize that these characters—despite their incompleteness—show similar emotions and feelings.

As for the third aspect, "attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader", we do not think that the child reader is attracted by the matchstick man because it would constitute a role model, at least not in the same way that other famous characters from children’s books, such as Alice, Dorothy, and Emil, may serve as role models for some children. Instead, we think that the matchstick man may be attractive to a child reader because the child discovers that the matchstick man is similar to her own drawings. The sensation lies in the observation that something that the child likes to produce is leveled to the status of a picturebook hero. Probably also attractive to the child are the humorous properties of the matchstick man.

The fourth aspect, "ability to take over a certain perspective of the literary character (based on its characterization)" is strongly connected to the phenomenon of empathy. Empathy demands the ability to understand other people’s feelings, beliefs, and wishes. In this respect, the child reader may be enticed to reflect upon the severe difficulties of the matchstick man in the fictional world, as well as of the easiness to overcome these challenges. These difficulties include not only obstacles due to the matchstick man’s tiny size, but also problems that arise from its marginal status in the storyworld, being either in the position of a child, a toy, or a lonely figure that has to start its own family. Narrative empathy as a sharing of feeling, as well as adoption of perspective induced by reading demand high levels of imagination and immersion (Keen 2006, 209). Thus, despite the matchstick man’s "simple" body and actions, the child reader is encouraged to comprehend the matchstick man’s life condition and to draw analogies to her own situation, especially regarding the restrictions children are usually confronted with in an adult world.
This aspect refers to the fifth issue, namely "affective relation to the character that may be induced by a number of factors, some possibly of a rather idiosyncratic nature." One case in point is the humorous nature of the matchstick man. The juxtaposition of matchstick men with human figures or a setting that is drawn in more detail certainly contributes to the humorous quality of the picturebooks. Furthermore, the incompleteness and changing sizes of the matchstick man provokes an abstract humor that challenges the child's imagination. In contrast to a child, only a tiny matchstick man is able to balance on a pot handle. The reduced drawing of the matchstick man's body prompts the viewer to deduce that it has no bodily needs. But the illustrations and story challenge the reader's expectations. Although one might conclude that a trunk consisting of a black line has no space for food, the matchstick man in Der Strichmann feels hungry and eats a whole fish for lunch. In Meissen's picturebook, the matchstick man even feels pain when it is hurt by the cup's splinters, which cover his trunk, legs, and arms, which are all drawn as thin black lines. If the viewer accepts that matchstick men also have feelings similar to the feelings expressed by humans, she might be able to compare the matchstick man's emotions and related cognitive abilities with her own emotions. This procedure prepares an affective relationship between the child reader and the matchstick man character.

Turning to the sixth aspect, this relationship might be regarded as a significant precondition for the evaluation of the matchstick man, "which is in turn dependent on a set of individual attitudes and preferences, as well as on world knowledge (including historical, social, and cultural knowledge)." The matchstick man may be evaluated as an incomplete and funny literary character that belongs to the sphere of early artistic undertakings. When children grow older they tend to reject this character and prefer more round characters. Yet there may remain the memory of a developmental stage where matchstick men were real achievements in one's own artistic development. Moreover, second-order matchstick men, as displayed at school boards, etc. remind the reader of this social and cultural embedding of the matchstick man. If this holds true, it might be argued that the matchstick man plays an important role in the child's comprehension of her own artistic achievements, which are mirrored in the matchstick man character.

Conclusion and Outlook

Bearing in mind that the way texts present characters is highly influential on the relation between characters and reader, the analysis of literary characters in picturebooks presents an auspicious approach to investigate young children's developing appreciation of the cognitive, aesthetic, and narrative functions of characters in fictional texts. In this regard, the matchstick man as a figure that has emerged in picturebooks since the 1920s poses a challenge for the child audience, because it is a hybrid character that merges human and non-human traits. Additionally, the matchstick man emphasizes children's imaginative and creative power because of its origin in children's drawings. Despite its incompleteness, the matchstick man has physiological needs and shows emotional expressions. Because it needs completion, it invites the reader's empathy and his capacity to fill in the gaps left open by the incomplete drawing of the matchstick man's body. Although the dimensions to characterize the matchstick man as a figure in picturebooks are quite restricted where its complexity, development, and the opportunity to penetrate its inner life are concerned, the matchstick man stimulates the reader to build a mental model of its specific character.

This chapter could not deal with all issues related to the analysis of the matchstick man as a literary character in picturebooks, but hopefully it has demonstrated the multi-faceted aspects that emerge when taking this somewhat "simple" character seriously. To conclude our analysis, three further aspects should be mentioned that might stimulate further research in this field. Firstly, the impact of children's drawings on picturebook artists has not yet been well investigated, even though it opens up a new field of research for different disciplines and perspectives. We tried to show that the concept of the matchstick man obviously goes back to young children's drawings of the human figure, and that it is one of the inspiration sources for illustrators creating picturebooks for children. Nevertheless, empirical research on how children and adults understand these illustrations and whether they recognize different aspects of the matchstick man figure is still lacking.

Secondly, one might assume that simplified line drawings are easier to recognize than detailed depictions of objects and figures. Research in picture recognition by young children evidently shows that children usually have no problem to recognize simplified drawings of objects, even when depicted in a cartoon-like style (unless the illustration is too vague, thus arousing a sort of ambivalence concerning the correct naming of the objects and figures). The incompleteness and reduction of the matchstick man might be regarded as a reference to this observation. Nevertheless, it is also obvious from research in children's drawings that children older than four to five years of age usually strive to depict more detailed figures, thus refraining from the matchstick men-like features of human figures. In addition, if one compares the depiction of matchstick men in picturebooks with children's drawings, a closer consideration reveals that the matchstick men in picturebooks are drawn in a more abstract and cartoonlike style, whereas children's drawings almost never show human figures in the same symmetrical arrangement and reduction as in picturebooks.

Finally, it is our contention that the respective matchstick man images in picturebooks rather represent adults' conceptions of children's drawings, which is most obvious in depictions of second-order matchstick man. In addition, when adults and older children have the task to quickly draw an image of
a human figure, for example in order to demonstrate something related to humans on a blackboard, they usually refer to matchstick men-like figures. They represent a human figure, although it is not drawn in a realistic manner. Thus, the matchstick man has obviously become a sort of icon that appears in different functional circumstances. This tendency is notably connected to the aforementioned growing interest of older children in the depiction of comics and cartoon-like figures, although they are already accustomed to more sophisticated drawing strategies.

Notes
1 Pop Art picturebooks saw an explosion of strange and hybrid characters; cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2013).
2 Because of this property, we will consecutively refer to the matchstick man with the pronoun “it”.
3 The littleness is expressed by the German diminutive “Strichmännchen” (“stroke+man+DIM”), which means “little matchstick man”.
4 See, for instance, Fineberg (1997) and Menee (2012), who investigate the impact of drawing guides and educational pamphlets on the increasing appreciation of children’s early mark making and scribbles.
5 This interest of artists in children’s art continues until today, as a newly illustrated version of Pinocchio shows. Der neue Pinocchio (2010) with a revised and shortened text by Christine Nöstlinger, was illustrated by the Spanish artist Antonio Saura, who is famous for his line drawings of heads and human figures. As Saura indicated in the epilogue, his intention was twofold: first, to integrate specific graphic symbols and systems that are typical for modern children’s culture, especially comics and animated films, without betraying his own graphic style, and second, to create a new image of Pinocchio that should neither imitate earlier illustrators, such as Enrico Mazzanti and Carlo Chiostri, nor demand too much of the child audience. Against all the stereotypical and traditional images of this famous puppet, Saura decided to create pictures that clearly refer to children’s drawings, including matchstick men-like figures. Thus, Saura succeeded in creating a hybrid artistic style that combines his typical graphic style with references to children’s art.
6 A prominent example is Munro Leaf’s Grammar Can Be Fun (1940), in which grammatical features are expressed by tiny matchstick-man-like figures.
7 However, Margolin (2007) argues that all characters in fiction are incomplete, as there are no literary texts that manage to describe characters in all detail. Quite the contrary, authors of literary texts consciously leave textual gaps that should be filled by the reader.
8 Note in addition that matchstick men show a certain family likeness with robots, marionettes, and jointed dolls. A prominent example is the wooden puppet Pinocchio who, since its first appearance in Carlo Collodi’s Italian children’s classics from 1881, stimulated numerous illustrators to create their own individual image of this figure, shifting between animated toy character and human being. Another eye-catching exemplar is Mary Liddell’s Little Machinery (1926), a picturebook about an industrious robot boy, whose body is a fusion of human and tool. He is depicted like a person with loose-jointed marionette parts. His swivelling body consists of an assortment of rods, drills, and fly wheels, with double-barred arms and legs, and some swoops of red hair. Although the art deco style is dominant, the merger of natural and mechanical parts creates a hybrid form that is clearly influenced by the geometric design of Russian constructivism. The image of the smiling protagonist with his androgynous doll face and his distorted body can be interpreted as a simile for the challenges of modern technology on the development of mankind and nature. Little Machinery’s metallic body seems to be a complex variant of a matchstick man-like figure insofar, as it more or less consists of simple geometric forms, such as circle, rectangle, and line.
9 The concept of empathy is not innate, but must be acquired in a process that starts in early childhood and develops over the course of childhood and adolescence (cf. Hastings et al. 2006). Approximately at age four, children usually acquire the ability to develop empathy for another’s feeling. This capacity is a precondition to understand the depiction of emotional conditions in picturebooks and other children’s books (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2012 on the significance of emotions and empathy in children’s literature).

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