

# TELEVISION

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*Ralf Gerhardt*

## The Fantastic Film Factory

### Children's TV stories

**In the Fantastic Film Factory, a campaign launched by Disney Channel, children wrote the stories themselves. The stories are powerful, frequently the product of the kids' direct environment. They are about experiences in everyday life, they do not shrink from conflicts and disputes, but they always have a happy end.**

*" I therefore love children,  
for they still see themselves and the world  
in the wondrous magic mirror  
of their fantasy."  
(Theodor Storm)*

Children do what adults forbid themselves: they reflect reality in their play and make-believe stories. They feel no embarrassment in uninhibitedly "thinking and talking nonsense"; they leave logic and reason further down the line. With the aim of promoting children's wealth of ideas and rewarding their inspiration, Disney Channel launched the Fantastic Film Factory. After an impressive, successful first competition in 2001, the project entered the second round in 2002.

- With a total of over 42,000 requested writing guides and approx. 3,500 stories received, the campaign surpassed all expectations in 2002. Although every entry is undoubtedly unique, three trends crystallize from the stories:
- The most striking feature is that the stories invented are always very strongly linked to the children's experienced reality. Reality in addition to literary and filmic idols serve as sources of inspiration.
- With striking frequency best friends - boys and girls - represent the themes focused on, in a glorifying approach, rather remote from reality.
- Their stories refer to a great yearning for harmony: a happy ending for the kids' make-believe stories is a must.

The competition required quite a lot of the participants aged between eight and thirteen. Alone or in a team, they were asked to write a four to ten-page story. The only instruction concerning the contents: children of their age were to play the main role. The main prize: the filming of the winner's story and an invitation to appear on Disney Channel.

The topic was not prescribed, as children know best what interests their peers. Only a few tips about how to find a subject were supplied. The writing guide "Your personal story book" provided some helpful information: How do I find the first sentence? What creates excitement? Which stylistic devices do I use? Writing guidelines such as these were supplemented by practical exercises: the kids were advised to jot down their first flashes of inspiration, to draft narrative outlines or to enter synonyms for commonly used words on a substitute-word list. The Fantastic Film Factory sought not only to encourage children to

write creatively but also to satisfy their curiosity and their pleasure in learning.

Teachers intending to integrate the competition in their lesson programme were also included in the concept. Disney Channel supplied them with a folder containing worksheets and overhead transparencies for designing a lesson unit on "Creative Writing".

The girls and boys then had four months' time for putting their stories to paper. As a great effort was required of the children by Fantastic Film Factory, a rather low number of participants was expected. After all, what was involved was more than just scribbling down a correct answer on a postcard! The eventual winner spent every day of two weeks' holidays working on her story. The concentration and intensity with which the children tackled their stories are extraordinary in themselves. But the fact that almost 3,500 stories were sent in is a remarkable success. Children, by themselves or in teams, wrote down their sentences, crossed them out again, crumpled up sheets of paper, gave up, then continued and finally put the completed story into the post box, proud and beaming with self-confidence. Evidently, girls and boys seek an outlet for their fantasies; they were glad that their ideas, which in their everyday lives often have little time and space, were granted the attention they deserve.

*"The World only exists in your eyes.  
You can make it as big  
or as small as you want."  
(F. Scott Fitzgerald)*

For the young storyteller the world is often rather large and unsystematic: what matters therefore is the direct surroundings, the interpersonal relations. He or she aims to create a functioning environment where he or she as a child can cope more effectively.

A glance at some of the titles shows how deeply many stories are rooted in the child's personal environment: Karlo und sein bester Freund (Karlo And His Best Friend), Marcel haut ab (Marcel Clears Off), and Freunde fürs Leben (Friends For Life). The stories also reveal many descriptions probably taken from the children's biographies or reflecting their environment. "My name's Julia. I'm ten. About half a year ago I moved into a very old, dark house with my parents and my little brother, Marcus. My Mum is a vet and has opened a surgery in our new home. My Dad is a househusband; he looks after us kids and the house. He sometimes helps Mum in the surgery, too. Other members of the family are Elmo, our dog, Tarzan and Jane, our rabbits." (Julia Schmittziel: Die Sippis im Keller (The Tribe Down In The Basement)). The same applies to the conflicts they described. "We all used to live in Stuttgart. But only nine years long 'cause Mum and Dad had really fallen out. That's why Mum wanted to move with me and Miriam (Julia Schmittziel: Die Sippis im Keller) to my grandparents in Frankfurt am Main. Dad didn't agree to Mum making off with both of us. But once she's made up her mind to do something, there's no changing it." (Subin Shin: Mein unsichtbarer Freund (My Invisible Friend)).

Experiences at school and the first romantic crushes are also come to terms with in their stories: "Sahra passed me a folded slip of paper in the German lesson that said: 'For Franky P.S.: But don't open it before the break!' When I wanted to open it during the break, Sahra had quickly run out into the school playground though she normally never went out or only later. I opened it and read: 'Dear Franky! I love you with all my heart. My question: Do you love me? Please enter a tick and reply soon!'" (Simon Buder: Das Dimensionstor (The Dimension Gate))

The passages where the stories diverge from reality frequently draw on classical themes in children's literature and children's television. Das Gespenst ohne Namen (The Ghost Without A Name), Mein unsichtbarer Freund (My Invisible Friend) and Das Geheimnis des Rätselsteins (The Secret Of The Puzzle Stone) are titles illustrating that the young authors tend to fall back on traditional material in their storytelling. "Once upon a time there was a ghost family. The family had a daughter, but she did not have a name. A ghost does not get a name until it has earned it. It had to earn its name by proving to a jury that it had scared people so much that they were really afraid of ghosts." (Lisa Bost: Das Gespenst ohne Namen) There are no entries, however, in which the various levels of a video game have clearly influenced the structure and theme of a story.

*Experienced reality,  
literature and television  
are the key catalysts  
for the children's stories.*

In their fantasies kids digest what they have experienced and learnt. A very special role is assumed by

the "best friend". In a striking number of Fantastic Film Factory stories they play the main role. Fantasy and reality fuse together to confirm the kids' presumed priorities and needs. Regardless of whether it is the anonymous ghost or the invisible Matthias, the best friend can always be relied on to help out when needed. Surprisingly enough, his or her interests are easily compatible with the protagonist's. The children's therefore reflect wishful thinking rather than their actual experience. Child development psychologists proceed on the assumption that children use their imagination to buttress unpleasant situations with wishful thinking. At the Fantastic Film Factory this is very often used in the case of best friends. Regarding families I have often been told about their little idiosyncrasies and quibbles: "Mind your new trousers don't get dirty! Make sure you come back home for lunch on time!" (Subin Shin: Mein unsichtbarer Freund), the relationship with a best friend is immaculate: "They became inseparable friends and never quarrelled." (Daniel McMahon: Freunde fürs Leben).

And reality? When you talk to children, most of them do in fact dish up a best friend. The friends awarded this role fluctuate, however! Whenever the focus is on questions of friendship during live@five, Disney Channel's interactive live show, boys and girls report that communication with others is quite brusque: the best friend from third grade now sits at the other end of the room in the fourth; the friend who used to call by nearly every afternoon is suddenly stupid. Children do not refrain from using roles to exert pressure. "If you don't help me, you won't be my best friend anymore!" At an early age they had to face up to the fact that interpersonal relations were not always straightforward and pleasant, but in fantasy, on the other hand, things are clear-cut.

The yearning for an intact world of frictionless interpersonal relations is expressed not only in terms of amplified friendships but also in hackneyed happy endings. Rowdies are rehabilitated: "So his leaving ended well after all. In the next few weeks he would visit his friend again to see for himself how Felicia is standing on her own two feet." (Marcel Hartjes: Marcel haut ab) And everybody is willing to open their doors again for all individuals - even for unwanted dogs: " Strubbel was back again, and the best thing was he was allowed to stay. Karlo's Dad had fetched the dog from his hiding place and taken him home." (Franz Hildebrandt: Karlo und sein bester Freund)

Disney Channel's Fantastic Film Factory reveals how kids would entertain others their own age: with stories close to reality, in which conflicts are settled to everyone's satisfaction. In the children's fantasies there exists a more harmonious world.

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