



Leo Tolstoy and Hassan Zahreddine

Malashka and Akulka, two little girls, are playing together happily when they get into a disagreement... and before you know it, the entire village is involved!

[Little Girls Are Wiser Than Men](#) is a book for all ages and times adapted from a poetic short story by one of the world's greatest storytellers, Leo Tolstoy. This astute tale about conflict and resolution is illustrated with lino-cut art by Lebanese printmaker Hassan Zahreddine. Given the spirit of the tale, and Tolstoy's wry and gentle admonition to a world that seems to thrive on conflict, we are happy to have created this work across cultures, traditions, histories and places..

THE STORY

Like many of Tolstoy's stories, the events that unfold in this book centre around everyday life. In the telling, an important insight emerges which is neither a forced moral nor an argument that is attached to the story.

How do children experience the world, and what we might learn from them? This is a question that began to acquire currency in the mid and late 19th century, as the figure of the child emerged as a distinctive human presence and childhood was understood as a time of both innocence and wisdom. This idea was captured best in a now forgotten book, *The Century of the Child*, which saw the 20th century as both learning from what children are and do, and making the world a better place for them. Tolstoy had an intuitive sense of how we might do this and this story stands as testimony to that insight.

THE ART

The illustrations in this book were created by Hassan Zahreddine, a printmaker and illustrator who grew up in Lebanon, a country which tragically enough has witnessed endemic conflict and violence. The challenge has been to live and create and value peace and coexistence. And as happens in such straitened circumstances, people learn to do with what they have, even as they constantly innovate. We see this in Hassan's work: etching requires care, discipline and time but allows the artist to explore the frenzy of the times in a spirit of quiet thoughtfulness.

For more on the etching process, refer to '*Victorian Book Illustration: The Technical Revolution*' by Geoffrey Wakeman (1973).

Hassan worked on the book while in India, and the story was one he could identify with. Being masterfully and lightly narrated, it did not weigh him down. And he went on to create settings and characters from a century and more ago, in a simple, graphic style reminiscent of the folk art that was widely adapted by Russian children's books illustrators in the 20th century. Folk art was particularly attractive because it allowed artists to work with decorative motifs, bright colours, ornamental detail and iconic figures. While varied and subtle, these images were influenced by *lubki*, 16th century woodcut illustrations that were a popular and accessible form of print. The uses of this art were various: it could be used to interpret cozy, merry everyday scenes as well as surrealistic gloomy images.

Hassan worked closely with our production team to bring the etching process to the letterpress form, a printing technique we are working to revive. Hassan has a special relationship to this form of printing. His father, who moved to Lebanon from Palestine, used to work at a printing press.

THE PRINTING

It seemed fitting to print this book on handmade paper, using a vintage 1965 Heidelberg letterpress. Digital files of the text and art were used to create plates that relief-printed on to the surface of paper. This technique captures the spirit of the times that the

story was set in while connecting it to the context in which this edition was created. It also makes for a unique reading and viewing experience: the words are deeply etched on the page, the colours are solidly on the surface, and the texture of the paper invites exploration. We wanted to present this seemingly simple fable in ways that did justice both to its wisdom as well as its beauty.

For further reading on letterpress techniques, refer to '*For the Love of Letterpress: A Printing Handbook for Instructors and Students*' by Cathie Ruggie Saunders (2013) and '*Impressive: Printmaking, Letterpress and Graphic Design*' by Robert Klanten and H. Hellige (2010).

Using an old printing technique calls attention to the book as a cultural object that has come to us through the ages. In a world taken over by a constant buzz of messages, and ideas, the book becomes a meditative space, where we learn to slow down, linger over the page, and feel the tactility of this most physical of forms.

For more on the form of the book, refer to '*Art of the Book*' published by Gingko Press (2015).



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Our free resources and activity sheets help parents and educators looking to extend the scope of our books. They contain pointers and questions for discussion, as well as suggestions for activities based on the ideas, art and narrative in the book.

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