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► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Meunier Meunier. François Place, Traveler of the Imaginary. Bookbird, 2014, p.125-128.
halshs-01181071

HAL Id: halshs-01181071

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01181071>

Submitted on 31 Jul 2015

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François Place, Traveler of the Imaginary

by Christophe Meunier

The work of François Place is at the intersection of documentary and fiction, of historical or geographical reality and the imaginary. Traveler of time and space, the French artist has the gift of taking his readers of all ages through his lines, strokes and colors into parallel universes. In turn, illustrator, author, and novelist, François Place also has the genius of rethinking the very concept of children's picture books.

Born in 1957, to a school teacher mother and a mosaic artist father, François Place spent his childhood in Ezanville, a small town located about 20 kilometers north of Paris. He was eleven years old when the Place family moved to Touraine where his grand'parents lived. François pursued his secondary studies at Tours. With a literary baccalaureate in hand, he left the Valley of the Loire in 1974, and undertook three years of advanced study in Paris, more precisely at the Ecole Estienne, a school of advanced studies for the arts and graphics industries. After graduation, he first started out in business communication, publishing and advertising. In 1983, he began illustrating at Hachette, collaborating on the "Bibliothèque Rose" collection, where he participated in republishing the works of the Countess of Ségur¹. For Hachette Jeunesse always and for "Le Livre de Poche" collection, he worked with Henriette Bichonnier² and Roselyne Morel³. In 1985, he met Pierre Marchand, editor at Gallimard Jeunesse, who noticed his drawings for youth. His career as an illustrator seemed to skyrocket from this point. Gallimard entrusted him with the illustration of a series of five documentaries for the "Découverte Cadet" collection, having as a subject the discovery of the world, the great conquerors, explorers and navigators⁴.

In 1992, it was Casterman who put their faith in him. They published *Les Derniers Géants*, the first illustrated work of fiction in which he was both author and illustrator. The book suggests, by its form, a travel journal and tells the story of an English adventurer of the 19th century, Archibald Ruthmore, who having purchased at a port in Sussex a tooth that he was told come from a giant, embarked on a brigantine and left, armed with a map, in search of the last giants. The book was a clear success, receiving three major awards on its release: that of the *Salon de Montreuil*, the *Société des Gens de Lettres*, and the *Cercle d'Or Livres Hebdo*. It was translated into English in 1993 by William Rodarmor, under the title *The Last Giants*, by the American firm David R. Godine, then into German, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.

All while continuing to illustrate the work of other children's authors, Place undertook in 1994, an enormous piece of work which would take six years. The project was to produce an atlas of twenty-six maps from the letters of the alphabet and accompany each with a story of an imaginary country depicted by the map. The world of *Atlas des géographes Orbae* came to light as three volumes appearing in 1996, 1998, and 2000. The first volume was showered with praise and received the Children's Book Award from the Geography Book Fair at the International

¹ *Quel amour d'enfant !* (1983) ; *Les malheurs de Sophie* (1989) ; *Les deux nigauds* (1991) ; *Jean qui grogne et Jean qui rit* (1991) ; *Nouveaux contes de fées : Histoire de Blondine, La petite souris grise, Ourson* (1991).

² *Les Diamants de Lizy Jones* (1987) ; *Kiki la casse* (1987) ; *Micmac à la casse* (1988).

³ *Panique à Plexipolis* (1987)

⁴ *La Découverte du Monde et Le Livre des Conquêteurs* (1987) avec Bernard Planche ; *Le Livre des navigateurs* (1988) ; *Le Livre des explorateurs* (1989) ; *Le Livre des marchands* (1990).

Festival of Geography at Saint-Dié-des-Vosges in 1997, as well as the prize for the Bologna Children's Book Fair the following year. Six other children's picture books would follow before François Place started writing youth novels. In 2010, he published with Gallimard Jeunesse a fantasy adventure, that of *La Douane Volante* and of the initiation voyage of a young Breton orphan, Gwen-le-Tousseux, carried off by the wagon of Death. Two years later, François Place wrote a follow-up to the *Atlas des géographes d'Orbae* issuing in a boxed set two novels relating two crossed destinies, those of two characters from Orbae. His last novel, published in March of 2014, by Casterman, is again the recounting of a voyage, that of *Angel, l'indien blanc*, embarking in Buenos Aires on *The Neptune* and setting foot in Antarctica.

Whether through his picture books or novels, the voyage is at the heart of the work of François Place. Marked in his early childhood by wall maps, terrestrial globes which decorated the walls of his mother's classroom, fascinated in his youth by *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *Treasure Island*, and *Moby Dick*, the stories of Jules Verne or the collection of "The Children of the Earth," from *Les Albums du Père Castor*, our author was drawn very early on by explorers and explorations of time and space. Later, his work on the documentary series "Découverte Cadet" led him to spend a great deal of time in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and to immerse himself in the accounts of great explorers like Dumont-d'Urville or Chardin as well as in the engravings, prints, and atlases of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. What interests Place is how people perceive each other, how little by little they come to own the world that they circumscribe by representing it. If François Place affirms that his graphic style varies in function with the story that he wants to tell, nevertheless his touch remains finely chiseled in the manner of a Rembrandt or a Gustave Doré whose illustrations of the *Fables* of La Fontaine also sweetened his childhood.

The Last Giants, by its oblong format, recalls a travel journal and could makes us think of an illustrated book in which generally a passage of text placed on the right-hand page, is portrayed as a picture on the left-hand page. However, this is not the case. It is rather an iconotextual picture book in which the author plays with three interdependent dimensions: text, image, and medium. François Place chose a picture book of small dimensions to depict a world of giants. Different scales are thus put to the test: from the small to the infinitely great. The Italian-style format allows the use of landscapes as well as the setting of the tragic destiny of the Giants from their initial verticality of living beings to their final horizontality of defunct beings. As pointed out by Isabelle Nières-Chevrel⁵, verbal and iconic narration respond to each other on each double page. The typography, close to that of a novel, is not always the same size on the left-hand page so that the block of text can be in balance with the space taken by the picture on the right-hand page. Thus, the text is always dictated by the succession of pictures.

This is an identical process reproduced in *Atlas* whose underlying project is a reflection on time and space, on the relationship of man with the world. The trilogy of Orbae, whose only the first volume was translated into English under the title *A Voyage of Discovery*, is a shortcut for the world. It is still a hybrid picture book whose map frontispieces and conclusive collection of images for each of the twenty-six stories functions in an inter-iconic mode and form what François Place himself calls "reader-traps." As Yvonne Chenouf states, "each hero seems to be the witness and/or the incarnation of the stakes of the civilization from which he comes⁶." What Place hopes to find through these characters is the wonder of the first explorer, what we could

⁵ Isabelle Nières-Chevrel (2006) « Les Derniers Géants : album ou texte illustré ? » dans *La Revue des Livres pour enfants*, n°228, pp.61-80.

⁶ Yvonne Chenouf (2010) « Les héros et la foule » dans *La Revue des Livres pour enfants*, n°254, p.129.

call the “Columbus syndrome.” The *Atlas des géographes d’Orbae* is an encyclopedia of the known World. Mother-Map, on which women-cartographers draw what is reported by stories of the travelers, wants to be the knowledge of the World, registered inside a big circle (*enkuklos*, in ancient greek) and conceived to educate the peoples (*paideia*). But much more, it is also an encyclopedia of the myths and the literary genres, these both narrative structures which build societies. So, we can find, inside the three volumes of the Atlas, tales, initiatory stories, adventures, investigations, journey diaries, autobiographies. To elaborate his worlds, François Place leans on myths passed on by Greek, Buddhist, and animistic tradition. He stages physical, philosophic, metaphysical or social forces which represent inherent symbols to the human being or collective aspirations.

In 2011, the boxed set of *Le Secret d’Orbae* was a new iconotextual innovation. The set functions as a reading system: two novels, eighteen color plates, and a map of the known worlds of Orbae established by a certain Cornelius Van Horn. The two novels are the fruit of two prolonged and completed stories which come from *Atlas*. It is a love story in two voices. The set is conceived as a musical score with a high-pitched voice (novels), a deep voice (map), and a subwoofer (drawings of landscapes). It pushes back rather far the limits of medium. It makes the reader an explorer, an adventurer free to create his own itinerary. He has thus at his disposal the map, the landscapes, and the intersecting stories. It is up to the reader to act in a hollow space to make sense by intermingling the three dimensions, the three narratives, verbal (the two novels), iconic (the pictures) and malleable (the set itself).

If, as François Bon⁷⁷ wrote, “the world needs dreams and for one to still carry in front of oneself his greatest and very oldest memory,” the work of François Place is inventive and participates in the development of this dream machine, which the book is. His work pushes the limits of the iconotext, interrogates space-time, feeds on the dizziness of the imaginary. The passionate reader is called to enjoy the pleasures of the re-reading, to enter this “long distance reading”, according to François Place, to let him absorbed by the picture and to enter it “up to the weft”, to discover its infinite spaces of interpretation.

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