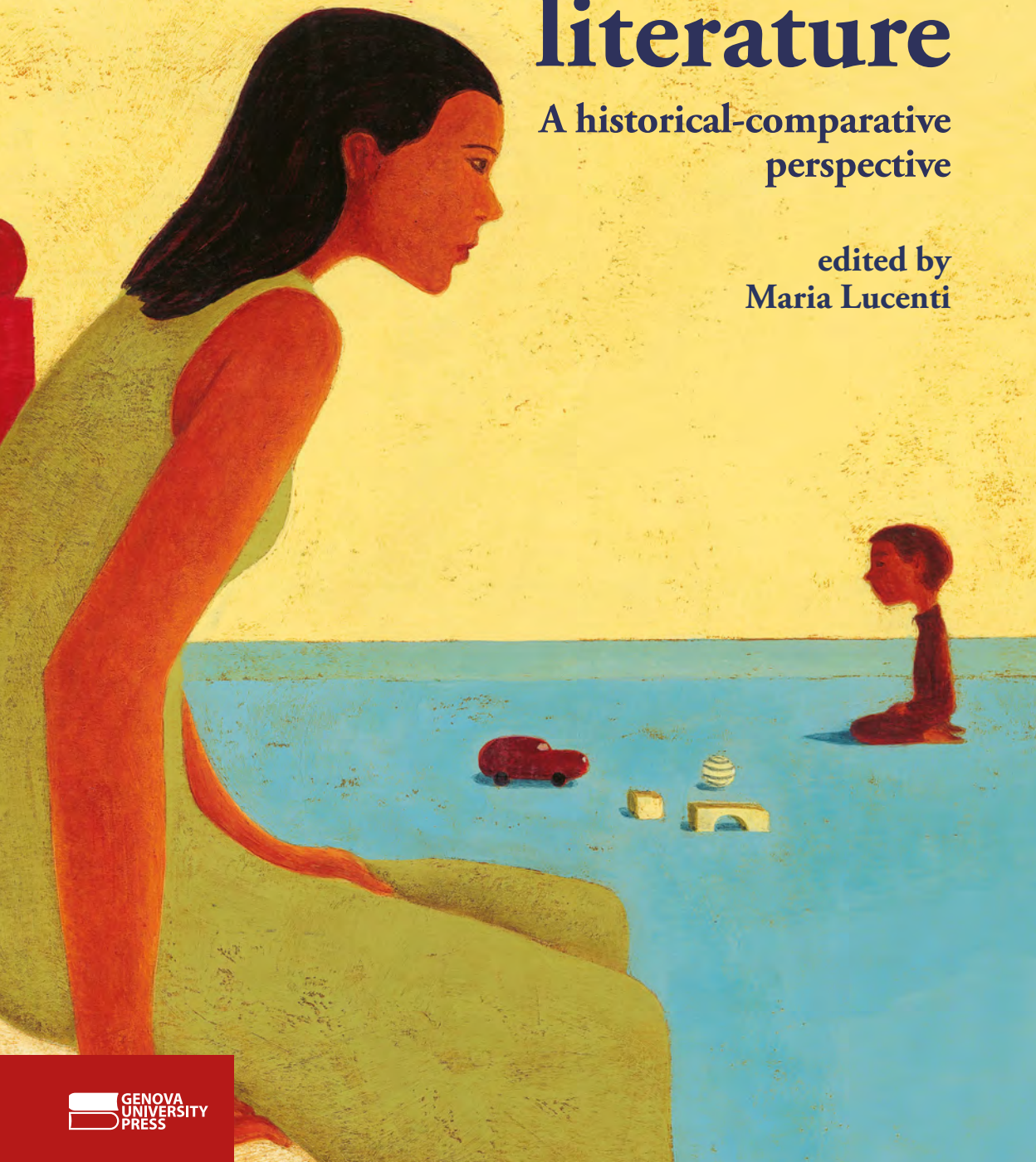


Diversity in children's literature

A historical-comparative
perspective

edited by
Maria Lucenti



Educare

15

Collana diretta da

Anna Antoniazzi
(Università di Genova)

Giorgio Matricardi
(Università di Genova)

Comitato scientifico

Antonella Lotti
(Università di Modena e di Reggio Emilia)

Andrea Traverso
(Università di Genova)

Silvio Premoli
(Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore)

Giuliano Vivanet
(Università di Cagliari)

Maria Teresa Trisciuzzi
(Libera Università di Bolzano)

Ilaria Filograsso
(Università di Chieti-Pescara)

Claudio Longo
(Università di Milano)

Maria Lucenti
(Università di Genova)

Diversity in children's literature

**A historical-comparative
perspective**

**edited by
Maria Lucenti**



è il marchio editoriale dell'Università di Genova



**Università
di Genova**

The cover image was published courtesy of the illustrator Michele Ferri, from *Il mondo è anche di Tobias* by Elena Spagnoli Fritze, 2009.



UNIVERSITY
PRESS ITALIANE

*Il presente volume è stato sottoposto a double blind peer-review
secondo i criteri stabiliti dal protocollo UPI*

© 2025 GUP

I contenuti del presente volume sono pubblicati con la licenza
Creative commons 4.0 International Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.



Alcuni diritti sono riservati

e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-343-2

Pubblicato a novembre 2025

Realizzazione Editoriale
GENOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Via Balbi 5, 16126 Genova
Tel. 010 20951558
e-mail: gup@unige.it
<https://gup.unige.it>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction <i>Maria Lucenti</i>	9
Beyond the limit of the sky. Women's flights in children's literature <i>Maria Lucenti</i>	17
All the colours of the rainbow: exploring the representation of gender diversities in the latest Italian children's literature <i>Valentina Baeli</i>	31
Feminist Happily Ever Afters: Rewriting Thumbelina and The Little Mermaid in Dalla parte delle bambine's Picturebooks <i>Anna Travagliati</i>	41
Picturing disability: historical itineraries in Italian children's literature <i>Silvia Pacelli</i>	57
Those wild things: adolescents as monsters and savages in David Almond's oeuvre <i>Elena Guerzoni</i>	71
A Folk Tale as a Framework for Educational Exploration of 'otherness' – Biberče case <i>Aleksandra Ilić Rajković</i> <i>Đurđa Maksimović</i>	93
<i>The Fifth Season</i> by Fulvio Tomizza – a novel that reflects on otherness and stimulates discussion about its ideal reader <i>Diana Njegovan</i>	105
A Matter of Perspective? Religious Othering in Children's Literature <i>Verena Marie Eberhardt</i>	121
Diverse Childhoods: Contextualizing Childhood and the Lives of Adivasi in Select Indian Picturebooks <i>Sridipa Dandapat</i> <i>Priyanka Tripathi</i>	137
The Plural Identity of Brazilian Children's Literature <i>Maria Carolina Nunes Gobbo</i>	149

Introduction

Maria Lucenti

Representations in children's literature are never neutral or merely expressive; rather, as Baldacci (2006) argues, they can crystallize into actual 'models' that inform behaviors, practices, and collective choices. When these representations are internalized within a community and begin to guide social conduct, they give rise to what can be described as 'educational models'. Narratives – whether conveyed through literature, textbooks, media, or oral storytelling – act as powerful vehicles for these models, shaping imaginaries and transmitting normative frameworks across time and social contexts. As such, they play an essential role in constructing, legitimizing, or contesting dominant social values. Baldacci (2006) further emphasizes that every educational system is structured around a model that articulates both its teleological aims and its practical implementations, ultimately functioning as a normative reference point for educational action. In this light, narratives do not merely mirror societal norms but actively participate in the production and circulation of educational ideologies. As Antoniazzi (2015, p. 23) affirms, narrative operates within the imaginative boundaries of its time, reiterating – or in some cases resisting – the dominant educational models it encodes, while offering readers symbolic reference points for identity formation and social positioning. Understanding these dynamics requires engaging with the framework of the 'collective imagination', which, as Beseghi (2018) notes, has become a critical field of inquiry for analyzing cultural representations. Drawing on the legacy of Jacques Le Goff and the Annales school, the imaginary is viewed not as a secondary or decorative layer, but as a vital space through which ideas, emotions, and symbolic systems are transmitted and historicized. In the Italian context, the work of Antonio Faeti (2005; 2011a; 2011b) has been instrumental in linking children's literature to this broader interpretative horizon. By applying Carlo Ginzburg's evidential paradigm to the field of children's narrative, Faeti

demonstrated the methodological complexity and interdisciplinary nature of the imaginary. As Beseghi (2018, p. 17) highlights, Faeti's work reveals the layered and elusive nature of children's literature, which resists reductive epistemological frameworks. However, despite significant progress, research on the construction of the child and adolescent imaginary remain underexplored, particularly in relation to diversity. In this sense, 'Otherness' becomes a central analytical category, as it defines the 'Other' in relation to a dominant 'We' – a dynamic embedded – in its contemporary configurations – in historical nation-building processes and broader political-cultural systems (Augé, 2000; Gallissot et al., 2001; Kilani, 1997). As historiographical studies have shown, this construction of identity and exclusion is never neutral, but contingent on ideological projects (Grillo & Pratt, 2006). Moreover, as Said (1978) demonstrated in his book *Orientalism*, representations of the 'Other' – particularly from the Global South – have often been shaped by asymmetrical power relations, producing essentialized, monolithic images that continue to influence cultural narratives. These representations, internalized by both dominant and marginalized groups, sustain exclusionary imaginaries that require deconstruction. In this context, children's literature becomes a crucial site for investigating how such imaginaries are formed, perpetuated, or disrupted – an essential task in the broader project of rethinking diversity, inclusion, and identity formation from both educational and literary perspectives. Children's literature therefore plays a pivotal role in shaping the minds of young readers. Through stories, children gain not only a sense of wonder and imagination but also a framework for understanding the world around them. The stories children consume shape their perceptions of themselves and others, laying the groundwork for their values, behaviors, and social interactions. Literature is a mirror through which children can see themselves, and it is also a window into the lives of others (Bishop, 1990). Therefore, the portrayal of diversity in children's literature is of profound importance. When children see themselves reflected in stories – whether it be through characters who share their gender, race, cultural background, or experiences of disability – they gain a sense of validation and belonging. Likewise, when children encounter characters whose lives and experiences differ from their own, they develop empathy and a broader understanding of the world.

The volume *Diversity in Children's Literature: A Historical-Comparative Perspective*, seeks to explore how literature for children has transformed over time to reflect the complexities of modern society, tackling issues of gender, race, disability, and identity. It examines how authors, illustrators, and publishers have responded to the call for greater representation, as well as how these shifts compare

across different cultures and historical periods. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on diversity by presenting a series of case studies through which it is possible to examine the progress achieved, the persistent challenges, and the potential of literature to serve as a medium for promoting inclusivity and fostering understanding among young readers.

While there is no shortage of authoritative and methodologically robust research on the subject (Crisp et al., 2016; Chetty & O'Connor, 2025; Koss, 2015; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019; Thomas & Dahlen, 2022; O'Sullivan & Immel, 2017), the topic can by no means be considered exhausted, as the data clearly demonstrate.

For instance, according to data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), of the 3,200 books received in 2013, only a small percentage featured diverse characters, highlighting a significant underrepresentation of diversity in children's literature. As Reckermann (2020) notes, the values promoted in school education – such as tolerance, equality, and respect – reflect those of broader society. Therefore, diversity should be placed at the core of educational narratives. Teachers, Reckermann argues, cannot overlook issues of diversity in their daily practice and should engage with materials and situations that help raise awareness and foster inclusivity.

This structure allows for a focused yet interconnected approach to examining how different dimensions of identity, are addressed in literature.

This volume focuses on specific areas that have historically faced systemic underrepresentation or misrepresentation in children's literature. Through a series of thematically and methodologically diverse contributions, the collection interrogates how historically texts for young readers have represented categories of difference – particularly gender, disability, cultural and racial identity, and other forms of alterity – within a broader socio-cultural and pedagogical framework.

Gender roles and cultural diversity, as well as the portrayal of disability, are explored in detail to illuminate how these themes have evolved over time. By starting with these dimensions, the volume underscores the foundational importance of challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity at the level of individual and collective identity. It also examines how these portrayals contribute to shaping children's sense of self and belonging, highlighting stories' crucial role in promoting empathy and understanding.

Several chapters address identity and alterity, broadening the lens to explore concepts of otherness, including cultural, racial, and religious identities. It builds on the previous themes, extending the discussion to societal and collective dimensions of diversity, and investigates how stories engage with the idea of 'diversity', using literature as a tool to promote cross-cultural understanding, challenge

prejudice, and foster pluralism. By addressing otherness and its portrayal in narratives, the authors provide a framework for understanding how literature can bridge divides and offer young readers a richer, more inclusive worldview.

The first chapters examine how issues of gender and disability have been represented in children's literature and how these portrayals have evolved over time. Historically, children's books have often reinforced rigid gender roles, with male characters depicted as brave and adventurous, while female characters were passive or confined to domestic roles. Similarly, people with disabilities were either absent or portrayed in ways that reinforced stereotypes of weakness or dependence. In Maria Lucenti's essay we see how literature has both perpetuated and challenged these gender norms. Lucenti explores the imaginative potential of flight in children's books, particularly through a gendered lens, illustrating how early stories about aviation were almost exclusively male-dominated. Over time, however, as society's views on gender equality have shifted, more recent works have introduced strong female protagonists who defy these historical limitations, inspiring young readers with tales of courage and determination.

In the second chapter, Valentina Baeli delves into the evolving portrayals of gender diversity in contemporary Italian literature. Baeli highlights how modern books move beyond binary depictions of gender, offering fluid and inclusive representations that resonate with the experiences of young readers today. This approach not only challenges stereotypes but also provides a framework for children to understand and accept diverse gender identities, fostering a more inclusive mindset from an early age.

Feminist reinterpretations of classic tales are the focus of Anna Travagliati's chapter. Travagliati explores how traditional fairy tales, which have historically reinforced passive female roles, are being rewritten to offer new feminist perspectives. These modern retellings empower female characters by giving them agency and control over their destinies, thereby providing young readers with narratives that challenge the antiquated gender roles of earlier versions. By doing so, these stories open up possibilities for children to see themselves as active participants in shaping their own lives.

Silvia Pacelli's chapter, continues the discussion of inclusivity by examining how disability has been represented in literature. Pacelli traces the evolution of disability portrayals from early depictions that reinforced negative stereotypes, to more recent works that celebrate the strength, resilience, and individuality of characters with disabilities. This shift not only reflects a more nuanced understanding of disability but also provides young readers with models of empower-

ment and inclusion, breaking away from narratives that marginalize or ‘Other’ those with disabilities.

The following chapters of the book shift focus to issues of identity and otherness, particularly in relation to race, culture, and religion. As societies become increasingly diverse, children’s literature has become an important tool for exploring concepts of ‘Otherness’ and fostering an understanding of different cultures and identities.

Aleksandra Ilić Rajković and Đurđa Maksimović use the Serbian folk tale *Biberče* as a lens through which to explore the theme of ‘Otherness’ in their chapter. The authors discuss how this folk tale is used in educational contexts to teach children about empathy and acceptance, demonstrating the power of literature to bridge cultural divides and foster understanding among people. This approach to ‘Otherness’ as an educational tool shows the potential of folk narratives to engage with contemporary social issues in meaningful ways.

Diana Njegovan’s chapter continues this theme by focusing on how Tomizza’s novel engages with the concept of belonging and exclusion. Njegovan explores how *The Fifth Season* encourages young readers to reflect on identity and inclusion, prompting critical discussions about what it means to be ‘Other’ in society. The novel’s ability to provoke thought about who the ‘ideal reader’ might be underscores literature’s role in challenging preconceived notions of identity and encouraging broader perspectives.

The theme of adolescence as a period of transformation and rebellion is explored in Elena Guerzoni’s chapter, where the author examines how David Almond portrays adolescents as ‘Other,’ using metaphors of wildness and monstrosity to capture the turbulence of growing up. Almond’s characters, often depicted as outsiders, reflect the psychological and emotional complexities of adolescence. Through these portrayals, Guerzoni argues, Almond engages with the notion of identity formation, illustrating how young people navigate their internal struggles and the expectations imposed by society.

Religious diversity is addressed in Verena Eberhardt’s chapter, where the author examines how children’s media portrays different religions and religious practices, discussing how these representations can either promote tolerance or reinforce stereotypes. By highlighting the need for more inclusive portrayals of religious diversity, Eberhardt shows how literature and media can play a crucial role in fostering a sense of religious pluralism and combatting religious ‘Othering.’

The theme of cultural diversity is explored in Sridipa Dandapatand and Priyanka Tripathi’s chapter. The authors focus on the representation of Adivasi (Indigenous) children in Indian picturebooks, highlighting the importance of

authentic portrayals that reflect the richness of Adivasi culture and experiences. By providing Adivasi children with stories that resonate with their own lives, these books offer a sense of validation and belonging, while also educating other children about the diversity of Indian cultures.

Similarly, Maria Carolina Nunes Gobbo's chapter examines how Brazilian literature reflects the country's complex cultural identity. Gobbo discusses how Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous identities are portrayed in children's books, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity in shaping a more pluralistic understanding of national identity. By focusing on the intersection of race, culture, and identity, Gobbo's chapter illustrates how literature can foster a deeper appreciation of diversity in a country as multicultural as Brazil.

Overall, the volume brings together a wide range of perspectives on how children's literature can be a force for promoting diversity and inclusion. From gender and disability to race, culture, and religion, the chapters collectively demonstrate how literature has the power to reflect societal change and challenge entrenched stereotypes. By offering young readers stories that embrace the richness of human experience, literature can help shape a more empathetic, inclusive, and understanding world. As the authors have clearly highlighted, a historically grounded analysis of how alterity and diversity have been constructed remains not only relevant but essential. Understanding the genealogies of exclusion, stereotyping, and symbolic domination enables us to critically assess the present and to resist the recurrence of reductive frameworks. Without this historical awareness, contemporary narratives risk reproducing the very hierarchies they claim to challenge, offering inclusion in form but not in substance. Children's literature, as a cultural and educational instrument, must therefore be approached with a vigilant and historically informed gaze – one capable of discerning whether narratives genuinely open spaces for pluralism, or whether they simply reconfigure existing structures of power. Only by confronting the deep-rooted dynamics that have shaped representations of the 'Other' can we begin to chart a meaningful path forward – one that avoids superficial gestures and instead fosters critical, transformative imaginaries for the next generations.

Although this volume does not aspire to offer an exhaustive or conclusive account, it enriches the current debate around diversity by critically engaging with specific themes, regions, and contexts that remain insufficiently examined within current scholarship. In doing so, it opens a significant space for ongoing reflection and deepens our understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept of 'diversity'.

References

- Antoniazzi, A. (2015). *Dai Puffi a Peppa Pig: media e modelli educativi*. Carocci.
- Augé, M. (2000). *Il senso degli altri: Attualità dell'antropologia*. Bollati Boringhieri.
- Baldacci, M. (2006). *Educazione e formazione: Teoria e pratica del curriculum*. Carocci.
- Beseghi, E. (ed.) (2018). *I tesori nelle isole non trovate: Fiabe, immaginario, avventura nella letteratura per l'infanzia*. Edizioni Junior.
- Bishop, R.S. (1990). *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors. Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3).
- Chetty, D., & Sands-O'Connor, K. (2025). *Beyond the secret garden: Children's literature and representations of Black and racially minoritised people*. English and Media Centre.
- Crisp, T., Knezek, S.M.; Quinn, M.; Bingham, G.E.; Girardeau, K. & al. (2016). *What's on Our Bookshelves? The Diversity of Children's Literature in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries*. *Journal of Children's Literature*, Vol. 42, Iss. 2: pp. 29-42.
- Dahlen, S.P., & Thomas, E.E. (Eds.). (2022). *Harry Potter and the other: Race, justice, and difference in the Wizarding World*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Faeti, A. (2005). *Specchi e riflessi: Nuove letture per altre immagini*. Il Ponte Vecchio.
- Faeti, A. (2011a). *Guardare le figure. Gli illustratori italiani dei libri per l'infanzia*. Donzelli Editore.
- Faeti, A. (2011b). *I diamanti in cantina. Come leggere la letteratura per l'infanzia*. Il Ponte Vecchio.
- Gallissot, R., Kilani, M., & Rivera, A. (2001). *L'imbroglione etnico in quattordici parole-chiave*. Dedalo.
- Grillo, R.D., & Pratt, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Le politiche del riconoscimento delle differenze: Multiculturalismo all'italiana*. Guaraldi.
- Horning, K.T., Lindgren, M.V., & Schliesman, M. (2014). *Observations on publishing in 2013. Cooperative Children's Book Center*. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/observations-on-publishing-in-2013/>.
- Kilani, M. (1997). *L'invenzione dell'altro: Saggi sul discorso antropologico*. Dedalo.
- Kilani, M., & Rivera, A. (2001). *L'imbroglione etnico in quattordici parole-chiave*. Dedalo.

- Koss, M.D. (2015). *Diversity in contemporary picturebooks: A content analysis*. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 41(1), pp. 32-42.
- O'Sullivan, E., & Immel, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Imagining sameness and difference in children's literature: From the Enlightenment to the present day*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ramdarshan Bold M. (2019). *Inclusive young adult fiction. Authors of colour in the United Kingdom*. Palgrave Mcmillan.
- Reckermann, J. (2020). *Dealing with diversity in English children's books in the heterogeneous EFL classroom*. *PFLB Zeitschrift für Schul- und Professionsentwicklung: Praxis Forschung Lehrerinnen Bildung*, 2(4), pp. 134-157.
- Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Beyond the limit of the sky. Women's flights in children's literature

Maria Lucenti

This contribution aims to explore the imaginative potential of flight in children's literature from a gender perspective. Flight has always been a synthesis of imaginative impulses beyond the real, the everyday, the ordinary. In this sense, children's literature represents the privileged place in which the theme of flight has largely contributed to nourishing the dreams of children of yesterday and today. But in addition to imaginary flights, literature also tells of real flights and aviation feats, even representing a propaganda vehicle for imperialist and colonial enterprises in certain contexts and historical periods. In this aviation history, progress and Western 'superiority' went hand in hand with the imposition of clear gender hierarchies, where women were undoubtedly among the excluded. Yet many women have undertaken epic feats of flight.

After an initial 'overview' of flight understood in a metaphorical sense in illustrated books, the paper analyses the presence of women in aviation history within children's literature, where recently there has been greater attention to gender inclusion in an area that has long been time a male prerogative.

Keywords: women, flight, aviation pedagogy, children's literature, picture books

1. Imaginary flights in picture books

Flight has always been a synthesis of imaginative impulses beyond the real, the everyday, the ordinary. In this sense, children's literature represents the privileged place in which the theme of flight has largely contributed to nourishing

the dreams of children of yesterday and today. Since ancient times, flight has been at the centre of storytelling at all latitudes. Generally, the prerogative of the divinities, it becomes a constitutive element of the 'magical' within children's narration, widely populated by figures capable of flying by magic, think of witches (Antoniuzzi, 2022). And a significant gender difference immediately emerges: not only were women left out of the flight narrative, but when present they take on a negative connotation, as Antoniuzzi states:

Going through the myths, legends, narratives and historical events that concern flight, not yes one may fail to notice a gap, a deep and, so far, unfilled imaginative hiatus: the almost total absence of female figures, if not relegated to the role of extras or negative examples [...] It almost seems that the ancient myths, as well as the modern narratives, but on closer inspection also the same concept patriarchal of humanity, have anchored the feminine to the ground, almost as if to deprive an entire part of humanity of the prerogative of taking flight, even just with thought and imagination (p. 35).

With an inexhaustible mass of meanings and imaginative challenges, flying has always led children where a 'down to earth' perspective cannot do, into the meanders of dreams, of the oneiric, of elsewhere, of the impossible. Whether real or metaphorical, it manages to break into the ordinary life of every boy and girl, to 'travel' with their head in the clouds, abandoning the certainties of the known and knowable world. And the journey itself inevitably represents one of the main themes of flying. Flying implies travelling. If the flight often involves a journey towards an unknown destination, in which the destination does not represent the main focus, it is the person who undertakes it and the path of change that this journey invariably generates that becomes the privileged object of narration. Traveling by flying in this sense means embarking on a path of growth, change and initiatory awareness. 'Fly the nest' is in fact the metaphor used to underline the fact of leaving the family unit, the 'comfort zone' and the taking on of responsibility that growing up entails. We leave behind what we are and what we know to enter the unknown. This journey brings together many contrasting feelings, from the unstoppable curiosity for the new to the fear of the unknown. If the metaphor of flight as overcoming the phase of dependence towards a new one of independence is one of the most effective for reiterating growth and the transition from childhood to adulthood, it is precisely the chick – whose presence in children's literature is certainly not recent or casual – the protagonist of a transformative journey in the book *For Those Who Want to Fly*

by Pirkko Vainio published in 2009. To learn to fly the little chick faces many daily tests, and through a journey of maturation, from birth with the hatching of the shell, the various stages do not represent simple 'lessons' for learning to fly, but true philosophical maxims for learning to live. This is, moreover, the aim of the book, whose premise on the back cover prepares the reader for this journey: «living is a bit like flying. It's not automatic: you have to learn to do it. This book is a perfect guide to learn how to... take flight! ». Rather than as an 'escape from reality', here learning to fly is a means and 'pretext' for learning how to live, in terms of a predisposition to be able to face any small or large challenge linked to growth, exposure, coming out of the shell to find one's own identity and place in the world, in the awareness that «it is not necessary to reach for the stars to touch the sky». It is always a small bird, a canary this time, that leads an entire family to metamorphosis and irreversible change in the illustrated book *The Flight of the Knitter Family*¹. Here all the assumptions that have often supported the story about flight collapse or are overturned. It is the pet that gives flying lessons not to its peers, but to the family that hosts and looks after it. Furthermore, the flight project no longer concerns the single individual, as a metaphor for individual growth, but the entire family, father, mother, two children, a dog, a cat and a canary. Everyone can learn how to fly regardless of age and they can learn to do it together. Once again, the destination is not a priority, in this sense flying is not just a means, a tool to reach a destination, but it is the very purpose of the journey, of discovery, of overcoming one's limits towards freedom. The family thus embarks on a flying journey until they land on an island paradise, an uncontaminated place far from the ugliness of the urbanized world. The days pass happily and the planned return for what was supposed to be just a «holiday» looms, arousing many protests and disappointments among family members. But there is no going back, because «perhaps, once you have learned to fly you can no longer stay on the ground» and so the Knitter family continues to fly towards unknown destinations, perhaps without ever going back.

Other times flying is the only saving means to escape from a horrifying reality. Like Sara, who manages to escape from the concentration camps thanks to a robin who lends her wings. In the book *Sara's Flight*² flying saves, frees from the horrors of the world. The birds that lend their wings to children allow them to

¹ Published in Spanish in 2016 by A buen paso, under the original title *El vuelo de la familia Knitter*.

² Published in Italian in 2011 by Fatatrac, under the original title *Il volo di Sara*.

pass through the barbed wire fences which, in addition to imprisoning the body, also imprison dreams, hopes, love, humanity. Flying in this case means taking back what belongs to the children's world. What no one can or should deny them. Among the protagonists of flying epics, Emilio undertakes his imaginative flights in the book *How to get to the moon*³ published in 2022. Emilio and his grandfather take flight by diving and «landing right in the centre of the Moon, into the water». They get to know the moon through a leap into the depths of the sea, aware of the fact that there is not just one way to «get to the moon». On the other hand, it has many faces, and they are all waiting to be discovered, explored, experienced.

2. Flight as a metaphor of emancipation

Among picture books, there is a category that talks about real historical events or stories of people who really existed using imaginative narrative gimmicks. Gender or racial discrimination is thus told through the metaphor of flight, as struggle, courage to overcome the status quo and go further. Flight then becomes a tool to transcend an unfair reality, of which one suffers all the absurdity and irrationality. Elevating oneself becomes a way to depart and distance oneself from these realities to imagine a different world, where everyone, women, children, ethnic minorities can find their place in the name of full respect, recognition and real inclusion. As in *The Year we Learned to Fly*⁴ in which flying becomes a way to explore new possibilities, whenever reality is not what we would like. And so, the grandmother teaches her grandchildren to fly, just as their ancestors had done before: «There were aunts and uncles and cousins who were brought here on huge ships, their wrists and ankles cuffed in iron, but, my grandmother said, nobody can ever cuff your beautiful and brilliant mind». Just as in the past the ancestors in slavery learned to fly to escape a dark reality – because no one can imprison the thoughts and the mind – in the same way the grandmother teaches her grandchildren to use the power of imagination and fly away whenever they need to open up to the world and escape the banality and crudeness of everyday life. This story teaches children and adults that words set you free, they can

³ Published in Spanish by Lecturita Ediciones, under the original title *Cómo llegar a la luna*.

⁴ Published in English in 2022 by Nancy Paulsen Books.

give you wings to fly and overcoming any pain and difficulty. And flight as a metaphor represents the means to create new worlds and new possibilities. This picture book is inspired by Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*⁵. The story tells of a distant time when some people in Africa possessed magical power. They could fly. But then many were enslaved and those who knew how to fly kept the secret. Until the day when Sarah, exhausted on the ground with her hungry and crying child, was beaten by the Overseer to get up and continue working. But Toby, raising his hands in the air and whispering magic words, made her fly over the fences. Whenever a man or woman fell exhausted and dying from exhaustion or extreme heat, Toby approached, whispered ancient African words – «Kum kunka yali, kum» – making them fly away. When the Overseers realize that it is because of Toby's words that people are flying away, they want to capture him. But Toby laughs, saying, «Don't you know who I am? We're the ones who fly». And so all the men and women who knew how to fly rise into the sky forming a single enormous spiral. Even those who don't know how to fly with their eyes and hands in the air beg to be able to escape, but Toby can't help them, there's no time to teach them to fly. And so the story of those who knew how to fly was passed down from parents to children up to the present day, to us.

And always of flights as a path to emancipation – this time of gender – it is told in the picture book *Loujain dreams of sunflowers* where the protagonist, a little girl named Loujain dreams of flying. Loujain repeatedly dreams of two things: of flying and of doing so over a field of sunflowers. Every day she pretends to fly in the garden and watches his father take flight away. In fact, only boys are allowed to fly and she is a girl. Every time Loujain tells her dream to her peers she is laughed at because everyone knows that girls are not allowed to fly. The mother sees her daughter's sadness in forbidding something for no real reason and so convinces the father to let her fly with him. From then on, every day father and daughter will fly up to the sky, to explore the skies and lands, up to the much desired field of sunflowers. But the next day as Loujain walked with her family towards school she noticed that everyone was looking at her and whispering. Until she saw that her photo while she was flying over the sunflower field was on the front page of the newspapers. Initially concerned, she saw little girls asking their fathers to teach them to fly, just as Loujain's father had done. The book ends with

⁵ Originally published in 1985 by Alfred A. Knopf, reprinted as picture book in 2004 by Dragonfly Books.

the author asking the readers a question: «Do you believe you can fly? I know you will fly – not immediately, but definitely». Loujain really exists, she is the sister of the author who inspired this story, who was in prison while the book was taking shape for violating the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. Just like the real Loujain, the protagonist of the book challenged unjust gender discrimination, until she achieved what she fought for, namely the removal of the driving ban for women in 2018. And the author concludes by telling young readers:

Sometimes it feels impossible to dream of a world where we can speak out and be who we are meant to be – where we can fly. Loujain is our hero because she has always, from a very young age, fought for what she believed in. She reminds us every day that our dreams and voices matter, dear friends.

3. The higher I rise, the more freedom I feel

Flight as a metaphor for growth, freedom, overcoming limits, research and discovery, escape has occupied and still occupies a predominant space in children's literature. But beside this imaginative dimension related with flight's representation within children's literature, analysing the productions of recent decades we find another important literary trend which reflects – more or less faithfully – the life experiences of aeronauts who accomplished extraordinary feats, surpassing the records in force at the time. Alongside the biographical illustrated books – dedicated to the epic exploits of an aviator – there are publications in which the 'really happened' story becomes an expedient for the construction of 'another story' in which the imaginative component is intertwined with the realistic references. This is the case of the two picture books *Lindbergh: The Tale of a Flying Mouse*⁶ and *Armstrong: The Adventurous Journey of a Mouse to the Moon*⁷ written and illustrated by Torben Kuhlmann. In the former picture book, the author reconstructs the story of the first Atlantic flight made by the American pilot Charles Lindbergh in 1927, through the journey of a mouse. The events narrated in the album precede Lindbergh's flight. Here the little mouse, starting

⁶ Published in German in 2014 by NordSüd Verlag AG, under the original title *Lindbergh. Die abenteuerliche Geschichte einer fliegenden Maus*.

⁷ Published in German in 2016 by NordSüd Verlag AG, under the original title *Armstrong – Die abenteuerliche Reise einer Maus zum Mond*.

from recovered recycled materials and thanks to the observation of the flight of bats, builds various contraptions and aircraft. Gradually perfecting his «flying machines», the little mouse finally completes his mission: to cross the ocean by flying from Hamburg to New York. Having become famous for the feat, the little animal will inspire an aerial show whose posters will cover the walls of many cities, until one day «in front of one of these posters, with his heart in turmoil, a little boy stopped. He dreamed that, sooner or later, he too would conquer the sky. His name was Charles Lindbergh».

In addition to Lindbergh, the register is full of references to other illustrious flight scientists who, with their contributions, laid the foundations for the Lindberghian epic: Leonardo, Otto Lilienthal and the Wright brothers. The author's second book, like the first, refers to a turning point in the history of flight: the moon landing. Also, in this case our mouse not only anticipates the exploits of Armstrong, the first man to set foot on the moon, but makes it possible. The men will refer precisely to the engineering sketches of the little mouse to build the Saturn V rocket that led Apollo 11 to the Moon in 1969. At the end of the story the author makes us aware of the key expedient that made the legitimation of the official and known version of the story: the mouse was called Armstrong, so as not to reveal the true identity of the first 'living being' – human or animal – to land on the earth's satellite. These are two narratives with compelling illustrations that retrace fundamental stages in the history of flight and humanity.

To conclude this quick 'flyover' among some illustrated books on flight, we quote a famous phrase by Charles-Augustin De Coulomb, physicist and engineer, who in 1780 stated: «no endeavour by man to rise into the air can succeed, and only fools would attempt it». He was wrong. Dreams and the narrative that tells them can really become reality and flying is one of the most sensational examples. A hope to tell today's dreams, keeping in mind that 'creativity is rarely applauded by a large audience', as Pirkko Vainio tells us in the book *For Those Who Want to Fly*. The limit, therefore, is and still remains only the sky.

4. Lighter than Air. Women who reached the sky

If the history of flight cannot be limited to that of airplanes, however the birth of aviation represents an interesting angle to observe and explore the ideological significance that the theme of flight has had in the history of education through children's literature. Aviation history is closely linked to the war exploits of the twentieth century: Western imperialism and colonialism, as well as the First

and Second World Wars. During this troubled history, children's literature has played a key role, since it was instrumentalized and subservient to the purposes of non-democratic regimes, that aimed at the formation of an «aviation pedagogy» (Lucenti & Mamone, 2024) with highly propagandistic connotations.

The presuppositions of this pedagogy were to establish the racial superiority of the Western white man. In this sense, flight was a symbol and emblem of this proclaimed superiority, as it decreed the overcoming of one of the limits considered insurmountable, that of flying. The 'conquest of the skies' began by the Italians with the Libyan war of 1911-1912, when planes were used in warfare for the first time (Mamone, 2022). In the childhood imagination, this technological progress was immediately accompanied by racist and sexist rhetoric, where the mythologization of the figure of the aviator reached its peak during fascism. Aviation becomes synonymous with the superiority of mankind over nature, an instrument of domination of nature and its limits through rationality and technological progress and ontologically linked to fascism, as a modernizing project. As Caprotti (2011) states «Aviation in fascist Italy was used both as a metaphor for the domination and overcoming of natural boundaries, limits, and distance, and as an expression of fascist modernity through speed, technology, and power» (p. 333). Aviation was among the themes most exploited and used to establish this supremacy with racist assumptions, precisely because of its effectiveness in assisting a series of values espoused by the regime, primarily the link with myth and sacredness (Esposito, 2015; Lucenti, 2022).

In this profoundly misogynistic and racist context, women were only allowed to admire and 'serve' the homeland and the men who built it and led it to victory. Yet many women, even in periods that preceded the manufacturing of the first airplanes, aspired to fly, making it a life mission. Children's literature has begun to make the story of these women known. In fact, illustrated books have recently been dedicated to them.

Women, great excluded from powered flights and aviation history, have found in the challenge of the sky a privileged area in which to break down gender stereotypes and prejudices, in the awareness that there was only a limit, the one imposed by the sky, certainly not by men on earth. Ruth Law, Aida de Acosta, Sophie Blanchard, Betty Skelton, Amelia Earhart are just some of the names of women who have questioned gender hierarchies in aviation.

Within the Candlewick Biographies series, the book *Lighter than Air. Sophie Blanchard, the First Woman Pilot* of 2017, tells the true story of Sophie Blanchard, the world's first woman pilot who flew hot air balloons. Since she was a little girl, Sophie has felt that flying was what she wanted the most and questioned the

prejudices that sanctioned the exclusion of women from any flying experience: «The sky was no place for a woman, some said. It was too cold up there, the air too thin, the winds too fierce. Women were made of weaker stuff. Their place was on earth» (p. 17). But Sophie knew in her heart that it could not be like this. Without reservations she met Monsieur Blanchard, the most famous hot air balloonist, confessing her passion for flying. Behind appearances he saw her great motivation, and so began their flying experience together, first as companions and then as a couple. But one day Sophie decided to fly alone, despite general disapproval. After her husband's death due to an illness during a flight, Sophie finds herself flying alone and making it a living. She became so famous that she was invited to court by Emperor Napoleon who named her «Aeronaut of the Official Festivals». It was she who set off fireworks from her balloon during the emperor's wedding or the birth of the emperor's son. During her life and career as an aviator, Sophie managed to break an important prejudice that saw women as naturally suited to the domestic sphere, demonstrating how the only limit was imposed by physical and natural laws, not by human superstructures on gender.

Similarly, the picture book *The Flying Girl. How Aida de Acosta Learned to Soar*⁸ tells children the true story of Aida de Acosta, the first woman of powered flight. Aida lives in New Jersey with her Cuban father and Spanish mother, but during a trip to Paris she met the airships inventor Alberto Santos-Dumont. Despite her mother disagreement, she accepted to let the daughter's dream to learn how to fly come true, so Aida's first flight took place in 1903, six months before the famous Wright Brothers' flight.

A few years later in 1916 it was Ruth Law's turn⁹ to break another record by flying from Chicago to New York in a flying machine. Despite the small airplane that could not contain enough gasoline for the entire duration of the journey, with some adjustments Ruth undertook the journey, thus managing to overcome a limit and become an exemplary role model for many women. As she herself said: «The sky was my limit and the horizon my sphere. It's any woman's sphere if she has nerve and courage and faith in herself. She's got to have faith in herself» (p. 36).

⁸ Published in English in 2018 by Atheneum books for young readers.

⁹ Published in English in 2016 by Calkins Creek, under the original title *Fearless Flyer. Ruth Law and Her Flying Machine*.

Of a biographical nature, the book *Amelia Who Could Fly*¹⁰ tells the story of Amelia Earhart, the first woman to cross the Atlantic Ocean alone in 1932. At the age of ten Amelia decides that flying is her dream and goal to pursue. The book, in the first person, recounts significant episodes of Amelia's childhood, whose passions did not conform to the ethos associated with the female gender in the first decades of the twentieth century. Amelia dedicates herself to hunting and collecting wild animals. With her uncle she did her first flying exercises by building a launch pad placed on the roof of a shed. In her notebook Amelia pastes photos of women who have achieved great feats. She knows that one day she too will be among those women. Having died at just forty years old during her last flight which aimed to go around the world, Amelia is one of the greatest women who have made the history of aviation.

Like Amelia, Elinor Smith also developed a passion for flying as a child¹¹. At six she convinced her father to take a biplane ride and at ten she began taking flying lessons. Elinor was one of the record-breaking women, the youngest female pilot in the United States, boy or girl. In fact, in 1928 Elinor earned her pilot's license at just sixteen years old. However, these conquests were not painless. Many men, pilots and otherwise, mocked Elinor, claiming that airplanes were men's things. Newspapers wrote that Elinor «was just playing at being a pilot» and one pilot taunted her by saying she would never be able to fly under one of New York's East River bridges. For Elinor it became a real challenge, flying under not one of the bridges but all four! On 21 October 1928 Elinor accomplished this dangerous feat, after months of preparation, becoming famous and earning the respect of important pilots, among whom Charles Lindbergh stood out. «She'd shown the world what a girl could do» (p. 36).

Among the intrepid young girls, there was also Betty Skelton¹², who since her childhood «while most girls played with their dolls, Betty Skelton played with her metal plane».

Betty's curiosity is satisfied by her parents who take her to the nearby navy base. But her resourcefulness leads her to fly alone with her father's absinthe at just 12 years old! And at 16, while all her peers were getting a license to drive a

¹⁰ Published in Italian in 2015 by EDT, under the original title *Amelia che sapeva volare*.

¹¹ Published in English in 2010 by Farrar Straus Giroux, under the title *Soar, Elinor!*

¹² Published in English in 2013 by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, under the title *Daredevil. The Daring Life of Betty Skelton*.

car, Betty obtained one to fly planes, ending up in the newspapers. But it wasn't just a hobby, Betty wanted to fly professionally. However, at the time, it wasn't allowed for women, and so Betty was ridiculed whenever she made such requests. And so Betty, unable to pursue a career as a commercial pilot, became an aerobatic pilot. She soon became famous for the inverted ribbon cut. In 1951 she broke the altitude record, reaching a height of 29,050 feet, higher than the top of Mount Everest! Having already broken aerial records, Betty soon moved on to other fields, such as car racing, breaking the women's speed record. She then moved on to the water, becoming the first female boat jumper. «She'd conquered the sky, the land, and the water. What would be next?» (p. 27). There was still one area to explore: space! And Betty was invited to be the first woman to train with male astronauts for the Mercury 7 mission. She did all kinds of training and tests, proving that women could even reach space, but in the end she was left out. It wasn't the right time yet, but Betty prepared the ground for the women astronauts of the following years, the first Russian Valentina Tereshkova reached space in 1963 and in 1983 Sally Ride, the first American woman. Betty continued her life in her own way, driving a red Corvette, as «she liked to go fast, and she did!».

5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the profound and multi-dimensional role of flight in children's literature, particularly through the lens of gender. Historically, flight has been a realm dominated by male figures, both in metaphorical and real contexts, with women often relegated to passive or negative roles. However, this narrative is being rewritten in modern children's literature, as authors bring to the forefront the inspiring stories of women who have challenged societal expectations, defied norms, and taken to the skies – both literally and symbolically. Flight, in these stories, is not merely an escape from reality but a transformative journey. It represents growth, self-discovery, and the courage to transcend limitations imposed by society. The metaphor of flight, long associated with freedom and exploration, now serves to highlight the struggle for gender equality and individual empowerment. Characters like Sophie Blanchard, Amelia Earhart, and Ruth Law, who have made extraordinary contributions to aviation, are presented as pioneers not just in the realm of flight but in breaking down the deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that had confined women to earthbound roles. Their stories embody a spirit of rebellion against the notion that women are

'too delicate' for such feats, instead showing that the sky is not the limit, but the starting point for women's achievements.

What makes these narratives powerful is that they speak to a broader audience, encouraging young readers – both girls and boys – to embrace their own dreams and aspirations, regardless of the societal boundaries they may face. The metaphor of flight as emancipation, growth, and defiance of the status quo becomes a universal message of hope, courage, and resilience. These tales teach that limitations – whether gender-based, cultural, or even self-imposed – can be overcome with determination and imagination.

Moreover, flight in children's literature has evolved to include stories of communal and collective freedom, where entire families, communities, or historically marginalized groups learn to fly together. This broadening of the metaphor from individual achievement to collective empowerment highlights the evolving nature of societal challenges and triumphs. It speaks to the importance of inclusivity and the notion that freedom, equality, and opportunity are not limited resources, but possibilities that should be available to all, regardless of gender, race, or age.

The chapter's exploration of flight in children's literature reveals not only the symbolic power of flight but also its historical significance, particularly as it pertains to real women in aviation. For decades, aviation was considered a male-dominated field, where women were often told they did not belong. However, real women aviators like Amelia Earhart, Bessie Coleman, Ruth Law, and Jacqueline Cochran defied these barriers, transforming flight into a space where gender stereotypes could be challenged and broken.

These pioneering women made significant contributions to aviation, not only through their personal achievements but also by inspiring future generations to pursue their dreams, no matter how impossible they may have seemed. Amelia Earhart, one of the most famous aviators in history, not only became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic but also used her platform to advocate for women's rights and encouraged other women to pursue careers in aviation and beyond. Similarly, Bessie Coleman, the first African American and Native American woman to earn a pilot's license, overcame racial and gender discrimination to become a symbol of perseverance and courage for marginalized communities.

These women did not simply fly – they soared beyond the confines of societal expectations, proving that the sky was not reserved for men alone. Children's literature is increasingly reflecting their stories, using their real-life achievements to teach young readers about breaking boundaries and pursuing their passions.

Their stories inspire children to believe that the sky truly is the limit – and even that limit can be surpassed with courage, innovation, and belief in oneself.

In weaving the stories of real women aviators with the imaginative flights of children's literature, the chapter highlights a dual narrative: one of fantasy and one of history, both working together to uplift and empower readers. These narratives teach that flight, in all its forms, is not merely about achieving physical lift-off but about rising above societal constraints, pushing boundaries, and daring to dream of a world where possibilities are limitless. Through their extraordinary feats, real women in aviation have expanded the horizons of what is possible, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to inspire young minds today.

In conclusion, the stories of women in flight, whether historical or fictional, serve as powerful symbols of resistance, growth, and the possibility of a more equal future. As children's literature continues to evolve, it not only offers the imaginative space for readers to dream but also imparts important lessons about overcoming obstacles and defying limits – whether those imposed by gravity or by society. Through these stories, readers are reminded that the ability to fly – literally or metaphorically – is not confined by gender or societal norms, but rather is accessible to anyone brave enough to spread their wings. As the sky remains the ultimate symbol of boundless potential, these stories encourage us all to rise above and reach for new heights.

Children's literature

- Dal Corso, M. & Volpari, D. (2015). *Amelia che sapeva volare*. EDT, Giralangolo.
- Engle, M. (2018). *The flying girl: How Aida de Acosta learned to soar*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Farina, L., & Possentini, S.M.L. (2011). *Il volo di Sara*. Fatatrac.
- Hamilton, V. (1985). *The people could fly: American Black folktales*. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
- Kuhlmann, T. (2014). *Lindbergh. L'avventurosa storia del topo che sorvolò l'oceano*. Orecchio acerbo.
- Kuhlmann, T. (2016). *Armstrong. L'avventurosa storia del primo topo sulla Luna*. Orecchio acerbo.
- Lang, H. (2016). *Fearless flyer: Ruth Law and her flying machine*. Calkins Creek.
- Lewis Brown, T. (2010). *Soar, Elinor!*. Farrar Straus Giroux.

- McCarthy, M. (2013). *Daredevil: The daring life of Betty Skelton*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Pirkko, V. (2009). *Lezioni di volo*. Clavis.
- Risari, G., & Castagnoli, A. (2016). *Il volo della famiglia Knitter*. Bohem Press.
- Santos, J., & Shamsi, M. (2022). *Loujain dreams of sunflowers*. Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Schuff Nicolás & Sender Ana (2022). *Come arrivare sulla luna*. Gallucci.

References

- Antoniazzi, A. (2022). Da Icaro a *Interstellar*. La mitologia del volo tra desiderio di scoperta e tensione all'avventura. In A. Antoniazzi & F. Caffarena (Eds.), *Il volo educante. Narrazioni alate per l'infanzia*. Rivista dell'Aeronautica Militare.
- Antoniazzi, A., & Caffarena, F. (Eds.). (2022). *Il volo educante. Narrazioni alate per l'infanzia*. Rivista dell'Aeronautica Militare.
- Caprotti, F. (2011). Profitability, Practicality and Ideology: Fascist Civil Aviation and the Short Life of Ala Littoria, 1934-1943. *The Journal of Transport History*, 32(1), pp. 17-38. <https://doi.org/10.7227/TJTH.32.1.3>
- Esposito, F. (2015). *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lucenti, M. (2022). Il volo nei manuali scolastici italiani. Dal Ventennio alle esplorazioni spaziali. In A. Antoniazzi & F. Caffarena (Eds.), *Il volo educante. Narrazioni alate per l'infanzia*. Rivista dell'Aeronautica Militare.
- Lucenti, M. & Mamone, G. (2024). *Flying to conquer. The aeronautical pedagogy in narratives for children in Italy (1911-1945)*. *Journal of Transport History*, 0(0).
- Mamone, G. (2022). Infanzia e guerra aerea in Italia (1911-1945). In A. Antoniazzi & F. Caffarena (Eds.), *Il volo educante. Narrazioni alate per l'infanzia*. Rivista dell'Aeronautica Militare.

All the colours of the rainbow: exploring the representation of gender diversities in the latest Italian children's literature

Valentina Baeli

The paper investigates how recent Italian children's literature depicts gender diversity and its connection to the concept of 'otherness'. By analyzing both Italian texts and translated works, the study highlights the narrative strategies employed to challenge gender binarism and promote an inclusive perspective. Drawing on authors such as Giorgia Grilli (2021), this research underscores the idea that childhood itself is often perceived as a first form of diversity, due to its capacity for subversion and freedom from social norms.

Through the close reading of picturebooks and graphic novels, the article shows how storytelling can confront stereotypes by featuring characters whose outward appearance, clothing, or behavior do not conform to traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. The analysis also examines texts which further explore the importance of self-acceptance in overcoming gender-based prescriptions.

Ultimately, the work aims to illustrate a growing trend toward validating gender expressions beyond rigid binarism by emphasizing the power of children's literature in nurturing empathy, openness, and a genuine celebration of difference.

Keywords: Gender, Diversity, Children's literature, Binarism, Stereotypes

Who is the 'other' and how is the concept of gender diversity related to it? In what ways does children's literature facilitate the encounter with otherness?

The aim of this paper is to examine the meanings surrounding the concept of gender diversity in Italian children's literature and its relationship to otherness. The analysis examines Italian books as well as translations of foreign texts published in Italy.

In her remarkable book on children's literature as a radical critique, the Italian author Giorgia Grilli describes childhood as the first, most persistent form of diversity – of otherness, so to speak – because it presents itself as uncontaminated by norms and collective values, plus it has the intrinsic power to recognize the precious and subversive role of diversity (2021, p. 253).

However, before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction clarifying some of the key theoretical concepts in this work. For instance, by collective values we mean the social prescriptions regarding gender identity, behaviour and special interests. By gender expressions we refer to how a person publicly expresses or presents his or her gender, in terms of behavior or outward appearance such as outfits, hairstyle, and make up.

Let us now consider two very poignant books which are thematically connected by the concept of colour. Contemporary societies are all colored by cultural and gender diversity. Indeed, colours are the fil rouge between these two picturebooks portraying the notion of otherness and diversity in general terms.

The first one is titled *Gli altri*¹ (Mattiangeli & Sitja Rubio, 2014), edited and written by the Italian publisher Topipittori. It describes a colorful journey that shows the strength and resilience of human beings, by picturing their diversities. Interestingly, within the pages of this picturebook, each character is depicted with a different colour and shape.

A remarkable aspect of this picturebook is the storytelling technique, namely the shifting points of view throughout the plot. In a first section, it is the reader that observes the other passers-by: «Se esci per strada, a un certo punto arrivano sempre. Hanno molte teste, molti piedi, molti odori. Hanno corpi di tutti i tipi, con molti vestiti, pochi o anche nessuno»² (*Ibid.*).

In the following section, it is the others who observe the reader. This extract suggests that the narrator acknowledges that the act of judging goes both ways: people judge you as you judge them. By shifting the point of view, the author seems to indicate the inevitability of judgement: no one is exempt from it.

The second work, *Io sono blu*³ (2022) – illustrated by the winner of the 2021 Silent Book Junior contest Irene Guglielmi – was published by another famous

¹ The title might be translated with *The Others* in English.

² «When you're out on the street, they always show up. They have multiple heads, feet and smells. They all have different body types, and wear different clothes, sometimes a lot of clothes, sometimes few or nothing at all».

³ The title might be translated with *I am blue* in English.

Italian publisher named Carthusia. This evocative story without words (also known as a silent book) is about a blue honeybee that tries to blend into the black-and-yellow swarm but fails on account of its diversity. The initial inscription prophetically reads: «Dedicated to diversity and to anyone who feels a little 'blue'». One passage of the silent book depicts many yellow bees mocking the only blue bee. So, the blue bee decides to sew a black-and-yellow costume in order to be part of the group. But very soon, the black-and-yellow swarm discovers the blue bee's true identity and sends it away. It is only at the end, when it later joins a colourful swarm of insects, that the blue bee manages to find its authentic self.

In our daily lives, we might encounter individuals whom we may recognize as foreigner, strange, odd, or deviant, simply because they appear to be different – or 'other' from ourselves.

However, what is it that actually makes these people different? What distinguishes them from us?

There are undoubtedly a number of defining characteristics that are likely to contribute to shaping our perception of the other as someone who deviates from our beliefs and values. These include: skin color, gender, clothing, attitude, gait, just to name a few. This form of social and cultural categorization may be attributed to the ongoing struggle within mainstream culture – despite decades of studies – to adequately address gender-related topic; not only is it important to examine children's fiction from a gender equality perspective, but it is also vitally useful to promote the representation of gender diversity and otherness (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005; Hunt, 2005).

It is critical to note that mainstream culture plays an essential role in shaping an individual's values, views, aspirations, but also fears and worries, as it reaches a broader audience within popular and media culture and literature.

When it comes to what it means to be a boy or a girl, books often reinforce the message that boys are naturally competitive and tough, while girls are always unpretentious and good-looking. This might suggest that gender is, still, mostly conceived in a binary and stereotypical way that exclude all the diverging representations. To further support this thesis, it is interesting to consider Tricia Clasen and Holly Hassel's contribution on the subject: «Because children's and young adult books are targeted at youth, portrayals of gender can be particularly powerful for readers whose conception of their own gender identity is in the process of forming and evolving» (Clasen & Holly Hassel, 2017, p. 2).

Children and young adult's literature can offer readers a means of engaging with different, critical, queer⁴ and otherwise narrow definitions of gender encountered in everyday experiences (Nikolajeva, 2010; Nodelman, 2017).

This research is especially focused on those queer character traits and, in particular, on the relationship between gendered identities, gender expressions and self-determination and how this relationship is perceived – and eventually judged – by others (e.g., family, peer group, friends, etc.).

The analysis will firstly examine a selection of texts from young adult literature, as this genre is likely to provide a rich experimental space for exploring a wide range of otherness including identity, violence, self-discovery, generational conflicts, and more. In addition, the popularity of this genre stems from its ability to act as a mirror for teenagers, reflecting personal difficulties through a simple literary structure and through accessible language (Rudin, 2022).

The memoir *Gender Queer* (2022), written and illustrated by Maia Kobabe, presents a challenging case. The book has won several awards, including the *Stonewall Honor Award*⁵ and *Alex Award*, for its originality and «crossover appeal»⁶. It has also been banned in more states than any other book by certain political factions, on the grounds of its perceived obscenity. Such a claim might originate from the bawdy aspects of the story. For example, Maia, the protagonist, is very open about sex, genital shapes, sexual orientations and so forth. The graphic novel bears testimony to Maia's open-hearted journey in which self-discovery and gender identity are closely linked.

The plot begins with an image of a writing class in which the protagonist is struggling to come up with ideas for a story focused on what Maia considers *eir*⁷ demons. *E* (Maia's pronoun) writes down these five words: «girly clothes, getting the period, swimming, bathing suits and boobs followed by a brief remark: 'all of these are about gender'» (Kobabe, 2022, p. 10).

Significantly, Maia reports an Hamletic doubt «Was I a gay boy trapped in a girl's body?», later followed by a poignant flowery metaphor: «The knowledge of

⁴ Queer is the term I use to denote characters who perform and embody non-normative sexualities and identities.

⁵ <https://www.ala.org/rt/rrt/award/stonewall/honored> [Last accessed: August 29, 2023].

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/04/1146874011/author-maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban> [Last accessed: August 29, 2023].

⁷ As in the original text, I will use the neutral pronouns *elem/eir* in reference to Maia.

a third option slept like a seed under the soil. This seed put out many leaves. But I didn't have the language to identify the plant» (Ivi, pp. 69-70).

This interesting metaphor is beautifully matched with an image of a seedling with many leaves, representing Maia's gender identity. For instance, one of these leaves bears the wish to have «a gender-neutral name», a second leaf reads «I wish I was a boy», a third reads «I never want to have sex», the fourth: «I wish I had short hair», while the fifth reads «I never want kids». Finally, the sixth and seventh are an expression of self-loathing, bearing the sentences: «I hate my breasts» and «I feel like something is wrong with me» (Ivi, p. 70).

However, Maia lacks the words to give meaning to these leaves, hence to describe the complexity of *eir* gender identity. Maia seems to be struggling against society, falling victim to a sense of authentic confusion, as *e* learns that diversity has no place in a binary society. As Maia confesses: «But why am I like this??? Sometimes I feel like my sexuality is broken and my gender is broken. I feel like there are wires in my brain which were supposed to connect body to gender identity and sexuality. But they've all been twisted into a huge snarled mess» (Ivi, p. 202).

This image underneath this quote is particularly evocative as it portrays the intersection between sexuality, gender and body through a messy tangle of lines.

The entire plot of *Gender Queer* is filled with meaningful moments of conflict and introspection concerning self-identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression. However, beyond being a personal story, this work also serves as a valuable and poignant guide to gender identity – clarifying its meaning and exploring how to sincerely accept it.

Since the publication of *Gender Trouble* in 1990, Judith Butler has advocated that gender is a reiterative performance of learned and internalized socio-cultural practices, but those practices can be 'performed' in many ways.

Significantly, several books coming from Italian children's literature (among which *Gender Queer*) are example of said concept of gender. These volumes are focused on challenging traditional notions of a normative male/female gender binary, by proposing alternative ways of expressing gender identities. One example of this trend is represented by Flavia Biondi's *Le Maldicenze*⁸ (2019) edited by Bao Publishing. This graphic novel is center around the courage of finding a place into society no matter how deep-rooted prejudices can be.

One interesting image drawn from *Le Maldicenze* presents a 30-year-old male protagonist wearing pearls and having a beard. It's the story of a man that likes

⁸ The title might be translated with *Slanders* in English.

to wear jewels but is trapped into gender stereotypes about manhood. He himself experiences this as a contradiction because he is led by society to believe that his appearance and identity are in stark contrast to the collective norms. Wearing pearls violates the heteronormative idea of manhood, as illustrated by the turmoil felt by the protagonist. As he sadly admits: «O porti la barba o porti le perle»⁹ (Biondi, 2021, p. 70). This statement can in fact be regarded as a testament to the perception of diversity shared by many. Later on in the story, someone will help him to learn to be true to himself and not to feel any shame: «Che sia un Dio, un politico, un padre oppure la società stessa... è facile scegliere un proprio messia e seguirne ciecamente le leggi... quello che è difficile è seguire noi stessi e credere nelle nostre idee...»¹⁰ (Ivi, p. 66).

Another example underlining the importance of celebrating 'gender freedom' (by quoting the subtitle of the front page) is Joana Estrela's *Maschio o femmina*.²¹ (2022), a picturebook that introduces very young children to the wonder of gender diversity.

In the fifth page of this picturebook, there is a fascinating image of a child cutting his own hair, and next to it there is another image presenting a pair of trousers and a skirt. The entire story posits two interesting questions: why is it that people must necessarily comply with gender norms? Why does one need to refrain from wearing items of clothing, having hobbies that are gendered by society? What is preventing us from invalidating and smashing stereotypes?

This theme of subversion recurs throughout this work in the shape of apparently simple images with challenging descriptions attached to them. For instance, a first one portraying a baby reaching for the toys attached to the cradle, reads «Femmina o maschio?». A second one reads «Rosa o Azzurro, sta a te decidere»¹². These two examples are representative of a pattern where the author asks rhetorical questions regarding the binary gender system. At the end of this series of images, Joana Estrela concludes with an insightful sentence «I will follow my own way» overlaying a charming image which portrays a young person wandering through colorful paths.

⁹ «Either you have a beard or you wear pearls».

¹⁰ «Whether it's a God, a politician, a father or society itself... it is easy to choose one messiah and blindly follow his laws... what's hard is to follow ourselves and believe in our ideas...».

¹¹ The original English title is *My own way*.

¹² «Girl or boy?», «Pink or blue, it's up to you».

This beautiful work might testify a key theoretical concept within Italian children literature. This trend consists in a focus on exploring stories of children and teens who reside outside mainstream culture, or who have suffered as the result of their gender expression, providing inspiring narrative frameworks that readers can use to give meaning to their own lives.

The concept of gender diversity, a common theme among all of these works, can be regarded as an essential aspect of gender expression, constituting the first step in the process of self-acceptance and personal growth.

The Narration Equality Award Winner *La gonna viola di Fede*¹³(Borges & Fagnani, 2022) and *Julián è una sirena*¹⁴ (Love, 2018), a roaring success at *Bologna Ragazzi Award 2019*, are both works attempting to deconstruct gender stereotypes about boyhood starting from the choice of clothing. A choice that is far from being neutrally made: «Male cross-dressing representations are analogous, as, rather than enabling a critique of gender stereotypes, they more often than not use cross-dressing to reassert conventional gender boundaries» (Flanagan, 2008, p. 6).

In the first picturebook *Fede*, the protagonist, is portrayed wearing a purple skirt, the same one that titles the work. For this reason, he's mistaken for a young girl all the time. Dejected and furious by what constantly happened to him, he asks his parents for advice and they tell him that for centuries fashion has always been susceptible to change in relation to societal norms about gender roles. To substantiate this claim, in the following pages we readers are shown images of other people around the world wearing pieces of clothing resembling a skirt.

Following his parents' advice, Fede eventually embraces his true self, and goes to school hand in hand with his mother wearing his favorite purple skirt.

Julián è una sirena is another interesting example of the freedom of expressing oneself through fashion. This captivating telegraphic book, loaded with marine imagery, follows the succinct story of young boy named Julián and his grandma *Abuela*. The two protagonists were strolling around, when suddenly they caught a glance of three women wearing elegant flowing robes who the young boy describes as mermaids. This event seems to spark Julián's interest. As soon as he is back home, he starts putting on whatever he finds in order to look like one of those mermaids he just saw. He uses a plant as a hat, a curtain as a makeshift skirt and so on. Afterwards, he is seen by *abuela*, who then gifts him a pearl necklace. Subsequently, his grandma appears to be supportive of his eccentric

¹³ The title might be translated with *Fede's purple skirt* in English.

¹⁴ The title might be translated with *Julián is a mermaid* in English.

fashion style, and brings him along in colorful party where many people wearing elegant and eccentric clothes come together to dance and have fun.

Many studies in the field of the education and social science literature underline the role of picturebooks in the transmission of gender scripts and schema. One of the most pioneering works in the field is the so-called *Weitzman study*, a research focused on *Sex-Role Socialization in Picturebooks for Preschool Children* (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). Weitzman *et al.* found that:

Picturebooks play an important role in early sex-role socialization because they are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Through books, children learn about the world outside of their immediate environment: they learn about what other boys and girls do, say, and feel; they learn what is right and wrong; and they learn what is expected of children their age. In addition, books provide children role models – images of what they can and should be like when they grow up (p. 1126).

This might be especially true within contemporary discourse about how masculinity and boyhood are reflected in children and young adults literature (Stephens, 2002; Wannamaker, 2008).

To conclude, this research focused on the analysis of the portrayals of gender identity in Italian children's literature. Through an examination of several texts, it was possible to observe the existence of several *topoi*.

What these works have in common seems to be a distinct representation of gender expression, conveyed by characterization through elements such hairstyle, make-up and clothing. Such representations are important because they provide an alternative option to gender norms. This claim is further supported by Karen Coats (2018) contribution on the subject. As she pointed out: «Girls and boys are visually coded by the color of their clothing, and the presence or absence of features such as jewelry or even prominent eyelashes, which female animals have and male animals, apparently, do not» (p. 123).

The first two picturebooks titled *Gli altri* and *Io sono blu* are both colourful examples of the struggle of individuals to fit into society, without touching on gender issues. Both works present themselves as an early introduction to the concepts of otherness and diversity.

In *Gender Queer*, the third book analyzed, the protagonist Maia is openly trying to question the validity of the binary gender schemas and scripts, but at the same time *e* lacks the words to define an alternative sense of *eir* queer identity. While *Io sono Blu* and *Gli altri* describe diversity in terms of physical otherness

as an enriching quality, these following works deal with otherness in terms of gender diversity and expression of a queer self.

This is also certainly true in the works titled *Le Maldicenze*, *La gonna viola di Fede* and *Julián è una sirena*, which are picturebooks that attempt at normalizing the idea that boys can usually put on clothing traditionally associated with womenswear.

The more these types of representations of gender diversities – such as non-binary identities, clothing etc. – are exposed to the public, the easier society and culture can normalize it.

Therefore, this literary trend plays a vital role in shaping the public's awareness on alternative gender expressions.

Nowadays, hate speech and discrimination based on gender is sadly widespread within our societies. However, this literary trend facilitates the promotion of awareness and discourages this social prejudice about queerness.

As these works seem to suggest, in order to establish an authentic relationship with the other, it is crucial to adopt an approach that fosters closeness, openness and solidarity. Such an approach entails cultivating attitudes of acceptance, active and mutual listening, empathy and shared experiences. By doing so, we can create a sense of belonging and mutual recognition, which facilitates encounters with others and promotes understanding of their experiences.

On a final note, it is interesting to end with an inspiring exhortation from Fabrizio Acanfora's essay called *La diversità è negli occhi di chi la guarda*¹⁵ (2020). In one passage, he argues that instead of using the term «inclusion» (which implies an imbalance of power between a majority that can decide whether and how to include, and minorities that often passively endure this process) we should begin to use the term «convivenza delle differenze»¹⁶ (p. 7), as it suggests greater parity between the parties involved.

References

Acanfora, F. (2020). *La diversità è negli occhi di chi guarda: superare il concetto di inclusione della diversità sul lavoro*. Disponibile in <https://www.fabrizioacanfora.eu>

¹⁵ In English: «*Diversity is in the eyes of the beholder*».

¹⁶ In English: «coexistence of differences».

- Biondi, F. (2021). *Le maldicenze*. Bao publishing.
- Borges, I., & Fagnani F. (2022). *La gonna viola di Fede*. Nube Ocho.
- Butler, J. (2013). *Questione di genere. Il femminismo e la sovversione dell'identità*, (Original work published 1990). Laterza.
- Clasen, T., & Hassel, H. (Eds.) (2017). *Gender(ed) Identities. Critical rereadings of gender in children's and young adult literature*. Routledge.
- Coats, K., *Gender in picturebooks* in Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (Ed.) (2018). *The routledge companion to picturebooks*. Routledge.
- Estrela, J. (2022). *Maschio o femmina?*. Mondadori.
- Feeney, S., & Moravcik, E. (2005). Children's literature: a window to understanding self and others. *YC Young Children*, 60(5), pp. 20-28.
- Flanagan, V. (2008). *Into the closet. Cross-dressing and the gendered body in Children's Literature and film*. Routledge.
- Grilli, G. (2021). *Di cosa parlano i libri per bambini. Letteratura per l'infanzia come critica radicale*. Donzelli.
- Guglielmi, I. (2022). *Io sono blu*. Carthusia.
- Hunt, P. (Ed.) (2005). *Understanding Children's Literature* (2nd edition). Routledge.
- Kobabe, M. (2022). *Gender Queer. A memoir*. Oni Press.
- Love, J. (2018). *Julián è una sirena*. Franco Cosimo Panini.
- Mattiangeli, S., & Sitja Rubio, C. (2014). *Gli altri*. Topipittori.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2010). *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers*. Routledge.
- Nodelman, P. (2017). *Alternating narratives in fiction for young readers. Twice upon a time*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rudin, S. (2022). The genre of the middle grade graphic problem novel. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 28(1-2), pp. 86-105.
- Stephens, J. (Ed.) (2002). *Ways of being male. Representing masculinities in Children's Literature and film*. Routledge.
- Wannamaker, A. (2008). *Boys in Children's Literature and popular culture. Masculinity, abjection and the fictional child*. Routledge.
- Weitzman, L., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C. (1972). Sex-Role Socialization in Picturebooks for Preschool Children. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77, pp. 1125-1150.

Feminist Happily Ever Afters: Rewriting Thumbelina and The Little Mermaid in Dalla parte delle bambine's Picturebooks

Anna Travagliati

Fairy tales, ever amenable to metamorphosis, have crossed centuries and adapted to the most diverse styles and languages. The second half of the twentieth century, in particular, witnessed the rising popularity of this genre in America and Europe, from Disney's animated films to feminist rewritings. In this context, Adela Turin, founder and principal author of the publishing house for feminist children's literature *Dalla parte delle bambine* (Milan, 1975-1982), had a particularly complex relationship with fairy tales: on the one hand, she shared the feminist criticism against them; on the other, she chose precisely this genre for her own stories. This paper aims to analyze the reinterpretations of two iconic fairy tales by Christian Hans Andersen, *Thumbelina* and *The Little Mermaid*. Rewritten by Turin herself, the large hardback picturebooks *Mignolina* (1978) and *Piccola sirena* (1980) are high-quality editorial and artistic products. This work will investigate how *Dalla parte delle bambine* retold Andersen's tales to propose feminist values to her young audience, as well as providing excerpts of my own English translations of these works. Particular attention will be paid to the stories' endings, 'hijacked' by Turin towards empowering and unconventional conclusions.

Keywords: fairy tales, picturebooks, feminism, rewriting, gender studies

Over the centuries, the ancient genre of the fairy tale has undergone multiple transformations; the relatively recent transition from oral narration to children's product is particularly emblematic. Jack Zipes writes: «In most European countries it was not until the end of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth

century that fairy tales were published for children, and even then begrudgingly, because their 'vulgar' origins in the lower classes were suspect» (Zipes, J., 2017 [1995], p. 336). Furthermore, Carla Ida Salviati commends this genre's «extraordinary amenability to metamorphosis»¹, a quality that «allowed [the fairy tale] to cross the centuries, passing from hand to hand, dealing with the most diverse intentions of the authors, accepting to adapt to trends, styles, and different languages», remaining nevertheless always recognizable (Salviati, 2002, pp. 9-10). Regarding its modern evolution, Cristina Bacchilega highlights the rising popularity of this genre in America and Europe during the second half of the Twentieth century, and its continuous presence in «jokes, commercials, songs, cartoons, and other elements of popular and consumer culture» (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 2).

Given their ubiquity in contemporary culture, fairy tales have also been intensely studied through the lens of gender. The Seventies were a fertile period for feminist rewritings, such as Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), and since then the criticism against fairy tales' sexist content has not waned. For example, *San Francisco Chronicle* journalists Julie Tremaine and Katie Dowd recently took a stand against the new Snow White ride at Disneyland, where the prince kisses the sleeping princess «without her consent» (Tremaine & Dowd, 2021, May 2).

Besides, the genre of the fairy tale is deeply embedded within Italian literary history. The pivotal role of Italian Giovan Francesco Straparola, author of *Le piacevoli notti* [*The Pleasant Nights*] (1550 and 1553), and especially Giambattista Basile, author of *Lo cunto de li cunti* [*The Tale of Tales*] (1634-36), has been highlighted by various scholars: among these, Nancy Canepa observes that «the fairy tale reached full literary autonomy only with Straparola's *Notti* and then, of course, with [Basile's] *Lo cunto*» (Canepa, 1999, p. 16), while Zipes notes that these writers «played a highly significant role in the rise of the literary fairy tale in Europe, and their tales had a profound influence on the French» (Zipes, 2006, p. 13).

Browsing through contemporary Italian authors, for example Italo Calvino, Gianni Rodari, and Beatrice Solinas Donghi, we see that fairy tales have known an enduring success in this country as well. More recently, Susanna Barsotti (2019: 224-225) has praised modern rewritings such as Aaron Frisch's and Roberto Innocenti's *Cappuccetto Rosso. Una fiaba moderna* (2012) – *The Girl in Red* in the English edition –, while Cosimo and Antonio Rodia have commended various contemporary *fiabisti* [fairy tales writers], including Roberto Piumini, Bi-

¹ Quotes from Italian articles and essays will be translated by me.

anca Pitzorno, Nicoletta Costa, and Fulvia degl'Innocenti (Rodia, C. & Rodia, A., 2012, pp. 167-188).

Despite the remarkable popularity of this genre, as well as Straparola's and Basile's essential contributions, in Italy fairy tales have nevertheless traditionally garnered harsh criticism. Pino Boero and Carmine De Luca examine the disinterest of nineteenth-century Italian intellectuals in this genre, «son of the didactic and moralistic vocation of our early children's literature, but also son of the concern of the new bourgeois class to harness popular materials by tying them to the need for consensus and the demands of a social development without transgressions» (Boero & De Luca, 2009 [1995], p. 36).

In addition to these antiquated reservations, which are intrinsically linked to the delay of the Italian translation of classics such as the Brothers Grimm's collection (see Cusatelli, 1983), over the decades fairy tales have been variously criticized. In the 1970s, as was the case in several Western countries, many in Italy disapproved of their sexist content. For example, Ugo D'Ascia wrote: «The fairy tales, the popular traditions are full of these merciless, hard, wicked women: step-mothers, ogresses, and 'degenerate mothers'» (D'Ascia, 1971, p. 27). Given this context, it is particularly relevant to revisit Elena Gianini Belotti's stance on this matter, encapsulated in her influential feminist essay *Dalla parte delle bambine* [On the side of little girls] (Belotti Gianini, 1973). Her words give us insight into the lively debate on fairy tales during that period, in particular regarding the scarcity of positive female models: «The old fairy tales propose women who are meek, passive, unexpressed, occupied merely with their own beauty, definitely inept and incapable. In contrast, male characters are active, strong, courageous, loyal, intelligent» (Belotti Gianini, 1982 [1973], p. 119). Furthermore, she writes: 'Little Red Riding Hood is the story of a little girl bordering on mental deficiency', «Snow White is a stupid scatterbrain as well», «Cinderella is the paradigm of domestic virtues, humility, patience, servility», «Donkeyskin competes in submission with Cinderella» (Ivi: pp. 119-120). She concludes: «Female characters in fairy tales belong to two basic categories: the good and inept ones and the wicked ones» (Ivi: p. 120).

In this context, Adela Turin, founder and principal author of the publishing house for feminist children's literature *Dalla parte delle bambine* [On the side of little girls] (Milan, 1975-1982) – the name pays homage to Belotti's aforementioned essay – had a decidedly complex relationship with fairy tales. On one hand, she shared Belotti's criticism of such narrations; on the other, she chose precisely this genre for her own stories, publishing courageous and emancipatory

picturebooks such as *Rosaconfetto* (1975²), a tale where young elephantesses rebel against the arbitrariness of gender roles, reminiscent of French feminist and writer Simone De Beauvoir's famous words: «One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman» (Heywood, 2020, p. 213).

This essay will focus on Dalla parte delle bambine's reinterpretations of two iconic fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, *Thumbelina* and *The Little Mermaid*³. Rewritten by Turin herself and masterfully illustrated by award-winning artist Nicole Claveloux, *Mignolina* [Thumbelina] (1978) and *Piccola sirena* [The Little Mermaid] (1980) are large hardback picturebooks, high-quality editorial and artistic products, co-published with French feminist publishing house *Des femmes*, founded in 1972 by Antoinette Fouque and still active today. My work will not dwell on the analysis of these two thematically rich tales, which undoubtedly present fascinating food for thought for gender analysis – Iona and Peter Opie, for example, noted the passivity of Thumbelina (or Tommelise, her original name in Danish), in contrast to the resourcefulness of Tom Thumb (Opie, I., & Opie, P., 1974, p. 219), while Rictor Norton interpreted the suffering of the little mermaid as a representation of Andersen's unrequited love for Edvard Collin (Norton, 1998, p. 129). Instead, I will focus on how Turin rewrote these two fairy tales in order to provide young readers with feminist books.

Before analyzing these picturebooks, it is necessary to understand the history of Dalla parte delle bambine, the first Italian publishing house for feminist children's literature. Active in Milan from 1975 to 1982, it was founded and directed by Adela Turin, a committed and passionate feminist, who wrote or edited most of the books. Turin was, additionally, an independent researcher and thoroughly studied many gender issues in picturebooks. Her most influential investigation was 'Attention Album!' (1996), a research project on Italian, Spanish, and French picturebooks published in 1994, conducted by her association Du Côtè des Filles, active in Paris from 1994 to around 2010. Its results were published and commented on in various publications, among which Du Côtè des Filles 1997, 1998a, 1998b, and 1998c; Brugeilles, I. Cromer, and S.

² *Candy Pink* in the 2016 NubeOcho's English translation.

³ The content of this chapter, especially regarding *Mignolina* and *Piccola sirena*, has been partially included in my article «Da fiabe d'autore ad albi illustrati femministi: *Ce que disent les fleurs*, *Mignolina* e *La sirenetta* riproposte dalla casa editrice Dalla parte delle bambine», due to be published in the journal *ri.trà | rivista di traduzione: teorie pratiche storie*.

Cromer 2002; Brugeilles & Cromer 2007, Cromer 2010, Fierli et al. 2020, Cromer 2021.

Despite its short life, *Dalla parte delle bambine* and its feminist picture-books had great success, especially in Italy, France, and Spain. The most popular books attained a circulation of 80.000 copies (Turin in Pavard 2005: 89), the praise of national newspapers such as *Le Monde*, translations into more than ten languages, including English, Swedish, German, Danish, and new editions since 1999. Indeed, some titles are still for sale today, including *Rosa Caramelo* in various Spanish-speaking countries. Besides their significance as overtly engaged feminist stories, Roberta Pederzoli has commended the artistic quality of the books (2013: 264), monitored by Turin herself, an art historian and textile designer. Indeed, *Dalla parte delle bambine* published brave and original books – refined in the illustrations as well as in the texts – and was socially engaged and willing to take creative risks, qualities often praised in the best independent publishers.

Browsing through *Dalla parte delle bambine*'s catalog, we see that *Mignolina* and *Piccola sirena* are peculiar publications. As a matter of fact, Turin only occasionally rewrote other stories, such as the myth of Ariadne in *Arianna, tra le righe di una leggenda* [Ariadne: Through the Lines of a Legend] (Turin & Herrenschildt 1979). Indeed, almost all of *Dalla parte delle bambine*'s books were original creations. One salient feature is present in both *Mignolina* and *Piccola sirena*: their status as rewritings is not made explicit in the title nor in other editorial information, despite the fact that Turin significantly modified the plot and the characters from a feminist perspective. As Valeria Illuminati notes, the reduction, adaptation, and rewriting of children's literature classics are widespread and often unreported phenomena within the publishing market, with outcomes that often create confusion (2017: 175). A common result, as in this case, is that at first glance the reader believes that the book will be a more or less integral version of the story, albeit with the addition of the pictures. However, once these picture-books are opened, the introductory notes are clear: «Hans Christian Andersen's tale landed on a happy marriage. We have hijacked it just in time: we do not want to tell tall tales to our little girls anymore» (*Mignolina*); «We have hijacked, at the last moment, Hans Christian Andersen's beautiful tale to a happier harbor. The poet, consulted, shrugged: women's struggle is none of his business»⁴ (*Piccola*

⁴As it was common in *Dalla parte delle bambine*'s books, these publications do not have page numbers.

sirena). If readers are thus partially warned of the alterations made to the stories by these opening lines, Turin's role in rewriting the tales is never made explicit, with the result that many reviewers, appalled at Turin's changes, wrongly blamed Claveloux for them (Heywood, 2020, p. 216), whereas the illustrator was on the contrary perplexed by this rewriting operation:

Although a feminist, Nicole [Claveloux] did not appreciate this twisting of literary heritage in the name of girls' emancipation, but she had not been able to make her point. So, in the antepenultimate image [of *La petite sirène*], in the guise of a mute protest, she concealed a gigantic question mark⁵ (Bruel, 2008, p. 113).

As I do not speak Danish, and therefore cannot read the tales in their original language, to study Turin's editions I compared the English, French, and Italian translations using the website <https://www.andersenstories.com/>, which presents useful versions in various languages. In addition to this, I read H. P. Paull's traditional translations in English (1872), as well as a prestigious Italian collection published by Einaudi and edited by Gianni Rodari (1970), in which the translations date back to 1954, carried out by Alda Manghi Castagnoli (*Mignolina*) and Marcella Rinaldi (*La sirenetta*). Since there is no indication in Dalla parte delle bambine's books, I have not been able to reconstruct the origin of the texts on which Turin worked. They may have been French translations instead of Italian ones – the title *Piccola sirena* instead of *La sirenetta* may refer to French *La petite sirène* –, whereas it is unlikely that a coworker translated the original Danish texts. Thus, the present article will analyze Turin's Italian versions, and all the quotes are my own translations.

A preliminary observation to better understand Dalla parte delle bambine's project: the comparison with other versions has made clear that, unlike other feminist retellings, which alter and actively rewrite stories from the very beginning, Turin takes a more subtle approach, limiting her action to small, targeted

⁵ Translation provided by me. Original in French: «Pourtant féministe, Nicole n'appréciait pas cette torsion du patrimoine littéraire revendiquée au nom de l'émancipation des filles, mais elle n'avait pu faire valoir son point de vue. Alors, dans l'antépénultième image, en guise de muette protestation, elle a dissimulé un gigantesque point d'interrogation».

interventions – virtually undetectable by the average reader –, right down to the surprising endings, completely revised.

Regarding this, *Mignolina*'s preface is very clear: «Hans Christian Andersen's tale landed on a happy marriage. We have hijacked it just in time: we do not want to tell tall tales to our little girls anymore»⁶. The use of 'favola', an Italian word with multiple meanings and deep implications, clearly shows the publishing house's complex relationship with this genre: quoting the online Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/italian-english/favola>), 'favola' may mean 'fable', a moral tale; 'fairy tale', for example, one of the Brothers Grimm's collection; but also 'tall tale', a lie.

This edition may at first glance look like a simple reduction and adaptation, but an attentive close reading reveals that Turin creatively and consciously acted on the whole text. For example, added adjectives contribute to enhancing the female characters: the adoptive mother of Mignolina becomes «loved by everyone», the witch who gives her the magic seed is 'affectionate'. Focusing on other macro-changes, the horrid female toad, who kidnaps Mignolina and tries to force her to marry her ugly son, becomes a male in Turin's text, to better convey her message against patriarchy. On the other hand, the Swallow becomes female. It is worth noting that in the original Danish text the Swallow is male, but in French and Italian he is traditionally translated as female (while in English he remains male), no doubt because of the grammatical gender attributed to the animal in the Neo-Latin languages (*la rondine*, *l'hirondelle*). A noteworthy addition is Mignolina's concern for her adoptive human mother: the girl asks the birds and the Swallow to tell the woman that she is fine. Nonetheless, the strongest changes appear in the ending, completely rewritten by Turin. Whereas in the original text the young king of the flowers falls in love with Mignolina at first sight, asks her to marry him, and renames his wife «Maia», in Turin's version the girl refuses the proposal.

The following table confronts the traditional English translation by Paull with the rewriting proposed by Turin (the bold has been added by me):

⁶Original in Italian: «La storia di Hans Christian Andersen approdava a un matrimonio felice. L'abbiamo dirottata giusto in tempo: non vogliamo più raccontare favole alle nostre bambine».

Translation by H. P. Paull (1872) ⁷	Rewriting by Turin (1978)
<p>«Oh, how beautiful he is!» whispered Tiny to the swallow.</p> <p>The little prince was at first quite frightened at the bird, who was like a giant, compared to such a delicate little creature as himself; but when he saw Tiny, he was delighted, and thought her the prettiest little maiden he had ever seen. He took the gold crown from his head, and placed it on hers, and asked her name, and if she would be his wife, and queen over all the flowers.</p> <p>This certainly was a very different sort of husband to the son of a toad, or the mole, with his black velvet and fur; so she said, «Yes», to the handsome prince. Then all the flowers opened, and out of each came a little lady or a tiny lord, all so pretty it was quite a pleasure to look at them. Each of them brought Tiny a present; but the best gift was a pair of beautiful wings, which had belonged to a large white fly and they fastened them to Tiny's shoulders, so that she might fly from flower to flower. Then there was much rejoicing, and the little swallow who sat above them, in his nest, was asked to sing a wedding song, which he did as well as he could; but in his heart he felt sad for he was very fond of Tiny, and would have liked never to part from her again.</p> <p>«You must not be called Tiny any more», said the spirit of the flowers to her. «It is an ugly name, and you are so very pretty. We will call you Maia».</p> <p>«Farewell, farewell», said the swallow, with a heavy heart as he left the warm countries to fly back into Denmark. There he had a nest over the window of a house in which dwelt the writer of fairy tales. The swallow sang, «Tweet, tweet», and from his song came the whole story.</p>	<p>«Oh, how cute he is!» said Mignolina. The Swallow frightened the little King, but the sight of Mignolina calmed him down: he had never met a little girl so beautiful.</p> <p>Removing the crown he asked her if she wished to marry him and become the Queen of Flowers. Mignolina was surprised.</p> <p>«But I don't know you, and I don't want to become the Queen of anything!». The little King appeared shocked and deluded.</p> <p>«If you want», Mignolina told him, «we can play together for a while, but when the spring will return I will leave to the North with my friend Swallow. You know, we love journeyes and we love each other very much...»</p> <p>And thus it was: as soon as the winter ended, they returned to Denmark, where the Swallow had the nest near the window of the man who tells stories to children.</p> <p>Mignolina and the Swallow told him their story, but the man of fairy tales judged the two friends too independent and carefree and narrated the story in his own way, without saying that Mignolina had renounced the Kingdom of Flowers, in order to not lose her freedom and her friend Swallow.</p>

These endings differ deeply: instead of a traditional happily ever after crowned by a royal marriage, Mignolina rejects the king of flowers, choosing female friend-

⁷ http://hca.gilead.org/il/li_tiny.html

ship over romantic (heterosexual) love. In addition to this, the king is presented in an ambiguous way, evidenced by the omission of the section in which Mignolina commends him in opposition to the other repulsive suitors. Furthermore, in this version the Swallow is not an avatar of Andersen, nor is she in love with the main character. Finally, Andersen and the whole genre of the fairy tale appear untrustworthy, as the poet does not support Mignolina's freedom and writes her story in his own way, actually fabricating lies to better suit his purposes.

A sense of distrust towards Andersen is also evident in the preface of *Piccola sirena*: «We have hijacked, at the last moment, Hans Christian Andersen's beautiful tale to a happier harbor. The poet, consulted, shrugged: women's struggle is none of his business»⁸. The choice of the tale itself is remarkable, as it was one of the fairy tales most hated by feminists, as recalled by Salviati (Salviati, 2002, p. 47). At first sight, this picturebook too appears as a simple adaptation, but a closer reading reveals that several details were cut or modified in a feminist sense. For example, the witch is altered to the point of being a positive character. The most macabre and horrific details disappear: Turin removes the cutting of the tongue of the young mermaid and the crone's sadistic enjoyment of the girl's future sufferings. In this retelling, the witch becomes fundamental for the new happy ending, completely rewritten. Indeed, the little mermaid refuses to murder her beloved's bride (another important change, as the designed victim was the prince in Andersen's version) and throws away the dagger bought by her sisters, but instead of becoming seafoam or a daughter of the air, she recovers her tail and voice, turns back into a mermaid, and returns home, as the witch had predicted. In order to show Turin's creative work on the text, I have translated the final pages of *Piccola sirena*:

The little mermaid lifted the curtain and saw the sleeping young woman leaning against the prince's chest. She approached, bent down, and placed a kiss on the forehead of the one she loved so dearly. Then she looked at the sharp dagger and again observed the princess, who was speaking in a dream at that instant. The dagger trembled in her hands... Suddenly, she threw it far into the waves!... At the spot where it had fallen, the water became tinged with blood and a few drops

⁸ Original in Italian: «Abbiamo dirottato, all'ultimo momento, verso un porto più felice la bellissima storia di Hans Christian Andersen. Il poeta, interpellato, ha alzato le spalle: la lotta delle donne non è affar suo».

splashed on her feet. At the same instant, her legs turned into a fishtail. She let out a cry: she had also found her voice again.

In the moment the sun rose on the horizon, having become a mermaid again, she dived into the deep sea, where the water is as blue as cornflowers and as transparent as crystal. Amid wonderful flowers and extraordinary trees, she swam happily, for hours, sensitive to every tremor of the water. She sang so loudly that her sisters and grandmother heard her from afar and, radiant, went towards her. With them, she still lives happily in that kingdom to which the witch well knew she one day would have chosen to return.

Sometimes, in the evening, the little mermaid goes up to the surface and, sitting on a rock, watches the sun setting over the gardens and towns of men. And she is reminded of the pains she suffered all those long years when, deprived of her voice and her fishtail, of her home and her sisters' affection, she was trying to please a prince and live in a world that had made her suffer so much. And all this seems to her so far, so distant, that sometimes she thinks she dreamed the whole thing.

Thus, instead of the original ending, in which the young mermaid becomes a daughter of the air and may obtain a human soul and admission to Heaven after 300 years of virtuous deeds (but only if children are good⁹), here the sea princess is lovingly welcomed back by her family. The princess also seems to have matured: she thinks that it was absurd to have suffered so much for the love of a selfish man. Although she is still curious about the surface lands, she does not regret her choice: men's world is cruel, while she is happy among the wonders of the sea, surrounded by her sisters' and grandmother's love. Turin disregards the idea of redemptive suffering, so prevalent in Andersen's fairy tales – especially in female characters, as various feminists observed (Teverson, 2013, p. 80). Instead, this ending exalts female bonds, especially familiar ones. Regarding other significant changes, it is not superfluous to note that the tale gets secularized: the wish for an immortal soul, which in the original version motivates the little mermaid in addition to the desire for the prince's love, is completely absent.

⁹Regarding this, P.L. Travers, *Mary Poppins'* author, remarked: «But – a year taken off when a child behaves; a tear shed and a day added whenever a child is naughty? Andersen, this is blackmail» (Travers, 1979, p. 93).

Considering that Dalla parte delle bambine published only three male authors¹⁰, Turin's choice of Andersen is imbued with meaning. Indeed, Andersen is not simply a beloved children's literature writer: as observed by Maria Tatar (Tatar, 2017 [1999], p. 346), he «ranks among the ten most widely translated authors in the world, along with William Shakespeare and Karl Marx». Furthermore, «his stories have become collective cultural property, operating almost like malleable folk tales rather than fixed literary texts». Turin's attitude regarding Andersen appears ambivalent: on one hand, she is clearly fascinated by his fairy tales (*The Little Mermaid* is described as a «beautiful story»); on the other, she reveals an iconoclast desire to rebel against tradition (the writer himself appears as a lying poet in *Mignolina*). Indeed, aligned with other feminist critics, Turin seems to not pay heed to Andersen's un-hegemonic masculinity, or his complex relationship with sexuality, or the fact that «he often casts himself in the role of his female characters» (Teverson, 2013, p. 80).

Turin's bold choice to tackle fairy tale tradition head-on by contending with one of the most famous and beloved children's authors of all time has, not surprisingly, attracted much criticism, as observed by Heywood (Heywood, 2020, p. 216). The fact that Turin's collaboration with Claveloux got interrupted, that Dalla parte delle bambine did not publish other fairy tales' rewritings, and that *Mignolina* and *Piccola sirena* were not translated into other languages, suggest that the books' reception must have been mixed at best – even if Salviati mentions *Piccola sirena* as one of the most beautiful books of the decade (Salviati, 2002, p. 47). Perhaps a clearer indication of their status as rewritten fairy tales would have better prepared the readers and improved the response to these books.

No matter the final sales or the readers' reception, Turin earnestly carried out her intention to emancipate and offer a feminist happy ending to the characters: not a hasty marriage for Mignolina, but a deep unselfish friendship with the Swallow; not centuries of laboring for the little mermaid, but a joyous and swift return to home. In opposition to suffering, an emblematic element of Andersen's poetic (Tatar, 2017 [1999], p. 346), Turin proposes happiness and independence for the protagonists, and thus she rebels against the tradition of sad, tragic, ill, passive, tearful female characters, so common in children's literature, as highlighted by numerous studies: «in the world of picture books boys are active and girls are passive» (Weitzman *et al.*, 1972, p. 1131); «*Passivity, docility, dependency*

¹⁰ Besides Andersen, Dalla parte delle bambine published French children's literature author Christian Bruel and Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen.

(*pseudo- and real*). Always it is the female of the species who exhibits this mild, soft, spiritless behavior within the pages of the readers» (Women on Words and Images, 1975 [1972], p. 23), «females are more often shown as dependent, submissive, nurturant, and passive and more likely to serve others» (Williams *et al.*, 1987, p. 154).

In conclusion, *Mignolina* and *Piccola sirena*, with their distrust of male writers, their emancipatory subversions, their enhancement of female characters (even traditionally wicked ones), their iconoclast charge, their artistic value, as well as their strong ideology, prove to be two noteworthy, if controversial, literary products of second-wave feminism. They also rightfully belong to the modern feminist trend of reclaiming fairy tales – regarding this, Nancy Walker highlights the importance of proposing «stories that simultaneously expose the fictive nature of all such tales and refuse to obey their authority by revising and appropriating them» (Walker, 1995, p. 83) – and enrich Dalla parte delle bambine's catalog, supporting Turin's resolve to offer young readers stories with heroines able to choose their own unconventional happy endings.

References

- Andersen, H.C. (1970). *Fiabe. Scelte e presentate da Gianni Rodari*. Einaudi.
- Andersen, H.C. (2007 [1872]). *Little Tiny*. Trad. H.P. Paull. http://hca.gilead.org.il/li_tiny.html
- Andersen, H.C., & Claveloux, N. (1978). *Mignolina*. Dalla parte delle bambine.
- Andersen, H.C., & Claveloux, N. (1980). *Piccola sirena*. Dalla parte delle bambine.
- [Andersenstories.com](http://andersenstories.com/) – Andersen's fairy tales. (n.d.). <https://www.andersenstories.com/>
- Bacchilega, C. (1997). *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Barsotti, S. (2019). Letteratura per l'infanzia, fiabe e nuove forme del fiabesco. In S. Barsotti, & L. Cantatore (Eds.), *Letteratura per l'infanzia. Forme, temi e simboli del contemporaneo*. Carocci, pp. 221-245.
- Belotti Gianini, E. (1982 [1973]). *Dalla parte delle bambine. L'influenza dei condizionamenti sociali nella formazione del ruolo femminile nei primi anni di vita*. Feltrinelli.

- Boero, P., & De Luca, C. (2009 [1995]). *La letteratura per l'infanzia* (Nuova ed. riv). Laterza.
- Bruel, C. (2008). Les jardins discrets de Nicole Claveloux. *La Revue des livres pour enfants*, 242, pp. 111-116.
- Brugailles, C., & Cromer, S. (2007). Albums illustrés créés par des femmes, albums illustrés créés par des hommes: quelles différences? Le cas de la production française de 1994. In D. Bajomée, J. Dor, and M.É. Henneau (Eds.), *Femmes et livres*. L'Harmattan, pp. 197-213.
- Brugailles, C., Cromer, I., and Cromer, S. (2002). Les représentations du masculin et du féminin dans les albums illustrés ou Comment la littérature enfantine contribue à élaborer le genre. *Population*, 57(2), pp. 261-292.
- Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). *Favola*. In *Translate Italian to English - Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/italian-english/favola>
- Calvino, I. (1956). *Fiabe italiane*. Einaudi.
- Canepa, N. (1999). *From Court to Forest: Giambattista Basile's Lo cunto de li cunti and the Birth of the Literary Fairy Tale*. Wayne State University Press.
- Carter, A. (1993 [1979]). *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Penguin Books.
- Cromer, S. (2010). Le masculin n'est pas un sexe: prémices du sujet neutre dans la presse et le théâtre pour enfants. *Cahiers du Genre*, 49, pp. 97-115.
- Cromer, S. (2021). Représentations genrées dans la littérature de jeunesse. Retour sur l'enquête Attention Album! (1996). In F. Salanouve (Eds.), *Agir pour l'égalité. Questions de genre en bibliothèque*. Presses de l'enssib, pp. 100-107. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pressesenssib.16232>
- Cusatelli, G. (1983). Filologi e fiabe: le vicende grimmiane in Italia. In G. Giorgi, A. Principato, E. Biancardi, and M.C. Bartoletti (Eds.), *Studi di cultura francese ed europea in onore di Lorenza Maranini*. Schena.
- D'Ascia, U. (1971). Onorevolmente cattive. *Noi donne*, 26(50), pp. 25-27.
- Du Côté des Filles (1997). *Quels modèles pour les filles? Une recherche sur les albums illustrés*. Association européenne Du Côté des Filles.
- Du Côté des Filles (1998a). *Que voient les enfants dans les livres d'images? Des réponses sur les stéréotypes*. Association européenne Du Côté des Filles.
- Du Côté des Filles (1998b). *Quali modelli per le bambine? Una ricerca sugli albi illustrati*. Association européenne Du Côté des Filles.
- Du Côté des Filles (1998c). *Cosa vedono i bambini negli albi illustrati? Risposte sugli stereotipi*. Association européenne Du Côté des Filles.
- Fierli, E., Franchi, G., Lancia, G., & Marini, S. (2020). Fammi Capire. Una ricerca tra le rappresentazioni di corpi, affettività e sessualità negli albi

- illustrati, per decostruire stereotipi e pregiudizi. *Education Sciences & Society*, 11, pp. 484-507.
- Frisch, A., & Innocenti, R. (2012). *Cappuccetto Rosso. Una fiaba moderna*. La Margherita edizioni.
- Heywood, S. (2020). Fighting 'On the Side of Little Girls': Feminist Children's Book Publishing in France after 1968. *Nottingham French Studies*, 59(2), pp. 206-220. <https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2020.0285>
- Illuminati, V. (2017). *Traduzione per l'infanzia e questioni di genere: viaggio tra i classici francesi e inglesi tradotti in italiano*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Bologna.
- Norton, R. (Ed.). (1998). *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters Through the Centuries* (1st ed). Leyland Publications.
- Opie, I., & Opie, P. (1974). *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Oxford University Press.
- Pavard, B. (2005). *Les Éditions des femmes. Histoire de premières années, 1972-1979*. Harmattan.
- Pederzoli, R. (2013). Adela Turin e la collana Dalla parte delle bambine. Storia di alcuni albi illustrati militanti fra Italia e Francia, passato e presente. In A. Cagnolati (Ed.), *Tessere trame, narrare storie. Le donne e la scrittura per l'infanzia*. Aracne, pp. 263-282.
- Rodari, G. (1962). *Favole al telefono*. Einaudi.
- Rodia, C., & Rodia, A. (2012). *L'evoluzione del meraviglioso. Dal mito alla fiaba moderna*. Liguori.
- Salviati, C.I. (2002). *Raccontare destini. La fiaba come materia prima dell'immaginario di ieri e di oggi*. El.
- Sexton, A. (2016 [1971]). *Transformations: Poems*. Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.
- Solinas Donghi, B. (1967). *Le fiabe incatenate*. Rizzoli.
- Tatar, M. (Ed.). (2017 [1999]). *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism* (Second edition). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Teverson, A. (2013). *Fairy Tale*. Routledge.
- Travers, P.L. (1979). The Primary World. *Parabola*, 4(3), pp. 87-94.
- Tremaine, J., & Dowd, K. (2021, May 2). Disneyland's New Snow White Ride Adds Magic, but Also a Problem. *SFGATE*. www.sfgate.com/disneyland/article/2021-04-snow-whites-enchanted-wish-changes-witch-16144353.php [Last accessed: October 30, 2023].
- Turin, A., & Bosnia, N. (1975). *Rosaconfetto*. Dalla parte delle bambine.
- Turin, A., & Bosnia, N. (2012). *Rosa Caramelo*. Kalandraka.
- Turin, A., & Bosnia, N. (2016). *Candy Pink*. NubeOcho.

- Turin, A., & Herrenschmidt, N. (1979). *Arianna: tra le righe di una leggenda. Dalla parte delle bambine.*
- Walker, N.A. (1995). *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition.* University of Texas Press.
- Weitzman, L.J., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C. (1972). Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(6), pp. 1125-1150.
- Williams, J.A. Jr., Vernon, J., Williams, M. C., & Malecha, K. (1987). Sex Role Socialization in Picture Books: An Update. *Social Science Quarterly*, 68(1), pp. 148-156.
- Women on Words and Images (1975 [1972]). *Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers.* Women on Words and Images.
- Zipes, J. (2017 [1995]). Breaking the Disney Spell. In M. Tatar (Ed.), *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism* (Second edition). W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 503-527.
- Zipes, J. (2006). *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Picturing disability: historical itineraries in Italian children's literature

Silvia Pacelli

Disability and deformity are emblematic *topoi* in children's literature, starting from fairy tales to contemporary works, and over time characters with disabilities have been extensively used by authors for educational purposes and as exemplary figures to convey social messages and values. Thus, children's literature can be considered as an historiographical source and as a multidisciplinary, complex field of study: the textual and iconographic representations of disability contained within it reflect the changes that have taken place over time and allows to investigate the collective imaginary, socially prevalent attitudes and cultural trends in this regard. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to examine, from an historical perspective, how the illustrations of characters with disabilities have evolved over time to identify recurring trends and aspects of renewal. In particular, the focus is on children's works published in Italy between the early 20th century and the early 2000s.

Keywords: Children's literature; illustration; disability; social representation; Italian picturebooks

1. Images as «eyewitnesses»¹

Today's society of the image assigns the iconic code with an ever-increasing portion of responsibility in the dissemination of information; in this framework, one cannot avoid recognising that illustrations play a considerable role in the

¹ The expression is borrowed from Burke (2001).

transmission of meanings, emotions and worldviews. These, in fact, represent a complex product, born from the process of invention and interpretation of a story through an autonomous and original language. As Dallari highlights, illustration, like every image, has an infinite capacity to add elements to the narrative, multiplying and enhancing the complexity of the reading. Illustration has a narrative task that is not subordinate but complementary to that of the word and, particularly in texts intended for younger children, can have a narrative role that is even superior to the text formulated in words (2013, pp. 34-35)².

Illustrations are, thus, to be considered as a specific code of communication, in a close relationship of complementarity or divergence with the text, and with a strong evocative power. For example, through choices of perspectives, points of view, mimicry and posture, portraits communicate the moods and feelings of the characters, but also the ideas and visions of the illustrator and of his time. In the case of illustrations for children, as mentioned, the symbolic and semantic device becomes even more delicate because it is characterised by a natural ambiguity³: on one hand, it can be enjoyed as an aesthetic and artistic experience, but on the other it is a vehicle of ideologies and educational intentions: «reading through images, like all reading, contributes to the construction of models, settles in the subject's imagination, suggests a representation of the world» (Lepri, 2016, p. 18).

Reading and analyzing images is, therefore, a more challenging task than it may initially appear, as it is necessary to take into account the multiple meanings concealed in iconic communication: an illustration is, in fact, never neutral or silent, as Barthes (1982) reminds us. To quote Burke (2001), images can be considered as mute eyewitnesses mediated by the adult – who more or less intentionally suggests an imagery – and illustrators as social historians, since through their works they record forms of social behaviour:

images constitute neither a reflection of social reality nor a system of signs unrelated to social reality, but occupy a wide range of positions between these two extremes.

²Throughout the entire contribution, when the original text is not in English, the translation is by the author of the paper.

³Narratives, even when in images, represent for the child's mind a new form of access to the world and to himself (Cambi & Cives, 1996). They contribute to the construction of «indelible images precisely because they settle in a reader who, at that stage of his life, organises and constructs his own representation of the world, learns the meaning of social life» (Lachal, 1974, p. 287).

They testify the stereotyped, but nevertheless constantly and gradually changing, way in which individuals or groups view the social world (Burke, 2001, p. 213).

The iconographic material represents a precious trace of ways of seeing and feeling (Berger, 2008) of the past, which are even more significant in the case of traditionally marginalised minorities as they make it possible to fill historical-social silences that have become historiographical gaps over time (Bacchetti, 1994). The study of such sources requires, then, a particular interpretative agility in order to continuously shift from an objective approach to a highly symbolic one, to discover the territory of the imaginary (Cantatore, 2015); this is what we aim to achieve in this paper by providing a view, necessarily partial but representative, of the illustrations of characters with disabilities and their evolution, offering some of the most important examples.

2. Historical itineraries

Monstrous-looking characters, dwarves, hunchbacks and many others who, due to their physical, intellectual or sensory characteristics, differ from the norm and are ‘disabled’⁴ by the community return again and again in children’s literature and are much more present than it is commonly led to believe (Arca, 2003; Beauchamp, Pacelli, 2025). Over the course of time, these representations have served different narrative and educational functions and have often been used as symbolic and archetypal objects (Fiedler, 1979), but, nonetheless, they have always found their place into narratives for children.

Examining children’s works of the past and present, there seem to be two main trends marking their evolution: firstly, a profound permanence of themes and rhetoric that has created true aesthetic-literary canons over time⁵; secondly, a strong actualisation capacity that has allowed disability images to change substantially in relation to the historical and cultural background to which they are linked.

⁴ Within the research, disability is considered as a social construct that is constantly evolving and is closely linked to the historical and cultural context (Stiker, 1982; Oliver, 1990; Davis, 2006). So, more than a medical-diagnostic category, my interest is to deepen how the authors have denoted diversity as disability over time.

⁵ As Mitchell (2015) points out, images are persistent: they resist migration, move through time and space and proliferate.

Throughout the first part of the 20th century, iconographic representations of disability inherited the typical elements of representation that characterised 19th century Italian literature: strongly pietistic and compassionate with the aim, primarily, of moving the young readers and provide desired models of behaviour (Lachal, 1974; Boero & De Luca, 1995). Characters with disabilities fulfil an exemplary function and their psychological traits are only sketched out and stereotyped. The illustrations collected align with the narrative dynamics that emerge within the texts: they are characterised by a realistic style and are mostly executed in pen with the *sfumato* technique or in black and white watercolour⁶. Until the mid-20th century, the territory of children's illustration shows a recurring emphasised presence of privileged themes, «true iconographic *topoi*, which tend always to be expressed through a conventional representational code: cut, point of view, expressive and depictive modes» (Pallottino, 1988, p. 215).

The figurine makers (Faeti, 1972) who shaped the national imaginary of the early 20th century Italy masterfully use *chiaroscuro* and perspective lines to accentuate the emotional elements and the suffering of the disabled character depicted: postures are resigned and curved, gestures are emphasised, their gaze is mournful and low, suggesting sadness, obedience and an attitude of resignation. As Blezza Picherle (2002) argues, one of the functions of such an extensive use in Italian educational literature of unfortunate characters, whose moral virtues were glorified, is also to encourage a «resigned contentment» (p. 23) designed to prevent deviance and social rebellion. Rather than crowded and wide scenes, the illustrators considered favour limited and short pictorial spaces: they place the key character in the foreground and enriched the image with expressive details. The setting, in most cases, is domestic, also because, due to their condition, the characters in the narratives appear socially isolated: confined within their own room or home environment, with few relational exchanges with the outside world.

Among the most representative artists of the time who portrayed characters with disabilities are, for example, Carlo Chiostrì, with his illustrations for Emma Perodi's novel *Sorellina* (1907), Enrico Mazzanti, in *Raccontafiabe* (Capuana, 1894), or Filiberto Scarpelli with the tales by Giuseppe Ernesto Nuccio (1923; 1924). The first two are mainly known to the general public for their illustrations of Collodi's classic, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, while Scarpelli comes from satir-

⁶The children's works of the period in Italy, if we exclude fairy tale collections, are also almost exclusively realistic. For an in-depth look at the history and evolution of Italian children's illustration, see Faeti (1972).

ical and caricature journalism: very different from each other, in these portraits all three of them abandon any form of grotesque, irony, and fantasy to turn to dark, quiet and melancholic tones. The characters assume similar postures and attitudes – sad, resigned, and hunched over themselves – and are the object of compassionate care and attention from those around them, who surround them with an affectionate, yet sad and concerned, gaze.

A similar tone is found in the work of Filiberto Mateldi, who grew up in the satirical magazines of the early 20th century: he abandons the harsh, merciless and caricatured lines of his style, to create one of the most tender and evocative representations collected: Lisa-Betta, the young protagonist in Fanciulli's novel (1938), bent over a large book to read to her blind uncle the descriptions of the flowers illustrated, while, in the intimate atmosphere of a lamp, he listens to her with his eyes closed, enraptured.

The iconographic ways of representing disability undergo an initial transformation with the First World War and during the fascist period, where the emotional aspects leave more room for the exaltation of qualities such as courage, resistance, and spirit of sacrifice for the Fatherland. In this period, numerous heroic depictions of mutilated soldiers appear and the image of a 'different' body takes on an unprecedented public dignity (Debè & Polenghi, 2016). Usually, there is no room in the narratives for sorrow and fragility, the men are shown as examples of strength and courage and the illustrators depict them with their uniforms still on, upright and strong: «always beyond pain, one feels a strength that wants to remain serene, bent for a moment, not defeated» (Fanciulli & Monaci Guidotti, 1935, p. 294). In the glorious images of soldiers returning from the war, such as the one of Giuseppe Scortecci in the novel by Camilla del Soldato (1929), the portrait that emerges of the veteran is one-dimensional: physical and psychological pain vanish from the scene just as the difficulties encountered (Salvante, 2013).

For a second significant shift in the canons of representation, we have to wait until the end of the 1980s, when, in the trail of the substantial innovations that affected children's literature and society as a whole, the presence of disabled characters in children's literature increased considerably and a new generation of illustrators began experimenting the potential of the medium within children's works. After the end of the fascist dictatorship, in fact, the 1960s and 1970s in Italy represent an era of substantial social and cultural transformations. Also, a deeper engagement in the social instances makes children's works more permeable to representing reality with its contradictions: traditional values start to be questioned and children's literature is mainly characterised by a transgressive charge. The strong political-ideological mobilisation of the post-sixty-eight era cre-

ates, as Canevaro points out, a «favourable climate to the processes of de-institutionalisation and 'liberation' of weak subjects, managed until then in a separate, special and segregating way» (2009, p. 9). In the light also of Foucault's ideas (1961; 1975) and thanks to the commitment of disabled people and family member's associations (Mura, 2007), in Italy starts a process of social and educational integration of people with disabilities; several regulatory procedures⁷, in an absolutely innovative way, lead to the inclusion in schools and classes of pupils with disabilities, recognising their dignity as individuals and their equal rights (Canevaro, 2007). This new framework also provides a new impetus for children's literature, which deals with the issue of integration and diversity with a new strength.

A key figure in the renewal process of Italian children's literature is Donatella Ziliotto⁸, author, of the novel *Io, nano* (1989), illustrated by the artist and cartoonist Maria Grazia Nidasio. In the book, the young protagonist feels excluded because he is a dwarf and suffers the anguish of his father, who refuses to accept him. One day he discovers that there is a group of dwarves living under the city who have created a parallel community in which they can finally feel at peace with their condition. Beneath the apparent lightness and irony, the narrative is highly critical and reveals the great difficulties of integration. Nidasio, with her illustrations, completes the text and fills in the silences. One particularly striking image that occupies the entire page shows the young man in front of a shop window intent on observing Velazquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, in which the figure of a dwarf at the court of the King of Spain appears in the foreground⁹. Alone, he seems to mirror himself in the shop window and recognise something of himself in the painting: in this way, the illustrator suggests to the reader the power that images have and their real impact on the world.

Representations of characters with disabilities also begin to appear more frequently in picturebooks from the late 1990s onwards. The original and complex compositional form of picturebooks in its few pages succeeds, in fact, in narrating even subjects that are generally considered as 'difficult', arousing strong emotional reactions and stimulating the reader's imagination. In the 2000s, in particular, a new generation of illustrators venture into the representation of dis-

⁷These include Law 118 of 1971 and the Falcucci document of 1975, that led to Law 517 of 1977, and Law 180 of 1978, known as the 'Basaglia Law' which imposed the closure of asylum facilities.

⁸On the figure of Ziliotto, see Guerrini (2006).

⁹On the work and its meaning, see Foucault (1966).

ability: going beyond a more realistic iconographic style, they begin to explore the dimensions of allusive, symbolic and evocative. The metaphorical approach appears in all its formative function as an invitation to «think more»¹⁰.

Illustrators, such as Chiara Carrer, Arianna Papini and Sonia Maria Luce Possentini, succeed with their works in making young readers aware what is not immediately apparent, revealing what is concealed; they manage to show how even between the lines of a visual text there is much that is unspoken (Campagnaro, 2019; Lepri, 2015). Indeed, in many contemporary picture books, the characters appear almost suspended in a distant world, existing between here and elsewhere, a world with blurred contours that can be approached but can never be fully reached or understood. The evocative figures and colours used invite the reader to a dreamlike immersion in the realm of fantasy: «a complete loss in the meanders of one's own interiority. [...] The child is fascinated by colour like the moth by the flame, its burning is a burning of the imagination, a wandering within oneself» (Negri, 2012, p. 347).

With visual metaphors, an allusive-symbolic atmosphere and a delicate, almost dreamlike, tension, the characters appear lost in boundless spaces or blur into the background: for example, in the picturebook *Il mondo è anche di Tobias* (Spagnoli Fritze, 2009), the mother is sitting on the bed in her disabled son's bedroom, while he is sitting on a blue floor next to some toys. The two are close, but at the same time far apart, divided by an ocean of silence (Fig. 1).

In the picturebook *È non è* (Berrettoni Carrara M., 2010), the narrator is the brother of an autistic child, who describes the lights and shadows of such a special bond and of a condition that is so delicate and still mysterious under many aspects. «She is as unpredictable as the weather, invisible as a breath, as sensitive as a leaf... she is an enigma, a labyrinth» (p. 4), we read in the book, and, then, how is it possible to represent a mystery, an enigma, if not with metaphorical and allusive illustrations that allow to perceive the difficulty of approaching and understanding her? Carrer engages the reader in a «whirlwind of solicitations, forcing him into a continuous associative and interpretative work» (Lepri, 2015, p. 277); she plays with blended colours, with collage, with shadows reflected on the wallpaper of the house. Hence, among a multitude of commercial and standardising products of quick consumption and easy appeal, it is possible to identify very innovative works as well: in the picturebooks examined, the illustration plays a central role and suggests a new idea of the condition of disability through the silences and atmospheres evoked.

¹⁰ Cfr. G. Grampa's introduction to Ricoeur (1986), p. XXV.



Figure 1. Illustration of Michele Ferri in *Il mondo è anche di Tobias* by Elena Spagnoli Fritze, 2009.

2.1 Thematic and iconographic persistence

There are two main rhetorics in the social discourses concerning disability (Vadalà, 2013) that, in particular, have long influenced and still influence Italian children's literature: the rhetoric of compassion or pity and that of the *supercrip* (Pacelli, 2022), which, instead, exalts the person with disability for the courage with which he faces the challenges of his condition. As briefly mentioned above, the representation of disability is characterised by strong permanence over time and certain themes and images are highly recurrent. In a transversal manner, thus, it is possible to identify affinities and similarities between narratives and illustrations even very distant in time.

There are, for example, numerous depictions of disabled characters confined to their home, forced to observe the flow of life from behind their own window

as passive witnesses to the activities of the community and other young people. In the novel *Il figlio di Grazia* (Bisi Albini, 1910), the young protagonist, Dorina, who suffers from arthritis, never ventures outside her room because she is ashamed to show her «crooked bones» (p. 92). The painter Chiesa accompanies the volume with ten illustrations. He portrays the protagonist sitting by the window, alone, wrapped in a large shawl, intent on observing the village outside. Despite her young age, Dorina appears almost as an adult in the portrait, sad and withdrawn from social life.

Similar representations frequently recur at the beginning of the 20th century, a time when in Italy individuals with disability were an exclusive responsibility of the family or were confined into private or religious institutions. The *topos*, nevertheless, persists in narratives and illustrations even in contemporary children's literature, as demonstrated, for instance, in the novel *Il bambino di vetro* by Fabrizio Silei (2011). The young protagonist, due to a rare disease, has a particularly fragile physical structure which forces him to remain isolated at home all the time. Every day he observes a group of boys playing in the street until he manages to find a way to interact with them and overcome the isolation in which he finds himself. Marco Somà's illustrations recall the iconographic canons of the portraits of the past: the framing is external, the observer is outside the building, immersed in the normal flow of life, while inside, behind the glass of a window, there is him; the protagonist greets children outside with his hand with a mournful expression, far away from his small porthole on the world. «Glass child», quoting Silei's title, is the nickname that the strangers use to identify him: a definition that focuses on the extreme frailty of the young man specifically, but also suggests a more general view of disability as a condition of weakness that requires special attention and care. The book's protagonist recounts: «although the day was warm, I had leather gloves, long trousers, a silk scarf around my throat and sunglasses to protect my eyes from branches, leaves, or who knows what other silent trap life may have in store» (Silei, 2011, p. 17).

He is not the only one, in fact, many characters are portrayed wrapped in heavy shawls, lying on large pillows and with woolen blankets on their laps¹¹. When observing them, only a few elements suggest their young age – they are mostly characters still in their childhood phase – on the contrary, they appear much older than they really are. Sofia Bisi Albini's short story entitled *Donnino*

¹¹ Interesting is the extreme similarity between one of Pietro Nardini's illustrations in *Il triangolo giallo* (Coppo, 1957) and that of Roberto Lemmi's in *Fiore* (Fanciulli, 1967).

(1911) and the illustration by the painter Lazzaro Pasini highlight this aspect very well (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Illustration of Lazzaro Pasini in Bisi Albini, 1911.

The protagonist, nicknamed «Donnino» by everyone because of his extreme frailty, is in one corner of the picture with a shawl on his head and a heavy jacket, while on the other side a group of children – all apparently younger than him – point him out and taunt him: «that shawl wrapped around his head seemed like lead: his brain and his heart bent under it with a painful sense of disheartenment» (p. 96).

Social exclusion and mockery are other recurring themes throughout the entire history of Italian children's literature when it comes to disability. The illustrators of the past and present, also in this case, use the communicative potential of the iconographic medium and place particular emphasis on two aspects: on one side the mimicry and gestures of the characters and, on the other, proxemics and the use of space. Various more recent illustrations, such as those by Maria Sole Macchia (1999) or Sonia Maria Luce Possentini in the picturebook *Noi* (Mazzoli, 2013), can be compared to Turati's early 20th century illustration (Bisi Albini, 1911). Some elements and illustrative choices are

strikingly similar: the protagonist with a disability is alone in a corner of the page, near the margin, or in the case of the picturebooks even alone within the entire page, while the other characters through their proximity and attitude create a single contrasting group; expressions of mockery and surprise accompany the gesture of pointing; the protagonist is turned towards the viewer and appears resigned and distant (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. illustration of Sonia Maria Luce Possentini in Mazzoli, 2013.

In these cases, illustration, even more than textual narration, succeeds in representing the situation of marginality in which the character with disability is placed in relation to the rest of society.

3. Conclusions

This synthetic historical itinerary of Italian children's literature allows us to examine the evolution of illustrations of characters with disabilities and to highlight some significant trends. Italian children's illustration, when dealing with disability, appears divided between new perspectives, with strong elements of renewal and innovation, and constants that remain from the past and affects the representation of disability and the concept of disability itself by returning constantly in the works for children. As emphasised in the paper, illustrations for children represent a valuable source for reconstructing the collective imaginary regarding disability and its relationship with the influences of the historical, social and cultural context from an historical perspective.

References

Critical works

- Arca, A. (2003). Il fascino del diverso nella letteratura per ragazzi. In Cappai, G.M. Cappai (Eds.), *Percorsi dell'integrazione. Per una didattica delle diversità personali*. FrancoAngeli, pp. 139-155.
- Bacchetti, F. (1994). Handicap: un silenzio storico e sociale. In F. Cambi, & S. Ulivieri (Eds.), *I silenzi dell'educazione. Studi storico-pedagogici in onore di Tina Tomasi*. La Nuova Italia, pp. 241-248.
- Barthes, R. (1982). *L'obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques III*. Seuil.
- Beauchamp, M., Chung, W., Mogilner, A. & Zakinova, S. (2015). Swimming in the mainstream: Children's literature. In Id. (Eds.), *A critical examination of the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in selected works of modern and contemporary American literature*. BrownWalker Press, pp. 127-146.
- Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.
- Bleza Picherle, S. (2002). *Libri bambini ragazzi: momenti di evoluzione*. Libreria Editrice Universitaria.
- Boero, P. & De Luca, C. (1995). *La letteratura per l'infanzia*. Laterza.
- Burke, P. (2001). *Eyewitnessing: The Use of Images as Historical Evidence*. Reaction Books.
- Cambi, F. & Cives, G. (1996). *Il bambino e la lettura: testi scolastici e libri per l'infanzia*. ETS.
- Campagnaro, M. (2019). La pluridimensionalità della visual literacy. Albi illustrati e itinerari educativi. In S. Barsotti, & L. Cantatore (Eds.), *Letteratura per l'infanzia: Forme, temi e simboli del contemporaneo*. Carocci, pp. 123-144.
- Canevaro, A. (Ed.) (2007). *L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità. Trent'anni di inclusione nella scuola italiana*. Erickson.
- Canevaro, A., D'Alonzo, L. & Ianes, D. (Ed.) (2009). *L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità dal 1977 al 2007: risultati di una ricerca attraverso lo sguardo delle persone con disabilità e delle loro famiglie*. Bolzano University Press.
- Cantatore, L. (2015). *Parva sed apta mihi: studi sul paesaggio domestico nella letteratura per l'infanzia del XIX secolo*. ETS.
- Dallari, M. (2013). Raccontare come pratica di cura. Dal concetto di intenzionalità a quello di cura. In M. Campagnaro, & M. Dallari, *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure: albi illustrati e relazione educativa*. Erickson, pp. 15-58.

- Davis, L.J. (2006). Constructing Normalcy: the bell curve, the novel, and the invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century. In L.J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader*. Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 316.
- Debè A. & Polenghi S. (2016). Assistance and education of mutilated soldiers of World War I. The Italian case. *History of Education & Children's Literature*, XI(2), pp. 227-246.
- Faeti, A. (1972). *Guardare le figure: gli illustratori italiani dei libri per l'infanzia*. Einaudi.
- Fanciulli, G. & Monaci Guidotti, E. (1935). *La letteratura per l'infanzia*. Società Editrice Internazionale.
- Fiedler, L (1979). *Freaks: Myths and images of the secret self*. Touchstone.
- Foucault, M. (1961). *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Plon.
- Foucault, M. (1966). *Les mots et les choses (sous-titré Une archéologie des sciences humaines)*. Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard.
- Guerrini, V. (2006). Donatella Ziliotto. Cinquant'anni di scrittura dalla parte dei bambini. In E. Catarsi, & F. Bacchetti (Eds.). *I 'Tusitala': scrittori italiani contemporanei di letteratura giovanile*. Edizioni del Cerro.
- Lachal, R. (1974). L'infirmo dans la littérature italienne destinée à l'enfance et à la jeunesse. Analyse typologique de 57 oeuvres. *Enfance*, 27(3), pp. 287-312.
- Lepri, C. (2013). *Le immagini raccontano: l'iconografia nella formazione dell'immaginario infantile*. ETS.
- Lepri, C. (2015). *Aedi per l'infanzia. Poeti e illustratori di oggi*. Pacini.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2015). *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mura, A. (2007). Tra welfare state e welfare society: il contributo culturale e sociale dell'associazionismo al processo di integrazione delle persone disabili. In A. Canevaro (ed.), *L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità. Trent'anni di inclusione nella scuola italiana*. Erickson, pp. 413-439.
- Negri, M. (2012). Nel regno delle figure. Lo sguardo di Walter Benjamin sul rapporto tra infanzia e letteratura. In F. Cappa, & M. Negri (Eds.). *Walter Benjamin. Figure dell'infanzia. Educazione, letteratura, immaginario*. Cortina.
- Oliver, M. (1990). *The Politics of Disablement*. Macmillan Press.
- Pacelli, S. (2022). Disability representation and children's literature: the supercrip rhetoric. *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion*, X(1), pp. 283-290.

- Pacelli, S. (2025). *Figure della diversità. La rappresentazione della disabilità nella letteratura per l'infanzia italiana dal Risorgimento a oggi*. FrancoAngeli.
- Pallottino, P. (1988). *Storia dell'illustrazione italiana: libri e periodici a figura dal XV al XX secolo*. Zanichelli.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). *La metafora viva*. Jaca Book.
- Salvante, M. (2013). Italian Disabled Veterans between Representation and Experience, in N. Copper, & S. McVeigh (Eds.). *Men After War*, Routledge, pp. 111-129.
- Stiker, H.J. (2000). *A History of Disability*. University of Michigan Press.
- Vadalà, G. (2013). La rappresentazione della disabilità tra conformismo e agire politico. In R. Medeghini, S. D'Alessio, A. Marra, G. Vadalà, & E. Valtellina (Eds.), *Disability studies. Emancipazione, inclusione scolastica e sociale, cittadinanza*. Erickson, pp. 125-148.

Literary works

- Berrettoni Carrara, M. (2010). *È non è*. Kalandraka.
- Bisi Albini, S. (1910 [1898]). *Il figlio di Grazia*. Vallardi.
- Bisi Albini, S. (1911 [1887]). *Omini e donnine*. Vallardi.
- Capuana, L. (1894). *Il raccontafiabe*. Bemporad & figlio.
- Coppo, A. (1957). *Il triangolo giallo*. Paravia.
- Del Soldato, C. (1929). *Le memorie del merlo zoppo*. Vallardi.
- Fanciulli, G. (1938). *Lisa-Betta*. Società Editrice Internazionale.
- Fanciulli, G. (1967 [1928]). *Fiore*. Giunti Bemporad Marzocco.
- Macchia, M.S. (1999). *Il signor Tazzina*. Fabbri.
- Mazzoli, E. (2013). *Noi*. Bacchilega Junior.
- Nuccio, G.E. (1923). *Girotondo mesto e giocondo*. Industrie Riunite Editoriali Siciliane.
- Nuccio, G.E. (1924). *Sicilia buona*. Paravia.
- Perodi, E. (1907). *Sorellina*. Salani.
- Silei, F. (2011). *Il bambino di vetro*. Einaudi.
- Spagnoli Fritze, E. (2009). *Il mondo è anche di Tobias*. Lapis.
- Ziliotto, D. (1989). *Io, nano*. Mondadori.

Those wild things: adolescents as monsters and savages in David Almond's oeuvre

Elena Guerzoni

If there are demons, this is the world in which they might pester us. If there are miracles, this is where they might take place.

David Almond

The chapter explores the representations of adolescence in British author David Almond's oeuvre. Using the lens of the evidence-based paradigm (Ginzburg, 1989) integrated with contemporary theories of metaphors – in particular, Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics (2005) and Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive linguistics (1980) –, Elena Guerzoni focuses on seven youth novels by Almond, beginning with *Skellig* (1998) and concluding with *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Hisself* (2011). In these works, the author creates enlightening metaphors for adolescence – namely wilderness, monstrosity, a vertical space-time dimension, and the use of an experimental language and form – that can be read as representations of adolescents' otherness and contribute to depict adolescence as a time of opportunities, a period of enormous potential in which the extraordinary inside and outside oneself is revealed. A careful examination of each referenced novel shows indeed how Almond's metaphors – having a cognitive power, and not a merely decorative and ornamental function – help create a new reality around the concept of adolescence, thereby deconstructing the pathologizing narrations which have now become part of the collective imagery.

Keywords: David Almond; adolescence; metaphors; otherness; wilderness.

Internationally recognised as one of the most authoritative voices in contemporary children's and young adult literature, David Almond discovered his vocation along his writing path. His epiphanic work in this regard was *Counting Stars* (2000), a collection of autobiographical short stories which for Almond represented the revelation of the charm and mystery of childhood and adolescence (see Varrà 2004 and Joosen et al. 2024). Almond's first book for young people, *Skellig* (1998), was actually published in the United Kingdom two years before the publication of *Counting Stars*, but like all the books to come it features the main themes scattered out in the author's epiphanic work.

What is particularly relevant for the topic I will address in this chapter is the representation of adolescence that Almond begins to form in *Skellig* through the two main adolescent characters in the novel, namely Michael and Mina. A teenager's figure with both animal-like and angelic traits subtly begins to take shape, being associated with a strange, mysterious creature as well as with birds – in that finding an echo in William Blake's poetry¹. Being depicted as closely related to non-human or non-properly-human beings, somehow part themselves of a dimension which is 'other' compared to everyday life, the two adolescents featuring in *Skellig* display all their otherness, their being deeply and ontologically different from most of the adults surrounding them.

Whereas in *Skellig* the association between adolescents and animals/monsters/angels is referenced in very delicate and lyric terms, with allusions and poetic images whose implicit meaning lies with the reader, Almond's later novels for adolescents and young adults leave no doubts about the diversity of adolescence, 'diversity' being defined mostly in terms of wildness and monstrosity. Indeed, the titles themselves introduce this otherness. In order of publication, Almond's books following *Skellig* include *Kit's Wilderness* (1999); *Wild Girl, Wild Boy* (2002); *The Savage* (2008); and *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Hissself* (2011). Thus, it becomes apparent just from the covers featuring these titles that the protagonists whose stories are told are somehow contaminated with Something Else, a time-space Elsewhere with which adolescents – living in a liminal territory between childhood and adulthood – keep the communication open.

In her latest volume entitled *Di cosa parlano i libri per bambini. La letteratura per l'infanzia come critica radicale*² [What Children's Books Are About.

¹ For a close examination of the connections between Almond's and Blake's oeuvre, see Latham 2006, pp. 37-41.

² Reviewed by Elena Guerzoni on *Bookbird* 62.1, 2024, pp. 68-70.

Children's Literature as Radical Critique], Giorgia Grilli states that in its best examples children's and young adult literature refers back to ancient myths and legends and ancestral wisdom, which considered that children and adolescents need to learn «other realms things», thereby getting to know the other-than-self, if they want to become full-fledged humans first and adults then (Grilli, 2021). Drawing on several myths and popular legends, like the Greek myths of Persephone (featuring in *Skellig*) and of Orpheus (both in *My Name Is Mina* and *A Song for Ella Grey*), and the Jewish myth of the Golem (portrayed in *Clay*, *Billy Dean*, and other books), David Almond demonstrates his considerable awareness – which he shares with our ancestors – that Here and Now is not everything: there is something extra-ordinary in our world, a Beyond of whose existence we are shown through children and adolescents.

In Almond's oeuvre, the characteristics of wildness and monstrosity are mainly associated with adolescent characters, whose liminal age brings along a series of abrupt physical, psychological, and neurological changes resulting in a sense of confusion and dismay that can be defined according to René Thom's catastrophe theory applied to adolescent development (Mancaniello, 2002). If on one hand adolescents' commonality with wildness and monstrosity in Almond's books serves as a metaphor for ancient initiation rites, which included the separation of adolescents from their villages and birth families, a liminal period to be spent in a wild place (a forest, for instance), and the final reunification with the civilised and adult world³, on the other such an emphasised otherness is evidence of the specificity and uniqueness of adolescence compared to the other stages of life. Making his adolescents similar to birds, monsters, angels, and other undefinable beings, Almond highlights that adolescents are not simply older children, nor are they less mature adults: they are beings with their own distinct characteristics, experiencing substantial and systematic changes in the anatomy and functioning of the brain in the period between puberty and the early twenties (see Steinberg, 2014); adolescence is a slippery and unstable ground, a suspended time between childhood and adulthood whose sense of precariousness, uncertainty and indefiniteness is exasperated in Almond's oeuvre by the metaphors of wildness and monstrosity.

³ A painstaking anthropological study of rites of passage is Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press, 1961. This work, first published in France in 1909, marked a turning point in the studies of primitive cultures and folklore, and was the basis for a radical renewal of the anthropological research on rituals.

The following paragraphs will analyse the representations of the otherness of adolescence in some of Almond's books for adolescents, starting with *Skellig* (1998) and *My Name Is Mina* (2010). Several concepts from the pedagogy and psychology of adolescence will be referred to, as well as notions derived from recent research in neuroscience. The analysis thus takes a multi- and interdisciplinary perspective, relying on an evidential paradigm (Ginzburg, 1989) and on contemporary theories of metaphors (Eco, 2005; Gibbs, 1994, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Stockwell, 2020).

By examining the representations of the otherness of adolescence in some of Almond's works, we can explore the author's perspective and resulting portrayal of this particular age in human life, thereby gaining additional knowledge of it through the enlightening, cognitive – and not merely decorative and ornamental – function of literary metaphors. As Ginzburg affirms, «though reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones – signs, clues [and, we can add, metaphors] – which allow us to penetrate it.» (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 123).

1. Extraordinary Adolescents: Michael and Mina

Like all the teenage characters in Almond's work, Michael is an ordinary boy who lives an ordinary life in an ordinary place. His story is narrated in Almond's first book for young readers, *Skellig* (1998), a novel of mystery and self-discovery which was awarded the prestigious Carnegie Medal and Whitbread Children's Book of the Year. It is set in the house in which Almond lived, in Heaton in Newcastle (Almond, personal website). Michael's sister has just been born when he moves to that old house with his parents. She is premature and has a congenital heart defect, which causes her to be detained in hospital where she gets daily care and finally undergoes a heart operation. Michael's parents are very busy with the restoration of the old dilapidated house, and they are also very concerned about the health of their newborn; his mother spends a lot of time at the hospital with the newborn, and the news she reports is never reassuring. Michael, who is a preadolescent facing new situations (moving to another house and the arrival of a newborn in his family), feels the heaviness and gloom of the atmosphere surrounding him, and he is both sad and frightened. Moreover, he feels helpless in relation to his little sister. To get distracted and refrain from giving way to his bad thoughts, Michael begins to explore the tumbledown garage at the bottom of his new garden, into which he is told not to go. And it is precisely inside the garage, behind «old chests of drawers and broken wash-basins and bags

of cement, ancient doors leaning against the walls, deck chairs with the cloth seats rotted away» (Almond, 1998, p. 9), all covered in dust and spiders' webs, where Michael discovers a wizened, mysterious creature also covered in dust and spiders' webs, whose hair and shoulders are full of dead blowflies.

He was lying there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he'd been there forever. He was filthy and pale and dried out and I thought he was dead. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'd soon begin to see the truth about him, that there'd never been another creature like him in the world (*Skellig* p. 9).

This strange creature named Skellig has human traits and a bump on his shoulder blades, which Michael soon discovers to be wings. Soon after, Michael finds a new friend, a neighbour girl named Mina. She is homeschooled and spends most of her time on trees, where she carefully observes birds, draws, and writes in her journal. Mina's otherness is immediately apparent, both in *Skellig* and in *My Name Is Mina* (2010), an extraordinary experimental novel which will be more thoroughly discussed in the next paragraph. Taken to the garage, Mina also sees what Michael is able to see, namely Skellig. The two adolescents' shared vision is a sign that they both share the strange creature's diversity. Nobody, except for Michael and Mina, sees Skellig, whereas they can see him and talk to him, somehow tuned in on his same wavelength. They both belong to his 'other' dimension, being deeply attracted by him, and they are close to the dimensions of darkness and death – both represented by Skellig. Like Skellig – half human, half bird or angel or winged monster – Michael and Mina, as well as the baby sister, are *liminal* people: as for Michael and Mina, their adolescent age determines their being suspended between two age stages, with their projections toward the future of adulthood and their frequent regressions to childish states (Mancaniello, 2018); in the case of Michael's sister, this very little human creature, just come into the world, is suspended between life and death, still belonging to that Elsewhere where she comes from and still uncertain whether she will enter the world or not – and this is the reason why she does not have a name yet.

From these premises, it can be inferred that adolescents (and infants) are endowed with incredible sensibility, which enables them to recognise the presence of the extraordinary in everyday life and, as Latham argues, within themselves (Latham, 2006, p. 33). As well as the mysterious creature named Skellig, the two adolescent characters of this story are outsiders and attend 'other' dimensions compared to the ones of adults. Indeed, they often are in forbidden, dangerous

places, where adults never go, like the tumbledown garage, Mina's grandfather's old abandoned attic (where owls nest), and tree branches. Adolescents' otherness is thus emphasised also through the diversity of places adolescents inhabit. Moreover, as we will get into later, their direction is often vertical: they are frequently placed high up, on trees or tall buildings, or they are literally sent underground, into dark tunnels, niches, ancient collapsed mines, or sewers under the city – in that resembling Lewis Carroll's protagonist Alice, whose adventures actually take place underground⁴.

On this point, it is interesting to refer to contemporary psychology deriving from the empirical evidence that results from an interchange between recent research in neuroscience and developmental psychology. In his essay entitled *Age of Opportunity. Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (2014), Laurence Steinberg refers to a recent discovery about brain development which according to him represents a valuable reason to reevaluate how we are raising young people: adolescence is a period of tremendous 'neuroplasticity', in which the brain's potential to change through experience is extremely high. The early years, commonly referred to as 'zero to three', are the first period of heightened brain malleability, in which experiences make a major, lasting difference in how children's brains develop and their lives unfold (Steinberg, 2014, p. 9). Recent research in neuroscience testifies that there is another period of development which can be equated with the early years in terms of neuroplasticity, namely adolescence. But there is more. Steinberg adds that «not only is the brain more plastic during adolescence than in the years that immediately precede it, but it is also more plastic during adolescence than in the years that follow it. The drop in plasticity as we mature into adulthood is just as significant as the increase in plasticity as we enter adolescence. In fact, adolescence is the brain's *last* period of especially

⁴The original manuscript version of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was entitled *Alice Underground*. Carroll's Alice can be considered an icon of adolescence, its quintessence or, as Giorgia Grilli states, «the absolute – or most successful – paradigm of growth as a turmoil, with a focus on female growth. Carroll managed to grasp and masterfully represent that delicate transitional period from childhood to you-do-not-know-what that every girl (as well as boy) has to go through. He did not reduce this passage to a simple, obvious, meaningless and painless event. On the contrary, he portrayed it as a difficult, ambiguous, anxiogenic and alienating moment with nightmarish traits» (Grilli, 2021, p. 171, translation mine). Alice's body changes continuously and unexpectedly, making Alice feel inappropriate and alien to herself – she even resembles a monster when she becomes huge after drinking from a little bottle in the White Rabbit's house.

heightened malleability» (Ivi: p. 10). Therefore, «adolescence is the new zero to three», states Steinberg (*Ibid.*), which explains why so many children's and young adult authors, perhaps unconsciously, assign infants (or very little children) and adolescents the ability to see more deeply, and to see the unseen. In Almond's *Skellig*, there is a sign that demonstrates the close bond between adolescents and infants: Michael feels her baby sister's heart beat in his breast; in this incredible and inexplicable way, he knows that she is alive and communicates with her. Skellig, for his part, is linked to that baby in a very special way. It is as if they were one, a unique undefinable creature inhabiting a liminal territory between life and death. Skellig's increasing health improvement goes along with the infant's health improvement, and when Skellig visits her in the hospital she finally recovers and receives the name of Joy⁵.

As in all Almond's young adult novels, the two adolescent characters perform a sort of final initiation rite which takes place in the attic of Mina's grandfather's old house, where owls have been feeding Skellig during his stay there. Skellig takes Michael and Mina by the hand and begins to dance slowly in a circle. Suddenly, they begin to rise from the ground and whirl, while «ghostly wings» (Almond, 1998, p. 120) rise from Michael's and Mina's shoulders. This elevation, exciting as well as frightening – and somehow monstrous –, firmly confirms the adolescents' diversity and their belonging to Something Else, which is not just the ordinary everyday life. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that when asked what he actually is, Skellig eventually says «Something *like you*, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel» (Ivi: p. 167).

Through his mysterious creature named Skellig, David Almond creates an enlightening and powerful metaphor of the adolescent condition. Like Skellig, adolescents are ambivalent, mutant, uncertain and contradictory, both angels of death and angels of healing (Latham, 2006, p. 36). Resembling to some extent Barrie's Peter Pan – who is only seven years old –, they are 'half-and-half', being no more children but not yet adults: they are 'in-between', suspended and ungraspable, waiting for becoming something else.

⁵ Latham suggests that the name Michael's family finally chooses for the newborn child recalls William Blake's poem *Infant Joy* (*Songs of Innocence* 1879), which is about a two-day-old baby who says «I have no name [...] Joy is my name». This poem, together with the illustration that Blake designed to accompany it, emphasises the close connection between angels and children, which is also represented in *Skellig* (Latham, 2006).

The passage from childhood to adulthood that adolescents have to go through is never painless. There are always trials to be overcome, and a price to pay. That is why Skellig is suffering and faces the danger of passing away at any moment. He is monstrous, in some ways also disgusting, but his typically human characteristics (like his great passion for Chinese food) remind us that he is not that different from the two adolescents who take care of him and come to love him deeply.

Adolescents too may seem monstrous: their abrupt physical changes, the frequent occurrence of acne and their behavioural turmoil often frighten us adults. We no longer recognise them; they become alien to us since they are irreducibly different from our way of living and thinking. The same goes for adolescents themselves, who are grieving because of three interior losses, also called «The Fates of Childhood»: the death of the childhood's family; the death of the childish body; and the death of the childish dimension (Mancaniello, 2018). Adolescents also feel 'other' and are a mystery to themselves. Mirrors reveal another being's image, with which adolescents have to deal.

Therefore, the question Michael eventually asks Skellig – the one concerning his identity – is the question *par excellence* of adolescence, namely the question on the self. Asking Skellig who he is means, for both Michael and Mina, to wonder about one's identity. What Skellig finally tells the two youngs – «Pair of angels... That's what you are» (Almond, 1998, p. 167) – helps them understand that beyond their monsters there are two extraordinary beings ready to be born anew.

So is Almond's oeuvre: a liminal territory between light and shadow, life and death, reality and imagination, monsters and angels. And so are his adolescent characters: they are ordinary boys and girls who live ordinary lives in ordinary places, but they are nonetheless extraordinary. As Latham affirms, «[Almond's] adolescent characters are as unique and extraordinary as the enigmatic being who serves as the title character» (Latham, 2006, p. 45). And since at the end of the narration the newborn child has recovered, and Michael and Mina have learned to recognise the presence of the extraordinary in the ordinary, Skellig can finally fly away. Whereas Michael and Mina can fly toward the future of their adult life.

2. Like owls and bats and cats: her name is Mina and she loves the night

Twelve years after the release of *Skellig*, David Almond published *My Name Is Mina* (2010), an amazing novel that he chose to devote entirely to his favourite

character, for him the most important figure in *Skellig* (Almond, personal website): the weird, crazy, paradoxical, absurd, wonderful Mina McKee. As readers have already noticed in *Skellig*, Mina is anything but typical. In *My Name Is Mina*, that is Mina's personal journal, Almond revisits her before she has met Michael and Skellig, making the reader enter her mind – «a place of wonder!» (Almond, 2010, p. 10) – and consciousness. Through the combined use of the first and third person, Almond depicts Mina's interior world emphasising the extraordinary beauty of her otherness, which is depicted mainly in terms of wildness and nonconformity.

Unlike other titles I mentioned earlier, *My Name Is Mina* does not feature the words 'wild/wildness/wilderness' or 'monster' or 'savage', but as soon as readers take the book in their hands and browse it, they instantly notice that the book itself is something weird, or at least different from usual. A dozen pages of white text on a black background immediately catch the eye, as well as the use of different fonts and the inclusion of footnotes, poems, calligrammes, completely white pages, and rectangles containing «Extraordinary Activities» that Mina offers to her readers. According to Eve Tandoi, *My Name Is Mina* fits into the category of 'hybrid novels', by which she means novels that «draw attention to themselves as artefacts in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality» (Tandoi, 2017, p. 330). Referring specifically to *My Name Is Mina*, Tandoi argues that «Almond is able to make use of the synergy between visual and verbal elements to engage in metafictional reflections on the nature of storytelling» (Tandoi, 2019, p. 80). The synergy Tandoi highlights is combined to other characteristics related to the literary form and structure of the text as well as to its content, which allow the association of Almond's writing to the literary current of modernism. Indeed, the diary form of *My Name Is Mina* does not have the temporal progression typical of autobiography. The several narrative moments do not follow a chronological order, nor are they afforded equivalent time and space by Mina. As she herself declares in the opening pages of her journal,

I'll let my journal grow just like the mind does, just like a tree or a beast does, just like life does. Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line?
Words should wander and meander. They should fly like owls and flicker like bats and slip like cats. They should murmur and scream and dance and sing
(*Mina* p. 9).

Mina's journal, thus, proceeds by emotional jolts and time shifts, following a continuous flow, without any filter. Mina reports her sensations and memories

in the order – or rather in the disorder – in which they come to her mind, suggesting that «time is not something regular and unchanging, but plastic and measured not merely by clocks and calendars but by the altered states of consciousness through which it is apprehended» (Brown, 1995, XIII).

In addition to that, *My Name Is Mina* also features an incursion into a myth – the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice – that is typical of modernist fiction. What is important to underline here is that Almond's experimentation with language, form and structure also constitutes a metaphor for adolescence, that is in turn erratic and non-linear, a stage of life in which the most pressing question is the one regarding the self, that *qui suis je* pronounced by Paul Valéry and other coeval modernist authors. In other terms, Almond's writing is 'wild' since it also serves as a metaphor for the wildness of his adolescent characters.

Mina herself is highly aware of her wildness, and she is particularly proud of it:

I look into the night. I see owls and bats that fly and flicker across the moon. Somewhere out there, Whisper the cat is slipping through the shadows. I close my eyes and it's like those creatures are moving inside me, almost like I'm a kind of weird creature myself, a girl whose name is Mina but more than just a girl whose name is Mina (*Mina* p. 8).

Later she writes:

PARADOXICAL!

That's the kind of nickname I'd like to have. Not Typical McKee, but Paradoxical McKee!

Or Nonsensical McKee, of course! (*Mina* p. 17).

Mina, who defines herself as «fantastically nonsensical» (Almond, 2010, p. 14), knows and recites William Blake's poems by heart. Her resemblance to this visionary poet and artist is emphasised by her being, like him, an outsider considered to be mad – which she is perhaps, as she herself writes, because at night she turns her face towards the moon and laughs. Latham notes that «she even resembles Blake in appearance: at one point Michael notes that Blake was small and red-headed, just like Mina. It is even possible, given Mina's mother's fondness for Blake, that she named her daughter after the poet, 'Mina' being short for 'Wilhelmina', a feminised version of 'William'» (Latham, 2006, p. 38).

The otherness of this adolescent character is therefore emphasised through different expedients and metaphors, including her spatial location, which is, as

previously stated, mainly vertical: Mina indeed spends most of her time on trees and she even goes underground, when she undertakes a journey to the underworld in order to look for her dead father, thereby playing a modern Orpheus. When she tries to be «a good girl», going to school for a while, she ends up being criticised and laughed at. In some way resembling Baudelaire's beautiful albatross, that «vast sea bird», Mina becomes clumsy and alien, a savage others cannot understand, when she inhabits the horizontal dimension of the *Diesseits* (see Hillman, 1999).

However, thanks to Almond's sharp eye and his true love for young people and their age, of which he sees the complexity below and beyond what may be scary and problematic, we know that this bird-loving, school-hating 'wild thing', who dances the «Wild Rumpus» and «is born for joy» (Blake, *Infant Joy*) is extraordinary. Her name is Mina and she loves the night.

3. Wild Girls, Wild Boys: the wilderness inside Kit, Blue and Elaine

Kit's Wilderness is Almond's second book for young readers. It was first published in the United Kingdom in 1999, and following the publication in the U.S. in 2000 it won the 2001 Michael L. Printz Award from the American Library Association, recognising the best young adult book of the year. The novel is about Christopher Watson, also called Kit, a thirteen-year-old boy who has just moved back to Stonegate with his parents to live with his beloved grandfather, an ageing former miner suffering from Alzheimer's.

Right in the first chapter Almond explains what the wilderness, the outer one, is: «an empty space between the houses and the river, where the ancient pit had been» (Almond, 1999, p. 5). This wild, empty space becomes the bond between the two main adolescent characters in the novel, Kit and Askew. Kit is a good and quiet ordinary boy facing, just like Michael in *Skellig*, a new situation derived from moving into a new town and school and from his grandfather's gradually succumbing to Alzheimer's disease. Latham notes that Kit never describes himself, which could be associated with a (at least temporary) confusion of identity (54). Askew, whose full name is John Askew, is in contrast described as a gruff and threatening figure whose hair is dark as the night, hanging heavy on his brow. He wears black jeans, black trainers and a black T-shirt with 'Megadeath' in white across it, he is tattooed and is always accompanied by his wild dog Jax.

In the old mine tunnels below the wilderness, Askew leads and performs «the game called Death», a frightening ritual, perhaps the result of hypnotism, that functions as a perfect initiation rite for the adolescents involved in it. Therefore, Askew's connection with wildness, darkness and death becomes immediately clear. Furthermore, this connection is emphasised by his family name, 'Askew', which literally means crooked, lopsided, oblique, not in a straight or level position. Again, we are confronted here with a weird, at times monstrous adolescent, whose direction is not horizontal: like all the adolescent protagonists in Almond's oeuvre, his direction is vertical or, in this particular case, oblique, since he spends most of his time underground, stumbling down the crumbling steps and crouching against the walls to reach what Kit calls Askew's den, as if Askew were a beast.

John Askew thus seems to be the complete opposite of Kit. However, he keeps insisting he and Kit are just the same and they will get so close «it'll be like we're joined in blood» (Ivi: p. 11). Kit, who is at the same time scared and drawn by Askew, follows him in the depths of the mine and finally acknowledges that «we're joined in blood» (Ivi: p. 203). Functioning as a shaman ferrying Kit and other adolescents to an Elsewhere of wildness, death and nonbeing (see Grilli, 2021), John Askew represents Kit's counterpart, his *doppelgänger*. Askew is actually Kit's 'bad seed', his obscure, dark side, that wild energy that lies hidden within him. In other words, the wilderness inside himself. In a monograph about British author Aidan Chambers, American scholar Betty Greenway uses Josef Conrad's short story *The Secret Sharer* to explain the doubleness that also characterises Chambers' adolescent characters (see Greenway, 2006). In Conrad's story, the young captain of a ship rescues a naked swimmer, who is actually a murderer, and hides him from the other sailors, finally saving him. The «secret sharer», who turns out to be the dark side of the captain's personality, also saves the captain, making it possible for him to take command and become aware of his own identity (Greenway 2006). Exactly the same happens between Kit and Askew, who eventually save each other, helping one another understand who they are and mature into adulthood. Latham argues that creative activity is also a way for Kit and Askew to construct their adult identities (Latham, 2006). The story Kit writes about a primitive boy called Lak and the illustrations Askew draws help them come to a fuller understanding of the events they are facing, shedding light on some aspects of their identities and lives otherwise incomprehensible⁶.

⁶For further information on coming of age through artistic creativity in Almond's oeuvre, see also Silva, Emma-Louise, 'Social and material minds through the lens

The presence of an *alter ego* for Kit provides evidence of the multiplicity of identity, which according to Latham is also suggested by the multiple names given to the characters (Latham, 2006, p. 54). There is a third adolescent character who is central to the construction of Kit's identity: her name is Allie, she is an actress and also represents a peculiar side of Kit's personality – the theatrical and extroverted one, both good and evil like the Andersen's Snow Queen she plays for school. Therefore, as Aidan Chambers affirms in his youth novel *The Toll Bridge* (1992), «we coexist as our *selves*. We are multiple beings. A mix of actualities and potentialities» (Chambers, 1992, p. 265). And the years of life in which we become more than ever aware of this multiplicity seem to be the ones of adolescence. Being engaged in an active experimentation, in which they assume (and then abandon, if they are not functional) different identities (Erikson, 1968), adolescents perceive that they are divided, multiple beings, feeling as if they were inhabited by several people. The wilderness, then, also functions as a metaphor for the adolescent multiplicity and confusion of identity. It reflects the adolescent characters' inner world; it attracts and unites them, and finally helps them understand who they are, thereby determining their growth.

Kit's Wilderness has many similarities with *The Savage* (2008). «Part novel, part graphic novel» (Almond, personal website), *The Savage* is illustrated by the award-winning Dave McKean, whose illustrations masterfully enhance the adolescent character's wildness. All in green, black and blue tones, McKean's illustrations have a distorting trait that takes the character's otherness to the extreme, perfectly reflecting Almond's increasing darkening of his metaphors of adolescence.

The book, that may come under Tandoi's definition of hybrid novels, also features an ordinary adolescent boy who has to deal with painful losses: the sudden death of his beloved father and the progressive end of his childhood. Soon after

of cognitive narratology in *Clay and Bone Music*', in Joosen, Vanessa et al., 2024, pp. 36-58. In this chapter, Silva focuses on the coming of age of the adolescent characters in Almond's *Clay and Bone Music*, using the lens of cognitive narratology integrated with the material engagement theory. Among others, Silva argues that the adolescent characters in the novels examined mature into adulthood through acts of creative material engagement: «they [Davie and Sylvia] 'shape' different materials in order to create cultural artefacts, and these artefacts, in turn, shape Davie and Sylvia» (Silva, 2024, p. 49).

his father's death, Blue Baker – this is the boy's name – begins to write a story called «The Savage» about a savage kid living in Burgess Woods.

He had no family and he had no pals and he didn't know where he come from and he culdn't talk and he lived on berries and roots and rabbits and stuff like old pies that he pinched from the bins at the back of Greenacres Rest Home. He lived in a cave under the roined chapel. His wepons were old kitchen nives and forks and an ax that he nicked from Franky Finnigin's alotment.

If anybody ever seen him he chased them and cort them and killed them and ate them and chucked their bones down an aynshent pit shaft.

He was savage.

He was truely wild

(The Savage pp. 8-11).

Once again, there is an adolescent character trying to overcome his hurt and to construct his own identity by means of artistic creativity. As in the case of Kit, the story created by Blue helps him understand the new situation he is facing and deal with the local bully Hopper, who is always picking on him. Whereas Kit finds someone functioning as his counterpart also in the real world (Askew), Blue creates his own double by himself, using his artistic abilities.

The Savage is everything what Blue is not able to be, but which lies inside him, hidden and dark and violent. He is Blue's wild and monstrous side, the one which is abruptly changing physically and psychologically, and which finds it difficult to use appropriate words for the turmoil that goes wild inside. Like Kit in his relationship with Askew, Blue is both frightened and attracted by this savage boy, and he soon acknowledges that «it was nearly like I was him and he was me» (Almond & McKean, 2008, p. 31).

At a certain point in the narration, Blue enters his own story with his little sister. The two boys look into each other's eyes and the Savage realises that Blue is a good boy. The Savage then imitates Blue and his sister and «he still felt like the savage but like somethin else as well» (Ivi: p. 38). This poetic image, told in a language that is also wild, slippery and stumbling, is a masterful metaphor for the reconciliation of the different parts of one's self. Only acknowledging and accepting the wilderness inside himself, Blue can thus find his true balance and finally come of age.

In the delicate and touching play entitled *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, first produced in London in 2001, a girl called Elaine Grew also has to deal with the painful death of her beloved father. Elaine's father's death causes her a great deal of

emotional turmoil: the girl is restless and stunned, she cannot follow the thread of her thoughts anymore and can no longer read or write. Like Mina in *Skellig*, Elaine begins to stay away from school, where teachers and classmates make hurtful comments to her, just like her neighbours do. Their voices, featuring in a chorus, «reflect attitudes towards difference and the wildness of creative imagination», as Rosemarie Ross Johnston notes (Johnston, 2003, p. 141). Indeed, to ease her pain and feel close to her father, Elaine uses her creative imagination to transform her bedroom – where she is being held – in her father's wild allotment, in which she spent much of her time with her highly imaginative parent, who called her «his Wild Girl». In this story again the wilderness – both external and interior – is the key to overcome a difficult situation and a metaphor for the emotional turmoil of a confused adolescent mind as well. The wilderness is the one that receives, heals and finally saves Elaine, whereas all the people around her, even her mother, think she has gone crazy and regard her as a dangerous, deranged girl. Elaine's father's allotment, with its tall grass, vines and wild bushes, welcomes her among its vegetables, and Elaine slips inside it, slithers through the grass like a snake, and gets happily lost. Here she sees her father again and once meets a Wild Boy, who has fur on his hands and who, like the Savage, cannot speak. He is perhaps a figment of her imagination or an imaginary friend, but he may also be interpreted as Elaine's *alter ego*, representing her wild, unchained and illogical side⁷.

Elaine's father often told her daughter that one of the most extraordinary allotments is the human mind, where you can grow everything. With her 'extraordinary mind' Elaine creates, together with Wild Boy, an imaginary allotment where they crawl like lizards, slither like snakes and work spells with spiders, and thus go very far, into the heart of wild nature. Wild Girl therefore functions as a metaphor for the loss of identity during adolescence and, when reunified with Wild Boy, as a metaphor of rebirth, which is only possible if you accept the presence of the extra-ordinary and the mystery in our ordinary world and if you find a wild place to stay, also within yourself.

⁷ Johnston argues that «[t]he grotesque hairy body of Wild Boy provokes ambivalence and ambiguity: is he a figment of Elaine's imagination? delusion? imaginary friend? alter ego? symbol of imaginative freedom? shadow? metaphor of the fertility of the untamed, and the barrenness of the safe and ordinary?» (Carnivals, the Carnavalesque, *The Magic Pudding*, and David Almond's *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: Toward a Theorizing of Children's Plays*. *Children's Literature in Education* 34, 2003, p. 143).

4. Stephen Rose and Billy Dean: Adolescents as Monsters

Set in 1960s Felling, *Clay* (2005) is Almond's darkest young adult novel, the one that most of all emphasises adolescents' otherness, depicting adolescent characters as monsters capable of exercising destructive power (see Grilli, 2012).

Fourteen-year-old Davie and his best friend Geordie are ordinary kids serving as altar boys at their local Catholic Church. One day, they meet Stephen Rose, a mysterious, marginal boy who was expelled from school because of the negative influence he exerted on his classmates. «Mother crackers, father dead, granddad wild» (Almond, 2005, p. 17), Stephen now lives with her aunt, whom everyone calls Crazy Mary, and it is rumoured that he howls in his shed and carries lumps of clay in the graveyard. Like Kit with Askew, Davie and Geordie are frightened by Stephen but at the same time they feel a deep attraction to him, who might be what they need to teach the local bully named Mouldy a lesson. For that reason, they befriend him, and after spending some time with him Davie acknowledges that «somehow we were meant to be together» (Ivi: p. 166).

Like Askew, Stephen is a very talented artist: he creates clay sculptures resembling human beings and angels and apparently brings them to life. Both horrified and fascinated by Stephen's power, Davie contributes to the «divine mission» the strange boy says he received by an angel: together, they fashion clay into a huge monster (whom they call Clay) and bring him to life, thereby claiming to be like God. But things get out of control the day after their creation, when Mouldy is found dead.

Almond never reveals whether Clay is real or imaginary. Is Clay perhaps the result of hypnotism and suggestion? Did it really kill Mouldy, or Stephen did? We will never know the answers to these questions. What we can deduce is that Stephen functions as Davie's counterpart, his dark, violent side, helping him accomplish what he alone would never do. As Latham puts it, Davie reveals his potential for monstrosity in that he too wants Mouldy dead, just like his friend Geordie does (Latham, 2006, p. 120). When Geordie tells Davie he had a dream that he killed Mouldy, Davie gets excited about the thing:

'I dreamed I killed Mouldy the other night.'

[...]

'Was there loads of blood?'

'Gallons. Blood and guts everywhere.'

'Great!'

'I did it here. I stabbed him in the heart, then I chopped his head off and I hoyed it in the pond' (*Clay* pp. 3-4).

Davie's bond with Stephen thus represents his encounter with his own 'other' dimension, the wild, nocturne, uncivilised, and monstrous one, which is nonetheless necessary for him to grow as civilised, decent person (see Grilli, 2012).

Whereas in the novels previously discussed adolescents' otherness – their wildness, monstrosity and creative imagination – is positive, since it generates awareness and serves as a means for the passage from childhood to adulthood, in *Clay* it is explored in its negative, pathological and destructive side. The figure of Stephen leaves no room for ambiguity: he is evil and there is no possible redemption for him. Davie's possibility of growth, then, lies in recognising the complete negativity of that boy (and of his own destructive personality) and to send him away from himself, which he eventually manages to do.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2011, *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Hissself* is a coming-of-age novel intended for mature readers and featuring a boy, Billy Dean, whose father says he is a monster. Born of an illegitimate relationship between a young hairdresser and the local priest, Billy lives locked up in a room, only surrounded by mice and dust like Skellig, and here he does «the Lord's work»: he writes on mice's skins with the blood of a bird and with his own blood as well, plays the Flood with his tiny plastic animals, and creates a hybrid creature from a mouse and a bird, bringing it finally to life. While God seems to be absent or distracted (Galli Laforest, 2016), Billy continues his demiurgic work, until at the age of thirteen he is left free to go out into the world.

Supported by the shamanic figure of an old lady, the adolescent Billy goes to the Underworld, like Kit, Mina and many other adolescent characters before him, and listens to the voices of the dead. He carries messages from beyond and heals the wounds of others, thereby becoming the «Aynjel Childe» (Angel Child) who «has dun the deeds of monsters» (Almond, 2011, p. 8). Struck by the words of his ambiguous father, who both loves and hates him, Billy really feels like a monster, hybrid and incomprehensible like his creatures, but his wildness and otherness never breaks out into evil, as in the case of Stephen Rose. When adolescent, indeed, Billy learns to master his powers, also through the creative activity of his writing, which is wild and suspended the way he is⁸. To complete his development and finally ma-

⁸Almond's linguistic experimentation, already started in *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *The Savage* (2008) and *My Name Is Mina* (2010), is here taken to the extreme, strongly reminding of the last, extraordinary and crazy literary adventure of Irish modernist author James Joyce, that «book of the night» which is *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Therefore, the language in *Billy Dean* also constitutes a metaphor for the liminal age of adolescence, together with the wildness and monstrosity of the main adolescent character.

ture into adulthood, Billy must undergo an extreme trial, that of blood and pain, the difficult choice between the life of his father and the one of his mother. As a contemporary Oedipus aware of his parricidal action, never foretold by some oracle but arose from a dramatic and urgent need, Billy Dean sinks his knife in the flesh and blood, in the pulsating body that determined his existence and finally wants to cause its end. He takes life with that same knife that sharpens the pencil from which words flow. This is not, however, a destructive work, but the completion of a rite of initiation that eventually marks the passage of Billy Dean to the status of adult. Like the heroes and heroines of the ancient fairy tales of the popular oral tradition, Billy Dean defeats the antagonist of his own existential story – the true, evil monster – and, since the antagonist here is his father, he metaphorically cuts off all ties to his childhood. Billy Dean is finally ready for the mournful separation, for the never painless detachment from his parental figures.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed some of the metaphors for adolescence through which David Almond has represented the otherness which characterises people at this age. Since his first published book for young readers (*Skellig*, 1998), Almond has been creating adolescent figures with both animal-like and angelic traits, associating them with strange, mysterious, sometimes monstrous creatures as well as with birds. Closely related to non-human or non-properly-human beings, Almond's adolescent characters are liminal in that they express a tension between pairs of opposites – childhood/adulthood, light/shadow, wild/civilised, innocent/guilty – on which depends the possibility of the narration itself (Negri, 2025). Almond's metaphors for adolescence thus communicate readers that adolescents are deeply and ontologically different from people of other stages of life, living in a suspended time between childhood and adulthood whose sense of precariousness, uncertainty and indefiniteness is depicted in the author's oeuvre mainly by the metaphors of wildness and monstrosity.

While experiencing rapid physical, psychological, and neurological changes (Palmonari, 2011; Steinberg, 2014; Mancaniello, 2018), Almond's adolescent characters make encounters that change their lives forever and mark the beginning of initiation rites which put them to the test. During these liminal phases, they are forced to confront their dark, monstrous side, that wilderness that lies inside them, as well as out of their self. The use of creative imagination (Johnston, 2003), that in most cases results in drawings, sculptures, and writing, func-

tions as a means for the construction of one's own identity and, consequently, for the transition to adulthood (Latham, 2006; Silva, 2024; Negri, 2025).

Alongside the metaphors of wildness and monstrosity, I have explored other metaphorical representations of the adolescents' otherness in Almond's oeuvre, namely the adolescents' space-time placement and the author's experimentation with language and form. As shown above, Almond's adolescent characters are often placed on high sites, on trees or tall buildings, or they are sent underground, into dark tunnels, niches, ancient collapsed mines, or sewers under the city. Therefore, I have argued that their direction is vertical, always suspended between land and sky. Moreover, Almond's adolescent characters «love the night», a peculiar time bearing a deep otherness, also in terms of possibilities of experience (Negri, 2025). As Negri explains, what is familiar during the day, when light illuminates everything, becomes 'other' at night, bringing with it both disturbing, uncanny feelings and wonder. Living a liminal territory between light and shadow, life and death, innocence and experience, adolescents in Almond's oeuvre also become unfamiliar both to themselves and to others (especially adults having to deal with them), and placing them in uncommon times and spaces enhances their otherness.

As for linguistic and formal experimentation, Almond's writing, always hermetic and mystical, features modernist traits that also function as metaphors for the precarious and suspended condition of adolescence. These traits are particularly evident in works like *The Savage, My Name is Mina*, and *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Himself*, the first two fitting into the category of hybrid novels theorised by Tandoi (2017).

The analysis of the metaphors for adolescence in some of Almond's books through the lens of the evidential paradigm and of contemporary theories of metaphors has contributed to draw up a profile of adolescent whose otherness finally proves to be an opportunity – the last one, according to neuroscientists (Steinberg 2014) – which encourages us to think about adolescence differently: not only as a time of problems, risks and vulnerability, but also as a period of enormous potential, in which the extraordinary inside and outside oneself is revealed.

References

- Almond, D. (1998). *Skellig*. Hodder Children's Books.
 Almond, D. (1999). *Kit's Wilderness*. Hodder Children's Books.
 Almond, D. (2000). *Counting Stars*. Hodder Children's Books.
 Almond, D. (2002). *Wild Girl, Wild Boy: A Play*. Hodder Children's Books.

- Almond, D. (2005). *Clay*. Hodder Children's Books.
- Almond, D. (2010). *My Name Is Mina*. Hodder Children's Books.
- Almond, D. (2011). *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Hissself*. Puffin Books.
- Almond, D. (2021). *Bone Music*. London: Hodder Children's Books.
- Almond, D. Personal website, <https://davidalmond.com/>
- Almond, D. & McKean, D. (2008). *The Savage*. Walker.
- Brown, T. (1995). 'Introduction'. In J. Joyce, *A portrait of the artist as a young man* (I. Harvey, Ed.). Cideb, pp. VII-LII.
- Chambers, A. (1992). *The Toll Bridge*. The Bodley Head.
- Eco, U. (2005). Metafora e semiotica interpretativa. In A.M. Lorusso (Ed.), *Metafora e conoscenza: Da Aristotele al cognitivismo contemporaneo*. Bompiani, pp. 257-290.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. Norton.
- Galli Laforest, N. (2016). David Almond. Il mondo dietro il mondo. In *Dove vanno le anatre d'inverno. Grandi scrittori per giovani adulti*, (Hamelin, Eds.). Hamelin, pp. 92-107.
- Gibbs, R.W. (ed.) (2008). *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R.W. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ginzburg, C. (1989). Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm. In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. John Hopkins University, pp. 96-125.
- Greenway, B. (2006). *Aidan Chambers: Master Literary Choreographer*. Scarecrow Press.
- Grilli, G. (2021). *Di cosa parlano i libri per bambini. La letteratura per l'infanzia come critica radicale*. Donzelli.
- Grilli, G. (2012). *Libri nella giungla. Orientarsi nell'editoria per ragazzi*. Carocci.
- Hamelin (Ed.) (2022). *David Almond. Oblò n. 6*. Hamelin APS.
- Hillman, J. (1999). *Puer aeternus*. Adelphi.
- Joosen, V., Anjirbag, M.A., Duthoy, L., Geybels, L., Pauwels, F. & Silva, E-L. (2024). *Age in David Almond's Oeuvre: A Multi-Method Approach to Studying Age and Life Course in Children's Literature*. Routledge.
- Johnston, R.R. (2003). Carnivals, the carnivalesque, *The magic puddin'*, and David Almond's *Wild girl, wild boy*: Toward a theorizing of children's plays. *Children's Literature in Education*, 34, pp. 131-146.

- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.
- Latham, D. (2006). *David Almond: Memory and Magic*. Scarecrow Press.
- Mancaniello, M.R. (2002) *L'adolescenza come catastrofe. Modelli d'interpretazione psicopedagogica*. ETS.
- Mancaniello, M.R. (2018). *Per una pedagogia dell'adolescenza. Società complessa e paesaggi della metamorfosi identitaria*. Pensa MultiMedia.
- Negri, M. (2025). Attraversare soglie. Il racconto come strumento di ricerca identitaria nella narrativa di David Almond. In F. De Giorgi, et al. (Eds.), *Passaggi di frontiera: La storia dell'educazione: confini, identità, esplorazioni*. Messina University Press, pp. 71-82.
- Palmonari, A. (ed.) (2011). *Psicologia dell'adolescenza*. Il Mulino.
- Steinberg, L. (2014). *Age of Opportunity. Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*. Harper Paperbacks.
- Stockwell, P. (2020). *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. Routledge.
- Tandoi, E. (2017). Hybrid novels for children and young adults. In *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 329-335.
- Tandoi, E. (2019). 'It's Not Just Writing': Negotiating Childness in Children's Literature Through Performance. *Children's Literature in Education*, 50 (1), pp. 76-89.
- Van Gennepe, A. (2012). *I riti di passaggio*. Bollati Boringhieri.
- Varrà, E. (2004). Cucire medaglioni: L'opera di David Almond. *Hamelin*, 11, pp. 24-29.

A Folk Tale as a Framework for Educational Exploration of ‘otherness’ – Biberče case¹

*Aleksandra Ilić Rajković*²

*Đurđa Maksimović*³

In this paper, we deal with the presentation of different interpretations of the Serbian folk fairy tale and the story of *Biberče*, as well as the analysis of ‘otherness’ as active participants in Biberče’s environment. Our goal is to explore the roles and positions of ‘otherness’ that appears in the dramatic text as parents, peers, and other adults. It was published for the first time in 1870, and it is, with its many interpretations and editions, present in children’s literature today. The folk tale tells about a boy born the size of a peppercorn. The main idea of this tale is that the strength of a man lies in his heart – that heroism, if it is strength without spirit, remains pure rawness and that a person’s self-confidence and persistence are the best way to achieve the set goal. To achieve the set goal, we will use the thematic analysis of the text. For the analysis, we will use the original text and its adaptation in the form of a dramatic text, which is intended for children of primary school age. It was performed for the first time in 1955, but it is still used today.

Keywords: a folk tale for children, otherness, educational content, drama in education, Biberče.

¹ Article is result of research done at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy, financially supported by the Ministry of science, technological development, and innovations (451-03-47/2023-01/200163).

² Associate Professor, avilic@f.bg.ac.rs

³ Ph. D. student, Scholarship holder of the Ministry of Science, Tehnological Development and Innovation of Serbia, petrovicdjurdja7@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Biberče is a folk tale and children's story published by Ana, the widow of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, under the title *Srpske narodne pripovijetke* (Serbian Folk Narratives) in 1870 as the second expanded edition in Vienna. Vuk Stefanović Karadžić is the most significant Serbian linguist of the 19th century, a reformer of the Serbian language, and a collector of folk literary work. *Srpske narodne pripovijetke* (Serbian Folk Narratives), collection of folk tales, in which *Biberče* is also published, were released after his death. Therefore, in the preface of this edition, it is stated that the fairy tales would have been more perfect if Vuk had published them during his lifetime, as he intended to further improve and refine them for printing. «Considering that this did not happen, it is stated that everyone should accept them as they were found in his manuscript, and if any mistakes are found, let everyone forgive and think that it is better that they were printed in this way than not at all» (*Karadžić, 1870*).

The original text tells the story of a little boy who was born the size of a grain of pepper. Hence, the fairy tale is named *Biberče* (meaning 'Little Pepper' in Serbian). The story begins with a woman who couldn't have children, so she prayed to God to grant her a child, even if it was as tiny as a grain of pepper. God fulfilled her wish, and she gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Biberče. At first, she didn't pay attention to his small size, but as his peers grew up, she became sad that her child remained the size of a pepper grain. One day, she dreamt that her son would grow up like all the other children, but her happiness was short-lived when Biberče told her that he had to go where he was instructed in the dream. He went to the imperial court and found the Emperor's daughter crying under a tree, because a nine-headed dragon had taken three golden apples that her father had ordered her to guard. Biberče went to retrieve the golden apples and succeeded in taking them from the dragon (we must not forget its size!). In order to seek revenge on the villagers, the dragon would take one girl every day, and then it was the Emperor's daughter's turn. Meanwhile, Biberče had grown as his mother's dream had foretold, saved the princess, and married her.

In the first part of our work, we explored various adaptations of the mentioned folk tale, from the original text to contemporary adaptations. Therefore, we have sought to showcase the dynamics, richness of interpretation, and continuous presence of the fairy tale *Biberče* in the educational context, as we consider it valuable and deserving of being passed on and potentially revived in the future in ways and under conditions that we cannot predict today (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022).

In the second part of the paper, we focused on the pedagogical analysis of the children's play text *Biberče*, specifically examining the theme of otherness as active participants in Biberče's environment, i.e., the others with whom he grows up and builds relationships. It is important to note that we did not delve into the magical and mythical aspects of the fairy tale, but solely focused on the people who have a significant influence on his upbringing. We believe this is important because when a child read or watch a fairy tale in the theatre, they identify with the roles, often the role of the main character, reflect on their own relationships, and attribute their own meanings to the fairy tale (Welsch, 2008). In addition to the child's role as a spectator, it is important to mention his participation in the dramatization as an actor. In schools, students often have stage plays, where they play the roles of actors, and in that sense they identify with the roles they play. Therefore, from birth, a person exists «in the world», and this relationship «with the world» is what defines them as human being (Bodroški-Spariosu, 2022, p. 28).

2. Various adaptations of the fairy tale *Biberče*

In this part of the work, we will illustrate the diversity of Biberče's appearances chronologically and in terms of genre, from the original version to the present day. We will highlight the main types of adaptations of this fairy tale over time and provide a more detailed explanation of these adaptations.

In the years following the release of the original version, we find data indicating that *Biberče* most commonly appears in the form of short prose and occasionally labeled as a fairy tale. This is prevalent from 1950 to 2000. An exception is the year 1942 when a masterfully executed *Biberče* comic book was published, subtitled «based on motifs from a folk tale». A year later, in early 1943, a continuation of the story was released as a separate volume with a significantly larger narrative than the original fairy tale, turning the comic into a serious series. Within a few days, all copies were sold out, indicating how much the stories told through pictures meant to children. Đorđe Lobačev, one of the most significant authors in the history of Serbian and Yugoslavian comics, is responsible for this masterful work. This fairy tale completes the cycle of Serbian fairy tales, a genre introduced to the world of comics by Lobačev. The comic is characterized by simple drawings, elegant dramaturgy, and holds not only anthological but also historical and cultural value. The author believed that such folk tales could be portrayed through film. Primarily intended for children, it aimed to stimulate their interest in culture and art while pointing out new paths and possibilities.

Unlike the original version, the author shapes the character Biberče in the context of World War II. Biberče is given attributes of an epic hero from traditional epic poetry, which reaches its peak in the most challenging historical circumstances that essentially inspired the artist to build his character based on similarities to the heroes from the poem⁴. The story told in this way points to new paths alongside well-established ones and encourages the development of interest in cultural heritage, considering that comics are considered a form of art and represent a significant medium in education.

Another fairy tale adaptation that deserves our attention in the context of our research subject is a dramatic text written by Ljubiša Đokić, a playwright and director, particularly known for children's shows. This adaptation introduces new characters that we haven't encountered before. They are Biberče's peers, one of whom is a good friend, while the other enjoys arguing. The play is written in the form of dialogue. It was first performed in 1955 and has been staged at the 'Boško Buha' theater in Belgrade since 1961. In this adaptation of the fairy tale, the author emphasizes Biberče's peers and the adults he spends time with. The writer wanted to show through dialogue that Biberče is aware of being different from others, that he wanted his peers to love and appreciate him, rather than judge him based on his appearance. Another aspect that further highlights the value of this children's play is its appearance in Braille in 1978.

From the first original version to modern adaptations for the 21st century, we find many differences in interpretations. Biberče, as the main character, appears in newer versions as a shepherd, as a poor boy living in the countryside or in the city. What is present in every version is his size, his dominant characteristic, and his distinctiveness compared to others. After the year 2000, contemporary authors often portray *Biberče* in the form of picture books and collections that encompass multiple Serbian folk tales. In late 2004, an exhibition titled *Children, Format, and Artistic Expression: 10 Years of the International Children's Art Colony 'Biberče'* was organized. The exhibition took place at the National Museum in Kruševac. Furthermore, in 2015, *Biberče* appeared in the form of an audio story. Additionally, it can be noted that in the Republic of Serbia, both state and private kindergartens bear the name *Biberče*.

Taking into account various historical, social, political, and educational changes and their impact on writers, interpretations of the original fairy tale text

⁴ Retrieved from <https://valjinaucionica.weebly.com/1041104810411045105610631045.html> [Last accessed: August 24, 2023].

have also changed in accordance with context and time. Regarding our topic of study, we agree with the authors (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022 according to: Schinkel, 2020) who argue that education represents a bridge between different generations, and in that sense, educational content (as the most valuable material and spiritual aspects of the world) is at its core (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022 according to: Gibbs & O'Brien, 2021; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019b). Generations of students may change, but what is valuable as educational content is still studied today. It is evident that people from different historical times, cultures, and spaces considered this fairy tale valuable and sought to preserve and pass it on to new generations (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022). In support of this, it is worth mentioning that the dramatic text *Biberče* is currently taught in the fifth grade within the primary education system in the Republic of Serbia, as part of the native language curriculum.

3. 'Otherness' in the children's play *Biberče*

Although there are numerous adaptations of fairy tales available, in this work, we have focused on the pedagogical analysis of a fairy tale adaptation as a dramatic text written by Ljubiša Đokić. Ljubiša Đokić has written dozens of plays for children's theater, which have achieved great success on Yugoslav stages and have been performed in numerous international tours. He was interested in working on scripts for educational and scientific television programs. His greatest artistic achievements were realized as a playwright for children's dramas, including *Biberče*, and he also published the book *Biberče* (1964). He has received multiple awards and recognition for his work⁵.

The significance of fairy tales began to be examined with the development of social sciences, while literature itself consistently preserved and nurtured fairy tales as a form that never departed from the everyday life of the people, later giving it an artistic format (Miljković-Pavlović, 2018). Fairy tales are characterized by various terms, such as «folk narrative, folkloric story, magical, extraordinary, or fairy story» (*Ibid.*, p. 482 according to: Vuković, 1989, p. 164). The modern way of life, accelerated development of science and technology, as well as achievements in many areas of today's society, have not surpassed human desire for the imaginary and fantastic (Tasić Mitić & Stojadinović, 2021). Fairy tales

⁵ Retrived from <https://teatroslov.mpus.org.rs/licnost.php?id=6121> 24.08.2023.

are said to be timeless because they nurture universal values (Miljković-Pavlović, 2018). Through the prism of magic and fantasy, fairy tales depict the relationship between humans and nature, other people, and society as a whole, as well as their relationship with themselves and their inner being (Tasić Mitić & Stojadinović, 2021). According to that, it represents the accumulation of human experiences in constructing an image of a person and the relationships they establish (Miljković-Pavlović, 2018). Considering the fact that fairy tales speak all «languages of the world», they educate a multicultural and cosmopolitan perspective while preserving the national identity of the child, who, among others, becomes acquainted with the fairy tales of their own people (Miljković-Pavlović, 2018, p. 482). This traditional literature for children nurtured their imagination and stimulated their fantasy. By addressing most of the essential questions children have, these stories have also become the «main agent of their socialization» (Betelhajm, 2015, p. 30). The fairy tale is presented in a straightforward and simple manner, without any demands on the listener. It does not make demands but instills hope for the future and promises a happy ending. The characters and events portrayed in fairy tales convincingly illustrate internal conflicts and also depict the resolutions of these conflicts, as well as the subsequent steps in development (Betelhajm, 2015, p. 32).

In the following text, we will focus on the pedagogical function of dramatized fairy tales and their significance in an educational context.

Dramatizations, improvisations, and role-playing can be inspired by stories from literature, poems, rhymes, and historical events (Stamenković, 2022). It is assumed that in this way, the fairy tale *Biberče* in its original version inspired the playwright Ljubiša Đokić to compose the text for the drama performance. Drama in education is defined in various ways: as a pedagogical approach, as a teaching method, and as an approach of contemporary pedagogy (Ćumura, 2019). Dorothy Heathcote, the founder of modern drama in education, emphasizes that through drama, any human content from any field can be explored, whether it is natural sciences, arts, or humanities. She believes that drama in education operates between theater as an art form and individuals who responsibly strive to live their lives. It is believed that fairy tales offer the opportunity to contemplate all the important questions of human society, regardless of nationality, skin color, or religion (Ćumura, 2019, according to: Tmačart, 2002, p. 25). Dramatic and theatrical arts are present in an educational context both as a separate subject (art itself or aesthetic education) and as a 'medium for learning' (educational tool) within other subjects specified by the curriculum. Furthermore, dramatic and theatrical techniques are applied for various purposes in many institutions or establishments (such as correctional facilities, social welfare institutions, etc.).

The educational power of drama as a methodological approach (educational tool, 'learning medium', or 'pedagogical medium') can be directed towards emphasizing: a deeper understanding of the themes and content outlined in the program and their connection to real-life events, prior experiences, and knowledge; elaboration of characters or situations from literature and comprehension of a specific event; speaking out and creating meaning; developing cognitive skills; fostering motivation and engagement in learning, as well as encouraging research and the pursuit of knowledge (Stamenković, 2022).

According to Radulović (2019), characters and living beings in fairy tales can be grouped into three main categories. The first category consists of humans, with the human being at the center of the fairy tale, and other groups are determined in relation to them. The second category, due to its prominent role in the genre, consists of animals. The third category comprises all mythological and fantastical beings, whether they appear as adversaries or helpers. The term 'fantastical' is used to describe beings that, with their attributes, are superior to the hero and, within a broader tradition, possess mythical qualities (such as dragons, serpents, fairies, etc.) (Radulović, 2009). In our analysis, we focused on the first category, which consists of the people surrounding the child, the main protagonist Biberče. In the analyzed fairy tale, each character that appears in Biberče's environment represents an important factor in his internal and external development. If we were to view children solely as beings in development, education would be reduced to the function of life and survival and would not consist of anything else. From a pedagogical standpoint, raising a child is not just a matter of growing up but growing up in the presence of others, which implies the shared life of children and adults (Bodroški-Spariosu, 2022 according to: *Pols & Berding*, 2018). Adults are not only there to support and assist when needed, and children are not autonomous and independent from the adult world (Bodroški-Spariosu, 2022). Therefore, in this dramatic text, we perceive 'otherness' as the main participants in Biberče's environment from a pedagogical perspective. In the following work, we will analyze the 'otherness' that arises through the relationships the main character builds with others in his environment, namely peers, mother, and grandfather.

The children's play *Biberče* consists of four acts. The first act has six scenes, the second act has eight scenes, the third act has ten scenes, and the final act has six scenes. The text of the play is written in the form of dialogue, and within the text, explanations (stage directions) are written in parentheses to assist with reading and role performance. The main characters are Biberče, his peers (Svadiša and Dobriša), Biberče's mother, and his grandfather (Stogodan).

The first active participants who appear in the play are peers. Two of Biberče's peers (Svadiša and Dobriša) have symbolic names that allow us to infer their character traits. Dobriša is a good friend, while Svadiša is a troublemaker. Through this relationship, peer comparison and rivalry among the boys are depicted, showcasing a desire to determine «who is stronger.» This comparison relates to sports competition, but the moment of 'victory' represents an important factor in peer acceptance if one becomes recognized. Svadiša mocks Biberče's appearance, but Biberče is aware of his differences compared to others. We must emphasize the significance of this situation in a child's development. Biberče is aware of his own size (he is physically small) but also aware of the size of his peers (they are physically big), and through this scene of sports competition, the writer emphasizes that Biberče wants to be accepted and appreciated by those he is growing up with, just as he is. In the case of Biberče, his small stature is emphasized, but on the other hand, his extraordinary strength emerges (Radulović, 2009). The other boy in the scene acts as a mediator, attempting to maintain group dynamics by accepting Biberče. Through his role, the author aims to highlight problem-solving without conflict. Observing this scene, each child will not experience the content in an identical or mirrored form, but they will undergo an internal transformation through «recognizing the relationship between the situation, behavior, and consequences, which they will incorporate into their behavioral repertoire» (Miljković-Pavlović, 2018 according to: Živković, 2004, p. 248). This allows children to explore their perspective through the characters, create their own meanings of the folk tale, redefine their own roles (Welsch, 2008), and develop social skills.

The other participant mentioned in the text is Biberče's mother. The mother, portrayed as a significant role in every child's upbringing, is depicted as the bearer of a 'moral compass' and expresses expectations for Biberče to respect it. Her approach towards Biberče is shown through her care for her child, constantly emphasizing his difference from others in terms of his personal weakness. We interpret this in the context of her concern for him, as he is physically small and there is a possibility that someone might harm him as he is, lacking sufficient strength to defend himself. Therefore, the mother in the scene is presented as a guardian of norms and an initiator of building relationships without conflict and violence. If that is not possible, she is the initiator of withdrawal from those relationships. In the continuation, we transmit that scene in its entirety:

Mother (she is looking at his scratch): You need to understand: they are stronger than you. You see how well they know how to scratch.

Biberće: And he, in the same way, got what he deserved.

Mother: It is unfortunate when there are conflicts among you.

Biberće: His maliciousness is to blame for all of this: constantly threatening and provoking trouble. He brags in front of everyone: yesterday he said he could beat me with two fingers. I showed him that it's not quite like that.

Mother: In the future, son, do it like this: if someone starts threatening and chasing you, kindly ask them to move out of your way. If they refuse and are eager for a fight, it would be best to avoid them, as you can see for yourself where arguments lead. Don't let this happen to you again.

Biberće: I thought that fighting was a better way. But, well, let it be according to your will (Đokić, 1955, pp. 4-5).

Bettelheim (Betelheim, 2015) argues that children need ideas on how to «organize their inner house and, based on that, be able to organize their lives» (Betelhajm, 2015, p. 11). These ideas serve as a moral compass that subtly conveys the benefits of moral behavior, not abstractly, but through what appears visible, correct, and therefore meaningful (*Ibid.*). In our example, the mother wanted to achieve this goal with her child. In one scene, when Biberće sets off to fight the dragon, the separation and channeling of unpleasant emotions arising from the separation from the mother are depicted. However, precisely because such action is not within the realm of moral behavior that the mother expects him to adhere to. The scene describes a memory of the father, where Biberće recalls stories of his father's bravery. This leads to Biberće identifying himself as a boy with what his father was like when he was young. Betelhajm (Bruno Betelheim) believes that fairy tales often depict «the inner problems of human beings and correct solutions to their difficulties in any society» (Betelhajm, 2015: 11). Therefore, if children are allowed their inner possibilities, they will learn to cope with the conditions of the society they live in (*Ibid.*). The question remains open as to why the father does not appear as an active participant, but only as a memory, specifically in terms of his bravery?

Then, in Biberće's environment, his grandfather appears, an old man from the village. The grandfather's name is Stogodan, which in Serbian means that he is a hundred years old. The grandfather takes on the role of someone who cares for Biberće, shows him respect, but also presents a challenge to him. He is the initiator of 'venturing' into the world of fantasy through the stories he tells about the dragon and the princess. The grandfather is portrayed as a man of tradition, and unlike the mother who is the bearer of the 'moral compass', the grandfather motivates Biberće. Through storytelling, he introduces Bib-

erče to the realm of further development, which Biberče had not experienced until then. The grandfather does this by telling stories about the execution of all the girls in the village by the dragon and that soon it will be the Emperor's daughter's turn:

Stogodan: There will be no end to these misfortunes until a stronger hero is found to slay the dragon.

Biberče: So, the emperor's daughter will suffer?

Stogodan: Yes, she will, unless the emperor brings forth a brave hero by Wednesday.

Biberče: But aren't there people capable of heroic deeds?

Stogodan: They are rare when it comes to matters of life (Đokić, 1955, p. 10).

Based on the provided context, we can conclude that the relationship with the grandfather is portrayed as a mentorship, encouraging Biberče's development. Furthermore, we can observe that throughout all the aforementioned relationships that Biberče builds with others, the principle of freedom dominates, specifically freedom in relation to others, which he 'conquers' despite his differences, even though children are not independent from the adult world (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022). Fairy tales play an important role in suggesting that a fruitful and good life is within reach, despite all the obstacles along the way – but only if one does not withdraw from those struggles, which are necessary for building a true identity (Betelhajm, 2015, p. 30). By telling stories in this manner, they promise children that «if they dare to embark on a daunting and arduous quest, benevolent forces will come to their aid and they will succeed in their endeavor. On the other hand, those overwhelmed by fear of taking risks must settle for a monotonous existence» (*Ibid.*). It is within this realm that Biberče 'conquers' freedom through his relationships with others.

Through the messages in the dramatic text, the writer convincingly explained the power that lies within a person and the unwavering will to pursue their intentions, while constantly acknowledging the acceptance of their own uniqueness compared to others and the challenges we encounter on a daily basis.

4. Conclusion remarks

Education always emerges with a love for valuable things that exist in this world and with the hope that they will be preserved and protected (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022 according to: Arent, 2016). Based on this standpoint, we wanted to draw

attention to the dynamism and richness of the fairy tale Biberče through the presentation of various adaptations over time. That is why we first focused on various adaptations of the fairy tale over time, to show that it has been preserved and shared with those who were just coming in the hope of generating interest, reflection, and understanding in their own way, thus reviving it once again (Bodroški Spariosu, 2022 according to: Marin, 2020; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019a; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019b). The richness of its interpretation speaks to this, while it is up to us to preserve it from oblivion and through this transmission, engage future generations in contemplating it and potentially discovering new ways and paths for its further dissemination. On the other hand, through a pedagogical analysis of 'otherness' as active participants in Biberče's environment, we aimed to highlight the value of the dramatic text in the educational system. This is further confirmed by the fact that the play was first performed in 1955. and is still included in the curriculum of primary education in the Republic of Serbia, specifically in the fifth grade. This indicates its longstanding presence in the educational system. With the desire to preserve this fruitful educational content, we attempted to present it from a pedagogical perspective and potentially inspire similar research endeavors.

References

- Betelhajm, B. (2015). *Značenje bajki*. Nova knjiga.
- Bodroški Spariosu, B. (2022). Povratak obrazovanju kao pedagoški odgovor na korona krizu. In Ž. Krnjaja, M. Senić Ružić & Z. Milošević (Eds.), *Obrazovanje u vreme krize i kako dalje*. Univerzitet u Beogradu Filozofski fakultet; Institut za pedagogiju i andragogiju; Pedagoško društvo Srbije, pp. 19-33.
- Ćumura, Lj. (2019). In M. Lončar-Vujnović (Ed.), *Nauka bez granica II: 3. Pristupi u obrazovanju*. Univerzitet u Prištini Filozofski fakultet, pp. 347-359.
- Đokić, Lj. (1955). *Biberče. Pozorišni komad za decu u stihovima u IV čina sa prologom – prema narodnoj pripovetki*. Dečja knjiga.
- Karadžić, A. (1870). 'Srpske narodne pripovijetke' koje je skupio I na svijet izdao Vuk Stef. Karadžić: (drugo umnoženo izdanje). L. Sommera.
- Miljković-Pavlović, A.(2018). Bajka u funkciji kultivisanja dečje igre. In S. Marinković (Ed.), *Jezik, kultura, obrazovanje*. Univerzitet u Kragujevcu Pedagoški fakultet u Užicu, pp. 481-490.

- Muzej pozorišne umetnosti Srbije (2017). *Ljubiša Đokić*. Retrieved from <https://teatroslov.mpus.org.rs/licnost.php?id=6121>
- Radulović, N. (2009). *Slika sveta u srpskim narodnim bajkama*. Institut za književnost i umetnost.
- Stamenković, I. (2022). *Drama kao metodski pristup u obrazovanju vaspitača za refleksivnu praksu* (doktorska disertacija). NaRDUS (123456789/13003)
- Svetionik – Biberče. Retrived from <https://valjinaucionica.weebly.com/1041104810411045105610631045.html>
- Tasić Mitić, I. & Stojadinović, A. (2021). Problemi recepcije bajke u razrednoj nastavi. *Uzdanica*, 18(1), pp. 339-349. <https://doi.org/10.46793/Uzdanica18.1.339T>
- Welsch, J. (2008). Playing Within and the Beyond Story: Encouraging Book-Related Pretend Play. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(2), pp. 138-148. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.62.2.5>
- Zrnić, M. (1946). *Biberče*. Prosveta.

***The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza – a novel
that reflects on otherness and stimulates discussion
about its ideal reader**

Diana Njegovan

Given the great importance of the perception of the Other, *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza shows its importance as an anti-war novel through the representation of otherness. Despite the existing interpretations of Tomizza's novel, there is no hypothesis focusing on the concept of otherness in this novel, and there is no explanation of the age of the ideal reader. In fact, the novel is published as a children's book, while its content requires a more mature reader capable of fully understanding its context.

The paper will draw on Tomizza's novel and include a study of the book's ideal reader. Since the novel is available in Croatian translation, and analyzed by Croatian critics, the paper will explore which publishers in Italy and Croatia have published the novel and how librarians and publishers see the ideal reader of the book. Written in 1957 and published by Mondadori in 1965, the novel, which was awarded the *Premio Selezione Campiello*, describes World War II in Istria from the point of view of a group of children who think it is a game and then realize its fatal consequences, like Pin from *The Path to the Spider's Nests* by Italo Calvino. We will discuss here the otherness of the world of an innocent child in the conditions of war and the otherness of the boy Stefano, the protagonist of Tomizza, whose family distinguishes him from the other children. This is what Tomizza experiences as a child. Tomizza also experiences war, thereby some critics have written about the autobiographical elements that Tomizza weaves into the text of the novel.

We expect that this work will contribute to the understanding of the world of children under war conditions and remind us of the importance of peace, tolerance, and acceptance of the Other.

Keywords: Tomizza, otherness, children's literature

1. Introduction

World War II is known as the greatest devastating event in the history of mankind. There are numerous literary works that deal with this subject and convey a strong anti-war message. Fulvio Tomizza's literary production is based on the trauma of exile¹ caused by World War II.

Fulvio Tomizza is an Italian-Croatian-Slovenian and Central European author whose literary work has been translated into twenty languages and awarded prestigious international literary prizes. This article focuses on *The Fifth Season*, originally written in Italian in 1957 and published in Croatian by Edition Hit Junior, a youth publisher, in 1990. This fact raises the question of who can be the ideal reader of the novel: adults who know the historical background of the two world wars, or young readers, as the Croatian publisher indicates, confirming that the protagonist of the novel is a boy.

Many researchers have dealt with the literary production of Fulvio Tomizza, but only Sanja Roić² has dedicated herself to the fact that Tomizza is also a writer for children and young people. She also pointed out that *The Fifth Season* was published in Croatia as juvenile literature, as it was the first Italian edition in 1965, while afterward, Italian publishers published the novel as adult literature in later editions (Roić, 2006, p. 206; Roić, 2019, p. 132). In this paper, we will study the Italian, Croatian, and Slovenian libraries and the classification of Tomizza's novels to find out who is the ideal reader for the novel.

Tomizza's novel can also be compared to *The Path to the Spider's Nests* by the famous Italian writer Italo Calvino, published in 1947. Both novels have a boy as the protagonist, who describes the war from the perspective of a child. War is very different from the point of view of an innocent child, and for this reason we will focus on and examine the otherness³ in the two novels.

¹The term was previously used by Marianna Deganutti. See Deganutti, 2018.

²One chapter of Sanja Roić's monograph *Fulvio Tomizza i sudbina granice* is named *Tomizza, pisac za djecu i mlade*, which means *Tomizza, a children and youth writer*. (Roić, 2019, pp. 132-237) See also Roić, 2006, pp. 206-215.

³To learn more about the concept of otherness, see Njegovan, 2023 b, pp. 126, 129; Njegovan, 2023 a, pp. 40-41, 45. See also Njegovan, 2023 a 45-49, 52-55; Njegovan,

We hope that this work will help us understand the world of children, as depicted in the novels *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza and *The Path to the Spider's Nests* by Italo Calvino, in the conditions of the World Wars.

2. *The Fifth Season*

The novel *La quinta stagione* or *The Fifth Season* was written in 1957 and published in 1965⁴, and won an important Italian prize named *Premio Selezione Campiello* (A.A., 2009 b, p. 73).

Literary critics agree that World War II is presented through Stefano's eyes (A.A. 2009 a, p. 56; Deganutti, 2018, p. 29; Nižić 1996, p. 59), and this, according to Claudio Varese, is the novelty of this book in relation to the literary work of Tomizza (Bellucci, 2000, p. 9).

The novel is set in the Istrian village of Materada in the period between 1943 and the end of World War II⁵, as Marco Neirotti (1979, pp. 62, 64) and Živko Nižić (1996, p. 60) explained, in the period before Istrian exile⁶. Maria Claudia Bellucci (2000, p. 45) explains that reading *The Fifth Season* helps understand the rest of Tomizza's production. Roić identifies «the fifth season» with the period of war depicted in the novel⁷. Nedjeljko Fabio (1977, pp. 119-120) states that *The Fifth Season* is not a war or historical novel, since World War II serves only as a background for the description of the protagonist's events.

Marco Neirotti (1979, p. 63) noted three themes in the novel. The first is World War II, which is seen and understood by the adults, but not by Stefano and the other children. The second theme is life in Istria during the war, and the third theme is Tomizza's autobiography, reflected in Stefano's character. Maria Claudia Bellucci (2000, p. 8), on the other hand, quotes Walter Pedullà, who sees

2023 b, 133, 135-137, 141-142.

⁴ Aliberti, 2001, p. 43; Deganutti, 2018, p. 29; Modena, 2014, p. 123; Neirotti, 1979, p. 62; Nižić, 1996, p. 61.

⁵ A.A., 2009a, p. 56; Aliberti, 2001, pp. 42-43; Roić, 2014, p. 34; Fabio, 1977, p. 119; See also Nižić, 1996, p. 57.

⁶ Neirotti, 1979, pp. 62, 64; Nižić, 1996, p. 60.

⁷ Roić, 2014, p. 37. See also Aliberti, 2001, p. 43; Fabio, 1977, p. 119; Nižić, 1996, p. 57; Roić, 2019, pp. 7, 201.

only two dominant themes. The first is represented by the historical movements during World War II, the second is private and individual.

The protagonist is Stefano Marcovich, a boy who does not understand what the war is but reenacts it in his often violent games with other children in an Istrian village. This allows Fulvio Tomizza to portray life during World War II from the perspective of a child.

Stefano's father Marco is a rich Italian and joins the fascist party to maintain his trading business, although he does not share these political ideas. His influence in the local community and his wealth allow him to let his son skip the last two grades of elementary school and enroll him in a seminary, where young Stefano will go at the end of the novel with the prospect of becoming a priest.

Aliberti, Deganutti and Neirotti see the protagonist as an *alter ego* of Fulvio Tomizza⁸. In fact, Tomizza's autobiographical experience is reflected in the novel⁹.

Fulvio Tomizza was born in the Istrian village of Materada, in a wealthy family. In order to save young Fulvio from the war and possible conscription into the army, his father made him skip the last grades of elementary school and sent him to a seminary in Koper¹⁰, as did Stefano's father in the novel.

This is why Živko Nižić defines the book as Tomizza's autobiographical Istrian novel¹¹.

Deganutti quotes and translates Fulvio Tomizza's words which confirm his autobiographical experiences of World War II visible in the novel, and we can also see that the following quotes show a connection between narrated events and Tomizza's language, who inserts Croatian words into Italian text. This device, as to Marianna Deganutti (2018, pp. 120, 129), corresponds to the first phase of Tomizza's literary production, with the language that depicts Istrian land:

With *La quinta stagione* [*The Fifth Season*], by immersing myself in the pure childhood of the native environment at first saved and then shaken by the war, I was perhaps able to express the maximum adhesion to the composite reality

⁸ Aliberti, 2001, p. 42; Deganutti, 2018, p. 29; Fabio, 1977, p. 119; Neirotti, 1979, p. 62.

⁹ A.A., 2009a, p. 56; Aliberti, 2001, p. 43; Bellucci, 2000, p. 44.

¹⁰ This autobiographical fact appears also in other Tomizza's novels. Like for instance *Il male viene dal Nord: Il romanzo del vescovo Vergerio* (*Evil Comes from the North: The Novel of Bishop Vergerio*) and *L'albero dei sogni* (*The Tree of Dreams*), see Njegovan, 2023 a, pp. 43, 45-46, 58, Njegovan, 2023 b, pp 125, 134-135.

¹¹ Nižić, 2003, pp. 27, 40; Nižić, 1996, pp. 7, 10, 60-61.

of the parish, especially in evoking the places dear to us boys and chosen for our games that parodied the war: the grassy area behind the houses, namely the intimate *rodina* where among other things the wheat was threshed (in Croatian *ràditi* means both to be born and bear fruit), the narrow paths of Vidia that hid a karst pit called *fòiba*, a very small pitch for football, before mysterious blacksmith's shop (in the two languages *kovàc*) that we called *covaztia*. In Bolzen exists a *schmideria* and in Klagenfurt a *kovàhous*)¹².

3. The Otherness

As we can notice, the world of children is the Other before the world of adults, and is contrasted with the events of World War II. This initial thesis stimulates research on otherness¹³, and *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza represents a new series of suggestions for the discussion.

The novel depicts the events of the war from the point of view of children who simulate war in their games. Svane is the poorest boy in the village, and in the attempt to prove himself to Other, richer children, Svane harms himself (Tomizza, 1965, pp. 13-14). In similar games, Dina, a poor girl who works as a servant in the protagonist's house, is injured. Her leg has been wounded by a gunshot. Because of this, the father beats the protagonist. Stefano and his father are seen as the Others. Stefano is not sure if he wants to be like his father, who beats him out of fear of war:

¹² Deganutti, 2018, p. 130. More information about Tomizza's language and style can be found at Fabio, 1977, pp. 146-147, and Neirotti, 1979, pp. 126-127.

¹³ In the paper *L'imagologia di Fulvio Tomizza*, Sanja Roić (2014, pp. 37-38) writes about the social, class, national, and ideological differences between the characters in the novel and about Tomizza's multilingualism, since in the novel he uses not only the Italian language but also Slovenian, Croatian, and a Chakavian dialect, with «sometimes the lexemes of the Other coexisting» in the languages mentioned. Živko Nižić in his monograph *Kolizijske kulture u prozi Fulvija Tomizze* writes about the oppositions between subject(s) and history, where history is determined by the war conflicts and the Istrian exile that followed the World War II. He also mentioned a particular Stefano's position as a rich boy, where Stefano is seen as a young Fulvio Tomizza, whose father with Yugoslav communism will lose property. (See Nižić, 1996, pp. 60-62). Maria Claudia Bellucci (2000, p. 33) writes that *The Fifth Season* represents the antagonisms caused by the war in Tomizza's family.

E Stefano, d'un tratto gli lesse negli occhi che aveva paura della guerra. Lo picchiava perché aveva usato un'arma, prestatagli poi da uno come Villi che più volte gli aveva detto era meglio lasciar perdere. Non voleva dunque fosse un giorno anche lui come suo padre, un fascista?¹⁴

The quote refers to an autobiographical fact concerning Fulvio Tomizza's father. He was also a fascist who, in order to keep his trading business, joined the party without being of that opinion. This got him into trouble with the Yugoslav communists after World War II. There is another autobiographical element. After the emigration of Tomizza's father to Trieste in Italy, the young Fulvio, initially attracted by communism, decided to stay in the former Yugoslavia to continue his education and immigrated to Italy only after his father's death. This fact reflects Stefano's doubt about whether he wants to be like his father, and the novel shows that the protagonist's father was not really a fascist. He refused to wear a uniform and instead wore only a black tie, citing the heat as an excuse:

Inforcarono la bicicletta e fuori Umago, ormai fra le viti, Stefano gli chiese: «perché non ti sei messo in divisa, papà?»

Rispose un po' sbuffando la fatica: «faceva troppo caldo». Dopo u'altra pausa aggiunse: «E non ho la cravatta nera?» (Tomizza, 1965, p. 42).

The protagonist's vision of the political events of the time is clarified by the following sentence, in which he knows very well that Mussolini, the Italian king and the pope have real power, and he learns it by seeing the portrait in his own living room:

E sopra a tutti stavano il Duce, il re e il Papa, come nel quadro che pendeva in tinello; sopra di loro restava che Iddio (Tomizza, 1965, p. 47).

In this novel, the protagonist's father is depicted as «il fior fiore degli umonini» or the «crème de la crème» of his society:

¹⁴ Tomizza, 1965, p. 31. Živko Nižić (1996, p. 57) stated that *The Fifth Season* presents adults in fear of the war.

Stefano voleva sapere se adesso la guerra l'avrebbero fatta ai poveri, se in essa avrebbe combattuto solo «il fior fiore» degli uomini, papà e santolo Cosma forse i soli per Materada (Tomizza, 1965, pp. 69-70).

Stefano's father is even wealthier and can dress better than some people in Trieste. Stefano notes that on Sundays his father was better dressed to go to church than some people in Trieste:

Non tutta la gente appariva ben vestita; addirittura rari erano gli uomini che, pur essendo signori, ricordavano papà di domenica quando correva a Materada per prendere l'ultima messa (Tomizza, 1965, p. 46).

On the other hand, Stefano's visit to Trieste shows the contrast between the city and the village, where there are different costumes. Stefano notes that the Triestines are above all others: «Qui la gente era al sopra di tutti.» (Tomizza, 1965, p. 47) or at least above Istrian villagers like him. The Triestines, in his opinion, are citizens by their attitude of not greeting other people on the street:

Erano signori in altro: nel fatto che non si salutavano né parlavano per strada (Tomizza, 1965, p. 46).

This novel only introduces the subject of Fulvio Tomizza's father to the regime, and Tomizza continues to write about the «trauma of exile» and his father's persecutions during his lifetime. In *The Fifth Season*, the only mention is that the protagonist's father has been warned to «choose a better friend» or avoid the Communists, who will end up persecuting, imprisoning, and exiling Tomizza's father.

As Živko Nižić (1996, p. 63) noted, *The Fifth Season* is often called a neorealist novel because there is a visible division between «good and evil, neo-fascism and fascism, poverty and wealth».

Not only the protagonist's father is seen as the Other¹⁵, but also the mother. When the protagonist is beaten by his father, the mother does not cry or show any emotion, which is why he sees her as the Other:

¹⁵ Marco Neirotti (1979, p. 118) noted that *The Fifth Season* represents the beginning of the antagonisms between the son and the father described in Tomizza's later novels, such as *The Tree of Dreams*. To find more about the conflicts between the father and son in *L'albero dei sogni* (*The Tree of Dreams*) by Fulvio Tomizza see Njegovan, 2023 a,

Mamma rammendava una calza e non alzò gli occhi per rispondere al saluto. Stefano, singhiozzando ormai sulle ginocchia di Eustachio, pensò che se fosse stata una donna come le altre si sarebbe messa a piangere (Tomizza, 1965, p. 32).

The mother is seen as the Other also by the children in the village because of her language, in which she mixes Croatian and Italian, and also because she does not wear a black handkerchief as the other women in the village do:

Rispose: 'Dèzza', burlandola per il suo diverso modo di parlare slavo. La tenevano a distanza anche perché non portava il fazzoletto nero come le altre (Tomizza, 1965, p. 15).

The protagonist, on the other hand, sees one villager as the Other because she spoke to him in Croatian, while the protagonist's father is a member of the fascist party and expects people to speak to him in Italian:

Cecilia Radinka che portava la broda ai maiali gli disse appena. 'Addio, moli'. Come si permetteva di parlargli in slavo? (Tomizza, 1965, p. 34)

The most important and obvious example of otherness is found in the life of Stefano. From the beginning, he had a different life from the other villagers. He came from a wealthy family, while the other boys were poor. His family had a poor girl, Dina as a maid, and his father made him skip two grades of school to save him from the dangers of war, and at the end of the novel he has the opportunity to leave the village to attend a seminary and become a priest. So he wonders if his life was an exception because of the war or because he had a special destiny:

Perché a lui non era consentito di passare attraverso il regolare svolgersi delle cose? Nato in gennaio, era stato mandato a scuola con la classe dell'anno precedente e venne a trovarsi in banco con ragazzi ripetenti persino di quattro anni

pp. 39, 43-49, 55, 58. This autobiographical fact appears also in Tomizza's oeuvre, and we will mention the novel *Il male viene dal Nord: Il romanzo del vescovo Vergerio* (*Evil Comes from the North: The Novel of Bishop Vergerio*), see Njegovan, 2023 b, pp. 123-126, 135, 137-138.

più vecchi, mentre da allora verso i propri coetanei aveva sentito un pungente senso di nostalgia e rimorso. La sua esistenza persistentemente veniva a costruire un'eccezione, si sviluppava com un terreno poco stabile, condizionata da modi e avvenimenti casuali. Era per via della guerra o doveva scorgere in questa sua particolarità il segno di un destino? (Tomizza, 1965, pp. 77-78. See also p. 33).

To sum up, Tomizza's novel is rich in examples of otherness. There are not only contrasts between children and adults, war and peace, and rich and poor people, but also between the children themselves, who can be rich or poor. Stefano's life is special, he is an exception in his own eyes. A boy, from a wealthy family, skips two grades of elementary school to be saved from the war and continue his education. His special life is shaped by the influence of his father, who is one of the most important men in the village, but this father is also seen as the Other, from Stefano's point of view, and he will become the Other in front of the communist regime, as it can be seen in other novels written by Fulvio Tomizza. So we can also discuss contrasts between fascism and communism, and between victims and prosecutors. It is worth mentioning that Stefano also sees his mother as the Other, which introduces another contrast between kindness and indifference.

4. Comparison between *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza and *The Path to the Spider's Nests* by Italo Calvino

In the introduction to his novel *The Path to the Spider's Nests*, a neorealist novel, Italo Calvino explains that he has experienced the reality he lived through, the war, from the perspective of a child named Pin (Calvino, 1976, pp. 7, 19, 21).

Pin is an orphan whose mother has died, and after her death, his father abandoned Pin and his sister. His sister is a prostitute, while Pin tries to make friends, but the other children do not like him because he is a «friend of adults» whose way of talking they do not understand; on the other hand, even the adults have reservations about Pin. To prove himself, Pin steals a pistol from a German soldier, his sister's lover. Because of this he is put in prison, but thanks to Lupo Rosso, a 17-year-old communist, another political prisoner, he manages to escape. Pin fights in the war with other communists and escapes from them without being caught. He decides to be alone in his secret place, a «spider's nest», believing

that when he grows up he will be as cruel as the others were to him. However, a man with the nickname Cugino finds him and offers him his friendship.

The otherness in Pin's character is made clear by the fact that he is rejected by both the children and the adults. In all the people he meets he finds a trace of otherness, for they possess «something disgusting like worms, and something good,» which attracts him to be their friend:

In tutti gli esseri umani per Pin c'è qualcosa di scifoso come in vermi e qualcosa di buono e caldo che attira la compagnia (Calvino, 1976, p. 104).

Otherness is one of the concepts that allows a comparison between the works of Calvino and Tomizza. Both neorealistic novels are set during World War II and were created thanks to the authors' experience of war, choosing a boy as a protagonist to portray the events of the war from the perspective of a child.

Both Pin and Stefano initially view the war as a kind of game¹⁶. Pin steals a pistol from a German soldier and is imprisoned, while Stefano wounds Dina with a friend's pistol by accident. Pin steals the pistol and is imprisoned, while Stefano is beaten by his father.

However, there are also differences between the two protagonists. Stefano provides food to German soldiers who pass through his village¹⁷, while Pin is imprisoned by them. Stefano may see the members of his family as the Others, but they are present in his life and committed to his education, while Pin has no mother and his father has abandoned him, while his sister ends up becoming a member of SS.

Stefano and his family belong to the elite of society, while Pin is abandoned by both his father and the other children. In the end, Pin manages to find a friend, while Stefano leaves his native village to continue his education and become a priest, the friend of men and God¹⁸.

¹⁶ Escaping from prison and hiding from the soldiers, Pin thinks it is a game of hide and seek. (Calvino, 1976, p. 77).

¹⁷ Carmelo Aliberti (2001, p. 44) writes that Stefano gets familiar with the German soldiers and has compassion for them. Marco Neirotti (1979, p. 66) notes that the German soldiers arouse curiosity in Stefano because they belong to the reality of war, which contrasts with the peaceful reality that Stefano had in his village before the war.

¹⁸ Maurice Actis-Grosso (2014, p. 162) writes that Tomizza in his literary works considers the Istrian exile as the absence of the god. Živko Nižić (2003; 1996) is of the same opinion.

5. The ideal reader of *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza

The Fifth Season by Fulvio Tomizza is a novel whose protagonist is a boy, but as we have seen, the novel's main theme is the Second World War and the life of Istrian boys during that time. The novel is complex and even contains an allusion to a rape scene¹⁹, so we can discuss who is the ideal reader of Tomizza's book.

To answer this question, we have studied university and general libraries in Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia, paying particular attention to the libraries in Trieste, Umag, and Koper, because in these three cities, *Forum Tomizza* is held. It is an annual event created in the year 2000 in honor of Fulvio Tomizza, and his literary work²⁰.

The survey in Slovenian libraries²¹ revealed that there is no Slovenian translation of Tomizza's novel. Slovenian libraries have Italian versions of the book, which are available in Ljubljana, Koper, Izola, Piran, Nova Gorica and Trieste. Four of seven bibliographic units categorize the book as «fiction for adults», one defines the book as «short prose»²², and the other two editions define the book as a «novel». The libraries also have a Croatian version of the book, which is defined as a «novel for school-age children between the ages of 9 and 14». The novels are available in Koper, Maribor, Murska Sobota, Nova Gorica and Ljubljana.

Croatian libraries have both the Italian original and the Croatian translation published by Hit Junior, a publisher of «youth literature»²³. The catalogue does not indicate the locations of Italian editions, but it shows that the Croatian edi-

¹⁹ See Tomizza, 1965, p. 93.

²⁰ Forum Tomizza Istrapedia, <https://www.istrapedia.hr/hr/natuknice/1942/forum-tomizza>. See also Roić, 2019, p. 199.

²¹ <https://tinyurl.com/bdmz3xz2>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/1002505>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/4724274#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/17774178#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/199041795#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/1500221#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/5962033#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/14095409#full>, <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/si/sl/bib/21848064#full>

²² We will disagree with the definition of the book as short prose. It is a novel.

²³ Sanja Roić noted that both *Materada* and *The Fifth Season* are published in Croatian by the Znanje publishing house in Zagreb in the Hit edition (Roić, 2006, p. 197). On the other hand, both *Materada* and *The Fifth Season* are published in Italian by the Milanese publishing house Mondadori, <https://tinyurl.com/3m8auph6>, <https://tinyurl.com/387n7fkf>, <https://tinyurl.com/2z9vd77j>

tion is available in the following cities: Drniš, Knin, Novi Marof, Osijek, Požega, Sisak, Split and Šibenik²⁴.

The General Library in Umag owns the Italian edition and also Croatian and German translations of Tomizza's novel. The original is categorized as «Italian literature/literary production in Italian», and the German translation is categorized as «Italian literature in German»²⁵, while the Croatian translation is categorized as «book for young people (12 to 15 years)»²⁶.

Italian Catalogue of the National Library Service (Catalogo del Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale) showed that Italian libraries possess Tomizza's Italian text as well as Croatian and German translations. The books in the original language and German translations are defined as «monographs», as well as a Croatian translation published by Hit Junior²⁷. The books can be found in the following cities Alatri, Alessandria, Alto Reno Terme, Bari, Baricella, Bergamo, Biella, Bologna, Brindisi, Cagliari, Camburzano, Casale Monferrato, Civitella in Val di Chiana, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Fabriano, Feltre, Firenze, Gorizia, Imola, Jesi, Milano, Monopoli, Monte San Pietro, Montegiorgio, Montevarchi, Nizza, Monferrato, Novara, Oria, Pedavena, Pescara, Polignano a Mare, Quartu Sant'Elena, Rivalta Bormida, Roma, Sale, San Donà di Piave, San Lazzaro di Savena, Sansepolcro, Torino, Trieste, Val di Zoldo, Venezia, Vicenza, Villanova Monferrato, Vilminore di Scalve.

The survey revealed that the Triestine libraries possess the Italian original of the novel, as well as Croatian and German translations, according to the Italian Catalogue of the National Library Service. The Croatian and German translations are categorized as «modern printed text in the monograph». The same classification applies to the Italian originals²⁸. The 1977 school edition (published by Mondadori «Edizioni Scolastiche Mondadori» of Milan), edited by Francesco Aquilino, provides an answer as to why the book can be read by young readers as well as adults. This edition includes a statement that the ideal age of the reader is

²⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/3m8auph6>, <https://tinyurl.com/387n7fkf>, <https://tinyurl.com/2z9vd77j>

²⁵ <https://bit.ly/4eRsEhM>, <https://bit.ly/4kT4Tri>; <https://bit.ly/4m2OKk2>

²⁶ <https://bit.ly/4m2OKk2>

²⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/32wfv458>

²⁸ <https://www.biblioest.it/SebinaOpac/query/fulvio%20tomizza%20quinta%20stagione?context=catalogo>

«between 11 and 14 years and young adults from 15 years and older»²⁹. The same edition in the Italian catalog of the National Library Service does not indicate the age of the reader, but only that the book is intended for young people³⁰.

To sum up, in the three countries where the Forum Tomizza takes place, there is a rich collection of books on Tomizza's novel *The Fifth Season*. The book is originally written in Italian, and Italian libraries have the largest number of publications of the novel, as the overview of the Italian catalogue of the National Library Service (Catalogo del Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale) shows, but, this catalogue does not define the novel precisely, stating that it is a monograph. Only one of the editions is apparently intended for young people, while the Trieste library for the same edition shows that the book is originally intended for readers «between the ages of 11 and 14 and young adults from 15 and older». This is proven by the Croatian translation published by Hit Junior, the publisher of youth literature, and by Slovenian libraries which also indicate that the Croatian version of the book can be read by schoolchildren aged 9 to 14, and by adults.

We are now in a position to interpret these different reading experiences in terms of Wolfgang Iser's theories. According to Iser (1987, pp. 29, 38, 53), the «ideal reader» is «a purely fictional being» who can fully consume and understand the text because he is guided by it, and he is able to fill in the gaps that keep appearing in textual analysis, while the «text» is a «frame of reference specifically chosen for analysis». Iser (1987, p. 34; 1983) also defines the concept of the «implicit reader» as a reader who consumes the text.

Applying Wolfgang Iser's terminology to this research, we will try to find the «implicit reader» and the «ideal reader». We note that they are «implicit readers», or readers who can read and might be interested in reading Tomizza's novel *The Fifth Season* are schoolchildren aged 9-10 and above, as well as adults, while the «ideal reader» is an adult who is able to fully understand the events of the World War II, its background and consequences, as well as Istrian multilingualism and history.

This is confirmed by the fact that in 1977 the Italian publishers defined the novel as a school edition, intended for readers «between 11 and 14 years of age and young adults from 15 years of age». In the late seventies, the events of the war were still quite fresh in readers' memories and the younger generations were able to understand them, but other Italian editions define the novel as a «mono-

²⁹ <https://www.biblioest.it/SebinaOpac/resource/la-quinta-stagione/TSA0205791>

³⁰ <http://id.sbn.it/bid/BIA0023535>

graph» or juvenile literature because the protagonist is a boy. On the other hand, Slovenian libraries define the Italian version of the book as adult literature, while the Croatian edition is defined as a modern text, or youth literature which is influenced by the fact that it is published by Hit Junior.

In conclusion, the book can be read both by young readers aged 9-10 and by adults, who will certainly have different reading experiences.

6. Conclusion

The paper is focused on *The Fifth Season*, a novel by Fulvio Tomizza. The book dates from 1957 and was published in Italy in 1965 by Mondadori, the same publishing house that published Tomizza's first and most famous novel *Materada*.

A boy named Stefano is the protagonist of the novel, set during World War II. Stefano comes from a rich family and therefore feels like the Other in the world. He is the Other for the adults, for the complex situation of the World War, for other poor people, and even for his father, who makes him skip two grades of elementary school for fear of the war, and for his mother, who shows no emotion, while the father beats Stefano, hoping that he will teach him not to use weapons or violence.

The Fifth Season by Fulvio Tomizza can be compared to *The Path to the Spider's Nest* by Italo Calvino. Both neorealistic novels are based on the autobiographical experiences of the two authors and have as protagonists a boy who goes through the experiences of World War II. These boys are the Others in the world, and in the end, Calvino's protagonist finally finds a friend, while Tomizza's protagonist goes to a seminary to become a priest, a friend of God and man.

The Fifth Season shows a complex World War II reality from the perspective of a boy. Because of this we discussed the ideal reader of the novel; the protagonist is a boy, while on the other hand, the cruel reality of war is presented that could only be fully understood by an adult reader. In order to answer the question of who the ideal readers of the novel are, the paper includes a survey of libraries in Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, the three countries where Forum Tomizza takes place, with a special focus on the original Italian text and the Croatian translation published by Hit Junior, a publisher of literature for young people. For that reason, Croatian libraries indicate that the translation can be read by young people. Italian school editions indicate that the ideal reader is between 11 and 14 years old, and from 15 years above, while Slovenian libraries indicate that the Croatian translation of the novel can be read by readers between 9 and 14 years

old. So, this paper promotes the idea that the book can be read by young people aged 9-10, but also by adults. We believe that the reading experience will be different for readers of different age groups.

Reading books with anti-war topics such as the novels *The Fifth Season* by Fulvio Tomizza and *The Path to the Spider's Nests* by Italo Calvino is a good reminder of what wars and especially world wars do to countries and especially to children. We hope that this paper and similar works will remind readers of the importance of peace, tolerance, and acceptance of Others.

References

- A.A. (2009b). Principali premi conferiti a Fulvio Tomizza. In E. Guagnini, G. Cimador & M.A.A. Moretto (Eds.), *Fulvio Tomizza. Destino di frontiera*. Comune di Trieste Civici Musei di Storia ed Arte, pp. 73-74.
- A.A. (2009a). *Peto godišnje doba / La quinta stagione*. In N. Ušumović (Eds.), *Tomizzini itinerari / Itinerari tomizziani*. Gradska knjižnica Umag, pp. 55-59.
- Actis-Grosso, M. (2014). Epopea corale e cosmogonia dicotonica ne *La ragazza di Petrovia* di Fulvio Tomizza. In M. Deganutti (Eds.), *Rileggendo Fulvio Tomizza*. Aracne, pp. 147-174.
- Aliberti, C. (2001). *Fulvio Tomizza e la frontiera dell'anima*. Bastogli.
- Bellucci, M.C. (2000). *La produzione letteraria dei primi quindici anni di Fulvio Tomizza*. Tipografia Bortolotti Arti Grafiche.
- Calvino, I. (1976). *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. Einaudi.
- Deganutti, M. (2018). *Fulvio Tomizza. Writing the Trauma of Exile*. Legenda.
- Fabrio, N. (1977). *Štavljenje štiva. Eseji i sinteze*. Znanje.
- Forum Tomizza Istrapedia, <https://www.istrapedia.hr/hr/natuknice/1942/forum-tomizza>
- Modena, A. (2014). L'esilio ininterrotto di Fulvio Tomizza. In M. Deganutti (Eds.), *Rileggendo Fulvio Tomizza*. Aracne, pp. 117-145.
- Neirotti, M. (1979). *Invito alla lettura di Tomizza*. Mursia.
- Nižić, Ž. (1996). *Kolizijske kulture u prozi Fulvija Tomizze*. Edit.
- Nižić, Ž. (2003). *Fluvio Tomizza, pisac osobne granice / Fulvio Tomizza – lo scrittore e i suoi confine*. Edit.
- Njegovan, D. (2023a). 'Death and the Dervish' by Meša Selimović and 'The Tree of Dreams' by Fulvio Tomizza as novels inspired by the authors' personal experiences. *Croatian Studies Review*, 1819(1), pp. 39-59. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/314616>

- Njegovan, D. (2023b). The experience of a frontier man who weaves into his historical literary production: The links between the sixteenth and the twentieth century. *History in Flux*, 5(5), pp. 123-145. <https://doi.org/10.32728/flux.2023.5.6>
- Roić, S. (2006). *Stranci. Portreti s margine, granice i periferije*. Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada.
- Roić, S. (2019). *Fulvio Tomizza i sudbina granice*. Gradska knjižnica Umag.
- Roić, S. (2014). L'imagologia di Fulvio Tomizza. In M. Deganutti (Eds.), *Rileggendo Fulvio Tomizza*. Aracne, pp. 31-46.
- Tomizza, F. (1965). *La quinta stagione*. Mondadori. The referred book can be found and consulted in various editions and translations at these referred web sources: Catalogo collettivo delle biblioteche del Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale <http://id.sbn.it/bid/BIA0023535>, <https://tinyurl.com/32wfw458>. Katalog Gradske knjižnice Umag – Biblioteca civica Umago, <https://bit.ly/4eRsEhM>, <https://bit.ly/4kT4Tri>, <https://bit.ly/4m2OKk2>. Skupni Katalog Crolist <https://tinyurl.com/2z9vd77j>, <https://tinyurl.com/387n7fkf>, <https://tinyurl.com/3m8auph6>. COBISS Kooperativni online bibliografski sistem in servisi, <https://tinyurl.com/bdmz3xz2>. Polo SBN dell'Università di Trieste, <https://www.biblioest.it/SebinaOpac/query/fulvio%20tomizza%20quinta%20stagione?context=catalogo>, p. 101, al forum Tomizza, di Istrapedia, undicesimo.
- Wolfgang, I. (1983). *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wolfgang, I. (1987). *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

A Matter of Perspective? Religious Othering in Children's Literature

Verena Marie Eberhardt

The article explores processes of religious othering in children's literature. By analysing Andrea Liebers's and Susanne Göhlich's *Das Schulschwein* and Bärbel Manaar Drechsler's and Linni Lind's *Der kleine Hassan*, the contribution examines how narratives construct and represent images of the self and the other. Both works focus on cultural encounters in Germany, with differing perspectives: *Das Schulschwein* adopts a non-religious, German viewpoint, while *Der kleine Hassan* reflects a Muslim perspective. Despite their intent to promote coexistence, the analysis reveals that these narratives reinforce stereotypes and establish distinctions rather than fostering mutual understanding. Key themes include the intersection of religion with identity markers such as nationality, gender, and age. The findings indicate that while both books aim to bridge cultural divides, they inadvertently perpetuate processes of othering through narrative choices and representational practices. This highlights the challenges of depicting religious diversity without resorting to simplistic dichotomies or stereotypes. The study calls for a more reflective and nuanced approach to portraying alterity in children's media, emphasising the importance of (visual) representation.

Keywords: Religious Diversity, Religious Othering, Children's literature, Representation, Stereotypes

1. Introduction

Encounter with other persons, with unknown worlds, and beings has always been a central element in children's literature, whose narratives are inspired by personal experiences as well as fantasies that go beyond reality. Such encounters, whether with people or unknown worlds, inherently involve a relationship between what is perceived as one's own and what is different or even foreign. This article focuses on examining the relationship between the self and the other, with a particular emphasis on a phenomenon that accompanies the other in two distinct ways: religion encompasses not only encounters with other individuals but also contact with different worldviews, interpretations of personhood and the environment that diverge from one's own sense-making, values, and ideas.

Over the past 30 years, the publication of children's literature dedicated to the topic of religion and religious diversity has consistently increased in German-speaking countries, which serve as the basis for the selection of the sources in this contribution. The encounter with the other now increasingly pertains to other religions, manifested as alternative beliefs, in rituals, festivities, dietary habits, and clothing. Besides religious practices, it is primarily values and norms that are subject to discussion in the encounter between various religions.

In this article, I analyze two children's books from a Cultural Studies perspective within the Study of Religion. This approach relates insofar to Cultural Studies as it focuses the representation of the other, emphasizing processes of producing and circulating meaning through communicative action. The two narratives both explore the encounter with Islamic traditions, but in different ways. Andrea Liebers's and Susanne Gröhlich's story *Das Schulschwein* (engl. *The Schoolpig*) published in 2019, depicts the encounter with Islamic traditions from the perspective of a German boy, of whose religious worldviews and affiliation we remain uninformed. Bärbel Manaar Drechsler's children's book *Der kleine Hassan* (engl. *Little Hassan*) tells the story of Hassan, a Muslim boy exploring his environment and the encounter with other, especially Christian traditions. Both narratives are set in Germany and focus on cultural contact, with *Das Schulschwein* adopting a German, non-religious perspective, and *Der kleine Hassan* presenting a Muslim point of view.

Comparing these two narratives proves to be fruitful for examining processes of othering in children's literature because it reveals the construction of alterity. Depending on which characters we follow in the narrative and from which perspective we experience the events, others are highlighted and evaluated as such. Both books, as stated in the blurb on the back cover, advocate for the

presentation of peaceful coexistence. However, a critical examination of the two narratives exposes that othering processes rely on conventional representational practices and stereotypes in portraying the other.

The article introduces with a theoretical insight into the concept of othering, referencing sociologist and Cultural Studies pioneer Stuart Hall and adopting his considerations to the field of religion. The theoretical introduction is followed by methodological considerations and the introduction of the primary sources. Chapter four encompasses the analysis of the sources, examining both works individually and subsequently comparing the representation of the other. The fifth chapter connects the findings from the source analysis with the theoretical assumptions, revealing that the positively intended encounter with the other and the foreign often culminate in stereotyping and judgmental othering processes. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I reflect on the significance of children's literature for societal discourses on religion and religious diversity.

2. The Self, the Other and Othering-Processes: Theoretical Background

It is equally simple and essential that concepts of the self and the other relate to each other, mutually condition one another, and can only coexist together: the other or foreign always serves as a discursive backdrop to the familiar or one's own, two constructs that do not exist independently of each other (Ricken & Balzer, 2007, p. 57). The constructions of both spheres are processual, never unequivocal, but rather fluid. While the other functions as the counterpoint to the self, encompassing one's own identity, self-image, and self-understanding, the foreign denotes that which is unfamiliar and distant to us. The foreign designates what is not easily accessible and identifiable (Wimmer, 1997, p. 1068).

To describe how others are categorized as different or foreign, the term *othering* has been established in Cultural Studies, primarily supported by the Post-colonial Studies, highlighting through its gerund form that it is a process of rendering someone as 'other'. Sociologist Stuart Hall extensively engaged with the concepts of difference and othering in his collection *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* as early as 1997, emphasizing that othering is fundamentally shaped by representation:

It is by our use of things, and we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*. [...] In part, we give things meaning by

how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them (Hall, 2003, p. 3, original emphasis).

Accordingly, representation and the differentiation between various elements are essential for establishing meaning. However, othering encompasses more than just the organization and categorization of the world; it is linked to a normative dimension. Othering typically pertains not to objects or circumstances, but to individuals and groups of people. The construction of self, other, and foreign is not devoid of values, but rather intricately connected to ascriptions, assessments, and sentiments that maintain discernment. The portrayal of the other is accompanied by power, and Stuart Hall interprets the misuse of this power as a form of symbolic violence:

Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature. [...] *Stereotypes* get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity. [...] [*S*]tereotyping *reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes* 'difference' (Hall, 2003, p. 257f., original emphasis).

The naturalization referred to in the quotation is understood by Hall as a strategy of representation aimed at solidifying and securing difference, as it «is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure'» (Hall, 2003, p. 245).

Stuart Hall primarily directs his studies towards othering within the context of racial discourses. However, his approaches are also applicable for examining difference and othering within the realm of religion. By religion, I refer to a worldview that pertains to transcendence and consequently can engender orientation. Within children's media, religion is imbued with diverse connotations, typically construed as faith in a deity; belief finds expression through various practices. Hence, religious othering pertains to the differentiation of various religions and the assessment and stereotyping of religion and religious people. As is the case across numerous domains, the concept of othering in the context of religion can be particularly effectively comprehended and operationalized through an intersectional perspective. Especially, interlinking it with categories such as gender, age,

and national origin can be meaningful within children's media that engage with religious diversity, given that religion is frequently associated with these domains.

The examination of religious othering will be evidenced within the analysis of sources on two levels: firstly, the question arises of how othering processes shape characters, actions, and spaces within the text; secondly, in chapter five, I intend to scrutinize the extent to which othering processes become effective at the level of production and reception. Following a brief introduction into the methodological approach and the sources, the next chapter presents the two selected children's books.

3. Methodological Considerations and Sources

Both sources are children's books that will be analyzed in a narrative text analysis focusing on the interrelation between content (*histoire*) and representation (*discours*). Concerning the *discours*, the narrative voice and its ontological positioning within the narrative are scrutinized. Regarding the *histoire*, my attention is directed towards motifs and themes, the plot, characters therein, as well as the depicted space and time. Alongside the intra-textual analysis, paratextual elements such as titles and cover blurbs are taken into consideration. With regard to the images, the intermodal dimension, i.e., the interplay between visual and written text, takes precedence. In addition to the depicted storyline, characters, motifs, and themes, the composition, style, and coloration of the illustrations are also taken into consideration.

The subsequent intermedial comparison juxtaposes both sources, primarily focusing on how the dynamics between the self and the other or foreign are articulated. What references to the self or the other come to light? How is the self or the other valued, if at all? To what extent do narrative positions, settings, and plot elements contribute within this context? To what extent do the sources inscribe themselves in discussions about religious diversity in society? The subsequent section provides concise introductions to the sources, their respective authors and illustrators, as well as the distributing publishers in order to analyze the books in chapter four.

The children's book *Das Schulschwein* (engl. *The Schoolpig*) was published in 2019 by Andrea Liebers through Peter Hammer Verlag. The author was born in Karlsruhe in 1961 and holds a degree in German Language and Literature as well as in Medieval Latin, having completed her doctoral studies in this field. As indicated within the book, many of her works engage with ethical inquiries

and offer alternative perspectives on everyday life. Her portfolio encompasses numerous children's books that explore religious themes, predominantly focusing on Buddhist traditions. The illustrations within *Das Schulschwein* were produced by Susanne Göhlich, born in Jena in 1972. Göhlich holds a degree in Art History and has provided illustrations for a variety of children's books centered around other religious subjects, including stories from the Bible. The analyzed publication is distributed by Peter Hammer Verlag, renowned for its emphasis on literature from Africa and Latin America, as well as its dedication to picture and children's books. The publishing house was established in 1966 in Wuppertal with the objective of disseminating critical (left-wing) political literature and non-mainstream literary works.

The narrative treats of an experience in elementary school, as perceived by the readers through the perspective of the German boy Finn. The classroom episode commences with a conflict arising among the pupils, triggered by Laila, a Turkish-Muslim girl, who sat down next to Finn. This seating arrangement is deemed forbidden by the Turkish boys Mehmet and Yasin. The teacher intervenes, resolving the dispute by seating Laila and Finn side by side. As the class deliberates upon the selection of an animal for a responsibility-themed project, Finn proposes a miniature pig. This idea stems from his two-week caretaking experience of his aunt's pig named Miss Piggy. However, Mehmet expresses his discontent with this idea, asserting that pigs are deemed unsacred, impure, and unclean. Suddenly, Finn's mother rushes into the classroom, explaining that Miss Piggy has escaped. The pig emerges in the school corridor, finds its way into the classroom, and approaches Mehmet. Strikingly, Mehmet is instantly captivated by Miss Piggy's charm and subsequently begins visiting the pig at Finn's home.

The other analyzed children's book, titled *Der kleine Hassan* (engl. *Little Hassan*) authored by Bärbel Manaar Drechsler, was published in 2010 by Salam Kinder- und Jugendbuch Verlag in Freiburg im Breisgau. Drechsler was born in 1943 in Bernburg and has a background as an educator. The focal point of her work is the lives of Muslim families within German society, an approach that is also adopted in *Der kleine Hassan*. The illustrator, Linni Lind, not only creates the visual imagery but also engages as a writer and poet herself. The Salam Publishing House presents its mission on its website as follows:

Children constitute both the bearers and the future of any society. Therefore, it is a concern of German society itself that Muslims, drawing directly from their own religiosity, contribute to shaping the local secular and free society, free from external or internal ideological influences (Kalam Verlag, 2023).

For the purpose of analysis, I have elected to delve into the chapter *Hassan and the Christmas Tree*. This chapter commences with the depiction of Hassan observing his friend Uwe as he adorns the garden with Christmas illuminations. Prompted by a sense of melancholy, Hassan queries the absence of comparably splendid embellishments as those adorning Uwe's home. Subsequently, Hassan's mother imparts to him the essence of the Christmas celebration and contextualizes the event from her own vantage point.

The following chapter undertakes an examination of both narratives, with a specific focus on processes of identity and alterity, aimed at a more nuanced scrutiny of representations pertaining to religious diversity.

4. Entanglements of Religion, Nation, Gender and Age

In the following analysis, I aim to highlight and discuss the aspects that specifically target constructions of identity and alterity, actively formulating processes of boundary work. Referring to the individual analyses, both narratives will be compared to elucidate the extent to which processes of othering are formulated from different perspectives.

4.1 Religious Othering in *Das Schulschwein*

The story *Das Schulschwein* is narrated from the perspective of an autodiegetic narrative instance identified with the schoolboy Finn. Initially, readers are provided no information about Finn, not even his name. This stands in stark contrast to his classmates, foremost among them Laila, whose appearance is described by Finn as follows: «I like Laila. Especially her beautiful long black hair» (Liebers & Göhlich, 2019, p. 5). Right from the outset, Laila is exoticized as different and introduced to readers as a distinct character through this portrayal. The characterization of foreign girl figures based on their hair is a typical motif in children's literature that engages with religious diversity (Kötter, 1989, p. 21; Orosz, 2016, p. 34). These characters are represented with positive intentions through a few physical attributes. However, the body – the aspect of ourselves that we cannot entirely control – becomes a significant element of otherness through this hair description. As the narrative unfolds, othering is supplemented with additional unchangeable markers of identity.

When Laila sits next to Finn, two boys, Mehmet and Yasin, intervene. They are represented both within the text and through illustration as unsympathetic classmates, depicting them with angry faces and hands on their hips (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Mehmet and Yasin are depicted as unsympathetic, recalcitrant boys (Liebers & Göhlich, 2019, p. 6).

The situation escalates as Mehmet and Yasin assert that Laila should not sit next to a German boy. Mehmet and Yasin are depicted as stern and powerful, a characterization reinforced by the protagonist's inner monologue: «As I spoke, I felt my throat constrict. The words came out thin and dry from my mouth» (Liebers & Göhlich, 2019, p. 7). The encounters between Finn and the two boys continue to be described as tense and laden with fear throughout the narrative. It is primarily these depictions of the protagonist's emotional inner state that present the two antagonists, Mehmet and Yasin, as unfriendly and aggressive, leading readers to feel attacked much like Finn. Mehmet and Yasin directly characterize themselves and Laila by arguing that she cannot sit next to boys because she is Turkish and Muslim.

The othering experienced by Laila, already initiated by the description of her body, is expanded to include her national origin and religious affiliation. Mehmet employs the German term «Moslem» in his portrayal of Laila, a label perceived by many Muslims as an external term compared to their preferred «Muslim» (Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 2021). Thus, the pervasive othering in the story encompasses not only the themes and portrayal of characters but also for-

mal aspects such as the wording of terms. By mentioning that Laila is Turkish and Muslim, both categories are interwoven and presented as expressions of otherness. The conflation of nation and religion is a common motif to address religious diversity but is simultaneously problematic as it swiftly gives rise to assumptions and associated biases. Interestingly, it is exclusively the characters whose backgrounds we delve into that are demarcated as different: we gain insights into the national origins and religious affiliations of both the Turkish and Muslim characters, as well as Tara, an Indian girl, who explains that cows are considered sacred in India. In contrast, all other characters, including Finn, manifest as ordinary German pupils, thereby precluding any discourse regarding their religious identities. This narrative construct accentuates the religiosity of the others, namely Islam, transforming it into an anomaly that warrants mention primarily due to its perceived problematic nature.

As the narrative progresses, we learn that Mehmet and Yasin's uncle often visited the boys and their family over weekends: «The uncle was very proud to be a Muslim and a Turk. And he had very specific ideas about how members of a Turkish family should behave. Every time he had been there, Mehmet felt compelled to implement everything his uncle had said on Mondays» (Liebers & Göhlich, 2019, p. 11). This passage introduces the dimension of age, explaining that while Mehmet himself is an acceptable boy, his uncle brings forth critical values. It is the influence of adults that makes it difficult for children to assimilate within their environment. Implicit in these descriptions is a form of othering, suggesting that Turkish Muslim men may struggle with integration and pass on these values to the next generation. As an opposing characterization to this gender role, the narrative portrays Laila as a courageous and self-determined girl, exemplified when she retorts to Mehmet and Yasin, «I can sit wherever I want» (Liebers & Göhlich, 2019, p. 7).

The title of the book, as well as the narrative, predominantly revolves around the transformation of the children's encounter through the presence of the miniature pig, Miss Piggy. Mehmet's perception of pigs as impure and unclean due to his religious convictions becomes a pivotal aspect, referencing Quran 6:145. The escaped pig, to which Mehmet develops a strong affection within the classroom, is strategically employed as a turning point in the storyline. This event prompts Mehmet to build a friendship with Finn and regularly visit the pig at Finn's home. Thus, the narrative endeavors to bridge differences as Mehmet relinquishes his pre-existing values. While the story ostensibly concludes on a positive note, given the newfound harmony among the characters, the narrative twist regarding religious othering is profoundly intriguing. Mehmet is portrayed as a

character overwhelmed by emotions for Miss Piggy, leading to a transformation in his previous stance toward pigs. Consequently, the narrative challenges the significance of Quranic regulations and aims to highlight emotional connections and sentiments toward the animal. The resolution does not stem from a negotiation of conflict, which would necessitate the children to engage in discussions concerning values and norms. Instead, it lies in a shift in Mehmet's emotional disposition. The narrative ultimately leaves the readers with the impression that Muslim boys exert influence over girls, whose fathers and uncles are depicted as stern and proud. To resolve conflicts of values, the narrative implies the necessity for these characters to recognize the emotional response of others, leading them to realize that their notions of right and wrong diverge from reality. Contrary to the presentation on the book's cover blurb, this narrative does not mediate a dispute; rather, it engages in religious othering, explicitly accentuating the distinctiveness of the «others».

4.2 Religious Othering in *Der kleine Hassan*

In the narrative *Der kleine Hassan*, the central focus revolves around the character of a young Muslim boy, Hassan. The heterodiegetic narrative instance with internal focalization guides the readers through an episode in which Hassan engages with his parents in a discussion about Christmas trees. Processes of othering are initially introduced in this narrative through a deficit: Hassan observes his friend and neighbor, Uwe, adorning his garden with lights. The radiant lights and decorations greatly appeal to Hassan, and with a sense of sadness, he turns to his mother and inquires, «Why don't we have a garden that shines as brightly as my friend Uwe's? [...] Why does Uwe receive many presents while I do not?» (Drechsler & Lind, 2010, p. 13) The juxtaposition of Hassan and Uwe underscores the substantial differences between the two. The absence of gifts and the lack of ornate decorations in his own family's garden evoke a sense of sorrow in Hassan. He directly addresses his mother, seeking clarification on what sets him apart from Uwe.

In a conversation, the mother explains that the occasion pertains to commemorating the birth of Jesus for some, while others use it as an opportunity for familial togetherness. When Hassan inquires about the significance of erecting a Christmas tree, she responds, «they believed these plants held special life force and health within them, and that they warded off malevolent spirits» (Drechsler & Lind, 2010, p. 14). Adopting a cultural-historical approach, Hassan's mother comments on the tradition of setting up and adorning Christmas trees. An initial form of differentiation from this practice becomes apparent as she explains,

«church officials vehemently contested this pagan custom» (Drechsler & Lind, 2010, p. 14). Here, the mother demarcates «pagan» traditions from Christian ones, while her phrasing also conveys that the Christmas tree was not universally embraced. The most pronounced form of demarcation follows, as the mother states, «and as you know, Muslims have no reason to believe in any malevolent spirits or to place branches or entire trees in their homes out of fear of illness. We implore our God for His protection and for good health. That is the best safeguard you can wish for» (Drechsler & Lind, 2010, p. 14). The tradition that initially captivated Hassan's curiosity and awe is subsequently dismissed by his mother as an unnecessary custom. She distances herself and Hassan, as Muslims, from those who set up Christmas trees, delegitimizing the notion that they guard against spirits.

In the concluding part of the narrative, Hassan's views on decorations change, and he reflects: «Hassan feels very secure in his mother's embrace and his father's hand. He wishes for this moment to last much longer. No, he doesn't need colorful illumination that doesn't truly bring joy and happiness, or an adorned tree that must perish for a few beautiful moments» (Drechsler & Lind, 2010, p. 15). In these reflections, Hassan is depicted as close to his family. The boundaries between him and his Muslim family on the one side and Uwe and his Christian family on the other are distinctly delineated. This demarcation is further accentuated by the devaluation of the custom, emphasizing that trees must die for it and that Hassan finds no genuine delight in the decoration. The mother endeavors to bridge the gap by explaining that Jesus is also recognized as a prophet in Islamic traditions, yet his birthday remains insignificant for Muslims. She also elucidates that Hassan receives gifts on their holidays, just as Uwe does on Christmas. Through this parallelism, the mother attempts to highlight both commonalities and disparities between him and Uwe.

Striking in this narrative is the observation that processes of othering are predominantly instigated by the adult characters. While Hassan himself initially finds enthusiasm in the illumination, it is his parents who reinforce his affiliation with a Muslim community and consistently demarcate themselves from «pagan» or Christian traditions. The concept of age is particularly pertinent in this narrative, as it shows us that the juvenile character would be less inclined to demarcate from Uwe; whereas, for the parents, delineating boundaries holds great significance. Especially noteworthy is Hassan's shift in perspective, wherein he eventually does not find the lights as captivating, underscoring the explicit formulation of demarcations between Islamic and Christian traditions.

4.3 A Matter of Perspective: Comparison

The analysis of both narratives reveals that processes of othering are fundamentally contingent upon the narrative perspective, themes, and motifs. In both stories, religious othering pertains to a tension between Muslims and Germans or Muslims and Christians. In *Das Schulschwein*, in addition to dietary regulations outlined in the Quran, the two boys, Yasin and Mehmet, endeavor to dictate the actions of a girl, thus disrupting an cooperative atmosphere in school. But Finn's religious affiliation remains unaddressed, accentuating the Muslims as distinct and rendering the other, German classmates as normal. In *Der kleine Hassan*, the narrative perspective differs as the story unfolds from the viewpoint of Hassan, a Muslim boy. However, evident attempts to demarcate oneself, particularly from Christian traditions, persist. In both instances, the other is portrayed as irrational and incorrect. Values and norms, nonetheless, are not negotiated among the characters but rather are categorized solely from their own perspectives. In *Das Schulschwein*, Mehmet is, in a way, converted, while in *Der kleine Hassan* Hassan's mother guides the interpretation for Hassan and the readers, elucidating that Muslims need not believe in malevolent spirits. In both works, the focus is not, as the blurbs suggest, on fostering mutual coexistence, but rather on distinguishing the self – whether German or Muslim – from the other. In the subsequent chapter, these insights gleaned from the source analysis will be intertwined with theoretical approaches to the concept of othering.

5. Getting to know others – or not after all?

The analysis of the two children's books has revealed that the positively intended encounter with individuals of different backgrounds and foreign origins ultimately leads to the reinforcement of stereotypical perceptions and judgmental processes of othering. In both cases, the concept of the other varies, on the one hand represented by Turkish and Muslim characters, while on the other hand by a German and Christian boy. Nevertheless, both narratives approach this notion of the other through a pronounced demarcation of what defines «us» in terms of thoughts and actions, juxtaposed against what constitutes the behaviors of others.

Particularly in the case of *Das Schulschwein*, this representation is entwined with conventional stereotypes that are also prevalent in other children's literature addressing similar themes. The portrayal of overly assertive boys, forbidding girls from making independent choices, an uncle who emphasizes his heritage as an

exemplar, and a rigid adherence to the Quran collectively create an impression that Muslim boys struggle to integrate and persistently disrupt the classroom environment. The book fails to convey a portrayal of Islamic traditions and appears inadequate for addressing culturally or religiously rooted conflicts. Similarly, *Der kleine Hassan* does not revolve around genuine encounters with the unfamiliar to gain insight into alternative practices, but rather focuses on reaffirming one's own identity.

Consequently, both children's books, adapted to their respective target audiences, disseminate representations of both own identities and those of others. They construct notions of communities that either bear similarities or exhibit distinctions. Power dynamics play a significant role in this context, primarily concerning distribution. *Das Schulschwein* is published by a prominent German children's book publishing house, making it widely available in bookstores and libraries across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland¹. Conversely, *Der kleine Hassan* is released by a niche publisher whose works are not listed in the inventories of bookstores and libraries.

The depictions portraying Muslim and Turkish children as instigators of disturbance and problems are thus disseminated more frequently and offered for consumption. It is the images predominantly depicting a German, non-religious community as «us», juxtaposed with a representation of the other as distinct in terms of physical, national, and religious attributes while simultaneously highlighting them as problematic. This form of representation is not confined solely to children's media but is also pervasive in other popular media, news, and political discourse.

6. Conclusion

With respect to processes of othering within children's literature, religion emerges as a particularly striking phenomenon. Religion can operate on a profoundly personal and individual level, rendering it a complex phenomenon intertwined with other markers of identity. However, the examined children's books depict religion as a simplistic differentiating criterion among individuals. In both in-

¹ Cf. e.g. Public Library Munich, Cologne, Hamburg, GER; Public Library Vienna, Innsbruck, Graz, AUT; Public Library Bern, Zurich, Basel, CH.

stances, religious diversity presents itself as a realm of conflict, demanding negotiation of one's own identity.

Especially when considering the lens of intersectionality, it becomes evident that religious identity is a central theme negotiated by the adult characters in both sources. While the children seem unbiased, it is the adults who are portrayed as those who embody and affect religious identity, defining what is right and wrong. The children adopt these stances, a disposition received positively in the case of *Der kleine Hassan*, and problematically in the case of *Das Schulschwein*.

Children's literature is consumed by individuals from early stages of life. Serving as a vehicle for socialization, children's literature can significantly influence young minds' perceptions of society, the familiar and the foreign, as well as values and norms. Many authors of children's literature aim to bring the world closer to children, to better them somewhat, and through their narratives, illustrate how to navigate positive interactions. However, these narrations concerning alterity are not devoid of stereotypes and problematic processes of othering. They construct ideas of an imagined «us» while concurrently shaping counter-images of individuals who differ in terms of religion, nationality, language, or appearance. This construct not only fails to bridge differences but actively forms them. These narratives solidify pre-existing perceptions about the other, depreciating it to underscore the positive aspects of one's own identity.

Depicting religious diversity without resorting to othering is an ambitious endeavor. It necessitates reflection upon one's own perspective, overcoming personal biases, and a disposition of genuine respect toward the other. As arduous as this task may be, its necessity is underscored by the imperative to acknowledge the multifaceted diversity of our world.

References

- Deutschlandfunk Kultur. (2021, February 14). «Muslim» oder «Moslem»? *Respekt drückt sich auch in der Benennung aus*. <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/muslim-oder-moslem-respekt-drueckt-sich-auch-in-der-100.html>
- Drechsler, B.M., & Lind, L. (2010). *Der kleine Hassan*. Salam Kinder- und Jugendbuch Verlag.
- Hall, S. (2003). *The Work of Representation*. Sage.
- Liebers, A., & Göhlich, S. (2019). *Das Schulschwein*. Peter Hammer Verlag.

- Kalam Verlag für islamische Theologie und Religionspädagogik KG. (2023). *Salam*. <http://kalam-verlag.de/salam>
- Kötter, I. (1989). *Die Kopftuchklasse*. Arena.
- Orosz, S. (2016). *Die Welt bei uns zu Hause: Vorlesegeschichten über andere Kulturen*. Dressler.
- Ricken, N., & Balzer, N. (2007). Differenz: Verschiedenheit Andersheit Fremdheit. In J. Straub, A. Weidemann, & D. Weidemann (Eds.), *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz: Grundbegriffe Theorien Anwendungsfelder*. Metzler, pp. 56-69.
- Wimmer, M. (1997). Fremde. In C. Wulf (Ed.), *Vom Menschen. Handbuch Historische Anthropologie*. Beltz, pp. 1066-1078.

Diverse Childhoods: Contextualizing Childhood and the Lives of Adivasi in Select Indian Picturebooks

Sridipa Dandapat, Priyanka Tripathi

This book chapter examines the representation of Adivasi childhoods in contemporary Indian picturebooks, focusing on *Kali and the Rat Snake* (2000) by Zai Whitaker and *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) by Mahasweta Devi. This study analyzes the shifting paradigm of Adivasi representation in children's texts and how these underrepresented communities have come to the forefront from the background. Using critical childhood studies and Adivasi studies frameworks, it examines how these texts challenge oppressive tropes and highlight marginalized child protagonists' lived experiences. This chapter also investigates the narratives' portrayal of social ostracization, cultural resilience, and education as a transformative tool. By foregrounding underrepresented voices, these picturebooks redefine childhood representations in Indian children's literature, fostering inclusivity and raising awareness about societal issues like caste, class, and gender inequality.

Keywords: Adivasi childhood, Cultural resilience, Diverse cultures, Indian picturebooks, Marginalized communities in India, Social justice

1. Introduction

In the contemporary human rights discourse, social justice is a non-compromising phenomenon. In the context of women and children or for people at the margins of caste and class or any other prevalent hierarchies, it becomes evidently and vehemently non-negotiable. Therefore, through its judicial bodies and also through various policies and schemes, the government tries to build a holistic society where 'social equity' is of surmount importance. Being a diverse

country, India is home to people of varied backgrounds (Dandapat and Tripathi, 2023). Adivasis¹, who are a larger group of indigenous people, find themselves struggling to belong to the mainstream as a kind of mythical narrative is woven around them by adopting a romanticized version of Adivasi life vis-à-vis standard patterns of modernity and development. The representation of Adivasi has been prevalent in Indian literature, whether as primary or peripheral characters, but their inclusion in children's literature is a rare sight. In the context of Indian children's literature, Sheoran finds the entire corpus to be «vast and varied as the subcontinent itself» (Sheoran, 1975, p. 127). To chronicle the development of children's literature in India, he divides it into two main segments: the first involves the transition of the rich tradition of oral narratives, including *Panchatantra*, the *Puranas*, the *Jatakas*, epics, folklores, and regional tales, from oral traditions to printed form. The second segment encompasses contemporary children's literature, which is moving away from fantasy themes towards a more realistic approach.

With the advent of the new millennium, the predominance of conventional genres like fairy tales, fantasy, and folktales has shifted to the inclusion of composite genres like comic strips, cartoons, picture books, and graphic novels that address the contemporary socio-political issues of society (Chatterjee & Gupta, 2009). In a heterogeneous and culturally diverse country like India, it becomes crucial to navigate how children's literature represents different communities, specifically the underprivileged and marginalized sections of society. Hence, it becomes evident that in the Indian setting, the construction of a child's self is impacted by the complex interactions among the societal factors of class, caste, gender, religion, and community. Banerjee (2013) opines that the negotiation among the socio-structural factors plays a crucial role when it comes to the representation and construction of subjectivity. The presentation of child figures with sundry social identities, redefines the diversity of the socio-cultural positioning of the child reader and the child protagonist, making space for social issues like gender, class, caste, and community in Children's Literature while bridging the gap between actual and «imagined concerns of childhood» (Rudd, 2005, p. 25).

¹ Adivasi – Minority Rights Group has claimed Adivasi to be a collective term to include the larger group of indigenous people of India. The literal translation of the term translates to the earliest inhabitants or the 'first people'. It refers to the constitutional affiliation of 'Scheduled tribes' and beyond while considering the diverse heterogeneity of tribal communities.

The way in which childhoods are being constructed in Indian visual-verbal narratives is indicative of how underprivileged child protagonists are influenced by caste, religion, and class in addition to their families and communities. They are influenced by an amalgamation of these variables. Additionally, they take an interrogative and reflective approach toward their marginalization and circumstances. Rather than existing as passive characters, they defy the age-specific norms and challenge the system that oppresses both adults and children while also attempting to find strategies through solidarity. Contemporary Indian visual narratives depict multifaceted childhoods by emphasizing character focalization, exploring different notions of childhood, and dealing with controversial themes. The shift in representation is evident when it comes to portraying marginalized childhoods, especially the children from Dalit and tribal communities. This trend negates Michelle Superle's (2011) assertion about the prevalence of upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu children as dominant protagonists, instead presenting «alternative constructions of childhood» (Mehra, 2018, p. 181).

This chapter analyses two Indian picturebooks – *Kali and the Rat Snake* (2000) by Zai Whitaker and Srividya Natarajan and *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) by Mahasweta Devi and Kanyika Kini (both published in several languages). This study focuses on the select texts to situate the discursive space for challenging and resisting the tropes of oppression as well as highlighting the lived experience of the marginalized child protagonists. These texts not only serve the purpose of social sensitization by offering representation to the children who were formerly peripheral in children's literature but also provide alternative narratives told from the viewpoint of the marginalized. This chapter will take the lens of critical childhood studies and Adivasi studies as the theoretical frameworks to analyze the selected texts. Write like: The prime objective of this chapter is to analyze the select texts and discern how these picturebooks construct a discursive space challenging oppressive tropes and offering nuanced perspectives on the lived experiences of marginalized child protagonists. It also evaluates the impact of these texts on children's literature, examining their role in reshaping societal perceptions, promoting social sensitization, and contributing to a more inclusive and diversified representation of childhood voices.

This chapter is categorized into three major sections; the first part establishes the status quo of the Adivasi in Indian society. This marks the stepping stone into the analysis of the selected visual-verbal narratives as the community-based oppression, stigma, and resilience are demarcated into the consecutive readings of the texts. The next section deals with *Kali and the Rat Snake* and discusses in detail the social ostracization and stigma of being an Adivasi. Following this,

The Why-Why Girl introduces a tale of resistance and how a little girl questions the functioning of the society that disenfranchises their livelihoods. These texts have been selected since these are the pioneering picturebooks that included the lives of Adivasi. Though the narratives come under the umbrella term of Adivasi childhood, they differ towards the resolution. In *Kali and the Rat Snake*, the narrative unfolds as Kali, a little boy from the *Irula*¹ community, joins the school with children from the mainstream. This text offers a vivid presentation of the cultural differences and the lack of inclusivity, causing social exclusion towards Adivasi children. *The Why-Why Girl* offers a strong voice for the rights of children, specifically female children from tribal communities, by portraying Moyna as an emplaced rhetoric for the children of the *Shabar*² community. The importance of education remains poignant in shaping the minds of individuals from marginalized communities. What these two texts do is offer a reflection of society and sensitize the child readers about the world of marginalized people while depicting the child protagonist as an agency of social change.

2. Mapping the Position of Adivasis in Present India

Adivasis or the indigenous people in India are one-sixth of the entire population of the country (Spivak, 1995, ix); tracing back the origin of the 'first people' (Sissons, 2005) or Adivasis is complicated since there is no official definition to validate until the government has designated certain groups of people as 'Backward Tribes' in 1936 and a modified list of groups as 'Scheduled Tribes' in 1950. The term Adivasi can loosely be translated as 'aboriginals' or as 'first people' in English, but the claim of indigeneity again raises the question of the length of the period they have been staying in the land. Despite being highly heterogeneous in nature, the term refers to the groups with traditional values for nature, attachment to land, and at the same time with a history of being exploited and oppressed based on their indigenous identity (Dandapat & Tripathi, 2020,

¹ Irula – Irula, often referred to as Iruliga, from the Dravidian ethnic group is found in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. The Irulas are historically known for collecting honey and catching rats and snakes as their primary jobs.

² Shabar – The Shabar people (also Sabar and Saora) belong to the Munda ethnic group tribe and are found mostly in Odisha and West Bengal.

p. 45). It has almost become taboo for social research scholars to define the term 'Adivasi' since the definition might challenge and exclude some of the officially recognized 'Scheduled Tribes'. Several names have been assigned to them by the government (Scheduled Tribes), scholars, and media (tribes or tribal community), but critics have observed that the tribes in India term themselves as Adivasi i.e., 'original inhabitant' while Basu has noted that the term Adivasi brings them a sense of pride (Basu, 1998, p. 194). Even though there is no appropriate official term to address this specified group of people, the term Adivasi has been chosen in this chapter to maintain consistency.

To map the position of the Adivasis in the context of contemporary India and how the issue of economic marginalization and social discrimination gets merged with it, one has to take a look at the tribal population in India as well as the official report of their livelihood. Among the countries with tribal communities or indigenous people, India has the largest population of Adivasis to make it around seventy million (Chacko, 2005, p. 16), and yet 90% of them are still landless, and almost 51% of the 'Scheduled Tribes' sustain lives below poverty line (Mohanty, 2001, p. 3857). After the political independence from England, a major scale of Adivasis or tribal communities in India «have had their lands taken away, their habitations destroyed» (Nayar, 2013, p. 291) and then put their opposition to modernity, development, and progress. A romanticized view over nature, natural possession, and its nexus with the indigenous people has been nurtured timelessly and has often resulted in the stereotyped presentation of the Adivasis with their «mountain fastness, backward and undeveloped» where they are deliberately kept apart from the mainstream (Guha, 1998, p. 330). Hence, the unmasking of the romanticized garb that covers the Adivasis to present them as living cultural artifacts and representing their issues of societal stigma, oppression, and exploitation faced due to Adivasi identity become requisite in order to bring social harmony and justice.

Introducing the realities of society through lucid stories to represent the construction of childhood promises a new dawn in making children aware of the existence of multifaceted identities. It not only captures a glimpse of the marginal class but also offers a larger picture of a dilapidated system of exploitation and oppression. To trace back to the nurturing of societal norms, as Shatadru Sen figures out, childhood is an indispensable tool to offer varied perceptions to young minds and help them perceive distinctions between «white and black children, girl and boy children, aristocratic and middle-class children, westernized and 'authentic' children and between the offspring of the elite and those of the poor and provincial» (Sen, 2005, p. 2). This chapter focuses on Zai Whitaker's

Kali and the Rat Snake (2000) and Mahasweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* (2003), to unfold the hegemonic structure that functions in several layers such as gender-caste, class-community, community-gender, gender-class, gender-religion, so on and so forth while tracing the emerging voices that are questioning and deconstructing the normative power hierarchy, inequality, and injustice.

3. *Kali and the Rat Snake*: Societal Stigma of Being Adivasi

In *Kali and the Rat Snake* (2000), Zai Whitaker inverts the romanticized notion of Adivasis and lays bare their oppressed plight while capturing the societal stigma that revolves around them. Before stepping into the world of Kali, the text offers a visual presentation of catching snakes as well as an insight into the *Irula* community, «the forest people of Tamilnadu» (Whitaker, 2000, p. 1). Through Kali, Whitaker picturizes the 'primitives' coming along with globalization and yet how they face renunciation from the mainstream people. In the interest of the 'post-settlers' in India, the Adivasis have been detached by and from the mainstream, as in the text, we see Kali hating school because of the ostracism he faces there. Kali expresses his seclusion from other batch mates several times: «I think they think we Irulas are weird» (Ivi: p. 4); that eventually affects his sense of pride in being an Irula as he wishes to be «an ordinary boy with a bus-conductor father» (Ivi: p. 5). Being the son of «the most famous snake-catchers among Irula» (Ivi: p. 4), Kali feels embarrassed about his identity when he finds his batchmates giggling and nudging each other to learn his whereabouts. As Nayar observes that the deprivation that has been done with Adivasis is not only by snatching their lands or forest but the system has stigmatized their language, belief system, as well as cultures (Nayar, 2013), which can be traced when Kali opens his tiffin box to find his favorite «fried termites» and yet instead of relishing the cultural dish Kali gets anxious about «...what if someone saw?» (Whitaker, 2000, p. 7).

Along with the social discrimination and stigmatizing of the identity, the oppression of the Adivasis is constructed through economic marginalization. Being the representative of 'forest people', Kali, belongs to the *Irula* family that earns its livelihood by catching snakes; catching more than a hundred cobras buys them the luxury of affording «many good things for the family» (Ivi: p. 3). The threads of economic marginalization are spread vastly all over India among the marginalized classes, as the Minority Rights Group reports how Adivasis, being accustomed to the traditional informal economy, might not be prepared for the formal transaction (Minority Rights Group International, 2020, p. 20). The relation

between the snake cooperative and the Adivasis is shown through the transaction of one hundred fifty rupees per poisonous snake, underlining the impacts of globalization among Adivasis and how they are coming forward to accept the formal trends of transaction. Their entire dependence on livelihood by catching snakes is highlighted throughout the text while diverging a path for discussion of how they were neither recognized for the indigenous knowledge they had, nor they were paid well off. The class struggle becomes even more prominent when Kali, after successfully catching the rat snake, ponders over how the Vandalur Zoo offers a good price for rat snakes and how he can «buy his baby sister a new dress» (Whitaker, 2000, p. 17). Through the alternative representation of the Adivasis, Whitaker emphasizes the coexistence of the Adivasis and nature and romanticizes their indigenous knowledge and survival skills as Kali wins over the admiration of his fellow batchmates through his skill of catching a rat snake bravely.

Dandapat and Tripathi point out that economic liberalization and rapid industrialization have compelled the Adivasis to be displaced and thus make them the victims of ‘internal colonialism’ in modern India (Dandapat & Tripathi 2020, p. 44). The term ‘internal colonialism’ can be stretched further in the context of *Kali and the Rat Snake* as in the very beginning of the text, Kali is portrayed as an *Irula* child who faces ostracism because his father catches snakes and they belong to the Adivasi community with a different culture. The class identity becomes secondary in this context to note how the classroom accepts a conductor and not a snake-catcher, and it is due to the Adivasi identity that he gets humiliated enough to hate school. The us-other binary comes on the surface between the ‘first people’ and the ‘post-settlers’ even though Whitaker closes the curtain on a happy note where Kali, the Adivasi child, wins the admiration of the fellow ‘post-settlers’ not for his yielding to the new culture but persisting on the acquired indigenous knowledge and skills. Even though Kali is so good in studies that «however badly he wrote his lessons, the teacher was always happy with him» (Whitaker, 2000, p. 9), it is not his acquired knowledge of newly introduced education but his indigenous knowledge and skills of catching a snake that aids him save the day. Undoubtedly, the identity of being an Adivasi is romanticized here, but Whitaker echoes the typical romanticizing of Adivasis not only for the sake of establishing a connection with nature but also to validate the indigenous knowledge and re-establish a recognition for the treasure the Adivasis have persisted. Whitaker’s sensitive narration of the tale not only represents the Adivasis and their culture but also embeds empathy for the ostracism they have to face. With rhetorical «clapping and cheering» as well as shared «secret grins»,

Whitaker establishes the vision of a new world where Kali and his fellow schoolmates become part of a society that offers social justice for all.

4. *The Why-Why Girl: Why-ing the Servility*

The social marginalization in the context of the representation of Adivasis in contemporary India becomes a discursive topic that includes discrimination on several layers, such as caste, class, gender, and community. Indian English Children's Literature has evolved over the years to bring in several kinds of protagonists, and in recent times, the visibility of strong female characters from the marginal classes can be noticed. Critics such as Sundar Rajan and Ipsita Chanda, among many others, have observed that the Indian anglophone children's literature has perpetuated the hegemonic role of class with gender while pointing out urban, middle-class girls as the protagonists who are often bestowed with an empowered status. Mahasweta Devi, through her *The Why-Why Girl* (2003), deviates from the norm and serves a captivating story beginning with Moyna's «But why?» (Devi, 2003, p. 1) and a series of whys that hover over the oppression and exploitation of the Adivasis. The graphic presentation of the Shabar livelihoods has been picturized in this text with Mahasweta Devi's mouthpiece, the 'why-why girl' Moyna. Unlike the rest of her community, Moyna does not yield to the servility that has been set as a norm, but she raises the question, «Why should I?» (Ivi: p. 6). It is only through the innocent questions that Moyna frames that Mahasweta Devi exposes the cruelty that has been going on over the Adivasis, the exploitations by the overpowering feudal lords, lack of education, scarcity to meet basic requirements, and their below-poverty-line livelihood. With her endless questions and pitching her indigenous voice against the oppressing system, Moyna defies Superle's notion of 'syncretic girlhood' where the prototype of the girl character needs some superior agency to save them from their plight and registers herself as the «first girl to be admitted to the village primary school» (Ivi: p. 21). Moyna, with her endless loop of questions about the surroundings, not only ends up getting herself educated but also motivates other Adivasi children in the village to raise their voices against the injustices happening around them. Not only the right to own land but the right to education and a labour-less childhood has been snatched away from the Adivasi children as Moyna's questions pin «Why do I have to walk so far to the river to fetch water? Why do we live in a leaf hut? Why can't we eat rice twice a day? [...] Why should I eat their leftovers?» (Ivi: p. 8). Even though stigmatized for being an Adivasi, Moyna does

not feel any inferior to the feudal lords, and when her mother asks her to thank the 'Babus' for the food, she seems to prick the societal norm of inequity through her rational answer: «Don't I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Does he ever thank me?» (Ivi: p. 6). Moyna advances questions on the societal functioning of the hierarchy of the feudal lords through queries like: «Why do I have to graze Babus' goats? Their boys can do it». (Ivi: p. 12). Moyna, as her mother observes, is «very obstinate. Just won't give in» (Ivi: p. 6), does not accept the servitude and looks for a better place to live, declaring to move in with the narrator with her interrogative curiosity, «Why not? It's a big hut. How much space does one old woman need?» (Ivi: p. 10). To bring the concept of a 'new woman' in the «rapidly altering cultural and social imaginary» context of India, Meenakshi Thapan argues that women's identity must evolve from their «everyday experience of women as they both contest and submit to the images and constructs that impinge on their senses, their emotions and their material and social conditions» (Thapan, 2004, p. 413). The 'why-why girl' echoes the similar attitude as Mahasweta Devi explicitly renders Moyna's attitude: «Moyna tended the goats of the village landlords or babus, but she was neither humble nor grateful». (Devi, 2003, p. 8) and to meet the whirligig of whys by herself she boldly asks the village teacher «why shouldn't I study too?» (Ivi: p. 18).

The social discrimination of the Adivasis does not operate singlehandedly but runs parallel with the economic marginalization as Sinha has noted how at the verge of post-independence, the Adivasis have been deprived of their possession of the land and natural resources for the sake of 'development' and rapid urbanization and instead, they are compelled to do the most difficult work in the lowest wage as in hard manual labor (Sinha, 2005, p. 120) resulting Moyna to work for the 'Babus', her mother working at the Samiti, father has gone off (leaving to) to Jamshedpur while her brother is compelled to go to the forest to collect firewood instead of attending school or availing a basic lifestyle. Along with the pictorial representation and storytelling, Mahasweta Devi opens the port of the Adivasi world in front of her audience explicitly by revealing Moyna's identity: «Moyna was a Shabar. The Shabars were a poor tribal group, and they owned no land. But nobody complained. Only Moyna's questions went on and on» (Devi, 2003, p. 8). It is because of the low-income status of the family that Moyna had to attend to the goats of 'Babus' with questions like «Why do I have to graze the Babus' goats? Their boys can do it». (Ivi: p. 12), but neither her Adivasi identity nor the economic barriers can stop her from telling «the other children all that she had learned» (Ivi: p. 15). Through her tireless questions, she bothers the teacher as well as the functioning of the society that oppresses the

Adivasis; she questions, «If you don't teach me, how will I learn?» (Ivi: p. 18). Since she and her fellow goatherds are bound to graze goats in the morning, she does not readily accept the servility but tries to find a way out to find the answers to her whys. Unlike Superle's concept of the 'new girl', Moyna finds the agency to carve out her indigenous voice through her endless loop of questions and the indomitable urge to learn.

5. Conclusion

Trailing the changing nuances of the representation of Adivasis in Indian Children's Literature in English, the select texts not only reshape the representation of childhood and society but also bring in protagonists from the peripheral sphere, making it evident to read the formation of identity through sundry accumulating factors like community, class, caste, and gender. The oppression thus operates on several levels, bringing trajectories among these factors that thrice alienate one's identity and thereby offer the child-reader a wholesome idea of society. *Kali and the Rat Snake* and *The Why-Why Girl* not only demonstrate an alternative representation of Adivasis but also incite the marginalization of Adivasis in the discourse of modernity. These texts ignite discussion for important factual problems like the scarcity of meeting basic requirements as well as the necessity of education, coping with rapid globalization, blending in with the new culture, and so on and so forth. Turner takes a cue from Anita Agnihotri's non-fiction to criticize government policies that plan expenditure in lieu of providing the Adivasis with «weapons to resist the events and traps in their surroundings that again and again pull them down into poverty and economic dependence» (Turner, 2012, p. 331). However, both texts are unique in their approach and presentation of the quotidian struggles of the Adivasis as well as their struggle to cope with rapid globalization. These texts go beyond the objectification of Adivasis as a mere aesthetic, cultural artifact to present their problems in the mainstream.

Through the analysis of the texts selected, the representation of Adivasis has been monitored on how their marker of identity has shifted with time to undermine the functionality of marginalization concerning various intersectional factors to accumulate the wholesome hegemonic structure of oppression. To dissect the process of learning normalized social values and unlearning the 'norm' of exploitation and oppression, children's literature reinstates moral values in a new dimension while arousing empathy for the distressed. Aside from anthropological development studies and emerging autobiographical writing of Adivasis,

the genre has been considered peripheral until the new alternative representation of Adivasis in mainstream Children's Literature that is paving the way for a futuristic representation of Adivasis not as an anomaly but as a contemporary social justice issue that has been ignored long. In the context of contemporary India, the alternative representation of Adivasis and placing them as the central character in mainstream children's literature offers an indispensable tool to stir up the public debate on marginalizing and exploiting the Adivasis under the garb of romanticizing their indigenous authenticity and hence arises the question for human rights and social justice for a better society.

References

- Banerjee, S. (2012). Strategic empowerment: A study of subjectivity in contemporary Indian English children's fiction. In *Subjectivity in Asian Children's Literature and Film*. Routledge, pp. 181-195.
- Basu, A. (1998). Indigenous feminism, tribal radicalism and grassroots mobilization in India. In *Women and revolution: Global expressions*. Springer, pp. 227-254. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9072-3_12
- Chacko, P. M. (2005). *Tribal communities and social change*. SAGE Publications.
- Dandapat, S., Tripathi, P. (2020). Representation of the Adivasis: An intersectional study of gender through select *Indian picture books in English*. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 26(12), pp. 38-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2021.1972750>
- Dandapat, S., & Tripathi, P. (2023). Rethinking resilience: Addressing Dalit childhood in selected Indian picturebooks. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221150164>
- Devi, M., & Spivak, G. C. (1995). The author in conversation. In *Imaginary Maps*. Routledge, pp. ix-xxii.
- Devi, M., & Kini, K. (2005). *The Why-Why Girl*. Tulika.
- Guha, R. (1998). Between anthropology and literature: The ethnographies of Verrier Elwin. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(2), pp. 325-345.
- Gupta, N., & Chatterjee, R. B. (2009). *Reading children: Essays on children's literature*. Orient Blackswan.
- Mehra, D. (2018). Representing marginalised childhoods in contemporary graphic novels and picture books in India. In *Childhoods in India*. Routledge India, pp. 181-202.

- Minority Rights Group International. (2020, June 30). Adivasis. *Minority Rights Group*. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/adivasis-2/>
- Mohanty, B. B. (2001). Land distribution among scheduled castes and tribes. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(40), pp. 3857-3868.
- Nayar, P. K. (2013). Indigenous cultures and the ecology of protest: Moral economy and 'knowing subalternity' in Dalit and tribal writing from India. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50(3), pp. 291-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2013.815127>
- Rudd, D. (2005). Theorising and theories: How does children's literature exist? In *Understanding Children's Literature*. Routledge, pp. 26-29.
- Sen, S. (2005). *Colonial childhoods: The juvenile periphery of India, 1850-1945*. Anthem Press.
- Sheoran, K. (1975). Contemporary Children's Literature in India. *Children's Literature* 4(1), pp. 127-137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0714>
- Sinha, S.S. (2005). *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Studies*. Stree.
- Sissons, J. (2005). *First Peoples Indigenous Cultures and Their Futures*. Reaktion.
- Skaria, A. (1997). Shades of Wildness Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56(3), pp. 726-745. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659607>
- Superle, M. (2011). *Contemporary, English-Language Indian Children's Literature Representation of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl*. Routledge.
- Thapan, M. (2004). Embodiment and Identity in Contemporary Society: Femina and the 'new' Indian Woman. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38(3), pp. 411-444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996670403800305>
- Turner, E. (2012). An Unfinished Story: The Representation of Adivasis in Indian Feminist Literature. *Contemporary South Asia* 20(3), pp. 327-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2011.649715>
- Whitaker, Z., & Natarajan, S. (2000). *Kali and the rat snake*. Tulika.

The Plural Identity of Brazilian Children's Literature

Maria Carolina Nunes Gobbo

This chapter examines the interplay between Brazilian Children's Literature and the nation's multiethnic identity. It highlights how the development of Brazilian identity, shaped by Portuguese colonial power, African slavery, and Indigenous cultures, has influenced the country's literary production for children. The article traces a historical background of Brazilian Children's Literature and critiques the utopic notion of cultural integration which overlooks the systemic oppression of marginalized groups. The study emphasizes the recent shift towards a more inclusive representation, with growing contributions from Indigenous and Black authors but argues that while contemporary Brazilian Children's Literature shows progress in acknowledging diverse voices, challenges remain in fully addressing an authentic representation of otherness. The article concludes by underscoring that critical reevaluation of past works and continued efforts towards authorship of underrepresented groups are essential for a more diverse representation of Brazilian multiculturalism.

Keywords: Brazil; identity otherness; Children's Literature; multiculturalism

1. Introduction

Brazilian Children's Literature is deeply rooted in the multiethnic history of Brazil. Therefore, there is an indissociable relationship between children's literature in Brazil and the country's history and the development of its identity. The main objective of this work is to provide an overview of the current scenario of Brazilian children's literature and explore how the concept of 'otherness' pervades its production and plot. To do so, it is of paramount importance to initially situate

the notion of Brazilian identity, the offspring of an assimilation between cultures which is often misled as amicable (Fiorin, 2009).

The complex development of Brazilian identity deeply influenced art and literature, especially children's literature. (Arroyo, 1986). After providing a socio-historical background on the cultural strings that created Brazil as a nation, the article delves into an exploration of the history of Brazilian Children's Literature until contemporaneity, underscoring the relevance of the plural identity of the country in the core of the book's production. Finally, a critical perspective of otherness in Brazilian Children's literature is analyzed, facing the influences and constraints of a multicultural identity.

2. Brazilian identity

The search for defining Brazilian identity has been a lifelong effort from artists and researchers. Due to its colonial roots, Brazil was born as a chapter in the history of European utopias (Paz, 1976). Therefore, the search for a detachment from the colonized experience was a challenging aspect of identity formation, and, to some extent, an impossible venture, since a long and lively tradition of the country is inevitably associated with Portuguese influences. (Holanda, 1936). Aside from Portuguese colonial power, African and Native cultures also represent an essential aspect of Brazilian heritage. According to Holanda (1936), there was a high interaction between these cultures in Brazil, generating an elevated level of mixing in the Brazilian population. (Wright & Smale, 2017). However, it is important to highlight the violent oppression operated in this interaction, since it was forged not only by colonialism but most importantly by slavery. (Bosi, 1992). The myth of amicable coexistence should not be understood as a reality in Brazilian identity formation and the acknowledgment of these systems of oppression exerts that power struggles were not only restricted to the colonizer/colonized dichotomy but were deeply ingrained in the roots of Brazilian society.

Throughout the formation of national identity in Brazil, literature played a fundamental role in foregrounding the roots of Brazilian culture (Fiorin, 2009). As described by Holanda (1936), ethnic mixing was evident in the development of the Brazilian population and influenced culture. This multi-ethnic perspective of Brazil was corroborated by literary Romanticism, in the nineteenth century, with the publishing of Jose de Alencar's (1857) novel *O Guarani*, which narrates a love story between a Christianized indigenous man

with a Portuguese woman. The novel inaugurated the Indianist movement in Brazil, which integrates the pre-colonial figure of the indigenous people into the values of the colonizer (Fiorin, 2009). Therefore, it is possible to perceive that the notion of multiethnic dialogue as a symbol of Brazilian culture and identity began to be established with this movement, but this dialogue would be still subjugated to the colonizer's gaze, and the role of the African influence was neglected in the discussion.

A more fertile effort in defining Brazilian identity and culture returned in the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Modernist Movement in Brazil. The modernist movement, initiated with the Modern Week of Art exhibition in 1922, is one of the most prominent efforts to bridge the gap between African, Native, and European influences into Brazilian identity. The movement also converged the aesthetic ideas of new European theories of the time (Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism and Dadaism) to generate new artistic and literary expressions in Brazil. (Teles, 1972).

One of the main contributions of the movement to identity formation was *The Anthropophagic Manifesto*, written by Oswald de Andrade in 1928. After receiving the painting *Abaporu* (1928) from his wife, the modernist Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral, Oswald decided to develop a manifesto in tribute to the gift. The name of the painting was his main inspiration: *Abaporu* derives from the indigenous language 'Tupi' and means 'man that eats people', as an amalgamation of the words 'aba' (man), 'pora' (people) and 'ú' (eat). (Veiga, 2019). This cannibalistic theme in the painting is also influenced by legends that, in the Tupi tribes, the meat of the enemy would be eaten as a process of assimilation of their qualities and strength. From this painting, Oswald de Andrade developed a groundbreaking manifesto. *The Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928) utilizes the cannibalistic idea as a metaphor for a national identity, that, instead of denying the colonizers, devours them and incorporates their attributes to transpose the barriers of alterity. (Schwarz, 2002). Therefore, by creating this analogy, the manifesto would empower the colonized to become agents of identity formation, and, thus, regain the power over their culture.

Andrade's manifesto cemented the notion of cultural and ethnic interaction as the basis of Brazilian identity but provided insights for discussing the role of the colonizer in this process, by subverting their power. In this sense, it operates «as a symbol of resistance against colonizing Portuguese culture» (Tosta, 2011, p. 217). However, the manifesto is not committed to a return to the precolonial past with the rejection of dominant influences. Instead, it seeks to synthesize the binary between natural and civilized man, (Madureira, 2005). This synthesis is

consummated in the allegory of assimilation, which acknowledges the cultural domination of the colonizer but shifts it into a strength, a possibility of freedom and autonomy.



Figure 1. *Abaporu* (Amaral, 1928).

The historical background of Brazil and the literary examples discussed in this section demonstrate that a clear definition of Brazilian identity is a challenging task. Rather than attempting to define it, it might be more fruitful to understand that the identity process is a result of multiple identities, of an ethnic and cultural exchange that was not detached from systems of oppression and coloni-

zation. Nevertheless, it generated «hybrid formations in all social strata» (Canclini, 2005, p. 46). This characteristic of intercultural syncretism is an important aspect of discerning Brazilian identity and its influences on the development of Brazilian Children's Literature.

3. Brazilian Children's Literature and its plurality

As an outcome of the country's multiethnic formation, Children's Literature in Brazil has been forged under the influences of African, Portuguese, and Indigenous cultures and it was deeply grounded in orality (Arroyo, 1968). In the slavery period, African influences were especially prominent in storytelling, and the marks of this influence remain alive in Brazilian folklore and literature. In African history, there is a long-held tradition of oral storytellers who act as institutions of cultural ancestry and guardians of memories and traditions of their people (Hampâté Bâ, 2010; Rocha, 2010). These storytellers, known as *griots*, are described as traveler praise-singers, who acted as historians, retelling the people's past in a «multigeneric narrative that includes genealogies, praises, songs, etymologies, incantations, oaths, and proverbs» (Johnson, 1986 cited in Hale, 1998, p. 23). In Brazil, this heritage of storytelling can be perceived in the figure of the old Black women, slaved nannies of the children of wealthy white families during the colonial and imperial eras (Arroyo, 1968).

Through the nannies' storytelling, these children grew up with access to a wide range of stories permeated by the assimilation of European stories, such as French fairy tales, with folkloric elements of indigenous culture and characters of African heritage (Arroyo, 1968). This assimilationist trace of storytelling is recounted in later testimonies from celebrated Brazilian authors, such as José Lins do Rego. He described that in his childhood, Perrault's character *Bluebeard* (1697) was retold by his nanny as a master of slaves from the Northeast of Brazil. (Arroyo, 1968). From this sole example, it is possible to see that the origins of Children's Literature in Brazil were already very attuned to the premise of intercultural syncretism. However, it is essential to reinstate that this syncretism was still deeply inscribed into a system of colonial oppression and a slavery regime.

While oral storytelling creatively thrived in the domestic environment, the development of texts for children in printed form did not take place until the nineteenth century through the arrival of translations of European Fairy Tales, revealing the dominance of a Eurocentric perspective in the field (Arroyo, 1968; Oliveira, 2013). The publishing of children's books originally written by a Brazil-

ian author who depicted Brazilian culture only took place in the twentieth century, by author Monteiro Lobato. His series of books *Sítio do Picapau Amarelo* (1920-1947) appropriated African retellings and indigenous folklore into the narrative, inaugurating a new phase of Children's Literature in Brazil. (Arroyo, 1968).

Despite Lobato's significance to Brazilian Children's Literature, it is of paramount importance to highlight the racist portraits of Black characters in his narratives. The awareness about Lobato's racist discourse was raised for the first time only in 2010 by the Federal Council of Education, which acknowledged racism in the books and reinforced a critical standpoint towards it in the school curriculum and classroom practices. (Natali, 2020). Even though the book use was not restricted by the organization, the statement suffered intense backlash from children's literature authors who claimed that it represented an attempt to censor Lobato's works and that, as former readers of Lobato themselves, the racist ideology in the books did not turn them into racist adults. (Natali, 2020). This backlash exerts the heritage of colonial and racial oppression that is often overlooked and normalized in Brazilian culture. It also reinforces that Brazilian Children's Literature is influenced by this heritage and therefore should be analyzed considering the country's complex history.

After Lobato's publications, Brazilian children's books suffered a period of stagnation in the face of political instabilities between two dictatorships (1945 - 1964). The renaissance of Brazilian children's literature would occur only in the 1970s, with the inauguration of the first schools of graphic design in the country due to a new era of industrialization (Mendes, 2016; Oliveira, 2013). The launch of graphic art courses deeply influenced picturebook production, leading to the rise of authors, such as Ziraldo, Lygia Bojunga, Ruth Rocha, and Ana Maria Machado. Following this period of growth, the end of the Military Dictatorship in 1985 broadened the literature perspective, allowing more political and critical questioning, with a stronger appeal to pictures and visuals (Gregorin Filho, 2012).

Aside from the increased political openness, educational policies also influenced the shift in children's book production at the end of the century, with the development of the new Law of Educational Guidelines (1996) and the National Curricular Parameters (1998). In these documents, issues about Brazilian multiethnic formation were finally addressed as well as a critical standpoint towards colonization, generating a fresher look at children's book production (Gregorin Filho, 2012).

One of the main examples of this new shift favoring multiculturalism in Brazilian Children's Literature is the new Indianism movement, initiated at the

beginning of Brazil's new century. Instead of maintaining a pre-colonial and exotic version of the Indigenous peoples, this new movement stated them as the protagonists in the narrative and the authorship of stories. (Lajolo & Zilberman, 2012). Today, authors such as Daniel Munduruku and Yaguarê Yamã explore their ancestry to narrate stories of their people, often utilizing not only the Portuguese language but also Indigenous languages in the books. The choice of bilingualism also reinforces the effort to shine a light on the linguistic richness of the Indigenous languages once neglected in favor of Portuguese assimilation.

Another example of the recent recognition of multicultural ethnicities in the literary landscape is the growth in the number of children's books published by Black authors, tackling an antiracist education amongst the young ones. This trend was majorly initiated due to the promulgation of a Law in 2003 that institutionalized the theme 'History and Afro-Brazilian Culture' in school curricula, pushing forward the book market to publishing materials about the topic. Although the growth was a direct effect of the law promulgation and may not have incurred quality publications at its beginning (Pestana, 2021), it was responsible for gradual attention and recognition from Black authors in the last ten years. (Cardoso, 2023). All the recent advances demonstrate a shift in the children's literature market to consistently engage with the multiethnic caldron of Brazilian identity and give authorship to once-underrepresented groups (Lajolo & Zilberman, 2022).

4. Otherness in Brazilian Children's Literature

According to Xie (2013, p. 1)

to speak from an other's thought is to redefine and renarrativize the world. Therefore, to exercise otherness is the effort to retell a once hegemonic story. In terms of Brazilian history and its principles of cultural assimilation, there has been a euphoric concept that Brazil's identity erases the barriers and hierarchies between race and class. In other terms, this all-welcoming portrait of Brazilian culture can undermine the layers of oppression and prejudice suffered by African and Indigenous peoples in colonial times that emerge until today in social life (Fiorin, 2009).

This misconception surrounding the multicultural Brazilian identity could be perceived in Brazilian Literature and art, especially in the Romantic Movement,

by the colonization of the figure of the indigenous hero. The erasure and denial of systems of oppression in cultural identity can be perceived even more recently in Children's Literature, by the refusal of renowned children's book authors to admit that Monteiro Lobato's works were ingrained in racist portraits (Natali, 2010). The neglect of observing and critiquing the controversial and violent descriptions of Black characters in Lobato's works is legitimized in favor of valuing his attempt to inaugurate the first Brazilian Literature for infants, blending elements of Black, Indigenous, and Portuguese cultures. However, to eliminate the forms in which these elements were portrayed is to perpetuate the false idea of amicable coexistence between peoples, and above all, to erase the oppressive marks of coloniality.

As stated by Mignolo (2005) the very notion of Latin America cannot be separated from Coloniality, «as the entire continent emerged as such in the European consciousness as a massive extent of land to be appropriated and of people to be converted to Christianity, and whose labor could be exploited» (Mignolo, 2005, p. 7). Therefore, the systems of oppression ingrained in the development of a Brazilian society marked by slavery and colonial hegemony cannot be unconsidered in the country's history and literature. The new perspectives of otherness in social studies have foregrounded new perspectives about identity, pointing to its complexities and reformulating it as «a matter of difference, hence challenging us to move beyond reductive binary structures of knowledge». (McGillis, 2013, p. 2). However, the mechanism of reeducation of the binaries self/other is a movement that is still under constant revision. According to McGillis

In order for cultural difference to be truly rehabilitated, we must demonstrate how it has been violated and reduced to the status of marginality, and what discursive mechanics Western imperialism has deployed in keeping the other under control (McGillis, 2013, p. 2).

Considering this affirmative, it is indispensable to acknowledge the systemic marginality of Black and Indigenous peoples in the development of Brazilian society to fully portray its complex identity. The recent accomplishments in Children's Literature in terms of more diverse production of books can be seen as positive and revelatory prospects of a more inclusive perspective to the young ones, as it provides authorship and voice to once underrepresented groups. However, there is still a long journey of reconstruction and retellings to come, as the discourse of difference is always an unfinished project (2013, p. 2).

5. Conclusion

This article provided an overview of the plurality of identities in the development of Children's Literature in Brazil. A social background on the multiple cultures that emerged in Brazilian society was presented, followed by a historical analysis of the genesis of Brazilian Children's Literature amidst the complexities of this multicultural country. The notion of cultural assimilation was addressed as one of the devices for explaining Brazilian identity but its acritical and utopic perspective was criticized in the work because it neglects the oppression suffered by Black and Indigenous people, as well as it masquerades the violent system of coloniality from which Brazil is offspring.

This prominence of this utopic perspective was exemplified by a polemic episode that occurred amongst literary academics in 2010 as they refused to acknowledge Monteiro Lobato's racist ideology in his children's books. In the article, it is argued that this refusal demonstrates an obstacle to advancing the discourse toward the acknowledgment of difference. However, the article concludes that a recent openness to a diverse community of authors can act as a gateway to foreground a more legitimized notion of otherness in Brazilian Children's Literature, by giving authorship to the once muted groups.

References

- Alencar, J. (1857). *O Guarani*. Folhetim.
- Amaral, T.D. (1928). Abaporu. Latin American Art Museum.
- Andrade, O. (1928). *Manifesto Antropófago*. Revista de Antropofagia.
- Arroyo, L. (1968). *Literatura Infantil Brasileira*. Edições Melhoramentos.
- Bosi, A. (1992). *A Dialética da Colonização*. Companhia das Letras.
- Brazilian Federal Government (2018) *Base Nacional Comum Curricular*. Ministry of Education.
- Canclini, N.G. et al. (2005). *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Cardoso, E. (2023). Escurecimentos literários: autoria de ancestralidade negra na fundação da literatura infantil brasileira. *ODEERE*, 8(1), pp. 106-118.
- Fiorin, J.L. (2009). A construção da identidade nacional brasileira. *Bakhtiniana*, 1(1), pp. 115-126.
- Gregorin Filho, J.N. (2012). *Literatura Infantil: Múltiplas Linguagens na Formação de Leitores*. Melhoramentos.

- Hale, T.A. (1998). *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Indiana University Press.
- Hampaté Bâ, A. (2010). A tradição viva. In J. Ki-Zerbo (Ed.), *História geral da África*. Metodologia e pré-história da África. UNESCO.
- Holanda, S.B. (2016). *Raízes do Brasil*. Companhia das Letras.
- Lajolo, M. Zilberman, R. (2022). *Literatura Infantil Brasileira: História e Histórias*. Unesp.
- McGillis, R. (Ed.) (2000). *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Routledge.
- Mignolo, W. (2005). *The Idea of Latin America*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Natali, M. (2020). *A Literatura em Questão: sobre a responsabilidade da instituição literária*. Editora Unicamp.
- Oliveira, R. (2013). O Brasil pela imagem: a ilustração de livros e o passado colonial. In E. Serra (Ed.), *A arte de ilustrar livros para crianças e jovens no Brasil*. FNLIJ.
- Paz, O. (1976). *Signos em rotação*. Brasiliense.
- Pestana, C.V. de A. (2020). As africanidades na literatura infantil contemporânea. *Revista Crioula*, 25 (1), pp. 286-300.
- Veiga, E. (2019) *Abaporu: a história do quadro mais valioso da arte brasileira*. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-47808327> [Last accessed: May 15, 2023].
- Velloso, M. (1988). Literatura como espelho da nação. *Estudos Históricos*, I (2), pp. 239-263.
- Xie, S. (2000). Rethinking the Identity of Cultural Otherness: The Discourse of Difference as an Unfinished Project. In R. McGillis (Ed.), *Voices of the other: Children's literature and the postcolonial context*. Routledge.

Conclusion

The volume highlights both the significant advancements made and the work still needed in the portrayal of diverse experiences in children's literature. The analysis throughout the book shows encouraging progress in how stories now represent different genders, races, abilities, and identities, but also exposes areas where improvements are crucial to truly reflect the complexities of the world children live in.

One of the key outcomes of this study is the increasing presence of multifaceted representations of marginalized groups in children's books. The transformation in gender portrayals is particularly evident, with more dynamic female characters breaking out of traditional, restrictive roles. The inclusion of non-binary identities and the portrayal of disability are also becoming more empowering, offering children stories where diverse experiences are normalized and celebrated. However, the research also points out the lingering obstacles. Despite the growing acknowledgment of marginalized voices, mainstream children's literature continues to centre on dominant cultural narratives, leaving many stories untold. Indigenous characters, racial minorities, and those with fluid gender identities are still underrepresented, often confined to specific literary spaces rather than being fully integrated into the broader publishing landscape. This uneven distribution of diverse narratives reflects the ongoing challenges of achieving full representation across different regions and cultures.

One of the critical findings is that while literature has made strides in questioning stereotypes, these efforts remain incomplete. There is a need for systemic change within the publishing industry to ensure that stories representing all kinds of diversity are consistently brought to the forefront, rather than being treated as outliers or occasional inclusions. Publishers, educators, and writers must work in tandem to make diverse narratives more accessible and mainstream, moving beyond simply adding diversity as an afterthought or token gesture.

Another important insight from the study is the need for deeper, more nuanced portrayals of 'otherness'. While children's literature increasingly addresses racial, cultural, and religious diversity, there remains a tendency to oversimplify these themes. Rather than treating difference as an exception, it is essential to craft stories that reflect the complex realities of identity and belonging in a more layered and authentic manner, enriching children's understanding of the world.

The road ahead requires continued focus on broadening the scope of inclusion in children's books. This includes not only publishing more stories featuring a diverse array of characters but also integrating these narratives more fully into educational systems, so that all children, regardless of background, have access to stories that resonate with their own lives and experiences. Future research should also explore how young readers engage with these diverse narratives and how exposure to a variety of perspectives shapes their understanding of the world.

To conclude, the volume illuminates the strides made in creating more inclusive stories for children, while also emphasizing the ongoing need for expanded representation. By embracing the richness of diverse stories, children's literature can become not just a mirror of the world as it is, but a powerful blueprint for the world as it should be – one where every child feels seen, valued, and limitless in their potential.

Notes on contributors

Valentina Baeli is currently a research fellow at the University of Catania working on the project ‘Gender, identities and rights in the mirror of contemporary children’s literature’.

She obtained her PhD in ‘Training Processes, Theoretical-Transformative Models, and Research Methods Applied to the Territory’ from the University of Catania. Her doctoral dissertation, *Vicissitudes of Masculinity: Gender Identity and the Construction of the ‘Masculine’ in Children’s and Young Adult Literature in Postmodernity*, investigated how literature for young readers can shape gender norms about masculinity.

Her recent publications are: *Critical horizons of ecofeminism: lineaments for a critical pedagogy*, in «Annali Online della Didattica e della Formazione Docente», n. 28/2024; *Contemporary traces of narrated pedagogies: the challenges of the maternal role in LGBTQIA+ growth pathways*, in «Women&Education», n. 3/2024.

Sridipa Dandapat is a doctoral candidate (UGC-SRF) in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Patna and the newly appointed executive editor of *International Research in Children’s Literature* (Edinburgh University Press). She has been awarded the International Youth Library Fellowship (2023-24) for her research on Indian immigrant girlhood. She has also received the ChLA Graduate Student Honorary Essay Award, IRSCL Travel Grant, and June Cummins Travel Grant. Sridipa has published in *New Review of Children’s Literature and Librarianship*, *Boyhood Studies*, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, and *Children’s Literature in Education*, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, and *Journal of War & Culture Studies*. Her research focuses on Gender Studies, Social Justice Discourse, Children’s Literature, and South Asian Fiction. She can be reached at shreedipaa@gmail.com

Verena Marie Eberhardt is a scholar in the field of religion and media. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Empirical Cultural Studies and German Language and Literature (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen) and a Master's degree in the Study of Religion (Ludwig-Maximilian-University Munich). Verena Marie Eberhardt completed her PhD in the Study of Religion at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich (*Religiöse Vielfalt in Kindermedien. Repräsentationen einer pluralen Gesellschaft*, Nomos 2024). Her research interests focus on religion and diversity, media for children, visuality, normativity, and the motif of the mirror in the European history of religion. Her current research project deals with religious and scientific world views represented by the motif of the mirror in 17th century copperplate engravings.

Maria Carolina Nunes Gobbo is a researcher in Children's Literature in Brazil. She is a PhD student at the University of São Paulo and a Master's Graduate in Children's Literature and Literature at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her research interests include Brazilian picturebooks, postmodernity, and postcolonialism in Latin America, as well as topics on Brazilian multiethnic diversity and its influences on children's fiction. She also works as a primary teacher in Brazil and undertake specialization courses in children's fiction, with more than eight years of experience in the field of education in the early years.

Elena Guerzoni earned her PhD in Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Bologna, where she is teaching assistant and professor on contract in Children's Literature and a member of the Scientific Council of the CRLI – Research Centre in Children's Literature. Her doctoral research, currently being published, has investigated the history of young adult literature and the representations of adolescence within contemporary youth fiction. She has conducted research at the International Youth Library in Munich and at the Department of Literature of the University of Antwerp. Among her most recent publications: *Ed ecco che arrivi tu. La relazione di cura tra vecchi e bambini nell'opera di Ulf Stark*, in Acone L., Trisciuzzi M.T., Ferro Allodola V. (eds.), *La Letteratura per l'infanzia come strumento di promozione del ben-essere e di contrasto alle povertà educative: percorsi di ricerca interdisciplinari*, «Medical Humanities & Medicina Narrativa – MHMN», vol. 10, n. 1, 2025; *Letteratura Young Adult*, in Nobile A. (ed.), *Dizionario di Letteratura Giovanile. Generi, temi, problemi*, Morcelliana-Scholé, Brescia, 2025; *Letteratura Young Adult. Definizioni di un genere 'irrequieto'*, in Nobile A., Mazzini A. (eds.), *Letteratura per l'infanzia? Morfologia di una disciplina in trasformazione*, Studium-Marcianum Press, Venezia, 2024.

Maria Lucenti is Assistant Professor of History of Education and Children's Literature at the University of Genoa. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, Migration Studies and Intercultural Processes. She deals with the history of formal and informal education, the comparative analysis of educational policies, school programs and textbooks in formal education and the representation of gender, cultural and religious diversity in children's literature. Among her latest publications: *Women in Formal and Informal Education. International Comparative Perspectives in the History of Education* (Brill, 2023); *Cultural diversity in textbooks and children's literature in Italy (1980-2000). Breakthrough or continuity?* In *Educazione Interculturale* (2022); *Le monde arabo-musulmans et l'occident dans les manuels d'Italie et de Tunisie. Autres histoires* (Harmattan, 2021); *Barbie, Sherazade and Alyssa in the imaginary. Analysis of gender representations in cultures*, in *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica/Journal of Theories and Research in Education* (2020).

Đurđa Maksimović is an Assistant at the Faculty of Education in Užice, University of Kragujevac. She is currently attending Phd in Pedagogy at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. The topic of her PhD is 'Pedagogical Science and literature intended for children in Serbia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century'. Her current research interests focus on the history of education, the history of school reforms and the pedagogical characteristics of children's literature throughout history. She can be reached by e-mail at petrovicdjurdja7@gmail.com

Diana Njegovan is a doctoral candidate in Italian Studies at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and a Croatian lecturer at the University of Graz in Austria. She is writing a dissertation on an Istrian author who experienced exile after the Second World War and incorporated these experiences into his literary production. The title of the dissertation is: *L'opera letteraria di Fulvio Tomizza: identità, luoghi e lingua (Literary Production by Fulvio Tomizza: Identity, Places, and Language)*. Since 2016 Diana Njegovan has written papers and essays on literature and cultural studies. She has given a guest lecture in Ukraine, a speech in Italy, and spoken at conferences in Croatia, Australia and Germany. She has professional experience as a Croatian and Italian teacher for adults and children, and has worked as a translator.

Silvia Pacelli has completed a PhD in 'Theory and history of pedagogy, education, children's literature' in the Department of Educational Science, Roma Tre University, with a research thesis on the representation of disability in Italian children's literature in an historical perspective. At present, she is a research

fellow at the University of Roma Tre and also a contract lecturer in ‘History of Pedagogy and Educational Institution’ at the University of Milano Bicocca. She also was a contract lecturer in ‘Children’s Literature’ at the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, Siena University. Her research interests primarily focus on the historical study of children’s literature, from both a textual and iconographic perspective, as well as the representations within it and the connections between literature and historical-educational contexts.

Aleksandra Ilić Rajković is an Associate Professor at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. She completed her doctorate in 2013 on ‘Activity School in Serbia (1880-1940)’ at the same institution. She is engaged in courses dealing with the history of pedagogical ideas and schooling. Her current research interests orient towards a history of education, activity school, contemporary educational theories, history of school reforms, game-based learning, textbooks, knowledge circulation, and educational media. She can be reached by e-mail at avilic@f.bg.ac.rs

Anna Travagliati earned her PhD in Contemporary Italian Literature at the University of Bologna in 2023 with a dissertation focused on Adela Turin’s *Dalla parte delle bambine*, the first Italian publishing house for feminist children’s literature. In 2024 she started a postdoc at the Université Clermont Auvergne (France), within the project ‘Représentations sexuées et genrées du « féminin » dans les albums de jeunesse | Sexual and Gendered Representations of the ‘Feminine’ in Picturebooks’. Her main interests include gender and women’s studies and children’s literature – particularly picturebooks. She is currently serving as the Social Media Officer of the International Research Society for Children’s Literature.

Priyanka Tripathi is an Associate Professor of English and former Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Patna. She serves as Co-Executive Editor of the Journal of International Women’s Studies. Priyanka has been awarded the Charles Wallace India Trust Visiting Fellowship (2024-25) at the University of Leeds and the IPD Visiting Research Fellowship (2022-23) at the University of Edinburgh. She has published widely in journals such as the Journal of Gender Studies, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, GeoHumanities, and Economic and Political Weekly among others. For more details, visit <https://www.iitp.ac.in/~priyankatripathi/>

Collana **Educare**

1. *Casale: la città della riscossa contro l'amianto*, a cura di Giorgio Matricardi, 2017; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-97752-82-0.
2. Agnese Larconetti, Anna Peluffo, *Il sogno di un bambino. Pietro e Seme*, 2019; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-94943-52-8.
3. Anita Maugeri, *Bambini in manicomio: agli albori dell'integrazione scolastica. Studio sull'educazione dei frenastenici presenti nel manicomio di Pratozanino durante i primi anni del '900*, 2020; ISBN 978-88-3618-006-6, e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-007-3.
4. *Faculty Development in Italia. Valorizzazione delle competenze didattiche dei docenti universitari*, a cura di Antonella Lotti, Paola Alessia Lampugnani, 2020; ISBN 978-88-3618-023-3, e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-024-0.
5. *Childhoods on the move. Twelve researches on unaccompanied minors in Italy*, a cura di Andrea Traverso, 2020; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-048-6.
6. *Ripensare gli anni Ottanta e Novanta. Infanzie e adolescenze in divenire*, a cura di Maria Lucenti, 2021; ISBN 978-88-3618-062-2, e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-063-9.
7. *Faculty Development e innovazione didattica universitaria*, a cura di Antonella Lotti, Gloria Crea, Sara Garbarino, Federica Picasso, Erika Scellato, 2021; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-100-1.
8. Serena Salvi, *Bambini che (si) riflettono. Un percorso didattico transdisciplinare per sviluppare empatia e senso di cura alla scuola primaria. Esperienze*, 2022; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-148-3.
9. Valeria Todaro, *Il sapere in comunic-azione. La discussione guidata come strumento per lo sviluppo di competenze argomentative. Esperienze*, 2022; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-161-2.
10. Gabriele Greggio, *Dal walkman ad Alexa. Ascolto ed educazione musicale informale*, 2023; ISBN 978-88-3618-225-1, e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-217-6.
11. Chiara La Banca, *Voglio diventare me. Un progetto educativo-teatrale tra scoperta e consapevolezza. Esperienze*, 2023; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-224-4.
12. Paola Alessia Lampugnani, *Età Multiple: rappresentazioni dell'infanzia nel Sistema dell'Accoglienza per i Minori Stranieri Non Accompagnati*, 2024; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-274-9.
13. *Una storia non trascurabile. Quarant'anni della cooperativa sociale ASCUR – Attività Sociali Comunità Una Rivarolo*, a cura di Luca Ciuffetti, 2024; ISBN 978-88-3618-301-2, e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-302-9.
14. *Dalle Politiche alle pratiche. La professionalità docente nell'evoluzione istituzionale e tecnologica*, a cura di Arianna Marci, 2025; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-317-3.
15. *Diversity in children's literature. A historical-comparative perspective*, a cura di Maria Lucenti, 2025; e-ISBN (pdf) 978-88-3618-343-2.

Maria Lucenti is Assistant Professor of History of Education and Children's Literature at the University of Genoa. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, Migration Studies and Intercultural Processes at the University of Genoa in co-tutorship with the University of Carthage. Among her latest publications: *Women in formal and informal education. International comparative perspective in the history of education* (Brill, 2023); *Breakthrough or continuity? In Educazione Interculturale* (2022); *Le monde arabo-musulman et l'Occident dans les manuels scolaires d'Italie et de Tunisie. Autres histoires* (Harmattan, 2021).

Children's literature has always been an important vehicle for the inclusion of all diversity. However, the potential inherent in children's literature to give voice and space to such diversity has not always been exploited appropriately. How has diversity found a place in children's literature in the past? How does it find space today? How has children's literature helped to represent contemporary reality, a reality in which all diversities should have recognition?

The volume intends to analyze and deconstruct the concept of "diversity" and its multiple implications of gender, culture, religion, identity, disability, etc. in the history of education, as well as highlight national and international best practices, future directions and developments in this field of research.

e-ISBN: 978-88-3618-343-2

Cover illustration by Michele Ferri
from *Il mondo è anche di Tobias*
by Elena Spagnoli Fritze, 2009