

“Narrating” homes and objects: images of domestic life in Italian picturebooks since the mid-20th century

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Abstract

The home is an emblematic *topos* in children’s literature. The home is intended primarily as a physical place where the family comes together, and where the protagonists’ primary needs are generally met. The home is also a place of memories and knowledge acquisition. It is capable of revealing the attitudes of the characters, their lifestyles, translating them into words and images. The home can reveal the quality of human relations within its walls and outside the family circle. The aim of this contribution is to analyze the home as a space of personal characterization and psychological, social and historical-cultural evolution. After providing a historical picture of Italian domestic life as of the years after World War II, the article outlines some of the ways in which the home, its interiors and the image of childhood have changed in Italian picturebooks over the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: home; Italian picturebooks; domestic geographies; household objects; representation of childhood

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1. Introduction

The home, be it real or imaginary, is an essential *topos* in children's literature (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Reimer, 2011). It is where the protagonists of the stories live, their starting point, the place they leave behind. The home is intended primarily as a physical place where the family comes together, and where the protagonists' primary needs are generally met. It protects them against the weather and the dangers of the outside world. The home is consequently a place of memories and knowledge acquisition. When we recall our childhood, many of our memories emerge from corners of the kitchen, living room, or bedroom, and from storerooms and cellars, attics, corridors, and the garden of the home where we grew up, which shaped how we became adults. "Without it, man would be a dispersed being" (Bachelard, 2015, p.35). The home also has a prodigious metaphorical value:

being or feeling at home is associated with dimensions of familiarity, shared wellbeing, feeling at ease and confident, especially of ourselves. It is a place where we can usually express even our most intimate thoughts and our identity can fully emerge, without fear of reproach or retaliation (Campagnaro & Goga, 2014, p.78).¹

Both in real life and in literature, however, the home is not always the wonderful place generally associated with childhood. It is not always that safe harbor providing physical and psychological security, nor does it always satisfy a child's lively desire to learn. Sadly, the home is sometimes a place of intimidation, violence and oppression. Driven by their desire to explore, or by family difficulties or psychological malaise, the protagonists of many children's stories leave their home and go out into the world, only to return later, more mature and enriched by their life experiences. The "home, away, then home again" or "home, away, then to a new home" narrative model is one of the most common patterns encountered in children's literature. Although other models, even differing significantly from this script,² have been circulating in recent years (especially in works for young adults), the home will continue to occupy such a special place that it is impossible, even today, to imagine children's stories without it (Thomas, 1986). In many stories, the home and its rooms seem capable of capturing the personality and

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attitudes of the characters, their lifestyles and interests, translating them into words and images. The home can reveal the quality of human relations within its walls and outside the family circle. Various scholars of children's literature (Beseghi, 1995; Dewan, 2004; Cantatore, 2015; Krogstad, 2016; Zago, Callegari & Campagnaro, 2019) have analyzed the home as a space of personal characterization and psychological, social and historical-cultural evolution. The present contribution is part of this line of research. After providing a historical picture of Italian domestic life as of the years after World War II, it outlines some of the ways in which the home, its interiors and the image of childhood have changed in Italian picturebooks over the second half of the 20th century.

2. Changing domestic spaces and reorganizing family relations in Italy after 1950

This analysis starts from 1945, a crucial time for the architectural history of Italian homes. After the war, the home started to reflect the significant changes underway in the social and cultural life of Italian people, giving rise – albeit in different forms and on different theoretical grounds – to a new “culture of home living” (Rochat, Sateriale & Spano 1980; Muntoni, 1982).

With the fall of fascism and its protectionist approach, and the urgent need to rebuild a country in ruins, the home regained a leading role. Under the fascist regime, people had to demonstrate their adhesion to the dictatorship in the collective sphere, by attending mass rallies in large open spaces for instance. Identities were shaped in city streets and squares. The primacy of the public over the private sphere was constantly reiterated. With the downfall of Mussolini's dictatorship, the fascist myth of the mass rallies soon faded. The birth of the republic brought new identity-shaping priorities in the life of an individual. With time, the private dimension became crucial, and so did the part played by domestic intimacy in the home.

Two other factors contributed to this phenomenon: a return to the idea of property ownership; and a changing family structure. They are discussed, one at a time, below.

A massive migratory flow within the country led thousands of farmhands from the south of Italy to move to the industrialized north. It was necessary to find or build new homes for this enormous mass of migrants, who were to be employed in the industrial

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and service sectors. Private building companies became one of the industrial sectors driving the Italian economy, but the need for housing was covered largely by the public building sector. In addition to funding the reconstruction of buildings and areas badly damaged by the war (Scrivano, 2005), the government passed a law on 28 February 1949, n. 43 “Provisions for increasing the employment of factory workers by facilitating the building of homes for workers” (the so-called Piano INA-Casa, or Piano Fanfani) that triggered the country’s greatest public residential building plan of the century (Di Biagi, 2001). With mixed public and private funding (from the State, employers, and employees), the plan lasted 14 years (1949-1963), enabling the building of inexpensive homes and contributing to launching the Italian economy and raising the employment rate. It also helped to provide an “institutionalized” answer to the needs of the poor on a national scale. For the first time, even less well-off families could benefit from better living conditions in homes that were modest, but new, healthy and modern. The homes were built in towns and residential districts, and architecturally well-designed. The Piano INA-Casa became a huge machine,

producing 2800 rooms and housing 560 new families every week [...]. With the approximately two million homes built over 14 years of activity, it improved the living conditions of more than 350,000 Italian families. According to a survey conducted by the public body managing the plan, 40% of the families that moved into a new home had previously been living in cellars, caves, huts or under the stairs, and 17% had been sharing their homes with other families. A great many had migrated from the countryside in southern Italy, and many others were refugees from Istria and Dalmatia (Di Biagi, 2013, pp.19-20).

The home became the hub of Italy’s social fabric. Architectural features, furnishings and decorations were useful for revealing and interpreting individual habits and lifestyles, and contributed to representing the social stratifications in the country (De Pieri, Bonomo, Caramellino & Zanfi 2013). Then, over the next three decades, younger generations of Italians began to dream of having a home that was more independent and individualized than the flats in high-rise blocks provided by the public building sector. The home was to become the most desirable of goods, a symbol of having achieved an

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economic wellbeing and an accredited social status. As well as for blocks of flats, there was a growing demand for homes that could be personalized, and offer a greater degree of individuality and privacy. This led to the popularity of terraced houses, a formula that satisfied the desire to live in a “single-family home”. During this period, the interiors of Italian people’s homes were being filled with furniture, household appliances, and various other objects acquired not only for their functionality, but in many cases as ostentatious symbols of social status:

The old dining room with its solid wooden furniture was replaced by ample living rooms of the kind used in northern Europe, complete with polyurethane armchairs. Instead of the kitchen with its large table there was a tiny, compact, practical cooking space. New tiled bathrooms with a mirror relegated the uncomfortable toilet on the landing to history (Lanaro, 1994, p.244).

In the Italy of the post-war economic miracle, the consumerist model and the logic associated with Calvinism became established. Differences between citizens/consumers in terms of cultural capital, social origins, occupation and family structure became less evident (Asquer, 2013), but the home remained the main object in which Italian families invested their savings, and a symbol of the pulsing heart of family and relational life (Asquer, 2011).

Turning now to the second factor, the structure of the family (a fundamental institution of Italian society) changed dramatically over the course of the second half of the 20th century. In Italy, the family had always been considered a vital container for nurturing an individual’s cultural, social, gender and generational identity. It is one of the core elements that enable us to situate and explain the country’s historical and cultural evolution (Asquer, Casalini, Di Biagio & Ginsborg, 2010).

At the start of the 20th century, families lived largely in a rural context and were organized according to the patriarchal model: the father was the unquestioned and unquestionable head of the family, who made all the decisions and established the rules governing family life. Day-to-day domestic life revolved around the home, where the women reigned, providing care, nourishment and security. The children came and went, largely to satisfy their primary needs. Their physical, cognitive, emotional and

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social identity was constructed elsewhere, out in the open air, in shared public spaces, courtyards and fields, on riverbanks and roads, in town squares, and so on. These are the spaces where children learned and grew up, certainly running risks at times, but completely free of adult control and supervision.

During the 20 years of European fascisms and nationalisms in the first half of the 20th century, the family – which had traditionally provided care, opportunities for socialization, and the transmission of rules and values - became a space for learning to conform, serving the purposes of the totalitarian regimes. Under fascist rule, the subjective dimension was entirely absorbed by the collective dimension, and the family (seen as a small subjective unit) was no exception. The great dictatorships needed families to be traditional, obedient, functional and conforming (Ginsborg, 2013). It was only with the end of the Second World War, in a country left devastated and in ruins, that the family structure gained a new social position. The process of Italy's political and cultural regeneration passed through a reorganization of the family unit. The need to find work in the industrial cities prompted young men and women to leave their family home and settle in the northern regions. They formed small families in homes in the suburbs, the women also in full-time employment (which necessarily meant rearranging the domestic workload). The large patriarchal families of old, in which young couples lived with their parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, were replaced by a very different domestic model. The challenges posed by a completely new economic and occupational reality led Italy towards more complicated, fluctuating and unstable family models. The economic boom, the protest movements that began in 1968, the cultural revolution, and the fascination with the logic of consumerism all contributed to the demise of the family that was “not only patriarchal (a model already superseded in the cities centuries earlier), but also bourgeois, with all its Oedipal nodes and enforced rules” (Cambi, 2006, p.23). The redefinition of the family structure became more sturdy in the last two decades of the 20th century, giving rise to

a set of family typologies that go beyond the patriarchal and the nuclear (the two models of the past), and are characterized by more personal, socially more fluid bonds, in which there is no hierarchy of roles established a priori, but a micro community of

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shared understandings and of actions taken according to a star-shaped model (Cambi, 2006, p.24).

At the heart of the new role of the family are the affections and care-giving activities, not the social rules and moral conformity of the past.

Clearly, these two factors did not just reshape the domestic geographies of the adult world. They also triggered a process of change along the path of identity construction in childhood. With urban settlements and the changing architecture of domestic spaces, and of the districts and cities where new homes were built, the family models were reorganized along new trajectories that did not always favor the development of social networks or the valorization of sociality. All this contributed to modifying the landscape of developmental age too, especially in the usage of inside-outside spaces. Children born after WWII, and particularly those born from the 1960s onwards experienced a marked reduction in their time and opportunity to socialize and explore out of doors in public spaces. Streets and squares, riverbanks and woods came to have an ever more marginal role in their developmental path, gradually replaced by the private, individualizing, safe environment of the home. Those unsupervised places out in the open air or dark, even underground spaces far from any adult's vigilant eye, where children had traditionally played adventurous games, developing their socializing skills and imagination, shrank and became inaccessible, almost disappearing altogether. As we shall see later on, this change was also evident in children's literature. The stories became more and more about girls and boys living in beautiful homes that were clean and healthy, well-furnished and comfortable, but childhood was gradually confined within their walls, inside closed domestic spaces. The children in the stories had fewer opportunities for free movement and socializing with their peers. Often, rather worryingly, they even had no direct contact with the natural world, which is known to be a pedagogically core factor in childhood. These conditions were restrictive, and sometimes even debilitating for a child's balanced development – conditions that pedagogical theory of the second 20th century had already identified as harmful, proposing alternative educational practices capable of containing their negative effects. A good example is *Outdoor Education*, a scheme for promoting and adding value to

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children's opportunities for "staying out", that conceives the outdoor environment and the natural world as fundamental to a child's education (Farnè & Agostini, 2014; Farné, Bortolotti & Terrusi, 2018).

3. Goals, tools, the corpus and the methodological approach of my study

The historical picture outlined above shows how the home regained a fundamental role in Italy after 1945, facilitated by the most remarkable scheme to build new homes in the country's contemporary town planning history. Such an acceleration in the renewal of the concept and physical place called home was bound to coincide with changes on various levels in the way the home was traditionally represented. There was a transformation not only in Italian social history and customs, but also in areas specifically related to the world of childhood, such as those studied by historians of education or (and here lies the reason for my own interest) of children's literature. As explained in the introductory comments, the home as a place for living and learning is an emblematic *topos* in children's books. It goes almost without saying that, if the old house of bricks and mortar where so many Italian children had grown up had changed so profoundly, then the house of signs depicted in children's books was bound to have been more or less affected. If we look carefully at the graphical evolution of picturebooks for children, we can find details that bear witness to these changes.

The aim of this article is to identify these details, analyze their importance, and suggest a critical-interpretative frame for charting the representation of domestic geographies in children's literature published in the second half of the 20th century. To do so, we took a look at the domestic images contained in a sizeable body of picturebooks.

This contribution stems from a personal investigation conducted as part of an international research project entitled "The construction of the sense of *espace vécu* in European children's literature in the second half of the 20th century (1945-2010). An international historical and comparative survey on picturebooks".³ Here we analyze some of the results emerging from said investigation, and from a historical-critical and comparative analysis of 34 picturebooks published in Italy between 1945 and 2010. The corpus of picturebooks considered is listed in Table 1.

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Table 1. The analyzed corpus

Picturebook creators		Title	Year	Decades
Author	Illustrator			
Ada Gobetti	Ettore Marchesini	<i>Storia del Gallo Sebastiano</i> [The story of Sebastiano the rooster]	1940	1940-1951-
Bruno Munari		<i>Gigi cerca il suo berretto</i> [Gigi is looking for his hat]	1945	1941-1950
Colette Rosselli		<i>Il terzo libro di Susanna</i> [The third book of Susanna]	1950	
Renato Rascel	Ennio Di Majo	<i>Il piccoletto</i> [The little boy]	1958	1951-1960
Elsa Morante		<i>Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina</i> (1° ed. <i>Le bellissime avventure di Cateri' dalla trecciolina</i> , 1942) [The beautiful adventures of Cateri with the pony tail]	1959	
Gianni Rodari	Giancarlo Carloni	<i>GIP nel televisore</i> [GIP in the television]	1962	1961-1970
Renata Sciovocampo	Giorgio Sansoni	<i>Tom e Luc</i> [names]	1963	
Ginevra Bompiani	Maria Enrica Agostinelli	<i>Piazza pulita</i> [The clean square]	1968	
Vladimir Majakovskij	Flavio Costantini	<i>Il cavallino di fuoco</i> [The fire horse]	1969	
Sergio Tofano		<i>Quella povera vispa Teresa...</i> [That poor Lively Teresa...]	1969	
Eugene Ionesco	Philippe Corentin	<i>Storia numero 3. Per tutti i veri bambini</i> [Story Number 3. For all real children]	1971	
Adelina Torelli	Beniamino Bodini	<i>Il mondo visto da loro</i> [The world seen by children]	1971	1971-1980
Bruno Munari		<i>Cappuccetto verde</i> [Little Green Riding Hood]	1972	
Bruno Munari		<i>Cappuccetto giallo</i> [Little Yellow Riding Hood]	1972	

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Picturebook creators		Title	Year	Decades
Author	Illustrator			
Altan		<i>Arriva la Pimpa</i> [Pimpa is coming]	1975	1981-1990
Adela Turin	Nella Bosnia	<i>Una fortunata catastrofe</i> [A lucky catastrophe]	1975	
Giovanni Arpino	Franca Capalbi	<i>Il viale nero</i> [The dark path]	1983	
Roberto Innocenti		<i>Rosa Bianca</i> [Rose Blanche]	1985	
Mario Gomboli		<i>Casa, dolce casa</i> [Home, sweet home]	1988	
Cristina Lastrego	Francesco Testa	<i>Giovanna sogna un drago</i> [Giovanna dreams a dragon]	1989	
Linda e Gino Alberti		<i>Il pacchetto rosso</i> [The red parcel]	1989	
Gianni Rodari	Ginetta Ioni	<i>La casa volante</i> [The flying house]	1990	
Chiara Rapaccini		<i>La casa impossibile</i> [The impossible house]	1991	1991-2000
Gianni Rodari	Nicoletta Costa	<i>L'omino della pioggia</i> [The man with the rain]	1991	
Guido Quarzo	Sophie Fatus	<i>Zampe di gallina</i> [Crow's feet]	1994	
Antonella Abbatiello		<i>La casa dei gatti piccini piccini picciò</i> [The house of the little little cats]	1998	
Riccardo Geminiani	Nicoletta Ceccoli	<i>Nuvolando</i> [Clouding]	1998	
Nicoletta Costa		<i>Agostino e il cane giallo</i> [Agostino and the yellow dog]	1999	
Maja Celija		<i>Chiuso per ferie</i> [Closed for holidays]	2006	
Giovanna Zoboli	Guido Scarabottolo	<i>Due scimmie in cucina</i> [Two monkeys in the kitchen]	2006	2001-2010
Davide Cali	Anna Laura Cantone	<i>Voglio una mamma-robot</i> [Mama Robot]	2007	

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Picturebook creators		Title	Year	Decades
Author	Illustrator			
Mara Cerri		<i>E' un pomeriggio d'autunno in via Curiel 8</i> [It is an autumn afternoon at numer 8, Via Curiel]	2009	
Marco Berrettoni Carrara	Chiara Carrer	<i>È non è</i> [She is, and she is not]	2010	
Roberto Innocenti	Roberto Piumini	<i>Casa del tempo</i> [The House]	2010	

From the methodological standpoint, it is important to mention two aspects. The first concerns the criteria used to select the picturebooks. As agreed at international research group level, two macro categories were adopted. One concerned the culture of belonging (the books selected had to be written and/or illustrated by Italian authors, or by foreign authors who had lived in Italy for some time, or printed as original works by Italian publishing houses). The other concerned the aesthetic and literary quality of the books (the picturebooks considered had won prizes or been included in honors lists, or reviewed and/or analyzed in critical articles, or were of acknowledged historical, aesthetic and educational value). It is worth mentioning that in some cases, especially for the first 20 years of the period considered (1945-1965), some of the works selected cannot really be defined as picturebooks, but they can be considered as precursors of the picturebook because of their graphical and pictorial layout, and the role of the visual language in the narration.

The second aspect concerns how the data were collected and analyzed. This study was conducted using methodological tools specifically devised for the above-mentioned research project, which consist of a Word datasheet containing 27 items, and an Excel data matrix comprising four spreadsheets (for a detailed analysis of the study method, data collection and data interpretation, see the article by Carla Callegari in this *Special Issue*).

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4. Domestic geographies in children’s literature: how are they represented?

The home, its rooms and the household objects in picturebooks provide significant insights to talk about childhood experiences, lending citizenship and representativity to emotions, and to the quality of social relations. Journeying around their own home enables children to develop a certain narrative disposition. In looking at real and fictional adventures, children consolidate their knowledge, experience, imagination and capacity for symbolization through their daily routines (Rodari, 1973). As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the home is a metaphorical place in children’s literature, capable of interpreting very special views and representations of childhood. The literary and visual geographies that contemplate the home as a starting place for a protagonist’s adventures deserve careful scrutiny because these “narrating” homes provide “precious details about reality [...], contain clues about historical and geographical places, social classes, status symbols, generational cycles or changing epochs, family transformations [...], and states of mind” (Beseghi, 1995, p.71). Some studies conducted by contemporary theoretical critics on the relationship between children’s literature, representations of infancy and ideology (Hollindale, 1988; Stephens, 1992; Filograsso, 2014) emphasize how domestic spaces that tell stories in children’s books contribute more or less explicitly to conveying views of the world and value perspectives of the cultural and historical context in which the works are written and illustrated,

The creation and telling of stories – what we will refer to as narrative discourse – is a particular use of language through which a society expresses and imparts its current values and attitudes, and this happens regardless of authorial intention. A narrative may deal with specific social problems as aspects of story or theme and express a more or less overt attitude towards the implications of those problems, or, if it does not have any obvious exemplary intent, it will express an implicit ideology, usually in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought (McCallum & Stephens, 2011, p.360).

This means that, in devising the fictitious worlds and domestic environments in which their characters move, writers and illustrators of children’s books also transmit their

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own memories, portraits of worlds in which they lived (or live), and representations of relationships between adults and children.

In line with these research perspectives, we now go on to explore the picturebooks selected for the present investigation (see Table 1). Drawing comparisons between the home interiors illustrated in 34 books revealed some significant elements that help us to explore and understand the social and cultural changes that have taken place in children's stories since the end of WWII. For reasons of space, we concentrate in this study on just two aspects: 1) the gradual restriction of the protagonists' range of action, which is increasingly confined within the walls of their homes; and 2) the insistence on representing daily life at home in rooms that are well-lit and well-equipped – good places for family relations, no doubt, but hardly suitable for sparking challenging and formative adventures. Our analysis gives priority to stories in which the visual impact of the images of domestic interiors is more accentuated, so it is not representative of the whole panorama of picturebooks published in Italy between 1945 and 2010. This investigation nonetheless can serve as a very promising starting point for studying and comparing historical developments and tendencies, as part of contemporary research on how the *espace vécu* is depicted in children's literature.

4.1 The gradual restriction of children's range of action to within the walls of their homes

One of the elements that attracted our attention in investigating these 65 years of children's picturebooks concerns the representation of the protagonists' freedom of movement, independence and range of action in the outside world.

In the latest picturebooks (published in the last 20 years), we might have expected to see children enjoying a greater freedom of action, but my analysis oddly revealed the opposite situation. Children featuring in books published between 1945 and 1975 were considerably more mobile, adventurous and independent than their 21st-century peers. Maybe their curiosity was aroused by faraway worlds that, in their time, were difficult to reach or even hear about (whereas today, with the advent of television and then Internet, they are just a click away), and this gave them a greater propensity to be outside in the open air, frequently going alone to explore woods and pine forests, rivers and

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streams. The fact remains that the protagonists of books written in the first half of the 20th century were better-developed travelers. They had the enterprising spirit needed to travel alone with great confidence to remote, unknown and dangerous lands. In *Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina* (1942/1959) by Elsa Morante, Caterì departs with Tit on a long and adventurous journey to find her much-loved cloth doll Bellissima. They climb on trains, carriages and motor cars, escape from thieves, and enter castles, in a whirlwind of adventures away from home that forms a very substantial part of Morante's book. Much the same could be said of *Il terzo libro di Susanna* (1950)⁴ by Colette Rosselli, a story with a very different style and narrative impact. Here Susanna, our protagonist, is an intrepid traveler. To prevent her friend Nicola the blackbird from being devoured, she embarks on a long and dangerous journey together with her dog Ucchi that takes her to the faraway Island of the Savages. Susanna travels over land and sea, astride her Vespa – a type of scooter that made its debut in those years, profoundly influencing the history of Italian urban mobility⁵ (Fig. 1) – or flying on the back of a stork.



Figure 1. The intrepid Susanna set off on her Vespa to reach the Island of the Savages.
Illustration from *Il terzo libro di Susanna* by Colette Rosselli (1950).

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Another unusual, bizarre, tongue-in-cheek journey is the one made by Gip in the story in orbit *GIP nel televisore* (1962) by Gianni Rodari. The young protagonist explores countries and regions of the world using a household appliance: the television. From his living room at home, Gip is “teletransported” to Egypt, Finland, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Holland, Sweden, and even into orbit, in the cosmic space around the Earth⁶. During his adventurous travels, Gip does not just circumnavigate the Earth, he even goes beyond the confines of our planet (Fig. 2). In this delightful story, the little boy from Milan journeys from one adventure to the next, all over the world and beyond, becoming a genuine “cosmic child” (Rodari, 1962, p.52).



Figure 2. Gip, the “cosmic child” who journeys in space. Illustration by Giancarlo Carloni, from Gianni Rodari, Giancarlo Carloni (1962).

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From the end of the 1960s onwards, however, there began a remarkable change in how the relationship between inside and outside the home was represented. In the picturebooks analyzed, the protagonists' range of action and the spaces to explore shrank significantly, especially from the geographical standpoint. With the imminent arrival of the 21st century, the characters in the stories gradually change from being explorers of the wider world to travelers in the "domestic cosmos". The setting of their adventures is no longer the planets, the sky, or wild exotic islands far away, but the streets of their own neighborhood, as in the case of *Cappuccetto giallo* (1972) by Bruno Munari. The protagonists' range of action implodes to reach no further than the garden wall around their home, as in *Il viale nero* (1983) by Giovanni Arpino (Fig. 3), or the walls of the home itself, as in *Due scimmie in cucina* (2007) by Giovanna Zoboli and Guido Scarabottolo (Fig. 4). Their adventures play out inside a room, a corridor, or a kitchen.



Figure 3. Challenges and adventures on the road home. Illustration by Franca Capalbi from Giovanni Arpino, Franca Capalbi (1983).

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Figure 4. Jungle animals and adventure within the walls of the home. Illustration by Guido Scarabottolo from Giovanna Zoboli, Guido Scarabottolo (2007).

In 1950, in the picturebook by Colette Rosselli, Susanna leafs through an atlas in her bedroom, then flies off to the Island of the Savages thousands of miles away. Amidst palm trees and parrots, she sets up an open-air kitchen to make a cake for the island's rulers. In 2007, Michele, in the story by Giovanna Zoboli and Guido Scarabottolo, reads books about monkeys (his passion) at home. Together with his sister, he transforms his domestic afternoon into a picaresque adventure, using his imagination to recreate the natural habitat of these animals in the kitchen, and interpreting their behavior and habits. What are the cultural changes separating these two such different views of childhood, so distinct in their use of the domestic space?

A clue to help explain this anthropological transformation can be found in *Casa del tempo* (2010) by Roberto Innocenti and Roberto Piumini, which begins with a double page showing a group of children freely exploring inhospitable Apennine forests

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echoing with the “songs of thieves and assassins” in the early 20th century (Innocenti & Piumini, 2010, p.6). While playing out in the open air, they come upon a ramshackle stone house dating from 1656. They show it to their parents, take possession of it, repair and rebuild it, and adapt it to their needs. This house of stone becomes their home, their nest (Campagnaro, 2018), a welcoming place with no fences, where the door is always open - even in the worst moments of the 20th century, during the two world wars. This is a home where what is inside (private) is interwoven with what happens outside (in the public sphere), without fear of contamination. It could hardly be more different from the same house in the 21st century, renovated with all mod cons, and now occupied by a new family. The last double-page illustration in the picturebook ends with a sad image of childhood, where children jump and play in an indoor swimming pool inside their large home, protected by security guards and under the bored gaze of their parents. So, these children’s books seem to be suggesting a view of the children’s world from which the adults – for dubious reasons of providing security and protection – have subtracted the space, freedom of action and opportunities for “crossbreeding” with what lies outside their own daily lives.

4.2 The well-lit and well-equipped places of domestic daily life

My analysis focused particularly on two lines of study regarding the domestic landscape in children’s picturebooks. The first concerns the temporal dimension, the time of day when the protagonists in the stories move around their home. The second concerns the spatial dimension, the rooms where the protagonists’ adventures begin and develop. Starting with the temporal dimension, with just two exceptions – *Il piccoletto* (1958) and *Il viale nero* (1983) – in which the adventures occur in the dark at night, in all the other 32 stories the protagonists take action during the day or, at the latest, as dusk falls, as in *GIP nel televisore* (1962). So the authors of children’s literature seem to prefer to tell stories about their characters’ public life in their domestic world, in adventures and encounters that take place in daylight, which are safer and more reassuring. This representation of domesticity keeps its distance from the unexpected, disturbing, and scary. In children’s literature, the night is a space of darkness and silence, of profound fear “of being abandoned, of animality, of being devoured” (Piccinini, 2012, p.183).

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But in many children's stories, the night is also when parents, and adults in general, sleep, loosening (or are unable to maintain) their control over the children, and the latter's thoughts and actions. In this limited space of time, childhood enjoys the freedom to experiment and, if necessary, to break the adults' rules. The characters in modern-day picturebooks seem to make little use of their domestic environment during the night. They tend to move around and take action almost exclusively in the light of day, in rooms that are well-lit and safer, less insidious, transgressive or destabilizing than in the past. What emerges, in most of the stories at least, is a picture of childhood that, though still not fully shaped, tends not to be subversive. Among the stories considered, there were certainly some tales of protagonists breaking the rules (especially when the adults were elsewhere), and offering a more rebellious and diverging image of childhood - as in *Gigi cerca il suo berretto* (1945), *Piazza pulita* (1968), *Una fortunata catastrofe* (1975), *Rosabianca* (1985), *La casa impossibile* (1991) and *Chiuso per ferie* (2006) (Fig. 5). Nonetheless, with a few rare exceptions, everything tended to return to normal in the end, presenting a picture of a restored harmony, family balance, security, and serenity.



Figure 5. An unconventional, “divergent” image of childhood. Illustration by Maja Celija, from Maja Celija (2006).

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To come to our second aspect, the domestic spaces and rooms in which the protagonists move seem to confirm the same propensity. The characters generally take action in homes that are bright, safe, warm, and comfortable. They mainly use three rooms, the kitchen, living room and bedroom (usually the child's), all very familiar, well-lit, secure places. There are virtually no pictures of stairwells, corridors, closets, pantries, attics or cellars. It is only in two cases – *Piazza pulita* (1968) and *Una fortunata catastrofe* (1975) – that the protagonists' adventures take place (with excellent developmental outcomes) in dark, inhospitable spaces: a storeroom, a closet, and an attic. It is worth adding that, each in its own way, the above-mentioned two stories curiously overturn the usual patterns and values of domestic life of the time. In *Piazza pulita*, Ginevra Bompiani criticizes the consumerist logic that led people to accumulate excessive quantities of useless objects, rapidly replacing them when they break. The author also points a finger at the town planning and architectural policies behind the new homes built in the 1960s, which were hardly suited to the educational and imagination-stimulating needs of childhood. The children had to live in homes that were all the same, in vast and impersonal high-rise blocks, where they led a boring and demeaning life spent largely in front of the television (Fig. 6):

Then he realized his home [...] was not a good place for ghosts to live in: the wardrobes were too full of drawers for them to be able to hide inside, the beds were too low, the corners under the stairs too well lit, the corridors too narrow. The doors never squeaked, the stairs would never have dreamt of creaking, and the most mysterious noises were those coming from the neighbor's radio (Bompiani, 1968, p.39).

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Figure 6. The sedentary life of the “domestic child”. Illustration by Maria Enrica Agostinelli, from Ginevra Bompiani, Maria Enrica Agostinelli (1968).

In *Una fortunata catastrofe*, Adela Turin (a historical founder in the 1960s of the publishing house *Dalla parte delle bambine*, created to combat gender stereotypes in children’s books) deals with family roles and the sharing of domestic duties between mother and father. Thanks to a fortunate flood, the mother is obliged to find somewhere else for the children to live, so she abandons the role of housewife and takes on the new role of explorer. Meanwhile the father, who no longer has an armchair in which to read his paper, decides to spend his time in the kitchen, preparing delicious soups for dinner (Fig. 7).

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Figure 7. A father “converted” to doing domestic chores in the kitchen for his family. Illustration by Nella Bosnia, from Adela Turin and Nella Bosnia (1975).

With the exception of the two above-mentioned picturebooks, all the other stories develop in more conventional places, those normally shared by the family. They describe kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms and living rooms that convey a sense of well-being, care and attention to the children’s needs. Such a comforting sense of human warmth comes in some cases from the reassuring presence of an adult at home. This is an important, but not a constant feature. A family member busy cooking (Fig. 7) or laying the table (Fig. 8) was quite common in the picturebooks published in the first 30 years considered (1945-1975). Take, for example, the protagonist’s sister Rosetta in *Le straordinarie avventure di Caterina* (1942/1959), the mothers in *GIP nel televisore* (1962) and *Il mondo visto da loro* (1971), the grandmother in *Cappuccetto verde* (1972). There were also revolutionary male figures like the father in *Una fortunata catastrofe*

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(1975), or Armando in *Arriva la Pimpa* (1975). This presence tends to fade over the next three decades, however, replaced by other symbols of the dimension of warmth and affection in the home.



Figure 8. The warm and reassuring presence of a mother in the home. Illustration by Adelina Torelli, from Beniamino Bodini (1971).

Probably due partly to the changing domestic routines deriving from the economic boom, and the rearranged family structures of the new urban lifestyles developing after the 1950s (with the switch to the nuclear family unit and the need for both parents to work, for instance), the representation in children's books of the warm, caring atmosphere of home changed significantly. In many of these stories, a symbolic use is made of certain furnishings and domestic appliances, turning them into genuine "narrating objects" – a concept dear to children's literature (Campagnaro 2016, 2018; Grandi 2019; Paladin 2019; Riccini 2019) – and their presence helps to express the affective temperature of a home (Fig. 9).

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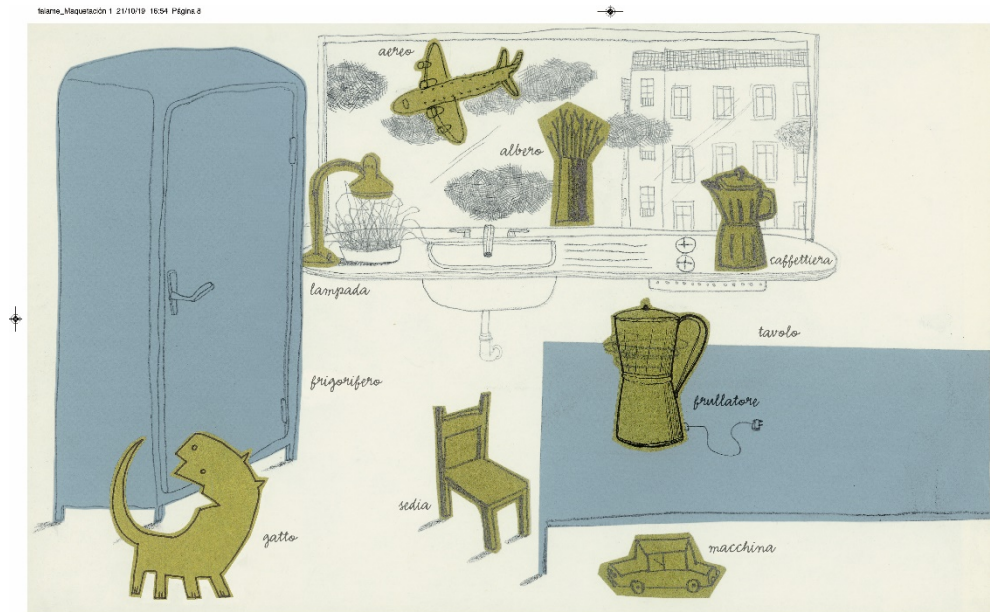


Figure 9. “Narrating objects” in children’s literature. Illustration by Chiara Carrer, from Marco Berrettoni Carrara, Chiara Carrer (2010).

That is why the domestic interiors of many picturebooks (especially those published as of the 1980s) have vases of flowers in the hall and on the windowsill, brightly colored wallpaper, curtains, spotted or chequered tablecloths. There are child-size plates and cups (Fig. 10), baskets of bread, jugs of water, plates of appetizing and healthy food (Fig. 11), bowls of fresh fruit, steaming mugs and soup bowls on the table, teapots and saucepans bubbling on the stove, shopping bags and refrigerators full of food in the kitchen, domestic appliances and lights on all over the house.

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Figure 10. – A very colorful, cheerful and “accessorized” home. Illustration by Antonella Abbatiello, from Antonella Abbatiello (1998).

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Figure 11. A table laid with loving care. Illustration by Anna Laura Cantone, from Davide Cali, Anna Laura Cantone (2007).

Among others, two objects of fundamental importance in Italian cultural traditions stand out: the refrigerator and the table. These two “narrating” objects succeed possibly more than any others in metaphorically conveying the caring dimension, affective temperature and sense of family experienced by the children in the picturebooks.

The refrigerator is a domestic appliance that profoundly changed the Italian lifestyle. At the end of WWII, in many Italian homes fresh food was still preserved in a pantry in a cool, dark corner, or in an ice box like the one in *Gigi cerca il suo berretto* (1945) (Fig. 12).

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Figure 12. A well-organized ice box? Illustration by Bruno Munari, from Bruno Munari (1945/2004) - © Bruno Munari. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini Srl, Mantova.

An electric refrigerator was still a dream for most Italians in the 1950s (only 6% of Italian families had one), but over the course of 20 years it became indispensable for 94% of the Italian population. This meant that in the 1970s Italy was one of the largest manufacturers of refrigerators in the world, together with the USA (Faravelli Giacobone, Guidi & Pansera, 1989). The central role of this particular appliance also emerges from many of the picturebooks analyzed. It often takes pride of place in the kitchen, with its door open and its shelves bursting with food. The illustrators often dedicate whole pages to it (Fig. 13).

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Figure 13. A “narrating” object in children’s literature: the refrigerator. Illustration by Sto (Sergio Tófano), from Sto (Sergio Tófano) (1969).

Over the course of more than 60 years, the refrigerator’s shape (design) changed, and so did the type of food it contained (generally more fruit and vegetables, less meat and fewer sweet things) (Fig. 14), but the symbolic value of the appliance remains intact to this day. So what part does the refrigerator play in these stories? Is it more than just a kitchen appliance? In most cases, a refrigerator bursting with food has a very clear symbolic meaning. It is a visual metaphor of the presence of a good, caring mother: she is attentive, diligent, and capable of offering her children both bodily nourishment (food), and emotional nourishment (love), even when she is not physically present in the home.

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Figure 14. New styles of refrigerator with new children's menus. Illustration by Anna Laura Cantone, from Davide Cali, Anna Laura Cantone (2007).

The second “narrating” object is the table (Campagnaro, 2016). Seeing how it is depicted in the children's picturebooks suggests some intriguing comparisons concerning its symbolism. What purpose does the table serve in the stories? The table is the stage on which the rite of daily domesticity is celebrated. It is used to prepare food that nourishes our loved ones, and it is around the table that our words nurture our family relationships. There is a close parallel between our hunger for food and our hunger for words: the words directed at a protagonist while sitting at the table are just as nourishing as a plate of good food. Hence the significance of a written note that a mother places alongside a plate of vegetables and a basket of bread (Fig. 11). The tables depicted in the books we analyzed contribute to defining the quality of the relationships, the sense of belonging, and the shared experiences of a family, “The gestures around the table described in children's literature speak of things and events that can tell us a great deal about how the child's universe evolves” (Campagnaro, 2016, p.374). The table illustrates both the daily life of childhood in a series of breakfasts, main meals and snacks, as in *Arriva la Pimpa* (1975) or *Giovanna sogna un drago* (1982) (Fig. 15), and also its extraordinariness, which revolves around anniversaries and special occasions, as in *La casa del tempo* (2010). Above all, and much more

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importantly, it registers the emotional and affective temperature of family life, even revealing complicities and relational difficulties.



Figure 15. A “narrating” object of children’s literature: the table. Illustration by Cristina Lastrego, Francesco Testa, from Cristina Lastrego, Francesco Testa (1989).

In picturebooks, the table is associated with a whole ritual of preparations and expectations that can be condensed into the expression “Dinner’s ready!”. So the presence (or absence) of a table in a character’s life is symptomatic: it reveals the good (or poor) quality of the love, prosperity and happiness expressed in sitting side by side, eating and chatting together around the table. The task of providing a snapshot of the quality of a domestic landscape is no longer assigned to the presence of human figures. More often than not, as we have seen, it is the abundance of objects and accessories (not just a refrigerator full of food and a table laid with care and love, but also the children’s drawings on the walls and a shelf dedicated to children’s books) that give us the idea of

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family and childhood. A dull, empty house with no lights on is like a body without a soul: lifeless and not fit for purpose (Fig. 16).

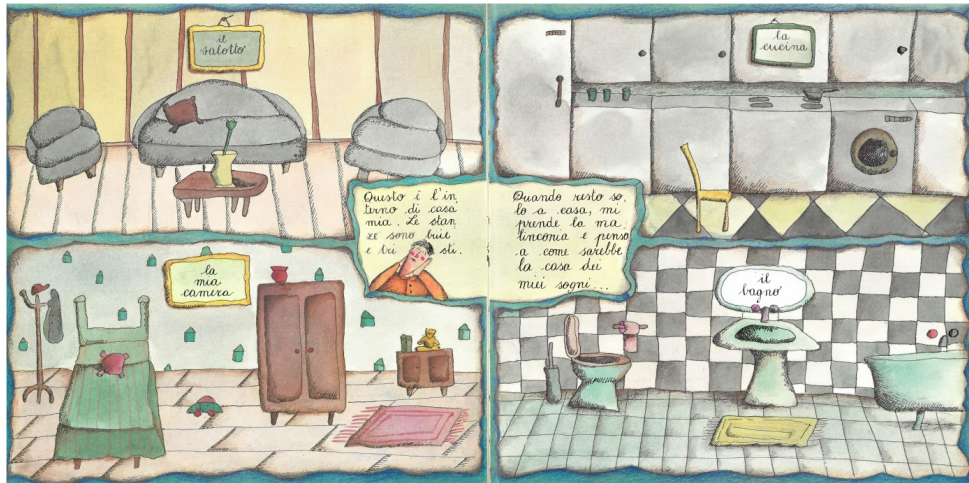


Figure 16. The great “missing” object: the table. Illustration by Chiara Rapaccini, from Chiara Rapaccini (1991).

Conclusions

Studying the geographies of home interiors in 34 Italian children’s picturebooks published between 1945 in 2010 gave us an opportunity to investigate the visual evolution of the home and domestic life in children’s literature. This revealed several significant changes in the image of childhood and the representation of children’s educational development over the period considered. The historical setting outlined at the start of this article pointed to some of the phenomena influencing the Italian customs and ways of life, underscoring how the home gradually regained a central role over the course of the second half of the 20th century. The home came to reflect major

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social, cultural and educational changes in Italians' lifestyles, and paved the way to a new "culture of living".

The renewed attention to people's private living spaces naturally affected the domestic geographies depicted in children's books as well. Authors and illustrators more or less explicitly reshaped the home, interpreting and explaining its physical space, identity and the special educational value it has in children's literature. This is because it can intercept children's needs and turn them into narrative experiences of great emotional and relational relevance.

My examination of how the representations of domestic spaces evolved over 65 years of Italian history in its picturebooks for children brought out three particularly interesting aspects. First, there is the change in how the protagonists use these indoor and outdoor domestic spaces. The second half of the 20th century saw marked (architectural and anthropological) changes in the living conditions of Italy's major cities, and in how families were organized in the new urban settlements. My study shows how children gradually spent less and less time outside and much more time at home. This anthropological change is clear from frequent references to overbuilding, the deterioration of the urban landscape (often visually represented by large, impersonal high-rise blocks of gray cement, that all look the same), and the loss of green spaces so vital to the life of childhood. The hazards and ugliness of a life lived in such depressing surroundings led to a shrinkage of the protagonists' mobility and range of action, starving them of the chance of adventures outside the home and obliging them to take refuge indoors.

Second, the focus is on well-protected and reassuring environments. In the picturebooks examined, the ugliness of the public spaces is countered by a domestic loveliness. It was quite common to represent domestic interiors suggesting a sense of security, protection and care. The rooms are well lit, clean, hygienic, safe and reassuring. There is little space for shadows and darkness, or hiding places. These homes are generally arranged horizontally so the characters move around them in a linear manner (whether the stories are about ordinary life or adventures outside the home). Three types of room are usually depicted: the kitchen, the lounge-dining room, and the bedroom. We might wonder what led to this visual convergence on these particular

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rooms, which gave rise to a symbolic loss of variety and verticality of the living spaces (Bachelard, 1957/2015). The young protagonists of the stories live in places that are calm and restful, but may also be boring, all on one level. Instead of a house, their living accommodation resembles brightly-colored boxes in which dark corners (where mysteries and the unknown lurk in traditional narratives) have no place. These homes have no stairs, neither leading skywards (to lofts, rooftops, attics, the open air), nor descending underground (into cellars, below-stairs cupboards, wells, secret tunnels, ...). In symbolic terms, this is no minor issue. Having no access to attics or rooftops leaves children without the opportunity for their thoughts and imagination to take flight up into the clouds and the sky. If they cannot go down into a cellar they are prevented from meeting darkness, obscurity, the unknown, the disturbing, “the irrationality of the depths” (Bachelard, 1957/2015, p.46), but also their inner self. So it comes as no surprise that these shortcomings have been contained in several stories by narrative mechanisms such as children’s use of their imagination to escape from their domestic isolation and the solitude of a melancholy life confined within their own homes. So Michele sits astride his father’s old walking stick and, looking out on a pleasant summer’s afternoon, he imagines launching himself from the window of his home with a double somersault and flying over the rooftops of his city – a city “made up of long rows of houses all the same, full of windows that looked out onto other windows just like them; and, on the rooftops, like so many crosses, thousands of TV aerials for all the houses, that five minutes later would all be turned on for thousands of children” (Bompiani, 1968, p.18).

Giovanna dreams of friendly dragons that turn a walnut into a boat so that she can sail off to visit “beautiful unknown places” (Lastrego & Testa, 1982, p.13). Emma imagines becoming a little girl again so that she can change how a love story with Dario turned out and, one autumn afternoon in *E’ un pomeriggio d’autunno in via Curiel 8* (Cerri 2009), she strips off the wallpaper in her bedroom, makes a hole in the wall and leaps into a luxuriant imaginary forest, the prelude to a new beginning (Fig. 17).

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Figure 17. Using the imagination to escape from domestic isolation. Illustration by Mara Cerri, from Mara Cerri (2009).

The third aspect concerns the growing importance of representing household objects. Starting from the 1960s, the picturebooks analyzed reveal a pervasive presence of objects that are no longer merely for decorative purposes. They are used more and more as vital indicators of the warmth of life at home, the quality of the affections and family relationships. They become genuine “narrating objects”. There are vases of flowers, attractive wallpaper, curtains and tableware, bread baskets, water jugs, fruit bowls, steaming soups, bubbling pans, fridges full of food. All the household appliances and lights are switched on. Together, these objects generate a narrative movement. They take part in the construction of the scenic action, and they play an active part in relation to the protagonists, as explained earlier (by way of example) in the case of refrigerators and tables. Starting from the 1980s, the emotions narrated in the picturebooks become increasingly rich and multifaceted. This is probably partly because children's literature

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also gradually comes to include stories of discomfort and suffering, situations of parental conflict, solitude, disease and death. The universe of children's picturebooks takes on a greater emotional complexity that also entitles the protagonists to experience negative emotions like sadness, rage, fear or disgust. The task of describing these new emotional landscapes is often entrusted to objects. Thanks to a wise use of shapes, proportions, chromatics, and spatial arrangements, they have proved more appropriate for an audience of young readers, and better able to convey the characters' feelings in figures and symbols.

To conclude our analysis, we could therefore say that studying the domestic landscapes and the *espace vécu* in children's picturebooks is a particularly promising field of investigation. It can promote a scientifically valid interpretation, from an original perspective, of the social and cultural changes that took place in children's literature of the 20th and 21st centuries. Exploring these geographies of home interiors also showed that they can be a precious resource worth sounding from the standpoints of the history of education and critical hermeneutics to shed light on how the perception and representation of childhood has changed since WWII. For instance, my study revealed a picture of childhood that, though not necessarily conforming, rarely tends to be subversive or rebel against the rules imposed by the adult world. There are exceptions, of course, but the way the stories ended generally presented peace-making and reassuring pictures.

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¹ All translations from Italian books are mine.

² As Mavis Reimer claims, with the arrival of the Third Millennium, we have seen a significant increase in children's stories from around the world that describe children who are "on the move", in whose life stories the role and function of the home has changed significantly. "These children might be immigrants, refugees, or exiles, if the narrative is working within political valences; vagrants, street kids, runaways, or "throwaways," if the narrative is working within (or against) the terms of domestic realism (the genre that continues to predominate in contemporary texts for young people); or tourists and travelers, if the narrative is working within the generic terms of fantasy and adventure (including comic misadventure). While children on the move have been at the heart of children's literature for a long time, what is different about these recent narratives is that the central child characters do not move inside or settle at the conclusion of their narratives. For them, it appears, there is no place to call home" (Reimer, 2013, p.1).

³ This project involves numerous European scholars and aims to undertake a historical-comparative study of how domestic spaces in children's picturebooks have evolved from the second half of the 20th century to the present day.

⁴ There is not enough space here to analyse Colette Rosselli's picturebook in depth, but it is worth mentioning that this story, published in 1950, prompts numerous reflections on the potentially severe side effects of children's literature expressing colonialist views and deformed ideas of exotic faraway countries.

⁵ The Vespa is a model of scooter with various engine sizes (from 50 to 200 cc), patented in April 1946 and produced in Italy by Piaggio & C, and stemming from Enrico Piaggio's bright idea to produce a low-cost product destined for a broad consumer market. The Vespa was hugely successful in Italy and abroad, but it was not just a commercial phenomenon. It also profoundly influenced customs in Italy and elsewhere.

⁶ In this story, Rodari masterfully combines reality and fiction. Gip's fictitious "spatial" adventure begins on 17 January at 18.30, and mimicks the real spatial adventure of the 27-year-old Soviet astronaut Jurij Gagarin a year earlier (12 April 1961, at 9:07 Moscow time). Gagarin took off from the Bajkonur space station in Kazakistan in Vostok 1, the first spaceship with a human on board. He went into orbit around the Earth, then landed successfully to inaugurate the era of space exploration.

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