

## Traces of History in children's tales and narrations

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### Abstract

This article intends to expose the hermeneutical potential of children's literature as a source for a broader understanding of the historical and education processes, and as a literary genre that can awaken the joy of discovery and of the encounter with history. Specifically we identify the links that connect stories to History through the analysis of literary materials (picture books, graphic novels, novels) which are capable of guiding us in the exploration of a collective memory whose loss and decline is often moaned.

**Key Words:** History of Children's Literature, Historical Fiction, Children's Imagery, Pedagogy of Storytelling

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### From stories to History

The fine but powerful thread linking the pages of children's literature to the events of our past, the narrations to the trails of the great wars, the time of the story to that of memory – a memory capable of leading the reader to discover her or his own roots - characterizes an editorial production of extraordinary interest at the border between different ages.

Children's literature, in fact, travels from one era to another, as well as from one continent to another, it connects to multi-age groups (from picture books to the series for young adults), crossing several genres and different means of expression. Yet, in this heterogeneous scenery, History does leave its fingerprints, sometimes subtly woven into the narration, sometimes more explicitly.

These are fingerprints, as recalled by Carlo Ginzburg in his wonderful book *Wooden eyes* (2011), which encourage us to take a different and unusual look; a glance that is often the engine of the story and that is originated by the powerful filter of the eye of a child or an adolescent. It is a look and a perspective that many critics have likened to the point of view of the camera of a film: when we see a movie, even if we are not aware, we are led to look from the point of view of the camera and to adopt its perspective. The same is true for the best stories, which are often entrusted to the poetic of the point of view, now at the center of an extensive critical debate.

So, from this point of view - at child height - characterizing the inner soul of children's literature, you can browse the pages of the history of childhood, social history, history of mentalities and the imaginary, etc. This article aims to expose the potential hermeneutics of literature for children both as a source for a broader understanding of historical processes and as a literary genre that can awaken the joy of discovery and foster the encounter with History.

## Children in time

We know, for example, that the history of childhood is a relatively recent conquer in our culture and that it is a questioning developing area, aware of the difficulties and complexities of investigation on the use of sources. Childhood is, in fact, an historically mute subject, belonging to the category of the voiceless and is very difficult to seize directly since we always grasp it through the tracks that adults have left behind. I believe children's literature offers material which is still too neglected or ignored.

The use of narrative form to investigate, interrogate or ask questions unprecedented in the past is a component of the French school *Annales* and the time is ripe for courageous approaches able to shed new light on otherwise opaque or incomplete dimension of infantile life. Children's literature is undoubtedly a valuable tool, able to advance in the knowledge of the history of this subject, by offering metaphors capable of entering into a detailed, deep, complex observation.

Take Dickens - among the great classics of the European scene, a great portraitist of childhood, able to convey the tragic fate of an abandoned childhood, subjected to a shameful exploitation through incredibly effective pages, expressed as a bitter complaint throughout his novels.

These novels are a real cutaway on street children, dragged like Oliver Twist on the muddy streets of London struggling with the terrible Fagin - bleak commander of a band of thieves and robbers -, and document the price that the childhood of the nineteenth century had to pay in industrialized countries. In those years, London was about to become the capital of the British Empire, but the gleaming metropolis had a gloomy, dark belly, full of suffering and decay, that the book describes admirably, perhaps more than many official documents of the time.

And how could one forget, among many examples, *I ragazzi della via Paal (No Greater Glory)* Immersed in the anonymity of massive urban concentrations, these children seem to herald a great theme that marks the history of childhood: the more than ever up-to-date condition of the "sons of concrete". While in search for themselves and for a new dimension in life - "We only make war to have a space where we can play ball" (Molnar, 2001, p.5) - they will find in gangs what the urban environment seems to deny them.

Children's literature is in dialogue with History under multiple aspects, offering materials that - often due to a specific iconography - provide information on the life of children inside the spaces of narration such as games, books, illustrated books, clothing and teaching aids. But it can also develop more subtle and elusive areas of investigation as the study of the changes of the imaginary. Egle Becchi (1996) in her extraordinary enterprise launched by the publisher Laterza on the *History of the Child (La storia dell'infanzia)* has opened an important breach that marked a true watershed on the topic.

In the essay that reconstructs the State of childhood in the nineteenth Century, Egle Becchi expertly draws on many authors of children's literature by making them talk to other sources: the crossings and references have proved fruitful, the research perspectives stimulating.

Children's literature is also a valuable observatory to investigate the ambiguous attitude of the adult towards the child and the different ways in which it manifests itself and changes in time. This aspect becomes a hermeneutic potentiality that allows to try fruitful connections between history and social studies dealing mainly with the imaginary born and consolidated around childhood. The different faces of the child gradually established by the literary works of the past represent useful paradigms to approach a reality that is still very little known. An indispensable reference to unravel the laborious evolution of the representation of childhood is offered by the important study by Dieter Richter (1992): a peculiar journey through a rich variety of sources (hagiographies and official documents, fairy tales and pedagogical writings, literary texts and iconographical material) regarding how the image of childhood from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century has been formed and transformed. This is a refined path that collects and deciphers the numerous calls arising from the succession of "metaphors of childhood" in a very broad historical arc.

### **The school between the lines**

The potential of narrative in historical studies on childhood reveal, among other things, unusual angles in those stories of growth dedicated to “tales of school” a genuine literary genre originated by authors from the British Public Schools (Grilli, 2003). This is a genre in which many high-level authors have engaged (Kipling, Forester, Orwell, Woodehouse and, more recently, Dahl), knowing how to effectively blend a fictional and a memoir streak, in order to convey all the life experiences and the fantasies related to an extremely detailed and convincing context.

What did the children and youths growing up in the schools of England in the last century do? How did they feel? We can know this exactly - and regarding certain details, we can only know it - through children's literature. Even in Italy, while lacking a system comparable to that of British Public Schools, short stories, novels and narratives of various kinds have had and still have main characters belonging to the school world. It is precisely to that world that the recent research by Anna Antoniazzi (2014, p. II), is dedicated. The research tries to track down, right through the literary production, the guidelines of the important political, economic, and social transformations involving our country in the last one hundred and fifty years. The most difficult attempt was to show - by letting the sources speak directly - how all that happens in society, at all levels, is reflected not only in the schools and in education, in the broadest sense, but - to a wider extent-, in the collective imagination as well. The fundamental concept is that we can trace the history of educational institutions through storytelling: stories - in fact - retain significant traces of the past and of our roots for those who know how and wish to locate them.

For a wider and more incisive understanding of the cultural and educational processes which have involved our country in the past two centuries, a special chapter should be dedicated to the deeply significant role that children's literature has played. Indeed a greater intertwining of these areas through a refinement of the respective methodologies would reveal entirely original spaces of investigation, as noted by Anna Ascenzi (2013) in her recent contribution. A strong impetus to this line of study came from the large group of researchers connected to the journal *History of Education - Children's Literature* and from the field of study - coordinated by Giorgio Chiosso and Roberto Sani - related to the realm of school book publishers, with its plots and interdependencies with children's literature.

The potential of children's literature as a “source” for the history of cultural and education processes are brought to light by interesting researches such as Anna Ascenzi's (2012), which offers us a critical path, inbetween literary narrative and journalistic report, through the extreme complexity and variety of the collective imaginary around the figure of the 19th century elementary female school teacher. By focusing on four different “masterful novels” (M. Serao, E. De Amicis, A. Fusetti, I. Baccini) the volume, besides adding a significant element to the history of women and girls' education, tackles the theme of the teacher's identity in the process of construction of a national identity, binding social history and imaginary through a broad critical framework on the condition of the Italian female teachers.

### **The thousand and one Italies**

Literature is a complex and multifaceted system, and its use as a source in the historiographical debate has opened up exciting developments and challenging comparisons. The radical renewal of the historical discipline in the last century, thanks to a real “documentary revolution”, borrowing Le Goff's poignant expression, stressed the need to expand the variety of documents on which the historian bases his or her's historical researches (Le Goff, 1978). Literature has proven invaluable to get know and reconstruct, for example, the image a society has and expresses of itself. And it is not to be considered as an auxiliary source, but one of primary importance in the field of history of the imaginary. Indeed, many do look at narrative in

search of that “intentionally revealing detail” which is useful to grasp significant aspects of history. Children's literature - now finally freed from the infamous brand of minor literature - is a valuable material to bring to light the ever unfinished pages of Italian history through a particular point of view.

Never before as children's literature have been the focus of rediscoveries, and the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the Italian unification have been an opportunity to trace, recover, find useful tools in the narratives to illuminate important moments of the history of Italy. A good example of this is the exhibition accompanied by a catalog edited by Hamelin (2011), where the close and not always obvious ties between our history and fiction for children have been brought to the fore. The catalog has allowed us to retrace a journey in the “veins of Italy”, to paraphrase Williams' book (1969) and to connect the most important moments of our national history to the most relevant pages for children, in an intertwining of History and stories, among authors, illustrators and crucial events of our country. Even the illustration, indeed, has played an important role. Just think of that particular lens on the Italian Risorgimento that Antonio Faeti highlighted right through an iconographic research then turned into an exhibition and a catalog he cured (Faeti, 2011). In children's literature and comics there is, indeed, abundant visual material that refers to our Risorgimento. As the author points out “Very soon, many realized the issues of telling the Risorgimento to the young with a language and with images that could refer to events without betraying the complexity of what had happened” (Faeti, 2011, p.3). The catalog, complete with color images accompanied by enlightening captions, includes many styles, numerous visual provocations and figural options, winding through a series of icons of the Risorgimento in a path that goes from the first Carbonarist conspiracies to the final facts of Trieste through the riots of 1848, the Five days of Milan and the Wars of Independence. It highlights numerous shrewd pedagogical plots where the artist does not use tempera simply holding out an innocent sketch but actually draws the profile of a winking ideology.

Therefore, a look back in the history of our country through the pages of children's literature, always guides us through a constant: the unusual filter of the child's glance, true engine of the story. A glance which is placed in the foreground in the beautiful novel by Giovanni Arpino (2011) - a title echoing fairy tales. Welcomed, at its first appearance in 1960, as a really innovative book, *Le mille e una Italia* narrates the adventure of a Sicilian boy who starts from his homeland to join his father, a miner of the Mont Blanc tunnel. Along a path in which the geographical spaces are intertwined with the timing of the story, the protagonist meets people from different ages (Garibaldi, Cavour, Mussolini, Gramsci, etc.) that help him understand the often unresolved features of our nation. The extraordinary imagination of the author, the effectiveness of the invention which is renewed in every page, the lightness of poetry, draw a portrait of a different Italy, far from that of many textbooks: unpredictable and full of hope.

This one Italy is precisely the one at the center of many children's books which, perhaps even more than in masterpieces of literature for adults, have had such a diffusion and a grip on the readers to have left a decisive mark in the collective imagination of entire generations. I will graze some iconic references to report the references to an area of great importance and evocativeness. Suffice it to mention *Giannetto* of Parravicini to remember that while the unification of the country was in the air (the thousand of Garibaldi would set sail shortly thereafter) the children going to school - still very few actually - already had a subsidiary that would accompany them in the classroom for several years and a small hero eager to learn without getting bored.

The triad Collodi - De Amicis - Salgari, Fathers of the Country as Giovanni Spadolini described them, through Gianburrasca, who in his “giornalino” reminded us that he was born on the day of the breach of Porta Pia, made up an itinerary for unusual rediscoveries. *Pinocchio* was about to be born while De Amicis was to publish *Cuore* only a few years later. And how could we forget the now classic pages of Asor Rosa (1975) in his essay *Le voci di un'Italia bambina (The voices of a new born Italy)*, dedicated precisely to *Pinocchio* and *Cuore* through the use of an extensive spectrum of feelings has been one of the most powerful tools of national unification, while *Pinocchio*, with its aspiration to a world free of daily needs, going through pain and misfortune, was the truest of many investigations of national identity that the 19th century has left us.

It is sufficient to notice how the figure of Sandokan, has mysteriously superimposed on that of Garibaldi, to find an example of how stories of fiction and history are connected. In a most acute analysis of the iconography of the hero, Omar Calabrese recognizes the archetype of new fictional heroes in

Garibaldi, and provides, *inter alia*, the bold but documented and fascinating comparison between Garibaldi and Sandokan, through narrative, descriptive and figurative coincidences (Calabrese, 1982). The new century sees the entrance of children's magazines - animated by a passion that has no parallel in our history in the urge to create a cultural identity and a strong national feeling: from the memorable cover artworks of the *Giornalino della domenica* and the astonishing quality of the visual apparatus entrusted to the best illustrators of the time, to the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, founding moment of a tradition among the most important in the world, and first case in which an Italian product for children left an indelible imprint in our collective imagination, so as to become a common heritage to many generations, while its characters entered an ideal parade of national icons (Hamelin, 2011, p. 63). Among them *Il signor Buonaventura*, Sergio Tofano's gentle hero that remained the symbol of a poor Italy who is allowed the luxury of dreaming with the lure of a thousand liras a month for a long time (Hamelin, 2007).

It is possible, in fact, to critically review an important page of our 150 years through the flavor, which is clear and live in many memories, of the illustrations for children, thanks to the reprinting of a book that has become a classic: in *Guardare le figure (Looking at pictures)*, a critical path between the late 19th and early 20th century on the Italian illustrators of children's books is set. Weaving together the iconography with history, the world of children's literature with the events of the time, the ideology with the teaching, *Guardare le figure* sheds new light on an important part of our country, with its unspoken moods, subtle sneers, insinuating echoes of alternative visions instead of the official contents.

History and politics do indeed peep in many children's books: sometimes underground, sometimes explicit convergences lead them to intertwine with culture, politics, and with the society of the time, that often, and often critically, children's literature mirrors. If you can read *Cuore* as a perfect cutaway of Italy under King Umberto I, the same can be done with *Gian Burrasca*, fierce criticism of the Giolitti epoch. Yet in the company of other children's books that can not be mentioned here, we could continue to browse the album of our Italian history.

As, for instance, the Fascist period that focused, with its exaggerated patriotism, on the single textbook, on a colonization of the imaginarium by manipulating even the most beloved fairy tale characters (from *Pinocchio in Abyssinia* to *Little Red Riding Hood in East Africa*), but that was also characterized by free zones with respect to the regime, by free thought as in *La Scala d'oro (The golden staircase)* and *La biblioteca dei miei ragazzi (My childrens' library)* where the pedagogical courage and the graphic elegance carry the openmindedness of foreign titles, prelude to new changes.

In the album of the following decades, including the post-war, the stylistic, graphic and content renewal of children's literature is striking, bringing, among others, the names of Gianni Rodari and Italo Calvino, unparalleled rewriter of *Fiabe italiane (The Italian Tales)* interweaving popular history of each Italian region. It has been more than fifty years since then, but his survey work, anthropological and sociological at once, with the partial rewriting of the texts and the precise description of the work undertaken, tale by tale, has not been equaled by anyone.

Inside these pages is all the national experience, the life, the popular history of each region, as well as the contact points with the European heritage. And beneath the pages of Rodari - protagonist and interpreter of the 20th century crisis, who changed children's literature in our country - unfolds a truly unique look on the lower classes after the war. Within their different and original expressive frameworks, history creeps in with its powerful claim. As a matter of fact, we owe the entrance of the Italian resistance movement in the stories to Rodari and Calvino, both partisans and socially committed authors: to Rodari with the weekly magazine *Il pioniere (The pioneer)*, which he directed and invented, and to Italo Calvino with his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno (The Path to the Nest of Spiders)*, acknowledged as a masterpiece about the Resistance, revisited through the eyes of a child and from a perspective that gives the narrative a masterful fairy-tale style, although the events contain historical dramatic implications. As for the great storytellers of the Resistance (Vittorini, Pavese, Calvino, Fenoglio), literature addressed to childhood can often unravel the human, social, and anthropological raw material that builds up history: examples of this can be for example the autobiographical stories of teachers, such as Mario Lodi in *Il corvo (The crow)* or Guido Petter in *Ci chiamavano banditi (They used to call us bandits)*.

Each decade of our history can be read backlit through the contribution of children's literature that

sometimes anticipates the emergence of new social issues. If the decade of the economic miracle of the 60's finds amazing and interesting expressive registers to represent the transformation of the lives of Italians, such as urbanization (*Marcovaldo*, I. Calvino), the entrance of television (*Gip nel televisore, TV Gip* in G. Rodari) or immigration from the south (*Il treno del sole, The sun train*, R. Reggiani), the 70's stand out for other influences such as women issues and girls' education that generates and stimulates lively literary experiments: from the publishing house *Dalla parte delle bambine (On the girls' side)* to novels as *Extraterreste alla pari (An au pair alien)* by Bianca Pitzorno. The examples could be multiplied in a network of internal references in a wide and often heterogeneous production which would deserve much more space, for the most famous names must be forged with other minor authors which have nonetheless contributed, in different ways, through their pages dedicated to childhood, to give fragments of the past - making it alive and throbbing - back to the curious reader.

In the mid-80's children's literature meets a big breakthrough with an international scope thanks to the abundant arrival of translated works, the emergence of new themes and talents, which will be followed in the 90's by a tumultuous growth that bears the mark of globalization that has reshuffled and still is changing the game. While the glance on the present and the future opens further questions on those authors and characters that are now entering the new literary heritage and will be the ingredients of an Italy to come.

### All of our yesterdays

The turning point of the '80s (Faeti, 1995) originated an actual revolution in children's literature, with the creation of innovative book series, the relevant entrance in the field by foreign artists, the diversification of the editorial offer, the richness of inputs and the strong planning attitude.

The translation of several English books addressed to children has been the main factor stimulating the emergence of a new tendency in literature, in which the arguments of the plot merge with an extraordinary simultaneous capacity to speak about the unforgettable past and the present through a never-ending playing of cross-references. Thus, we can recognize a narrative current in which components such as a continual seeking lost roots and images and a deep "sense of time" are magnificently portrayed. It is not surprising, therefore, to find behind the scenes of many stories, the Big History.

Indeed, there are quite a few contemporary novels that, narrating crucial events of History, possibly observing them through "the keyhole", lead us to all of our "yesterdays". These stories are frequently set in a recent past, on the background of collective events as well as of an everyday life by now relegated in subjects' memories and in the micro-history. None of these books attempts to give us the History back as a whole, they are rather focused on details and try to draw a reliable picture of costumes and perspectives characterizing a certain era as well as the emotional and psychological changes caused by specific historical events. It seems, in fact, that contemporary authors have chosen the means of "micro-history" or, in other words, they have preferred to use stories at the service of history, allowing them the possibility to approach ambiances, mentality of an époque which is minutely and reliably recreated.

This narrative material is able to lead us throughout the exploration of a collective memory which is often perceived as in decline or lost and to juxtapose a peculiar historical-anthropological accuracy to an autobiographic empathy. The majority of the authors (from R. Westall to Penelope Lively, from Bianca Pitzorno to Hans Peter Richter, from L. Garfield to John Boyne), although remaining within the boundaries of narrative and attempting first of all to tell an engaging and well-constructed story, refer nonetheless to known places, objects and horizons, as if they wanted to transmit a precious and really personal experience, creating in this manner a unique link between different generations.

The deep connection past-present is often the main source of a rich narrative current and it uses expedients that enable the passage from one era to another. At times these stratagems are realistic (the discovery of an old diary, the encounter with an aged wise man), sometimes they have a fictional nature (the opening of a door through which adventure and mystery are in service of the past). In both cases, however, this journey in time highlights the importance of knowing our own roots in order to understand ourselves:

the discovery of the past is indeed frequently transformed into an initiatory journey. That is true even for those memorable books of contemporary literature numbered on the shelves of memory, which are by now considered as “classics of the future” and are continuously re-printed: from Robert Westall’s *The Kingdom by the Sea*, which, although it is set in England within the explosions of the Second World War, is actually a story without time, to *The boy in striped pyjamas* by John Boyne, that has been translated in 32 countries and narrates the tragedy of the Holocaust through the incredulous and innocent eyes of a child, through the story of an intense friendship with a peer: a friendship that is divided by a barbed wire, with unexpected and terrible consequences.

From the tragedy of the Holocaust to an England that is bombed by the Germans during the Second World War in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, contemporary children’s literature gives form to legitimate masterpieces. *The Kingdom by the Sea* stands in-between a multiplicity of publishing offers, since it is featured by a rare symbolic efficiency in representing childhood during the war or, more precisely, children struggling with bombings, this, allowing the book - according to Faeti - to reach refulgent thematic zones of children’s literature, together with memorable narrations (Faeti, 1995, p.99). We are in 1942, during Second World War. England is troubled by continuous German bomb attacks, that transform Harry’s home, the protagonist, in a mass of smoking ruins from which his parents do not re-emerge. Harry escapes the orphanage and starts to travel along the English coast together with a big dog whom he had met during the first lonely night he spent on the beach. It is the beginning of an adventure between bomb attacks, escapes and dangers of every kind: that summer will change Harry deeply.

The novel, while offering an extraordinary cross section of a country during the war and the social and psychological changes caused by the conflict, stages the incredible figure of a child, an orphan traveller, with his unexpected and painful freedom and his new manner of looking at the reality that evokes many heroes (from *Huck Finn* to *Remigio* by Malot), and, at the same time, the structure of the narration, built through progressives proves, recalls the structure of the fairy tale and the Medieval legend.

Doing homage to this novel in an essay with a strongly symbolic name, *Dentro il rifugio, fuori dal guscio* (*Inside the shelter, out of the shell*), Antonio Faeti underlines the *topos* of the shelter as liberation and starting point for an initiatory path, pointing out to which extent the theme of the war becomes a metaphor for growth (Faeti, 1995). The intersecting of historical events - that is set in this case in war time and is able to show us the ambiance of that era - with the way of living, thinking and feeling, characterising the people involved, first of all the youngest generations, is a peculiar feature of other children’s book of undeniable quality. Among several Italian novels I would like to mention Donatella Ziliotto’s *Un chilo di piume, un chilo di piombo* (*A kilogram of feathers, a kilogram of lead*), a work that is strongly autobiographic. In the novel the author speaks of herself, observing one of the most terrible periods of our recent history through the eyes she used to have at that time. The book offers a precious reflection on what it means for a little girl who is entering adolescence to live in war time:

I have never had memory, so that I confuse reality with imagination, but the eight volumes of diary I wrote during the war, from when I was eight until when I was thirteen, helped me to remember how many feathers there are for a little girl even during years full of lead: skating during the alarms, breeding rabbits secretly, falling in love. And growing up. Thus, when peace came, I was ready for another sort of war, that is the adolescence (Ziliotto, 1992, p.4).

Obviously, the theme of the war boasts of a great tradition in children’s literature. From toy soldiers’ battles to the “gangs” of Molnar and Pergaud, from Salgari’s pirates to King Arthur’s fighters, from the pedagogical exhortation to die for the country that is addressed to the children, to the military novel whose protagonist is a very young hero, from battles in imaginary settings to a bitter and painful memory. In a popular paper, Walter Fochesato (Fochesato, 2011) attempts to reconstruct the process through which, in Italy, children’s literature has approached this problem: from a starting point marked by the conclusion of the Risorgimento period, to the present day, passing through *Cuore* e Capuana, Vamba and *Il piccolo alpino*, Fascism and its war and then arriving to the extraordinary outcomes of the novels by the already mentioned R. Westall and other narrators who disregard didactic purposes and transform the war into a story to read.

The centenary of the First World War, celebrated in 2014 stimulated not only a new season of war narrations but also an explosion of contemporary narrative production inspired by events that actually occurred. As if it were an attempt at contrasting the superficial amnesias and the tendency to forget which feature our era, children's book shops are full of titles referring to the war. There is no hole or small room of the huge castle of the past that is not investigated, explored by writers, illustrators, editors. From Spartacus' disastrous insurrection to the Kremlin's gloomy ambiences, from little Caesar to Mussolini's racial laws, from the epic of the Vikings to the mythical exploration by the Duke of the Abruzzi, from the Etruscan civilization to Sant'Anna di Stazzema's massacre. New book series as the "Big History" of Battello a vapore by Piemme designate some great Italian and foreign names as Lia Levi, Mino Milani, Christian Jacq, who are able to narrate - through a captivating style - protagonists, places and events that marked our history. Thanks to these narrations, the readers have the possibility to identify with the adventures of the protagonists and find out that history can be a long and exciting journey. In the meantime, new challenges are appearing. This is the case of the editor Laterza, which offers the readers a new book series, "Celacanto", a children's series conceived as a tool to speak about history never losing the passion for narration, adventure, imagination. For the first time, a few prominent scholars of this field, stimulated by this challenge, have contented with a new expressive style: from G. Traina (*Il piccolo Cesare* – Little Caesar) to F. Cardini (*Ivan e Svala* – Ivan and Svala, *I fratelli Vichinghi* – The Viking brothers) or Benny Stuart Strauss (*Spartaco* - Spartacus), who are inaugurating together the new series, to other already known Italian writers. It is a matter of understanding to what extent this new editorial tendency will keep up with this new challenge.

### **Bianca Pitzorno's Historical Novel**

A peculiar role is then played by the historical novel *per se*: this genre has not been particularly successful since it was influenced by the education market, directed to and changed into an expedient to teach history on the background of a well-packed event. A lucky exception, within the panorama of the historical fiction for children, is represented by Bianca Pitzorno's novels, an author who was able to integrate the most current perspectives of historiographical research into fictional writing (Casella, 2006, p.83). As the writer herself states:

When the representatives of the French school *Les Annales*, from a prestigious magazine expressed their intent to build the history of men and women by studying documents from a private sphere, and considered common people's everyday life as important as the decisions taken by powerful political figures, if not more, they were somehow opening the way for the great return of the historical novel, as we know it nowadays. Moreover, the attention to small everyday gestures from the private sphere has encouraged several women, who were not particularly inclined towards this literary genre, to approach it (Casella, 2006, p.83-84).

Pitzorno does never forget to keep the narrative *pathos* alive and she does not yield to a didactic tendency, succeeding in the hard task of weaving a complicated but magnificent tapestry in which every day practices, individual feelings, contingent problems intertwine with the social and cultural features of a specific era.

*La bambina col falcone* (*The little girl with the falcon*) is considered by critics as her most successful work within this genre. The fascination and the merit of *La bambina col falcone* arise from the fitting encounter of Adventure with History, in particular with the Middle Ages. For the young Melisenda, the protagonist of the novel, the idea is inspired by a 14<sup>th</sup> century codex and treaty on falconry by Federico the II's. Within the miniatures illustrating the manuscript, Bianca Pitzorno is struck by some of them representing very young female falconers. Thus, she stages a little girl who decides, powerfully, to dedicate her life to the paternal art and to go with her father, following the emperor among the crusaders, in order to study what happens overseas in relation to falconry. By contrast, her sister dreams of going and fighting in the Holy Land while



the rhythm of the events twists and turns page by page encompassing themes such as family relationships, manorial economy, Medieval culture within the cosmopolitan society of Federico the II, slaves', Saracens', heretical people's condition and the condition of a large quantity of "deviant subjects" handled with a rare and fruitful balance by the emperor's innovative policy which embraced the best of everyone. The pages of the novel come across as an actual treasure trove of events, costumes, practices, beliefs and knowledge and it does not happen, at any point, that the information overlooks the plot. Several of Bianca Pitzorno's novels are set in eras of "big events": the conquest of Asia by the Greeks in *La carovana di Alessandro* (*Alexander's caravan*) or the pacification of Palestine during the Davidic monarchy in *La giustizia di Re Salomone* (*King Solomon's justice*). There are several ingredients in Pitzorno's writing: the ability to juxtapose an already existent historical event with a "secondary plot" which keeps the reader gripped; the fascination for a type of dissemination which does not smooth over or trivialise complex and contradictory events; the curiosity to go continuously "beyond" already existent researches in order to find proves and new documents, which - even when they are really small - remain relevant within the historical development; the extraordinary talent to connect with the inner reality of childhood. Furthermore, in all this, we can feel the strong intellectual fascination characterizing the French school *Les Annales* for the "micro-stories", the small gestures of private life, the emotional dynamics crossing classes, ages, eras.

### **When image becomes History: from the graphic novel to the picture book**

History arrogantly pervades not only the novels but the whole lively and heterogeneous panorama characterising children's literature, which is permeated by the contamination between languages and media. This includes in its field the new hybrid form of writing and image, the graphic novel, with *Maus* by A. Spiegelman representing a point of excellence for the genre. Thus, through the potentiality of hybridization and stylistic innovations previously perceived as impossible, narrative crosses over new horizons. The process of growth that the graphic novel is passing through is featured by unusual components: these stories rework the comics-form and aim to occupy the same space as a novel or a big *reportage* would do. These genre, which is conceived for a demanding audience - arose out of the emerging visual culture that shows narrative complexity and extraordinary psychological intensity in telling stories (from Holocaust to Gaza, from the Italian massacres to superheroes' crisis) - won over the youngest generations.

*Maus*, in particular, is a complex and terrifying story, narrated on two different levels which overlap and intersect: the present reality of a New Yorker cartoonist and the past of a father intern in Auschwitz who tells his son the tragedy represented by the Shoah. In his masterpiece, Spiegelman not only alters comics' typical features and the traditional contents of the illustrated story, but he also uses the fable – which is that tale whose protagonists are animals – to narrate the unspeakable. Indeed, the protagonists – on the line of the tradition featuring the fable which begins from Esopo and La Fontaine and comes to Orwell's *Animal farm* – are anthropomorphic animals: mice the Jewish, cats the Germans. As Anna Antoniazzi underlines (2011, p.173), Spiegelman realizes that he cannot use a realistic code to tell his father's frightening memories, rather he must rely on a powerful tool such as the metaphor, which enables one to go deep into the bowels of the narration. *Maus* then becomes the efficient proof of how the contemporary use of several narrative codes could emphasize the power of narrative and restore human beings' interior humanity.

Similarly, history strongly penetrates those picture books which nowadays play an essential role within children's editorial production and are frequently identified as actual "artistic creations".

*Rosa Bianca* (*White Rose*) by Roberto Innocenti - one of the main exponents of the international panorama of graphic arts, honoured with the *Hans Christian Andersen Award* - is a picture book characterised by an extraordinary visual and narrative intensity. It is set in a small German town which is full of Nazi flags and slogans written on the walls: Rosa Bianca lives here, she is a little girl as many others and together with the other people of the town she looks at the tanks passing by and the trucks with men in uniform. Rosa Bianca is so stunned by what she sees that she follows, running, the tracks of a vehicle full of people. There

is also a little boy among these people, he manages to run away...but then he is forced to get in the vehicle again. What happens deeply disturbs Rosa Bianca, who wants to know where they will bring that child. By running so fast she then discovers a barbed wire fence separating her from squalid shacks, skeletal children wearing striped clothes with a yellow star on them. A child shows that he is starving and Rosa Bianca gives him the food she has. From that day and for the whole winter, Rosa Bianca brings those children any food she manages to find, while military convoys pass through the town more and more frequently. People begin to run away, soldiers who have been injured ask for help. She runs into the forest to check what is going on, but there is nothing left, no shacks, nor barbed wire. In the meantime, there are soldiers appearing and suddenly shooting. The town is destroyed, Rosa Bianca's mother is awaiting for her daughter in vain, but slowly, in the forest, the trees are recreating their leaves and the flowers are blossoming again.

This book, composed of twenty wonderful illustrations and a really short text, is generally associated with children's literature, even though it is actually suitable for readers of any age. *Rosa Bianca* is a text made of images, yet highly poetic. But above all, Innocenti shows, without describing it, the tragedy happening in Germany through minimal details. The author looks at the world through the same eyes as the protagonist: Rosa Bianca does not know the reason why there are soldiers, she does not understand the war if not through what she is experiencing, the shortage of food, people becoming sadder day by day, the children living in those shacks. This childish gaze is essentially the same gaze of that child-reader, who, seeing these images, will feel the necessity of knowing; and it is exactly thinking of these children and thinking of the strength and the hope they symbolize, that Innocenti gave us the last illustration of the book: suffering cannot be erased, it will stay forever with us and inside us, but nothing will be able to impede forests and lawns to be green again and the periwinkle to blossom once more, so that they will comfort us and make us remember – forever.

To illustrate is itself a different manner of looking at the world (Hamelin, 2006). In Innocenti's view, illustrating means to narrate as well, to such an extent that often the written texts come after, as if they would need to "illustrate" the images, already speaking by themselves. *Rosa Bianca*, a modern tale, is - even with no words - the metaphor of a peculiar and intense gaze: the little girl does not judge, but she decides that she will not stay in front of the window, looking at the war reflecting in it and the surface of reality; she goes into the street, she cycles quickly, she follows the figures of the soldiers, she recognizes other children and, looking at them, she sees herself in danger. As ourselves, the readers, she is constantly on the other side: beyond a window, a wall, the barbed wire. There is an invisible border between her actions and the slow, inescapable future she is moving towards, a future that is hanging through the cruel soldiers amused by their mission and the terrible truth hidden in the heart of the forest. Rosa Bianca is able to see where adults do not want to look at. Her dress fades, loses its red bow and slowly dissolves. She is losing more and more weight, her eyes are lifeless, it seems like she embodies the pain of the whole community. During her last winter she grows up, because she has seen.

There is a common feature in Innocenti's entire work: the attention for history, like in the book *Pinocchio*, where Tuscany is so real that we can perceive its sounds and smells. Lane by lane, brick by brick, stone by stone. As it happens in Collodi's writing, character and setting merge in illustrations that become a realistic unity of moods, references, memories.

### The Shoah in the stories

There is no such a thing which connected History and stories so tightly that they ended up blurring, as the abomination of the Holocaust did. As A. Molesini states in her critic essay *Nero latte dell'alba* (Sunrise's black milk) "The transmutation of the ash from the crematories in material for narrative and poetry is inevitable, as it has always happened in relation to events which have marked a point of no return in human history" (Molesini, 2001, p.54). Starting from the '90s, there have been several diaries, autobiographies, family stories and, more simply, novels telling the Shoah. Moreover, we can think of several authors who, having experienced directly the tragedy of the Shoah, entrust the narration of what happened to a written

page, fighting against the monster of the oblivion and the simplification, reaffirming through the power of the words that something always resists the annihilation and the danger of a final disappearance. Narrated through the stories of young characters, the experience of the Shoah is plumbed in its different phases and events through works which tell with no omissions, the survival in ghettos (*L'isola in via degli uccelli – The island in via degli uccelli*), the escape from the places occupied by the Nazis and the life of the refugees (*Una valle piena di stelle – A valley full of stars; Quando Hitler rubò il coniglio rosa – When Hitler stole the pink rabbit*), the solidarity towards the first victims of the persecutions (*La banalità del bene – The banality of the good*), the everyday life in the internment and extermination camps (*All'inferno e ritorno – To hell and back; Max e Helen – Max and Helen*). Furthermore, the tragedy is sometimes narrated through revisitations, like a spy story (*Il trillo del diavolo – Devil's thrill*), or in a fantasy version (*Il segreto di Mont Brulant – The secret of Mont Brulant*), and sometimes it is told in a mildly humorous manner (*All'ombra del lungo cammino – In the shade of the long walk*) which seems to foresee the one proposed by Roberto Benigni in *La vita è bella (Life is beautiful)*. There is then a quite interesting portion of literature focusing on the theme of friendship between persecuted and not persecuted children. Books such as *Arrivederci ragazzi (Goodbye children)*, *Stelle di cannella (Cinnamon stars)*, *L'amico ritrovato (Reunion)*, *Misha corre (Milkweed)* are examples of this literature.

Particular attention, as I already underlined referring to *Rosa Bianca*, must be given to the picture books. Addressed to the youngest, but not trivialized or simplified for this reason, the comic books are often proper masterpieces appreciated by readers of any age for their capacity of summarizing complex poetic forms in a few words, thanks to the power of image. If memory needs nourishment, eyes in a constant process of change and brave perspective to narrate the unspeakable, the picture book is the main tool to do it.

Within this area I would like to recall particularly moving books: from the delicate tones characterizing *Il volo di Sara (Sara's flight)*, which narrates the encounter of a redbreast with a little girl in an internment camp, from which the bird wants to save the child, to *L'albero di Anne (Anne's tree)*, a really special story inspired by the big and centenary horse-chestnut tree that used to gladden A. Frank's days in her hideout; from the disarming spontaneity of a big hearted little girl who is brought in the internment camps with her mother and sister in *La storia di Vera (Vera's story)* to *Il mestolo di Adele (Adele's ladle)*, a bizarre protagonist and narrator which is able not simply to evoke delicious dishes but to say much more when it is on the table among dozens of other objects seized from a Jewish family; from Lia Levi's *La portinaia di Apollonia (Apollonia's porter)*, that, through a small text and big colored illustrations let us look at the life of a Jewish little boy during the Second World War, to I. Millman's *Il bambino nascosto (The hidden child)*, hidden little boy, as many others Jewish children during Nazism, who tells his odyssey in the occupied French territories, though a narration in which words intertwine with photographs from the author's album and his drawings, things that speak as much as the writing. We should also mention *La storia di Erika (Erika's story)*, in which Innocenti has described, through really captivating illustrations, the story of a little girl who survived the Shoah since, after her mother had pushed her down a train directed to an extermination camp, the girl is found by a woman who will take care of her, and *Otto, autobiografia di un orsacchiotto (Otto, autobiography of a teddy bear)*, the story of a teddy bear named Otto and of two German children: inseparable playmates, who had been separated only by a yellow star stitched on the breast, but not forever.

Comic books deserve particular consideration, being the most effective example of how atrocities can be narrated even through the beauty of images and the creation of stories which stimulate to reflect and to build a better future. Children's literature, making the reader part of what is narrated, enables him/her to start and develop an encounter with the past, which sediments in the memory of one's life experience.

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