

Born to win.

Children's literature and male models

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Abstract

Compared to the complexity that has accompanied the transformation of female models during the most recent centuries of our history, the male ones, up to very recent times, have mostly been limited to two, specular and unavoidable of each other: the winners and the victims; taking into account, however, how this last type does not represent, hardly ever, an active reference point, but denotes the spectrum of existential situations which men of any age would do best to keep well away from. The male models also proposed by contemporary storytelling are particularly worrying, as they tend to convey, more than the female ones, stereotypes and educational-behavioural praxis linked to a patriarchal type of stainless culture.

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Rispetto alla complessità che ha accompagnato la trasformazione dei modelli femminili nel corso degli ultimi secoli della nostra storia, quelli maschili, fino a tempi molto recenti, si sono perlopiù limitati a due, speculari e imprescindibili l'uno dall'altro: i vincitori e le vittime; tenendo conto, però, come quest'ultima tipologia non rappresenti, quasi mai, un punto di riferimento attivo, ma denoti lo spettro di situazioni esistenziali dalle quali gli uomini di qualunque età sarebbe bene si tenessero lontani. Ancora oggi i modelli maschili proposti dalla narrazione contemporanea si ostinano a veicolare, più di quelli femminili, stereotipi e prassi educativo-comportamentali legati ad una inossidabile cultura di tipo patriarcale.

Parole chiave: Letteratura per l'infanzia; storia dell'immaginario; educazione di genere; modelli maschili.

Keywords: Children's literature; history of the imaginary; gender education; male models.

1. A brief introduction

If we look carefully at the imaginative contemporaneity, we immediately realise how much female models, even stereotypes are subtly recurring and inclined to pervade every communication field, and how they are, today more than ever, variegated and complex. The same cannot be said of those of males.

The reasons for this disparity are certainly many and the result of a complex and intricate series of concomitant factors; it is certain, however, that the female models of our contemporaneity are the result of an imaginative negotiation and renegotiation which, having begun well over a century ago, continue to be present and lively.

Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, in fact, a profound reflection on the feminine condition and on the motivations – anthropological, religious, social, educational, etc. – that led, apart from sporadic exceptions, to the marginalisation of women from political, economic and cultural power. Moreover, it is in that historical period that not only does the activism of women become more visible, explicating itself in a concrete political commitment, but also literature and media (newspapers, almanacs, etc.) are beginning to denounce abuses and harassment against women and promote different female models, alternative to traditional ones. One of the most solicitous claims, even if not the only one, concerns the right to vote.

It is the Great War, however, unexpectedly and tragically, to provide women with an opportunity to escape from the domestic environment in which they have been relegated for centuries: they are not only taking on the job roles left unoccupied by men at the front (in factories, offices, administrative tasks, etc.), but also in dealing with civil responsibilities and social duties.

Alongside the battles for the recognition of women's rights in the political, civil and social spheres, towards the middle of the last century, the idea began to take hold that – with extreme delay compared to the changes underway for over a century – education, and the educational models that convey it, are fundamental for a real and radical change compared to the old and persistent perspectives of gender. The denunciations and claims of authors such as Margaret Mead, Simone de Beauvoir and, in Italy, Elena Gianini Belotti, move in this direction.

Alongside the theoretical reflection on the female, the claims and conquests of feminism

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and the new awareness in the social and educational sphere, move the world of literature and, more in general, of the narrative imagination. If between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century *Romance Novels* gave the readers an opportunity, though not transgressive, to their desire for liberation and emancipation, it is in children's literature that they begin to make their appearance "little girls no longer hidden or harnessed by the representations that the adult world has built and circulated" (Beseghi, 2001, p.48). Along with Lewis Carroll's Alice (1865), Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868) – Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy – begin to indicate how, for young women, there are no pre-established personal training courses, equal for all.

However, in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century, characters such as Bibi¹ by Karin Michaëlis and Pippi Longstocking² by Astrid Lindgren undermine the image of female-declined childhood from its very roots. Perhaps for the first time these characters project the child dimension into a universe parallel to the adult one in which gender differences, although present and never hidden, do not interfere with the possibility that Bibi and Pippi have to move, act, transgress the rules, to claim their autonomy. Starting from these premises it does not seem strange that, in 1968, Pippi Longstocking emerged as an icon of the student revolution and became a privileged expression of the feminist movement.

In the following decades, then, in children's literature, female characters proliferate who are determined, capable, irreverent and combative towards a destiny for them already seemingly marked by gender belonging.

1. Male paradigms

Compared to the complexity that has accompanied the transformation of female models during the most recent centuries of our history, the male ones, up to very recent times, have mostly been limited to two, specular and unavoidable of each other: the winners and the victims; taking into account, however, how this last type does not represent, hardly ever, an active reference point, but denotes the spectrum of existential situations which men of any age would do best to keep well away from.

The same story of the narration, since ancient times, shows how, to be successful, the male can make use of all the possible expedients. The types of skills put in place by the

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heroes to achieve the desired result encompass the entire casuistry of the human, but some, perhaps, may be more significant than others. It is the stubborn determination to conquer immortality to push Gilgamesh, protagonist of the first epic poem so far known, to throw himself headlong into every challenge, in every adventure, especially if considered humanly impossible, so as to win the appellative of *sha nagba imuru*: he who has seen everything. It is cunning, careful, shrewd and creative intelligence, instead, to lead Ulysses first to the victory against the Trojans, then, to the return home, in the dangerous *nostos* towards Ithaca, regardless of the wrath of the gods. Those same gods who, in myth, give Perseus a pair of winged shoes, a helmet that makes him invisible and a leather bag (*kibisis*) to hide the head of the Gorgon Medusa, once he has succeeded, unique among mortals, in defeating her.

For Jason, like for many other protagonists of myths, fairy tales, legends and sagas after him, it is the conquest of a treasure – the golden fleece of the winged ram *Chrysomallon* – to give him fame, immortality and glory; that same glory that Achilles had chosen for himself as an alternative to a long and anonymous life: a life without victories. It is thanks to a brutal and uncontrollable force, then, that Heracles manages to overcome the twelve labours imposed by the oracle of Delphi not only as a price to obtain immortality, but perhaps, above all, as a penance for killing his own children.

The heroes of ancient narratives all belong to the male genre. Or rather, sometimes stories speak of some daring heroine; usually, however, it is not femininity that stands out among her gifts, but it is audacity, propensity to violence, to abuse, to aggression; all prerogatives linked to the male component. One example for all, the Amazons: a people of only women trained from childhood to war, hunting, military activities. Significant is the fact that Homer defines them with an unequivocal epithet: *virile*. The presence of the Amazons in Greek mythology, on the other hand, is a constant whose echo spreads, through an innumerable variety of narrative streams, up to Lara Croft, the protagonist of a real cross-media saga starting from the *Tomb Raider* videogame, released in 1996.

Returning to the male imaginary, even when, during the Middle Ages, Christianity overlaps with paganism, for the protagonists of the stories – and of history – the goal to be reached continues to be victory: against evil, against the ancient gods, against the infidels (as in the case of the knights), but above all, against death. To observe it from a particular angle, even the figure of Francis of Assisi, basically, embodies, reworking and adapting it to the medieval vision, a “winning” figure: refusing wealth and marrying

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“Madonna Poverty”, the “poor man” wins direct access to the Kingdom of Heaven and, consequently, victory over death.

Even weakness, then, as regards the male imaginative paradigms, can become an instrument of personal catharsis and, ultimately, of victory. The biblical example of the young shepherd boy David who, armed only with a sling, manages to defeat the giant Philistine Goliath, testifies, as will happen in many legends and, above all in fairy tales, that sometimes physical weakness can be transformed into a fundamental tool for personal success. And it is the fairy tale *Le Petit Poucet (Hop o’ My Thumb)* by Charles Perrault (1697), to tell how even the smallest and most helpless among human beings, a child as small as a thumb, has the possibility and the right to obtain his privileged place in the world conquering the treasure of the ogre after having defeated him. That same fairy tale, however, also reveals another aspect of the traditional male narrative: anyone who is not the hero, or his opposite, the loser, the victim, has no right to remain in the stories; disappears from their plots, leaves no trace of himself after having performed his function of accompaniment and, even more disturbing situation, no one cares. Hence, *Hop o’ My Thumb’s* brothers, although bigger than him, both in age and physically, not being at his level for intelligence, cunning and determination, simply disappear from the story as soon as the smallest of them becomes the hero, the absolute protagonist.

This situation, which at times may seem paradoxical, can be found for a long time, even in historiography where, for centuries, the same male categories present in the narrative imagination meet: the winners, or rather those who best embody the victory on the field (generals, warlords, statesmen, etc.) and the vanquished (the defeated). All the others – the poor, the children, the women, etc. – disappear from the historical narrative or remain mere extras.

This, in general, takes place at least until the studies of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre who – starting from the insights of Voltaire, Chateaubriand and Guizot – founded, in 1929, the journal *Les Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*³.

From that moment, considered by Peter Burke (1992), as a true “French revolution” of historiography, research is addressed to areas considered marginal from previous studies and open to new and complex epistemological and methodological approaches aimed at investigating, in addition to the characters, the dates, the striking events also the difficult management of everyday life, the movements of the populations, the persistence of mentalities and the material life of individuals.

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As can be clearly seen in other essays present in this volume, although the attitude of scholars has profoundly changed over time, the history manuals, still used today in Italian primary and secondary schools, are affected by archaic attitudes and situations, and are loaded with stereotypes and prejudices, also with regard to the male, considered, in many cases, the only “real” centre of interest for historical events, with few critical re-thinking of the winners/losers dualism, so dear to the traditional imaginary.

And yet, “the most revolutionary transformations of knowledge took place when the starting point, the whole building of knowledge accumulated up to now was questioned: tradition” (Bevilacqua, 2007, p.44).

Hannah Arendt wrote that in the Greek world history had the task of giving relief to exceptional men and enterprises, so that they would not fall into oblivion and not die, thus, forever. That art of the story was called to make individual men and events immortal. [...]. Here, I believe that this “search for immortality” has remained structurally linked to the historical narrative. In fact, it divinises what is not repeated, the fact that passes, the gesture that sinks into the past [...] But how can we fail to realise that the historical narrative is precisely the representation of power at work? It constitutes the effort to make immortal not so much men in the abstract, but to make the domain divine (Bevilacqua, 2007, p.119).

Domination, victory and hegemony are, on the other hand, also characteristics that, as anticipated, have accompanied for a long time, and sometimes still accompany not only the historical narrative, but also the “narrative fictions” with the male as the protagonist. The situation, however, is even finer, subtle and difficult to root out from the imaginary because, as underlined by Bevilacqua (2007),

we must acknowledge that in the individuality of the powerful there is concentrated a sort of synthetic representativeness that subrogates the complexity of real phenomena and offers unique and irreplaceable services to the historical narrative (p.125).

Here, therefore, is explained the presence, in an innumerable series of narratives, traditional and modern, of many different ways, of many different destinies in which the male is, however, called to obtain a single purpose: to win one’s own battle, exceed one’s limits and, when possible, those of all humanity.

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In particular, the male models proposed by contemporary narration are particularly worrying, as they tend to convey, more than the female ones, stereotypes and educational-behavioural praxis linked to a patriarchal type of stainless culture. From Hop o' My Thumb by Perrault to Harry Potter⁴ by J.K. Rowling, in this sense, little seems to have changed: we are faced with competitions, challenges, struggles for victory. Indeed, from a certain point of view, it seems as if the young protagonists of Western narratives cannot renounce the final triumph because, as we have seen, they are absolutely “born to win”.

Remaining in our national context, one can see how, historically, the patriotic rhetoric linked to the promotion of Italic heroism, present in the stories and images that from the *Risorgimento* accompanied the imaginary child – and not only – until the end of the two decades of fascism⁵, in the following decades, it was transformed into a mere exaltation of the heroic and saving qualities of males.

If *La piccola vedetta lombarda* (*The small Lombard lookout*) by Edmondo De Amicis (1886) sacrifices itself to complete the mission of keeping under control the enemy's advance, *Il piccolo alpino* (*The little Alpine*) by Salvator Gotta (1926), does not hesitate to go to the front pushed by the desire to see the war and to experience its adventures. Then there is a dense array of characters, narratives, images, suggestions that pushes childhood to conform to current ideals. An emblematic example, in this sense, is represented by the “postcards of war”, sent by families to the front and from the front towards home during the Great War. Many of these images, collected, studied and commented by Walter Fochesato, have childhood as their subject, declined both for boys and girls. Naturally, these are propaganda images through which “boldness enters the nursery and [...] seems to be a prelude to squad-like impulses and thrills, destined to unfold fully from there in a few years” (Fochesato, 2015, p.19). These are mainly images in which boys and girls “do the things of grown-ups, including, of course, war” (Fochesato, 2015, p.35). If the representations of the girls conveyed by postcards consistently insist on stereotypical female models now consolidated, linked on the one hand to care (in the war of the soldier, but more generally of the house and the family) and on the other to seductiveness, those of children always concern courage, audacity, ruthlessness and propensity for victory.

The three images of Attilio Mussino inserted below are very symptomatic of an imaginative attitude aimed at conveying precise behavioural indications and educational

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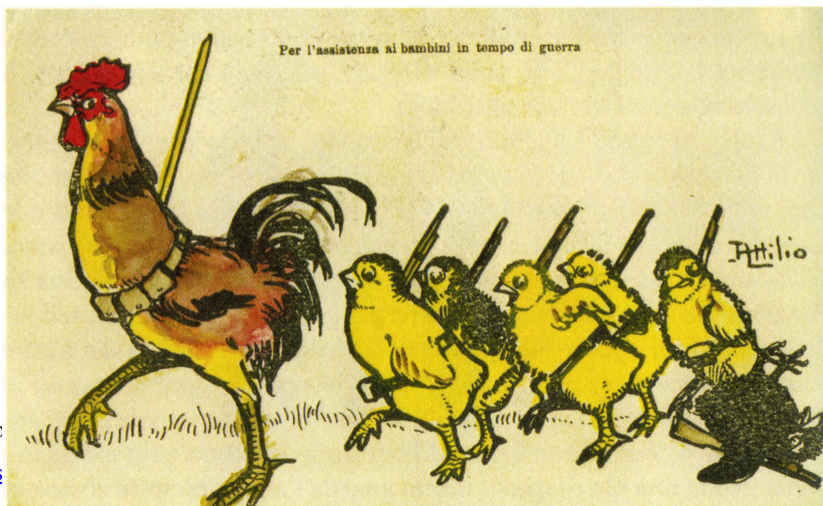
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models to be consolidated once the children become adults.



Figure 1 – Attilio Mussino (Fochesato, 2015).



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Figure 2 – Attilio Mussino (Fochesato, 2015).



Figure 3 – Attilio Mussino (Fochesato, 2015).

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This situation is exacerbated during the twenty years of fascism when childhood and its education become one of the cornerstones on which the fascist regime is still to guarantee stability and a future. The “new citizen” must be educated for war and for this reason there is a need to form a citizen-soldier who internalises and represents the warrior soul of a warlike and aggressive regime (Montino, 2005, p.43).

To realise the militarisation of the citizen and his character, we had to start early. In fact, already at six years old, it was possible to enter the party organisations dedicated to children and young people, such as the *Opera Nazionale Balilla (O.N.B.)* and the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (G.I.L.)* starting from 1937. Militarily organised into maniples, squads and centuries, in a perfect hierarchical order, the children “played” at war and learned order and discipline also through edifying readings specifically dedicated to them (Montino, 2005, pp. 43-44).



Figure 4 – La difesa della razza e la G.I.L. (Petrucci, 1941).

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Although the images in textbooks are effectively able to return the type of propaganda put in place by the regime to impose their own educational models, it is the fascist reinterpretation of fairy tales and classics of children's literature to make their intentions even more explicit.

The example of Pinocchio is extremely striking. The character created by Carlo Collodi, in fact, in his clothes revisited by the authors of the twenty years of fascism becomes, among other things, *Balilla* (Schiatti & Schizzo, 1927), instructor of the Negus (unknown author 1939) and even "*squadrista*" (member of the fascist action squads) since Giuseppe Petrai (1923) makes him participate in punitive expeditions against the hated communists in order to obtain the fascist membership card.

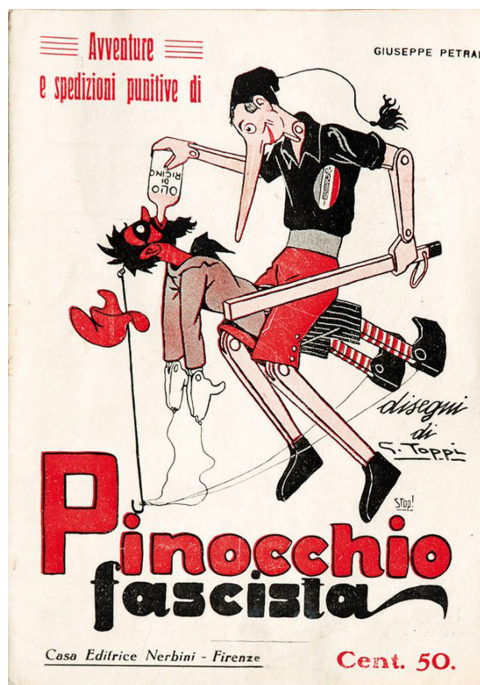


Figure 5 – Pinocchio fascista (Petrai, 1923).

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The ideal of supremacy (of the “race”, of the male, of violence) proposed by fascism, together with that inherited from the *Risorgimento*, of “victory or death” – where dying took on the meaning of becoming a hero-martyr, in order to guarantee a greater good in the final victory – give way, in the post-World War II narratives, to a more prosaic determination of the male to demonstrate their superiority in the domestic, political, economic and, more in general, social sphere. Regarding the literature for children, in the fifties and sixties:

there are two lines: one progressive, libertarian, democratic and another conservative and moralist. The latter, which proposes dense stories of right-minded teachings, of artificial universes of good sentiments, largely coincides with Catholic production and is supported by the conservative currents of pedagogy. The other strand, in its best results, [...] is fuelled by the desire to confront the most pressing problems of current events to present them, without masks and pedagogical duplicities, to boys. (Boero & De Luca, 2009, p.243)

As for the textbooks in use in elementary schools, then, Umberto Eco notes how, still in the early seventies of the twentieth century they have a false, ridiculous, grotesque, residual character of an authoritarian and repressive society (Eco, 1971, pp.7-12).

If many clues, between the fifties and seventies of the last century, indicate the possibility of an effective paradigm shift in the perception of childhood and in its education, the conservative drives and a new inattention towards the younger population led, decades later, to lose sight of, or to misrepresent, the intuitions of the great innovators (authors, thinkers, illustrators, editors, etc.) who helped to promote the renewal of at least a part of the traditional imaginary. In fact, emptied of the profoundly revolutionary charge of which they were bearers, in fact, not only the works of Gianni Rodari and Bruno Munari or the pedagogical intuitions of Mario Lodi, but even the new scholastic institutions – the single middle school⁶ and the nursery school⁷ – saw the opportunity to be interpreters of a true and effective social and imaginative transformation fade.

As for the male reference paradigms, confirming that being born to win is a feature that unites the protagonists of stories from very different societies and cultures, one from the other, but always of patriarchal matrix, arrive in Italy, at the end of the seventies, the first Japanese TV series. The imaginary child is literally overwhelmed by the media inva-

sion made by the great robots: Goldrake, Mazinger, Mazinger Z, Daitarn III, Gundam, Steel Jeeg and the others represent, at that time, the last bastion of the fairy tale, embodying, in new clothes, the eternal struggle between good and evil. The hero is dressed in gigantic armour of titanium and steel to face unknown, terrible and extremely destructive dangers: alien forces, occult powers, mysterious and terrifying creatures that live in the depths of the blue planet and want to conquer the Earth or delete it from the universe.

At this point we need a clarification: that of the person who redeems himself from a miserable condition, who fights for justice or for his ideals, who sacrifices himself for the common good or “fight against evil”, is not a negative educational model, much less deplorable. The problem, if anything, is that it ends up representing the only possible point of reference beyond which for the child it is difficult, not to say impossible, to go; the only model with which he can compare, adapt or renounce. The male protagonists of the stories must be, in fact, always up to the situation, able to face trials, overcome obstacles, constantly keep the attention and control over everything; even at the risk of claiming rights and legitimising actions that are not entirely appropriate.

3. A new beginning?

If it is true that the “turning point” made, starting from 1987⁸, by publishers for children and young people led to a general rethinking of themes, topics, characters and situations, it is equally true that the stereotypes related to the male continue to rage in the publications. Only here and there are titles able to shift attention to other aspects that concern, especially in adolescence, the feeling of insecurity, inadequacy, sometimes clumsy, in the face of changes and transformations of the body and its impulses; but also of emotions and feelings. In *The Schernoff Discoveries*, for example, Gary Paulsen (1998) staged, among other things, the difficulties, embarrassments, the unsuccessful strategies of the protagonist faced with his first date with the girl of his dreams and his first kiss. Harold is clumsy, awkward, not really good-looking, but he is full of initiative so, no one knows how, he manages to convince Arlene to go out with him. He cannot afford to go unprepared to the event, so: “he went to the library, of course, and con-

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sulted books on etiquette, romance, love and heaven knows what else. During the following week he did nothing but read” (Paulsen, 1998, p. 24).

Imagining that he had learned everything from the books, he decided to adopt with Arlene an approach based on the one hand on the “Raleigh method”, from the name of the famous conquistador of the Elizabethan era, on the other hand on the indications of an improbable manual without an author. Needless to say, the appointment turns out to be a complete disaster.

The adventures, or rather the misadventures of Harold and his friend who, in first person, tells of those deeds, anticipate characters who, shortly thereafter, will be destined to provide new male models to the imaginary. It is in the first decade of the new millennium, in fact, that the narratives addressed to the younger generations – transversely to every media – begin to present in a consistent way characters with atypical features compared to tradition.

A special case is the animated full-length film *Chicken Little* by Mark Dindal (USA 2005).

Chicken Little is a shy, insecure, reserved young country chicken, often mocked by his companions and misunderstood by his father. Faced with indifference and hostility, however, he is not discouraged and carries forward his own ideas and convictions: convinced that aliens want to conquer the Earth he tries in every way to reveal it to his fellow citizens who exalt him as a hero right in the moment in which the spectator and the protagonist discover that this is only a misunderstanding. We are faced with a new change of direction in the imaginary, especially in that which surrounds childhood (Antoniazzi, 2016, p.120).

What *Chicken Little* highlights is the disorientation when faced with the unpredictability of existence, the precariousness of certainties and the provisional nature of the points of view. Faced with this situation, the young protagonist tries to be himself, with all his limitations and abilities, beyond public opinion, always too influenceable and swinging in its position taken in the face of reality.

It is another cult-movie, *Cars* (John Lasseter, USA, 2006), to reveal a real discontinuity – already present in the best literature for children, but often little known to the general public – compared to the most used model. In the film made by Pixar, indeed, the pro-

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tagonist, despite being vowed to victory, does not hesitate to renounce it (at least temporarily) in the name of a sense of duty, respect and friendship. Having won the arrogance of being “number one” and forced into everyday life, Lightning McQueen discovers for the first time a world made of gestures, emotions, experiences that go well beyond the glory of a moment. It is an episode, but quite striking to point out a trend, to show a change of attitude compared to male models. However, there is no need to lower one’s guard because in the contemporary world of TV series, films, video games and the latest generation of apps, continue to offer, under different masks, the model of reference linked to tradition. Not only the great Japanese productions, but also the Disney world (and the one inspired by it) end up, in fact, confirming the dangerous ideal that the world is a place exclusively for winners. And they often do so in a hidden way since many female characters, just like in ancient times, to free themselves from a situation of disadvantage or to “win”, end up using the same tools as the males.

But not only that: on closer inspection, even unsuspected characters, such as Hiccup, the young Viking protagonist of the animated feature film *Dragon Trainer* (Chris Sanders & Dean DeBlois, USA, 2010) continue to propose the same reference model.

Hiccup is a Viking, son of the village chief.

In a world in which the main occupation of a man is to show his worth by killing dragons, the protagonist proposes a new way of facing reality, upsetting the village on a cultural and social level. Bearer of a “different” physicality compared to his peers, being scrawny and obviously weak, Hiccup uses unusual “weapons”, but which prove to be very effective, to become part of a world that would like to exclude and marginalise him: intelligence, cunning, generosity and a new form of courage not based on bravado and on the need to prove oneself undaunted, but on knowing oneself, one’s possibilities and limits. A new type of hero, therefore, in some way the evolution of the traditional superhero, which does not set as a priority and unquestionable objective to save the world, but to try to solve individual situations as they occur, through specific strategies: a divergent thought compared to the common one, the sharpness of the gaze, the intuition (Antoniazzi, 2015, pp.91-92).

Yet even he, a character in many aspects of rupture with respect to current paradigms, continues to belong to the “born to win” type. He is no longer alone, however: in imaginative contemporaneity one wins in a group – even though Hiccup is undoubtedly a

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leader – and it is in peer solidarity that the true driving force of change is found, the evolution of reference models.

Contemporary dystopias with children and children protagonists – from *Bambini nel bosco* (Children in the woods) by Beatrice Masini (2010) to the *Berlin* saga by Geda and Magnone (2015-2018), from *Monument 14⁹* by Emmy Laybourn (2017) to *Darkest Minds* by Alexandra Bracken (2012) – reiterate, then, how only solidarity between peers and mutual aid, beyond momentary leadership, from time to time conquered in the field, are the only way to survive hostile realities and project oneself towards a better future.

In particular, *Bambini nel bosco* by Beatrice Masini seems to lead us in that direction. The novel stands in the wake of the stories of the “after bomb”, which tell of a wounded and painful humanity that is no longer able to look at childhood as a resource, as a prospect, as a future; a humanity that hides the horror of knowledge in disinterest for children. In the dystopian world narrated by the author, children are locked up in a sort of concentration camp, the Base, and kept without recollections and without a memory by the “medicine” administered every day, so that they can spend their days without thoughts, without goals and without hope. Yet one of them, Tom, remembers. They are fragments, “shards” of past life that resurface and make room in the mind; they are flashes of life that light, heat, make bold. They are memories of a different world in which parents and children lived together, reading was not forbidden and affection was not a feeling to be avoided. Driven by those memories and the need to explore the unknown, to surrender to the curiosity of the forbidden, Tom – the unconscious engine of the whole story – convinces his “gang”, the small group to which he was assigned, to go into the woods that surround the “Base”. In the explorations the child always carries a book of fairy tales and, hidden from the adults, reads aloud. Those stories awaken the memory of other children. And with memory, words, numbers, curiosity, and the desire for freedom are also awakened. Not even when they are captured and returned to the Base, do the children stop trusting and dreaming: the passage through the woods and the fairy tales collected in the book have profoundly and irreversibly changed them, and nothing for them will be more like before (Antoniazzi, 2014, p.158). For them, dystopia will no longer be a prison from which it is impossible to leave, but a nightmare from which one can awaken. Paraphrasing what was said by G.K. Chesterton (1909), in fact, fairy tales do not lie because they are not limited to telling children that dragons are real

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– whatever the form they take in childhood experience – but they reveal that dragons can be defeated; that you can get away from the horror:

“We have all the stories here” Cranach pointed to his head “and here” and pointed his thumb at his heart. “And we have no more children to tell them to. Apart from us, I mean”.

“Maybe we’ll find other children”, said Jonas.

“In the wood?” asked Lu [...].

“In the wood, or who knows where. Books are still useful. To keep stories. So that others can know them”, said Jonas.

“Then shall we put ours in it too?” Cranach beamed.

“Maybe yes” said Tom Twice. “After, maybe yes”.

And is this the end of the story? But no, this is just the beginning (Masini, 2010, pp.199-200).

We do not know what happened to the small protagonists of the novel by Beatrice Masini, if and how they grew up, if they continued to hope, if they managed to build a better world: that open end leaves the reader the possibility of independently continuing the story, of connoting it, of pushing it to its extreme consequences.

If it is in *Dragon Trainer*, that the contemporary “dystopian girls”, even with elements of continuity, are detached from the idea that to be men, even “little men”, it is necessary to triumph, at any cost; the most disruptive breakup of the “born to win” model, however, takes place through a literary character rendered an icon by contemporary preadolescents: Gregory Heffley, protagonist of the famous *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*¹⁰ by Jeff Kinney (2007); published, to date, in thirteen volumes. Like most real kids, Greg does not want to excel above all, let alone save the world, but he does not even want to hide from the world; he does not want to win at all costs, but he does not want to lose the battles he faces; he does not want to be an absolute protagonist, but tries to carve out a role, albeit marginal, within events. His only weapons are a smile and self-irony, thanks to which he succeeds, well or badly, to get out of all situations, even the most ridiculous and embarrassing ones. We are probably faced with the birth of a new educational model that, if properly combined with traditional ones, will allow new generations to broaden their cognitive and experiential horizon. Even from an imaginative point of view.

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The change of perspective is striking, and yet, as often happens with what breaks traditional patterns, the phenomenon has largely gone unnoticed, especially to “insiders” who have pleasantly snubbed him. Of course, we are not dealing with a masterpiece of literature, or even art history, but with something, perhaps, more profoundly effective, for the period in which we are living. The adventures, and misadventures, of Gregory Heffley, although destined not to become classics of literature, are accompanying a generation of boys (and girls) to approach the world with less gravity, but with a wider, variegated and welcoming, range of personal expectations and possibilities, within which each one can look for and find his/her own particular place; and a destiny that goes beyond the model imposed by tradition.

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1 In Italy they were, for the first time, published by Vallardi: *Bibi una bimba del Nord* (1931); *Bibi e il suo grande viaggio* (1932); *Bibi ha un amico* (1933); *Bibi e le congiurate* (1935); *Bibi di sorpresa in sorpresa* (1936); *Bibi si fa contadina* (1938).

2 Published in Sweden (Rabén & Sjögren, Stockholm) in 1945, *Pippi Långstrump* arrived in Italy in 1958 thanks to the Vallecchi publishers in Milan.

3 See on this topic: Burke (1992).

4 Saga published in seven volumes between 1997 and 2007.

5 See, on this point, the volume: Colin (2012).

6 Set up in 1962.

7 Set up in 1968.

8 See for instance: Faeti (1995).

9 In Italy it was given the title: *L'esercito dei 14 bambini* (Newton Compton).

10 *Diario di una schiappa* in the Italian version.

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