



A Precocious End of Innocence: Re-reading Children's Literature for Today

(Laura Tosi (ed.), *Hearts of Lightness: the Magic of Children's Literature*,
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by Nicoletta Vallorani

A long time ago, people used to tell magical stories of wonder and enchantment. Those stories were called Fairy Tales.

Those stories are not in this book. The stories in this book are almost Fairy Tales. But not quite. The stories in this book are Fairy Stupid Tales. (...) In fact, you should definitely go read the stories now, because the rest of this introduction just goes on and on and doesn't really say anything. (...) So stop now. I mean it. Quit reading. Turn the page. If you read this last sentence, it won't tell you anything.

I stole this quotation from the beginning of Tosi's essay – "Did they Live Happily Ever After? Rewriting Fairy Tales for a contemporary Audience" – included in the volume she edits. I did so because Scieszka's statement seems so suitable to the perspective in which the volume is grounded. And it tells a lot about the project Tosi aims at developing in her collection, working as a framing device for a critical approach that explicitly tries to locate new perspectives in children's literature.

If there is a key to this collection of essays, it is the virtue it makes of combining a diachronic analysis of children's literature from Middle Age to today with a deep revision of the critical perspective usually taken when tackling this genre. While introducing the volume she edits, Tosi points out the sharp change our contemporary context imposes on the profile of children's literature. This change is partly due to the increasingly problematic meanings gathering around the concept of childhood. More in particular, Tosi considers the way in which the very idea of childhood innocence has been lost in recent times. She even locates a precise moment in space and time, going back to what happened in 1993, near Liverpool: "As British tabloids and newspapers announced the idea of childhood innocence in Great Britain was officially lost on 12.02.1993, when two-year-old James Bulger was killed by two ten-year-olds and the whole world was mercilessly confronted with the video of the two older children leading the toddler from Bootle shopping centre near Liverpool to the place of his untimely death".



In the light of this and other similar – if not so tragic – events, any position on what is to be considered a suitable reading for children needs revision. And an increasing ambiguity in the meaning of being a child is to be taken into consideration when linking the tradition of fairy tales to the current use and usability of narratives for children. Therefore it is not a huge surprise, for example, that the fairy-tale adaptations so common today tend to challenge the traditional value system, also revising the once sharp distinction between good and evil. Far from ultimately sorting it out, this revision revives and fuels the ancient debate “about ‘child’ as a ‘real’, ‘true’ being, an individual, in contrast with a view of childhood as an adult fictional construct or a nostalgic appropriation”.

Tosi firmly guides the critical explorations she collects in this volume. After stating her cultural and critical starting points in her crystal-clear introduction, she approaches the slippery matter of retellings trying to see how the traditional formulae of fairy tales are adapted to modern times. Given as a flexible and “anarchic genre”, the fairy tale seems particularly suitable to produce renewed textualities that may result more suitable to a revised social context and therefore more effective in transmitting the cultural inheritance that is often the core of storytelling for children. The relevance of the audience is never omitted. Tosi is well aware that “The initiating and socializing function of children’s literature (...) makes it necessary to address an audience whose decoding must rely on the reader’s recognition of familiar genres and narratives – hence the value of retelling as a strategy to activate the implied child reader’s often partial competency and this reader’s aesthetic pleasure off recognition and appreciation”. Conversely, as Petrina points out, the lack of a specific literature for children may be simply due to the absence of an idea of childhood as a specific moment in the process of growing up. While tracing a profile of the medieval child, Petrina observes that Middle Age lacks the awareness of childhood as “an age that deserved special attention and determinate forms of instruction or of educational entertainment”. This by no means implies a lack of children’s care and education, but simply defines an almost exclusive attention of the parents to the child’s future rather than to his or her entertainment.

Adults’ positions and appropriations of the fable seem in fact to be the point in most cases when dealing with narratives for children. Gregori explores the ways in which the intrusive presence and concerns of the parents often mediate the transformation of the genre into a vehicle for satire and political propaganda, with specific reference to the fable in the eighteenth century. This of course raises questions on the power of storytelling, but at the same time it elicits debate on the complex relationship adult/child as it is portrayed in children’s literature. Scrittore in particular focuses her work on the adult attraction to the child body and the anxieties it raises. Analysing Carroll’s letters and photographs, Scrittore reflects on the way in which the child figure is tainted by Carroll’s personal stance on the relationship child/adult, and it is given a more concrete and autobiographical flavour in these texts, therefore shedding a new light on the strictly fictional narratives of *Alice in Wonderland*.



Alice recalls Pinocchio. Each of these two sharply different profiles tends to outline a specific national tradition that becomes one with the most desultory aspects of the two characters. Paruolo chooses a specific perspective, while dealing with Collodi's work, suggesting that Pinocchio is "one of the most exemplary cases of the transmission and cultural reappropriation of an Italian classic in the English-speaking world". Discarding the stiff moralizing core of the Italian tales, she prefers emphasizing some less apparent aspects: Pinocchio is not merely full of rules, but these rules do exist to be broken. Also, the tale concerns an unstable and highly impermanent body, and therefore it has to do with a metamorphosis and the permeable border between organic and inorganic as a core feeling in childhood. Finally Pinocchio gives sharp relevance to the children's sorrow in feeling the environment's stubborn hostility to them and to their consequent rebellious attitude, which seems more than justified. Collodi's playful and creative use of language is added value to the tale that - seen as such - seems particularly suitable to the English tradition and audience.

Also the issue of humour and irony is a basic one when dealing with children's literature, particularly in the Anglophone context. Styles focuses on these aspects in poetry for children, giving particular focus to the linguistic and stylistic strategies of nonsense, cautionary verse, and parody: that is the many ways in which the sense of the uncanny may be given the shape of a poem. Though specifying that "There is not a lot of difference between comic verse for adults and children, except in terms of sexual material and some branches that are not appropriate for a young readership, such as satire", Styles provides plenty of samples of authors - such as Quentin Blake, Edward Lear, John Tennyson, Lewis Carroll and others - that seem amusing both for children and for their grown up parents.

A survey of the current critical debate on picture-books is provided by Vinas Valle, that also reflects on this genre as providing a privileged point of view: picture-books have no counterpart in adult fiction and their position of liminality make them unique in their successful use of images to evoke the magical worlds of phantasmagoria and fairy tale.

This leads us back to Tosi's outlining of children's literature as a transitional genre, mostly intended for children and adults alike, and nevertheless giving space to many kinds of marginal entities. So Bassi elaborates on the way children's literature fits in a postcolonial perspective considering Kipling, his involvement in colonial ideology and the implication of this position in his writing for children. Under this perspective - somehow taken also by Marino in tackling the issue of heritage and cultural identity in multicultural America - it is quite true that increasingly often hidden political messages may be harboured in entertaining and innocent fiction and films for children. Bassi also takes a specific stance about this issue when he states: "By postcolonial reading I mean an assessment of the impact of colonialism on western culture and imaginary, an irreversible impact whose consequences have lingered well beyond the political end of the British Empire".



More than fit to join this company is Orestano's discussion of the dilemma orality/literacy in the formation of the female self. We do know that the fairy tale is often concerned with female experience (and frequently, too, with rites of passage), and therefore it makes a fitting format for a reflection on orality and literacy in the formation of the female self. As Orestano maintains, "Orality and literacy define two culturally-shaped distinct areas according to the selective use of voice or writing".

I deliberately choose to deal with the first essay at the end of my review. Peter Hunt needs no introduction as a scholar and his familiarity with children's literature is doubtless: therefore I somehow thought his cute reflection on the academic status of children's literature might help to close the circle. Hunt lists seven reasons why children's literature remains academically unrespectable, all of them familiar to any of us professors and researchers. He then goes on acknowledging that the status of children books are difficult to define and that children's literature is a gloriously complex subject. And he concludes, on the ground of a very well documented survey, on an optimistic note: "Children's literature, both the texts and the study, is about breaking boundaries, but the biggest difference between the NEW study of children's literature and the OLD study of literature is that it implies a shift in power".

This is good news, and an encouraging prediction for our future.

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