

Education on Diversity. The Contribution of Early Childhood's Literature

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Abstract. In recent years, in the field of publishing for the Italian children it has spread an audacious and healthy production of books aimed at early childhood capable of interpreting with intelligence, originality and care an increasingly plural and complex social reality, breaking mindsets, prejudices, cognitive canons, and leading us, through stories and images, towards recognition and appreciation of differences. Starting from some historical backgrounds, the paper intends to take a look at this editorial production to reflect on the characteristics of the best picturebooks in the perspective of education on diversity with particular reference to the theme of gender difference and homo-affectivity.

Keywords. Children's Literature – Picturebooks – Diversity – Same-sex love – education on diversity

1. Background

Nowadays, the scientific community agrees in considering the contribution of editor Rosellina Archinto an epochal turning point in children's book publishing. In 1966, Mrs. Archinto founded in Milan the publishing house Emme Edizioni, transforming the concept of illustrated books for children, which became quality books designed to combine the pleasure of narration with readers' sensory perceptions, stimulating especially the eyes with artistic illustrations. Artists, intellectuals and designers like Bruno Munari, Iela and Enzo Mari, Lele Luzzati, Maurice Sendak, Tomi Ungerer, Eric Carle, Leo Lionni and many others worked with Emme Edizioni, with the purpose of restoring dignity to children books and, more broadly, to the picturebook¹.

Special mention should be made of the significant work of Leo Lionni, which represents a model in terms of interplay between the iconic and verbal language, aesthetic experimentation and deep textual message. Moreover, Lionni's books may be considered the "forerunners" of new children's literature as they introduce to children the idea of

¹ Regarding this topic, see Hamelin (ed.), *Ad occhi aperti. Leggere l'albo illustrato*, Roma, Donzelli, 2012; M. Terrusi, *Albi illustrati. Leggere, guardare, nominare il mondo nei libri per l'infanzia*, Roma, Carocci, 2012; M. Campagnaro, M. Dallari, *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure. Albi illustrati e relazione educativa*, Trento, Erickson, 2013; C. Lepri, *Le immagini raccontano. L'iconografia nella formazione dell'immaginario infantile*, Pisa, ETS, 2016.

diversity in its broadest terms and in the most appropriate way. *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, published in the United States in 1959 and the first book in the catalogue of Emme Edizioni², has now become an internationally acclaimed classic. The book describes the day of two blobs of colours that meet, play and mix together. When they return home, they are different because their meeting enriched them. Their change is a visible sign of their joyful encounter that brings about a process – unavoidable and necessary – of transformation of one's identity, through the relationship with *the other*.

Over the years, the most progressive part of the children's book publishing sector has been able to bring forward the legacy of Emme Edizioni and of great masters of design. Since the 1980s, which represented the golden age of children's literature in Italy in terms of production and critical studies, niche-publishing houses, like Fatatrac and La Coccinella, have flourished. They specialized in quality-illustrated books that focus on aesthetic provocation and on the production of carefully designed children books. Thanks to their work, the picturebook became popular in Italy, although considerably later than in the United States and Europe.

3. To be continued... Beyond the stereotype

The process of cultural deconstruction of stereotypes related to diversity is slow and demanding because it challenges established beliefs and mind-sets that feed on prejudice. Even the most modern and quality children's literature is not exempt from this phenomenon.

With regards to gender difference, for example, illustrations show a clear gender polarization expressed, more or less explicitly, in the use of colours (pink for girls, blue for boys), in the distinction of roles in the family and, as a result, in the division of the spaces of the house (the mother is responsible for household chores and stays in the kitchen, the father works or reads the newspaper in an armchair) and professional futures (different jobs for boys and girls) as well as in the representation of the traditional family, composed of father, mother and children.

However, it should be recognised that some progress has been made and nowadays, great attention – and commitment – is put on the deconstruction of genre stereotypes since early childhood, thanks to the work of small, independent and culturally active publishing companies. They are, as we will see below, mostly engaged in the publication of quality picturebooks, attentive to the materials, to emerging authors/illustrators chosen from valid writers and artists at a national and international level, as well as to the innovative and provocative themes that promote an open and relative vision of the world. They are an example of *healthy* publishing able to understand, with intelligence, originality and attention, an increasingly plural and complex reality that courageously break mental habits, prejudices, cognitive canons, and lead us, through stories and images, «beyond identities, while not denying them»³. They represent a part of publishing

² The first Italian edition is L. Lionni, *Piccolo blu e piccolo giallo*, Milano, Emme, 1967. The new edition of the book has been published by Babalibri, Milano.

³ It seems useful, in this context, to refer to the most recent trend using the words of Franco Cambi in *Incontro e dialogo. Prospettive della pedagogia interculturale*, Roma, Carocci, 2006, p. 7, since the same assumptions and theoretical models of intercultural pedagogy and of any pedagogy aimed at valuing diversity seem valid

industry that does not focus on profit but carries out a significant cultural project, allowing adults, educators and parents, that act as mediators of reading, to introduce complex concepts involving the perception of the self in relation to others, the construction of identity, the world of emotions and feelings, for which it is not always easy to find appropriate words.

These editorial (and cultural, we repeat) experiences have given new impetus to a trend that, especially in recent years, reacts with strength and attention to the danger of homologation and of a limited, closed, retrieved vision of the reality in which we live. It can be said that a new frontier based on quality works has been opened, which promotes the representation of a *divergent* childhood (not only with regards to gender, but also to interculturality or disability), a non-conforming childhood that is not 'caged' within a pre-established ideal and whose identity, in the end, is built dialectically. These are books that, based on the model of *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, present elements of originality and introduce new challenges and topics of discussion, suggesting a different interpretation of reality, which is socially inclusive and aimed at valuing differences. They are books that contribute to educate to diversity in its broadest sense and trigger a process of building of an independent, critical and open self, able to consider different points of view, to be at ease with the *other-than-oneself* – that should be always respected and accepted – and capable of facing many different situations. In order to do so, these books usually make use of a sensitive and delicate language, implicitly suggesting an open and multifaceted vision of reality.

In other cases, these books not only reflect an image of today's childhood: literature for children, through words and images, acknowledges and interprets the change that has occurred in the main educational institution, the family; therefore, it increasingly presents dynamic, changing, complex realities that go beyond the traditional model of family. As a result, picturebooks have now started to depict the many kind of families that make up our world: from the traditional family formed by mother, father and children to the foster or adoptive family. From 'extended' families, that grow bigger following the successive unions of one or both parents, and the single-parent family to the family with parents of the same sex; all these models challenge, especially in the latter case, a powerful taboo. Same-sex families, from the French *famille homoparentale*, are families comprising at least one parent who considers and declares her/himself as homosexual and her/his own son or daughter. The term today takes on a broader meaning to indicate all the families with parents of the same sex and families that «can have different configurations with regard to procreation, filiation and couple because they are formed either by previous unions, by an assisted procreation or even by an adoption»⁴. As it will be discussed later, the books that introduce the idea of same-sex family are mostly educational or scripted books or simple proto-stories designed to provide the little reader with a rather schematic 'encyclopaedia' of the ways of being and feeling like a family.

to us.

⁴R. Bosisio, P. Ronfani, *Le famiglie omogenitoriali. Responsabilità, regole, diritti*, Roma, Carocci, 2015, p. 8.

3. Censorship

As it is easy to imagine, the representation in children's books of ambiguous 'paper figures', with an undefined sexual identity (or clearly defined as homosexual), as well as the representation of "atypical" families, provoked resistance or even protests and bitter controversy in those who, representing institutions or groups of parents, consider these ideas as a threat to the development of the identity and sexual orientation of young generations.

In particular, it has had great resonance the censorship applied in 2015 by the Mayor of Venice, who issued a circular for the withdrawal of the so-called 'gender' themed books from the nurseries and schools of this municipality. Such ban mainly referred to a long list of readings drawn up by the association for social promotion *Scosse* within the project *Leggere senza stereotipi (Reading without stereotypes)*⁵, presented at the Casa delle Donne in Rome and – later – to the Venetian educators at the request of the Delegated Officer for Civil Rights and Anti-Discrimination. The list comprises forty-nine books and includes, in addition to books on homosexuality by the publishing house Lo Stampatello such as *Piccolo Uovo* and *Più ricche di un re*⁶, classics by Leo Lionni (*Piccolo e blu e piccolo giallo* and *Guizzino*), Mario Ramos' works, which tell the funny adventures of a wolf/bully as well as books on families and even – among others – *Il pentolino di Antonino*, a delicate story of disability by Isabel Carrier published by Arka⁷.

More recent (July and December 2017), however, are the episodes of censorship that took place in Verona and Todi: in the first case, the electoral program of the newly elected mayor explicitly spoke of opposition «to the dissemination of *gender* theories in schools» and «commitment to reject any initiative (resolutions, motions, agendas, gathering of signatures, *gay pride*, etc..) contrary to the values of life, the natural family or the primary right of parents to educate their children according to their moral and religious principles». In the second case, the Councillor for Family and the Councillor for Culture of the Municipality of Todi, with the aim of making the Civic Library «more accessible to those who are perhaps most welcome, i.e. children with their families», through a formal act, have requested to remove books on topics such as «same-sex parenting, surrogate motherhood, same-sex unions and other sexual content»⁸ from the section dedicated to children in the municipal library.

Other hotbeds of protest are periodically rekindled, but the collective actions taken by educators, pedagogues, experts and scholars of children's literature, as well as librarians and booksellers together with the representatives of the AIB (*Associazione Italia-*

⁵ The project was presented as follows: «Texts and images of children's books often offer a stereotyped representation of genres, which does not take into account the profound changes that have occurred in our society in recent decades. The project *Leggere senza stereotipi (Reading without stereotypes)* starts from this awareness, in an attempt to overcome a widespread trend in our country, also present in most textbooks of primary schools and propose, instead, a culture free from stereotypes that enhances the differences between the genres». See <https://www.topipittori.it/it/topipittori/il-caso-dei-libri-ritirati-dalle-scuole-venezia-i-fatti> and http://www.scosse.org/leggere-senza-stereotipi/?s_p_c_t=1342&cat_id_0_1=2&page_num_0_1=1, last viewed 15 September 2019.

⁶ F. Pardi, Altan, *Piccolo uovo*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2011; C. Barbero, *BUM ill&art, Più ricche di un re*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2011.

⁷ L. Lionni, *Guizzino*, Milano, Babalibri, 2013; M. Ramos, *Sono io il più bello*, Milano, Babalibri, 2012; I. Carrier, *Il pentolino di Antonino*, Padova, Kite, 2011.

⁸ *Episodi e minacce di censura in biblioteca*, in <http://www.libertweb.it/CMpro-v-p-1216.html>, last viewed 15 September 2019.

na Biblioteche, Association of Italian Librarians) and AIE (*Associazioni Italiana Editori*, Association of Italian Publishers), who released an official statement, confirm a strong commitment to the defence of freedom of expression and teaching, recalling – among other things – what is indicated in the IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto, which encourages public libraries to «promote intercultural dialogue and protect cultural diversity».

However, the censorship does not just come from the outside. It is interesting, in this regard, the testimony of the writer and editor Manuela Salvi, author of one of the first Italian picturebook with a *gender* theme, *Nei panni di Zaff*, the irreverent story of a little boy who wants to become a princess, attracting the outraged comments of people («You are strange! You must be a troublemaker, out of your mind, abnormal, a freak of nature, an alien, a pussy, a gay?»⁹).

Common sense, shared laws and values can create various levels and forms of censorship necessary to be compliant to the concept of *political correctness*. Suppressing and punishing when a text is considered offensive is certainly a way of strengthening the foundations of democracy itself and authors living in a democratic country activate forms of self-control both for fear of repercussions and for sincere fear of offending the values of others. The real problem, however, emerges when a work is defined “offensive”, and it is precisely the notion of “appropriate/inappropriate” that creates problems. When does self-control become self-censorship, often unconscious, to avoid exclusion from certain groups? When does the labelling of texts as “appropriate” become an arbitrary choice or even a lie?¹⁰

Those are the questions that Manuela Salvi puts forward, identifying some crucial issues that link freedom of expression to the sensitivity of the author and the readers. Bruno Tognolini defines this attitude as the “censorship of *Pietas*”¹¹, which involves personal emotions and beliefs but which should not interfere in other people's choices, nor – I would add – in the poetics of the author. Yet Manuela Salvi continues:

the Italian author of books for children is [...] at a crossroads: writing for schools – which means talking to critics and teachers – or writing for the market – that is to say talking with the marketing offices and following the latest trends. In the first case, it is likely that the author will have to avoid controversial subject [...]. In the latter case, the author should avoid controversial subjects because they reduce saleability and do not attract investment. These two poles – “education” and “business” – characterize the publishing industry of all Western countries but in Italy there is a lack of the third pole, which in France is represented by Marie-Aude Murail, in Denmark by Guus Kuijer and in England by Aidan Chambers. Moderation and prudence are expected from Italian authors, favouring, in my opinion, a literature that is often escapist and in which black and white are preferable to nuances. Despite the presence in Italy of great writers, a third, subversive literary pole, which breaks established patterns and certainties to foster discussion and suggest alternative visions of the world, does not exist, with some minor exceptions. Therefore, it is very unlikely that a potential Italian Aidan Chambers will find investors, and the fact that Gianni Rodari was the only Italian author to win the international Hans Christian Andersen award could confirm this point¹².

⁹ M. Salvi, F. Cavallaro, *Nei panni di Zaff*, Firenze, Fatatrac, 2005.

¹⁰ M. Salvi, *L'innocenza imposta. Tabù, conformismo e censura nei libri per ragazzi: quando l'edulcorazione produce una "conoscenza soggiogata"*, in «LiBeR», 105, 2015, p. 42.

¹¹ See B. Tognolini, *Le tre censure*, in «LiBeR», 107, 2015, p. 39.

¹² M. Salvi, *L'innocenza imposta*, cit., p. 45.

3. Taxonomies of the family

*All happy families are alike;
each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*
L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*¹³

The twentieth century triggered a process of radical transformation of the family:

today the idea of family comprises a *great variety* of family typologies, which go beyond the patriarchal and the nuclear structure (the two historical models of the past) and are more focused on personal relationships, characterized by mutable social structures. In the new family, there is no – *a priori* – hierarchy of roles, but a micro-community of shared understandings and actions carried out according to a star model. In this new structure, parenthood has become unique (Bettelheim spoke of “a good enough parent”, for example) and focuses on the dynamics of affection and care, the latter meant as support provided to *that* subject and placed in *that* specific relationship with the adult¹⁴.

The result is a family characterized by pluralism, described and interpreted by the new children’s literature that acts as a ‘mirror’ of reality, reflecting its variety, types and dynamics¹⁵.

In this respect, a forerunner in Italian publishing is the graphic novel *Milly, Molly e tanti papà* by Pittar and Morrell published by EDT (2006)¹⁶: the story starts in a school class where Muriel cries, “Dad packed his suitcase and left home”. The teacher hugs her and proposes to the children to talk about their dads. Readers meet children whose father is in the hospital, children who have two dads and children with only one dad. There are those whose father stays at home all day and those who see him only on holidays because they have another family. Some children have an adoptive father while some have a heroic uncle and so on with other cases, even the most dramatic. The illustrations are rather scanty but the story is perfect for an *occasional* reading in school and at home, which does not mean that this text is not important: a book read in a specific occasion can play, at the right moment, a redeeming function, just as it happens with some “themed” books. A number of great picturebooks on family were thereafter published starting with *Quante famiglie!* by P. Floridi and A. Gatacre (Il Castoro, 2010)¹⁷ (which profiles a day in the life of eight children and their non-traditional family, for example, Michael’s gay fathers: «My father’s name is Sebastiano and he is an ophthalmologist. Franz, a friend of dad’s, also lives with us»), continuing with the ironic *Il Grande Grosso Libro delle Famiglie* by

¹³ L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, it. tra. by P. Zveteremich, Milano, Garzanti, 1965.

¹⁴ F. Cambi, *La famiglia che forma: un modello possibile?*, in «Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare», 1, 2006, p. 23. Italics are in the text.

¹⁵ See F. Bacchetti, *I bambini e la famiglia nell’Ottocento. Realtà e mito attraverso l’infanzia*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1997; E. Freschi, *La famiglia nei libri per i bambini. Rappresentazioni familiari e stili genitoriali negli albi illustrati*, in «Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare», 2, 2014, pp. 89-106; M.T. Trisciuzzi, *Ritratti di famiglia. Immagini e rappresentazioni nella storia della letteratura per l’infanzia*, Pisa, ETS, 2018.

¹⁶ G. Pittar, C. Morrell, *Milly, Molly e tanti papà*, Torino, EDT, 2006. The book is part of the Milly and Molly series and was published for the first time in New Zealand in 2006. The back cover reads: «the stories of Milly and Molly tell in a lively and engaging way the great themes that help to grow responsibly and with respect for others».

¹⁷ P. Floridi, A. Gatacre, *Quante famiglie!*, Milano, Il Castoro, 2010.

M. Hoffman and R. Asquith (Lo Stampatello, 2012)¹⁸ (the variety – and multiculturalism – of families is portrayed first describing the members which they are composed of and then their lives at school, work, on holidays, together with the various foods they eat, their clothes, festivities, hobbies and emotions. The conclusion is that «families can be big, small, happy, unhappy, poor, noisy, quiet, complicated, made of well-tempered, anxious or relaxed people. Most families are all these things at once»), up to the colourful 'taxonomies' defined by Todd Parr (Piemme, 2012), in *Il libro delle famiglie* by R.H. Harris and N.B. Westcott, in *Tante famiglie. Come sono, quante sono* (Emme, 2013)¹⁹. This book conveys a strong message, which focuses not so much on the infinite varieties and habits of families but on the feelings that binds together their members: in a first passage the author says: «All families love to hug each other», and: «Most of the time, and whatever happens, in every family children and adults really love each other! Families love being together». Moreover, as Franco Cambi points out,

the ethical imperative of the current family is [...] support, which means providing assistance and help when needed, encouraging without overwhelming the other, reassuring, appreciating someone, but it also means setting rules, indicating values, educating, i.e. a personal process carried out by the individual alone yet encouraged and supported by its family²⁰.

Very significant, in this regard, are the words contained in the *incipit* (almost a dedication) of the picturebook *In famiglia...* by Sandro Natalini published by Fatatrac (2011)²¹: «The bond that unites the family is not a bond of blood but a bond made of respect and joy for each other's lives. It is not the flesh or the blood but the heart that makes us parents and children». The book contains large and beautiful illustrations of animals representing the many kind of families that make up our world (there are families whose members have the same colour and "multicolour" families, those who work together like bees, those upside down like bats, those who argue... «but most of the time they hug each other») and invites little readers to build their own family tree, using the special frames in the endpapers.

This line of intelligent thinking can be extended to *La mia famiglia selvaggia* by Laurent Moreau, recently published by Orecchio Acerbo (2014)²². The book depicts the exceptional family of the narrator, composed of a giant elephant in a playground («My older brother is strong and respected. Just don't upset him»), a giraffe who walks in the city traffic («My mother is tall and beautiful. She is also shy and prefers not to stand out»), a peacock in the shopping centre («My aunt. Always perfectly primped. She never leaves the house without looking her best») and other (im-)probable members. Figures and words provoke a semantic bewilderment and induce a smile, inviting readers to identify, in each family, vices and virtues of each component, expressed through the most ancient

¹⁸ M. Hoffman, R. Asquith, *Il Grande Grosso Libro delle Famiglie*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2012, published for the first time in Great Britain in 2010.

¹⁹ T. Parr, *Il libro delle famiglie*, Milano, Piemme, 2012, published for the first time in the USA in 2003; R.H. Harris, N.B. Westcott, *Tante famiglie. Come sono, quante sono*, Trieste, Emme, 2013, published for the first time in Great Britain in 2012.

²⁰ F. Cambi, *La famiglia che forma: un modello possibile?*, cit., p. 25.

²¹ S. Natalini, *In famiglia...*, Bologna, Fatatrac/Edizioni del Borgo, 2011.

²² L. Moreau, *La mia famiglia selvaggia*, Roma, Orecchio Acerbo, 2014.

and effective metaphor: the animal world. This book focuses, with disruptive irony, on the human diversity that characterizes each family, with all its peculiarities and imperfections.

Another type of book is the proto-story or narrative books²³ where words and images describe the life of a non-traditional family. With regards to same-sex parenting, a first breakthrough has been made with the publication in Italy of the book *E con Tango siamo in tre* (Junior, 2010)²⁴, whose plot was inspired by the sweet, true story of two penguins at the Central Park Zoo in New York. The book tells the story of two male Antarctic penguins, Roy and Silo that hatch an abandoned egg. When Tango is born, the little penguin chick will be cared for and raised with love by the two parents. It goes without saying that the book, often included in school bibliographies, is one of the censored books contained in the lists mentioned above.

A true challenge to censorship is the opening, in 2011, of the publishing house Lo Stampatello, created by Maria Silvia Fiengo and Francesca Pardi, a couple in their private and professional life. With the motto *Parlami in stampatello* (Speak to me in capital letters), the two women intend to talk to children about complex issues with a simple language to fill a gap in early childhood publishing, i.e. books on «families with two mothers or two fathers who love each other»²⁵, as written on their official website. The result was the publication of books such as *Più ricche di un re* by C. Barbero (2011), a scripted book telling the story of a child with two mothers; *Perché hai due mamme?* (2012) and *Perché hai due papà?* (2014), by Pardi, Sammartino, Torelli; *Qual è il segreto di papà?* (2011) by Pardi and Guicciardini; *Il matrimonio dello zio* (2014)²⁶ by Fiengo and Not and many more picturebooks that focus on individual growth and development, as will be shown afterwards. As the two editors point out, rather than an entrepreneurial operation, their work may be defined as a courageous cultural project, testified by their efforts in supporting various social initiatives, such as the campaign against bullying and gender violence. Moreover, it is worth mentioning *Stella, babbo e papà* by Schiffer and Clifton-Brown (2016)²⁷, published by Gallucci, which tells the story of a little girl with two dads that does not know who to take to Mother's Day at school. The book clearly has a happy ending, where everyone is welcomed. In the wake of *Milly e Molly*, the book depicts all manner of existing families, showing «how the family is not a structure prevailing on individuals, rather, a social category, whose traditional-conventional structure is neither fixed nor immutable»²⁸.

²³ We use the classification of Roberta Cardarelo. See R. Cardarelo, *Libri e pratiche di lettura: la comprensione nell'infanzia*, in F. Bacchetti (ed.), *Attraversare boschi narrativi. Tra didattica e formazione*, Napoli, Liguori, 2010.

²⁴ J. Richardson, P. Parnell, H. Cole, *E con Tango siamo in tre*, Azzano San Paolo (BG), Junior, 2010, first published in the USA in 2005.

²⁵ See <http://lostampatello.it/>, last viewed 15 September 2019.

²⁶ F. Pardi, A. Sammartino, G. Torelli, *Perché hai due mamme?*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2012; Id., *Perché hai due papà?*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2014; F. Pardi, D. Guicciardini, *Qual è il segreto di papà?*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2011; M.S. Fiengo, S. Not, *Il matrimonio dello Zio*, Milano, Lo Stampatello, 2014.

²⁷ M.B. Schiffer, H. Clifton-Brown, *Stella, babbo e papà*, Roma, Gallucci, 2016.

²⁸ R. Bosisio, P. Ronfani, *Le famiglie omogenitoriali*, cit., p. 9.

4. Same-sex love and identity: reading suggestions

Raising awareness on diversity also means educating to love, to understand their own and others' emotions, to think about identity and one's own orientations. The readers' relationship with books and stories, or rather with *good* books and *good* stories, allows the inner self to grow and develop one's identity, from an emotional and rational point of view²⁹. There are numerous reading suggestions on the subject of the "growing-self", especially for pre-school children that encourage young readers to reflect on the pages of a book. An excellent case in point is the abovementioned *Nei panni di Zaff* and *Salverò la principessa* by Cinquetti and Vignale (Lapis, 2008)³⁰, a story that breaks with the traditional fairy tale of Prince Charming: the princess imprisoned in the tower, in fact, will be saved by a special knight, a little girl, who immediately after removing her helmet runs to the swing to play with her friend. In *La storia del toro Ferdinando* written by Munro Leaf in 1936 and republished in 2008 and in the picturebook *Beniamino* by Rickards and Chamberlain (Il Castoro, 2008)³¹ the protagonists are animals, with whom the reader can easily identify: in the first case, the sensitive and peaceful bull Ferdinando, that loves the scent of flowers, refuses to take part in bullfighting; in the second, a penguin wakes up one day to find himself turned pink and everybody starts teasing him: «males are not pink!» Beniamino, who does not like to be different, tries to find the place where he belongs among the flamingos in Africa. However, he finally understands that it is time to come back home, where he will be welcomed by his parents and friends who will listen admired to the stories of his adventures. Other splendid picturebooks introduce the idea of diversity to the youngest readers; among them are *Oh, che uovo!* by Éric Battut (Bohem Press, 2005), *Bice Speciale. La pecora a strisce* by Miriam Koch (Donzelli, 2012) and the more recent *Il pinguino che aveva freddo* by Philip Giordano (Lapis, 2016)³². In this context, a significant contribution to publishing is once again given by Lo Stampatello with the 'incriminated' series *Piccolo Uovo* by Francesca Pardi and Francesco Tullio Altan: *Piccolo Uovo* is an embryonic creature that already scrutinizes the world with curiosity in an attempt to find its own dimension in relation to the others – its family – and to be happy, despite appearances³³.

These stories, in most cases accompanied by cheerful illustrations and written with a specific language appropriate to children, together with many other readings and through the correct mediation of adults, may effectively contribute to the building of the culture of rights on which today's increasingly open and democratic society is based³⁴.

²⁹ F. Cambi, *La cura di sé come processo formativo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010, pp. 63-64.

³⁰ N. Cinquetti, S. Vignale, *Salverò la principessa*, Roma, Lapis, 2008.

³¹ M. Leaf, R. Lawson, *La storia del toro Ferdinando*, Milano, Excelsior 1881, 2008 and L. Rickards, M. Chamberlain, *Beniamino*, Milano, Il Castoro, 2011. The story of the bull Ferdinand is quite well known. Back in 1938, a short film was made for the direction of Dick Rickard produced by Walt Disney. The film received the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film 1939. In 2017, the animated film *Ferdinand*, directed by Carlos Saldanha and produced by Blue Sky Studios and 20th Century Fox, was released.

³² E. Battut, *Oh, che uovo!*, Trieste, Bohem Press, 2005; M. Koch, *Bice Speciale. La pecora a strisce*, Milano, Donzelli, 2012; P. Giordano, *Il pinguino che aveva freddo*, Roma, Lapis, 2016.

³³ The series published by Lo Stampatello includes F. Pardi, Altan, *Piccolo uovo* (2011), *Piccolo uovo: chi è il più ricco del reame?* (2012), *Piccolo uovo. Maschio o femmina?* (2013), *Piccolo uovo. Nessuno è perfetto* (2014). In 2017, the series introduced new cardboard for young children to «promote psychological and relational well-being at school and in the family». See <http://lostampatello.it/bullismo/>, last viewed 15 September 2019.

³⁴ See F. Cambi, *Omofobia a scuola. Una classe fa ricerca*, Pisa, ETS, 2015.

5. Concluding considerations

Since the end of the 2000s, many publishers have been taking up the challenge of illustrating diversity to young readers: the list includes the publishing houses Lapis, Il Castoro, Lo Stampatello, EDT-Giralangolo (which recently gave life to the series “Sottosopra”³⁵) and Gallucci. More specifically, since 2010 there has been an exponential increase in the number of picturebooks that represent the different kind of families as a *place of the affections*: the children’s and youth book magazine «LiBeR» dedicates a monographic issue to the theme *Oltre la gay barrier. Omosessualità e omofobia nell’attuale letteratura per ragazzi*³⁶. The work of Lo Stampatello, in the same year, undoubtedly breaks down a taboo, offering its books not only to ‘rainbow families’, but to an increasingly wide audience of readers, first importing stories from abroad, then involving Italian authors. Altan has put the “seal” on this interesting experience: the change, albeit with difficulty, seems to have begun, despite the problems highlighted and relating to the prevailing tendency on the part of publishers to reassure their readers through a traditional representation of relationships capable of intercepting the values of a large part of society.

In the context of this new frontier of children’s literature, books are carefully written and combine a beautiful story with vivid illustrations that provide added-value to narration. When this combination is successful, the book becomes a sophisticated work open to multi-level interpretations, carrying a message that promotes dialogue and discussion on complex issues such as homophobia, as already mentioned above, providing adults, parents and educators the “right words” to explain children real-life situations that may affect them closely.

Not all the books on the subject treat these themes with thoughtfulness, tact and delicacy and sometimes they end up being reductive or excessively didactic, simplifying and impoverishing the important message that they promote. In these cases, activists authors and publishers use the book as an inopportune tool to fight for civil rights. How to find a balance? How can readers avoid themed books that insist too much on their content and on their pedagogical-didactic purpose?

As stated by Bruno Tognolini, the author of many works, a beautiful book, for children and not, whatever the subject, is based on sense and beauty. Sense means the message that the book aims at communicating (peace, friendship, multiculturalism, care for the environment...); beauty means the set of aesthetic, stylistic and formal elements (with regard to picturebooks, this idea refers to the use of words and the quality of illustration, as well as the harmony between the two codes). A book can make readers “fly” when there is balance between these two elements, as if they were wings, i.e. one wing must not be longer than the other. If sense takes over beauty, the product is “unbalanced”, and will not be able to communicate its important messages with lightness and

³⁵ «The “Sottosopra” series, curated by Irene Biemmi, was conceived with a precise objective: to promote an alternative imaginary through illustrated books expressly oriented towards the principle of gender identity and the interchangeability of male and female roles. The protagonists of these books are girls and boys, women and men, free to act, think and behave without constraints related to their biological sex. “Sottosopra” is aimed at readers aged 3-5 and 6-8 years, age groups in which the processes of gender identification are played out in a decisive manner and therefore the most favourable age to trigger a change for the new generations». See <http://www.edt.it/aree/giralangolo-sottosopra/>, last viewed 15 September 2019.

³⁶ See «LiBeR», 85, 2010. Also worth mentioning is «LiBeR», 99, 2013 on the theme *Happy new family*, while the reflection on censorship is mentioned in «LiBeR», 105, 2015.

delicacy, thus damaging the same cause that it intends to serve. Tognolini believes that these books should be subject to the censorship "of *Levitas*, beauty and lightness"³⁷.

To conclude, it may be argued that publishers, authors and illustrators have today, as they had in the past, a great responsibility: children's literature should become a tool to give voice to diversity and other key issues of our times. Books, however, should be written with balance and responsibility, without forgetting their literary nature aimed at conveying a deep aesthetic and artistic meaning. In this way, children's literature will be able to open the mind of young readers to new ideas, promote dialogue, curiosity and encourage readers to discover the world and search for one's inner self, thus fighting any future seeds of acquiescence, conformism, prejudice and narrow-minded behaviour.

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